

# TO BE OR NOT TO BE SEEN: AN INCURSION INTO TRADITIONAL ROMANIAN VILLAGES THROUGH TOURIST SIGNAGE

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**ABSTRACT.** **To be or not to be seen: an incursion into traditional Romanian villages through tourist signage.** Any tourist experience is shaped by a series of factors that leave their mark on the destination, including elements of accessibility and visibility. If a destination benefits from additional recognition by being included on specific official cultural routes, tourist signage becomes mandatory. This article aimed to investigate the impact of tourist signage on traditional villages, focusing on Poiana Negrii, in the context of their inclusion on thematic cultural routes such as the Via Transilvanica. The survey conducted in November 2025 in the selected case-study area revealed 26 tourist signage elements, a density indicating the presence of the Via Transilvanica route in the territory, as well as references to tourist attractions that support various forms of tourism (spa tourism, ecotourism). On the other hand, the analysis of reviews on the Google Maps platform (n=3339) associated with locations within Poiana Negrii shows tourists' interest in Țara Dornelor and, implicitly, in Poiana Negrii, which they associate with specific architectural landmarks, etc. Tourists perceive Poiana Negrii as an emblematic place of Bucovina's ethnographic identity, where natural, architectural, gastronomic, and social heritage blend harmoniously. Nevertheless, the evaluation of tourist signage in Poiana Negrii reveals significant discrepancies in quality and positioning, highlighting a lack of visibility and maintenance, which points to the need for a clear strategy to improve tourist information and overall visitor experience.

**Keywords:** rural tourism, Țara Dornelor, Via Transilvanica, tourist signage

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The accessibility of a tourist destination and the quality of its signage have a significant impact on the tourist experience. Wan (2024) states that tourist signage is essential for guiding visitors, especially in historical locations with complex routes, such as Macao, where people of all ages and physical abilities rely on signs to navigate safely. The principles of Universal Design ensure that all visitors can use signage without discrimination, adhering to standards such as

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legibility, colour contrast, message simplicity, and the use of internationally recognized symbols. Regulated standards, such as ISO 7001, support a universal iconography for public spaces. Visitor experience becomes fragmented and the destination loses its appeal if visual and functional coherence is lacking (Wan, 2024; Neves et al., 2017). Romania has a significantly important presence of several European cultural routes, such as the Route of Jewish Heritage (2004), the Route of Saint Martin of Tours (2005), TRANSROMANICA (2007), Iter Vitis (2009), the Route of European Cemeteries (2010), and the Route of Historic Cafés (2022), but a relatively modest one compared to other European countries (Council of Europe, 2025). In this context, a more attractive and sustainable promotion of tourist attractions included on these routes would contribute significantly to encouraging forms of tourism that go beyond transit, stimulating longer stays and local exploration; to improving the well-being of local communities by valorizing their own cultural and economic resources; and to promoting an authentic form of tourism that respects the specificity of each place and supports the cultural identity of every region (Florea, 2024). The emergence of a cultural route such as Via Transilvanica, which aims to promote the vernacular heritage of traditional villages - more or less isolated - and which connects, from north to south, a large part of Romania's territory, can influence the development of slow tourism and offer alternatives to mass-tourism experiences. In this context, analysing the accessibility and visibility of such routes aims to highlight the (insufficiently) exploited potential of these routes in Romania and their impact on rural spaces.

The purpose of this article was to investigate the impact of tourist signage on traditional villages in the context of their inclusion on specific thematic cultural routes, such as Via Transilvanica. The formulated research questions were:

RQ1: What is the density of tourist signage elements in a village integrated into the Via Transilvanica route?

RQ2: Is there a correlation between the existing rural tourism in Poiana Negrii and the Via Transilvanica?

## **2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

### **2.1. The Role of Tourist Signage in Enhancing the Tourist Experience**

Tourist signage represents a fundamental element in facilitating visitor experiences, having a complex role that goes beyond simple spatial orientation. Academic research in this field is continually evolving, focusing on optimizing the visitor experience by providing efficient guidance and accessible information. Wan (2022) emphasises that previous studies have not directly collected end-user

opinions or applied universal design principles to evaluate signage accessibility, indicating a gap in the specialised literature. In parallel, Deri et al. (2023) observe that research literature has marginally covered the use of smartphones for tourist signage, and existing solutions often depend heavily on internet connectivity, which represents a problem in outdoor destinations or rural areas. On the other hand, Ribera (2021) notes that academic discourse has often distanced itself from the proximity of signage to residents, focusing exclusively on visitors. However, a gradual evolution is observed towards a desire to connect both groups in a friendly, inclusive and comprehensive manner. Accessibility is a key element of contemporary tourism, making travel faster and more comfortable while enhancing visitor experiences and loyalty. Universal design offers a foundational approach to accessible tourist signage by ensuring it can be used by people of all ages, sizes, and abilities through its seven principles: equitable use, flexibility in use, simple and intuitive use, perceptible information, tolerance for error, low physical effort, and sufficient size and space for approach and use (Wan, 2022).

Complementary to this perspective, sustainability is approached from a holistic perspective that includes four pillars: cultural, social, environmental and economic, with tourist signage needing to be designed considering these aspects from the incipient phases. The concept of slow tourism is promoted through sustainable signage, a deeper and more respectful exploration of visited areas, and low-impact technological solutions, such as QR code labels, which are identified as consistent technologies for outdoor signage of natural and cultural heritage (Deri et al., 2023). Heritage interpretation represents another key concept that refers to the process of revealing the significance of sites to increase visitor enjoyment, with interpretive signage being distinct from informational signage, having the purpose of educating and telling a story (Ababneh, 2016). Visitor experience is strongly influenced by interpretation at heritage sites, with signage becoming a key objective in improving this experience and public knowledge about local heritage (Ababneh, 2016). In this context, tourists' behavioural intentions are analyzed, examining how perceptions about signage affect tourist experiences, satisfaction and intentions to repeat visits and make recommendations (Wan, 2022). Smart signage extends this perspective through the use of advanced technologies (sensors, digital screens, connectivity) to offer dynamic and personalised information to tourists, creating an interactive urban system that communicates with visitors (Zhong et al., 2025). This approach allows personalisation and interaction, offering information adapted to individual tourist preferences, as well as collecting and analysing data about their behaviour for continuous service improvement (Zhong et al., 2025).

The perspective of social integration recognises the central role of signage in connecting different visions of tourism and responding to local needs (Ribera, 2021). Signage must reflect reality through the incorporation of plural and non-exclusive language, as well as resources that address all audiences

without accessibility or ergonomic limitations (Ribera, 2021). It becomes a transversal instrument that goes beyond the tourist event, integrating into general territorial needs and serving as an open and informative resource for all citizens (Ribera, 2021). Stakeholder theory completes this conceptual framework, postulating that key stakeholder groups and their interests should be identified and considered in the tourism planning process, recognising the need to understand the needs of different groups (tourists, signage designers, destination managers) in the design process (Wan, 2022).

The advantages of tourist signage are multiple and well-documented in specialised literature. It improves the overall tourist experience, satisfaction, and behavioural intentions, with an easier-to-navigate community enhancing the experience for both tourists and residents, and well-designed signs being positively correlated with perceived aesthetic value. It facilitates navigation and orientation, helping tourists find their way and navigate through an area with peace of mind and efficiency (Deri et al., 2023; Wan, 2022; Zhong et al., 2025). Effective signage can lead to repeat visits and positive recommendations, with accessible information representing a quality indicator that influences tourist decisions. It also reduces anxiety, increases length of stay, helps disperse visitors, and plays a crucial role in destination branding and marketing (Wan, 2022).

Additionally, interpretive signage reveals the significance of sites, enhancing visitors' enjoyment and knowledge of historical or ecological values, and potentially increasing awareness of site conservation and value (Ababneh, 2016). It contributes to tourism flow management, serving as an efficient instrument to direct visitors to different enclaves and to favour internal mobility (Ribera, 2021). Smart signage enables monitoring of visitor flow and preferences, offering valuable information for tourism planning and service optimization (Zhong et al., 2025).

The signage typologies identified in specialised literature can be classified by function and technology. By function, welcome and information signs are distinguished, which create a sense of arrival and offer promotional information, directional and guidance signs that offer directions to attractions and public facilities, warning signs that indicate dangers, and interpretive signs that tell the story of cultural heritage and educate visitors (Wan, 2022; Deri et al., 2023; Ababneh, 2016). By form and technology, traditional physical signage with information panels, wall signage attached to buildings, digital signage that uses various methods to display multimedia content, smart signage that integrates advanced, interactive and personalized digital solutions, and QR codes as low-cost solutions for accessing digital content in areas with limited connectivity are identified (Wan, 2022; Deri et al., 2023; Zhong et al., 2025).

Guidance and visibility are essential, offering clear and sufficient directions, facilitating easy navigation and a better understanding of the route, with signage placed in visible locations and easy to spot (Deri et al., 2023; Wan,

2022). The informative and educational character involves offering relevant information about attractions, history, culture or nature, enriching the visitor's experience (Deri et al., 2023; Wan, 2022).

A good indicator must be sustainable, designed with a holistic approach that considers cultural, social, environmental, and economic aspects, and use low-cost, low-impact technologies (Deri et al., 2023). Clarity and legibility, including basic elements such as the title, introductory paragraph, and additional details, are fundamental, and the use of symbols and clear language is crucial, especially for those with reading difficulties (Ababneh, 2016; Wan, 2022). Strategic placement and consistency with the natural setting of the location play an important role in providing information, with signs needing to be placed at eye level and in locations where they do not create or obstruct dangers (Ababneh, 2016). An effective indicator must be easy to update, capable of being updated quickly and efficiently to ensure relevance and accuracy, and maintain good condition with clear, contrasting colours (Wan, 2022; Zhong et al., 2025). Finally, a good indicator must use plural and non-exclusive language, address all audiences without accessibility limitations, respond to local needs, and serve as a facilitator between different visions of tourism, contributing to social cohesion and a better distribution of users on the tourism scene (Ribera, 2021).

## **2.2. European Cultural Routes**

European cultural routes are transnational grassroots initiatives that connect places, communities, and stories around a shared heritage, highlighting Europe's cultural diversity (Oprică, 2015; Cojocariu, 2015; Council of Europe, Cultural Routes, 2025).

The main characteristics of these routes are:

- the presence of a network: a cultural route is a thematic network, not a simple succession of isolated monuments;
- the promotion of intercultural dialogue, historical understanding, and respect for cultural diversity;
- the diversity of routes, ranging from historical ones (e.g., Santiago de Compostela Pilgrim Routes, Via Francigena), thematic ones (European Route of Historic Thermal Towns, Prehistoric Rock Art Trails), religious ones (Route of Saint Olav Ways), commercial networks (The Hansa), to artistic or technical routes (Transromanica).

By their nature, these routes combine tangible heritage (monuments, architectural ensembles, archaeological sites) with intangible heritage (traditions, gastronomy, craftsmanship), transforming cultural tourism into an integrated experience. Many European cultural routes include successive settlements-villages, market towns, cities-interconnected along a shared thematic path (Via Francigena, which crosses numerous European localities integrating religious and

civil heritage; Santiago de Compostela Pilgrim Routes, connecting diverse communities through the spiritual experience of pilgrimage; Route of Saint Olav Ways, which unites northern routes of historical and spiritual value) (Council of Europe, Cultural Routes, 2025).

For the tourism sector, cultural routes bring significant advantages. They diversify Europe's tourism offer by integrating tangible and intangible heritage, traditions, and contemporary creativity (Richards, 2011; Zabbini, 2012). Tourists benefit from authentic, personalised experiences that bring them closer to the lives and values of local communities. At the same time, these cultural itineraries help redistribute visitor flows more evenly, expanding tourism into rural or lesser-known areas (Zabbini, 2012; Cojocariu, 2015) and reducing pressure on overcrowded tourist destinations.

For local populations, the benefits are equally important. Increased tourist activity generates jobs and new income, stimulates small businesses, and supports the economic revitalisation of communities (Lin et al., 2024; Tobă, 2024). For instance, Via Transilvanica is a cultural route that can foster sustainable tourism, supporting rural economies and the preservation of natural and cultural heritage (Tobă, 2024). Moreover, the involvement of local communities in shaping the route strengthens identity and local pride, promoting social cohesion and intercultural dialogue (Engberg et al., 2022; Oprică, 2015).

Via Transilvanica is one of the most ambitious contemporary cultural and tourism initiatives in Romania, designed as a route spanning over 1,400 km that connects seven regions - Bucovina, Țara de Sus, Terra Siculorum, Terra Saxonum, Terra Dacica, Terra Banatica, and Terra Romana (Tobă, 2024; Florea, 2024). Inspired by El Camino de Santiago, the project was launched by Tășuleasa Social Association and inaugurated in 2022, aiming to develop sustainable rural tourism, preserve cultural heritage, and reconnect people with the authentic values of nature and community (Tobă, 2024; Florea, 2024). Through the diversity of landscapes and communities it traverses, Via Transilvanica offers a slow-living travel experience, enabling visitors to immerse themselves in nature, history, and tradition while exploring Romania at a thoughtful and unhurried pace (Tobă, 2024). The route crosses 10 counties and over 100 administrative units, connecting rural communities, traditional villages, and areas of high natural and cultural value (Florea, 2024).

The Via Transilvanica project has a dual significance: it is both a sustainable tourism initiative and a tool for rural revitalisation. According to Florea (2024), the route was conceived not merely as a tourist path but as a social and educational project aimed at reactivating declining rural communities. During the pandemic, this initiative attracted numerous Romanian tourists, offering essential support to guesthouses, farms, and local businesses that depended on visitors. Additionally, the route promotes non-polluting mobility -

hiking, cycling, and horseback riding - thus reducing carbon emissions associated with conventional transport (Tobă, 2024).

Teodorescu et al. (2025) analyse the Via Transilvanica route from the perspective of cultural ecosystem services, emphasising the importance of forests and rural landscapes for recreation and ecological education. The project involves collaborations with institutions such as the National Forest Administration and the Ministry of Environment to limit aggressive logging and preserve areas of high natural value. This approach turns Via Transilvanica into an example of balance between tourism development and environmental protection, with a positive impact on public awareness of natural resource conservation.

At the same time, the route holds deep cultural value. Székely et al. (2025) describe Via Transilvanica as a “journey of diversity” that unites elements of history, geography, and spirituality. The hiker’s guide provides detailed information on geographic areas, signage, accommodation, and tourist attractions, ensuring a safe and comprehensive experience for visitors. Through these resources, hikers can explore local traditions, interact with host communities, and discover diverse landscapes - from the Bucovina highlands and the Călimani Mountains to the banks of the Danube (Székely et al., 2025).

Thus, Via Transilvanica is not only “the road that unites,” but also a pathway to rediscovering authentic Romania, a European example of best practices in sustainable tourism and cultural heritage protection (Florea, 2024; Tobă, 2024; Teodorescu et al., 2025; Székely et al., 2025).

Through its published Visual Identity Manual, the Council of Europe provides certified cultural routes with a set of branding and communication resources, emphasising visual coherence across all promotional materials (logos, panels, maps, websites, brochures), recognition of the “Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe” brand, and harmonised tourist signage (Council of Europe, 2025). Visual identity and tourist signage become key components of tourism promotion, directly linked to the signage topic addressed in the previous section. Coherent route visibility contributes to consolidating a unified image of European heritage and to facilitating the tourist experience for visitors. At the same time, by combining tourism with heritage protection and community involvement, European cultural routes stand out as models of sustainable development. They do not merely attract tourists; they create meaning, connecting past and present and transforming heritage into a living resource for Europe’s future.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1. Study area**

To illustrate the impact of cultural routes on tourist destinations and local communities, the Via Transilvanica was selected as a representative tourist route

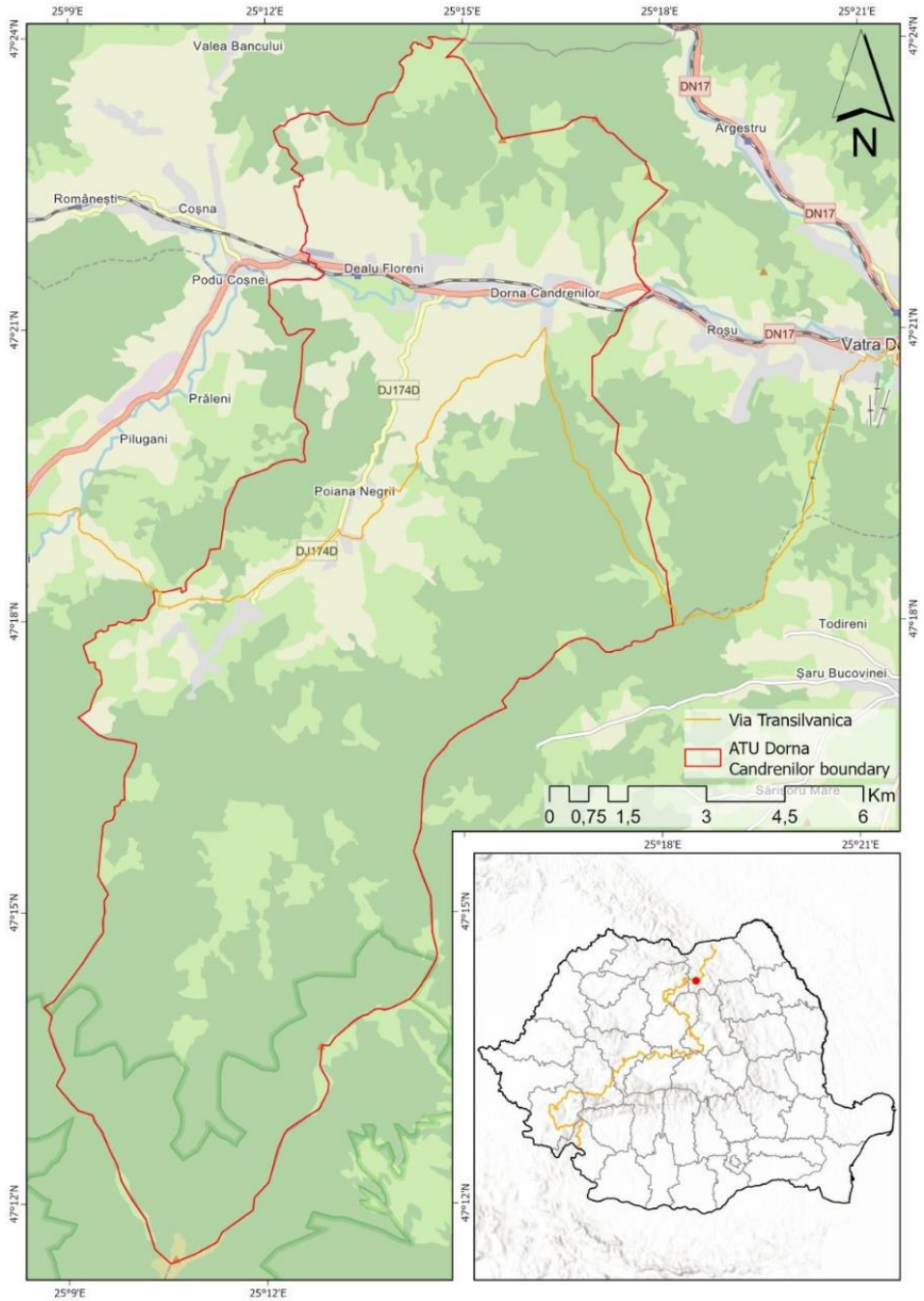
for Romania. At 1,400 km, it is the longest long-distance hiking trail in the country. Additionally, the social character of the route positions it within the administrative boundaries of rural settlements that are more or less isolated, yet hold landscape features of tourist interest. Of the eight sections that compose this route, the first one – Bucovina – linking Putna to Poiana Stampei, ends with Poiana Negrii, a village belonging administratively to the commune of Dorna Căndrenilor. This village is representative of Țara Dornelor (Mihalca, 2015) in terms of landscape, architecture, and the lifestyle of its inhabitants (Fig. 1). Morphologically, Poiana Negrii is located in the tectonic depression of the Dorna Basin, along the Dorna River (Dorna Căndrenilor Town Hall, 2025).

Defined by hilly relief, the Dorna Depression is one of the highest depressions in the Romanian Carpathians, with average altitudes exceeding 800 m and a climate typical of cold, humid depressions with frequent temperature inversions (Dorna Căndrenilor Town Hall, 2025).

Along with other localities in the Dorna Depression, such as Vatra Dornei, Șaru Dornei, Neagra Șarului, Dorna Căndrenilor, and Coșna-Teșna, Poiana Negrii is known for its bicarbonate-carbonate mineral springs formed by post-volcanic activity. Another distinctive feature of this settlement is the presence of peat bogs and oligotrophic marshes, locally called tinoave. Over 900 hectares of such lands can be found across the entire depression (Dorna Căndrenilor Town Hall, 2025).

From a tourism perspective, the key representative elements of the chosen case study include:

- Poiana Negrii has an ecotourism profile, validated through its inclusion in the Țara Dornelor ecotourism destination (Ministry of Economy, Entrepreneurship and Tourism, 2025).
- the commune of Dorna Căndrenilor is certified as a local-interest tourist resort, due to its balneoclimatic profile (Ministry of Economy, Entrepreneurship and Tourism, 2025).
- a development level concentrated on the accommodation sector of the Dorna Căndrenilor administrative unit, with a total capacity of 346 beds (of which 131 are located in Poiana Negrii). This capacity is provided by 30 classified accommodation units, most of them 3-star/flower establishments (21 units), complemented by six units with two stars/flowers and three units with four stars/flowers. The accommodation typology is diverse, including rental apartments (3 units), rental rooms (13 units), agritourism and tourist guesthouses (13 units), and one camping-type cabin.
- the food service sector consists of 3 classic restaurants (one of which is located in Poiana Negrii), all classified as 3-star establishments.



**Fig. 1. The Territorial Context of Poiana Negrii Village**



- the network of certified mountain trails, which ensures accessibility and diversity in hiking experiences, such as Via Transilvanica, suitable for recreational tourists and families, representing accessible nature-based tourism or the second trail, Poiana Negrii – Schit Apa Rece – 12 Apostoli – Călimanul Cerbului Peak, a trail that attracts experienced mountain tourists and promotes forms of active, adventure, and nature-exploration tourism (Ministry of Economy, Entrepreneurship and Tourism, 2023).
- Tourism activities within the commune are managed by two Destination Management Organisations (DMOs): DMO Țara Dornelor, according to Approval No.2/20.01.2023, and DMO Bucovina, according to Approval No. 11/17.05.2023, reflecting a coordinated institutional approach (Ministry of Economy, Entrepreneurship and Tourism, 2023).

The analysis of tourism dynamics for Poiana Negrii indicates a moderate tourism profile, with a slightly upward trend between 2015 and 2024 (Fig. 2). Statistical data show a steady increase in the number of arrivals until 2019, followed by stagnation in 2020-2021, corresponding to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on tourist mobility at the county level. After this period, a recovery trend is observed, with a slight increase in tourist flows up to 2024. Compared to other localities in Suceava County, Poiana Negrii ranks below the regional average in terms of arrival volume, being surpassed by established tourist centres such as Vatra Dornei, Sucevița, Putna, Gura Humorului, or Vatra Moldoviței. These destinations benefit from more developed tourism infrastructure and higher national visibility. In contrast, Poiana Negrii functions mainly as a complementary area to the Vatra Dornei resort, attracting tourists interested in the natural environment, tranquility, and mineral water resources.

The evolution recorded for the overnight-stay indicator confirms this trend. Although the absolute values are low compared to other tourist localities, since 2021, there has been an increase in the average length of stay - an indication of the consolidation of recreational and relaxation-oriented tourism. This shift may be correlated with the diversification of rural accommodation options and the growing preference for less-crowded mountain destinations.

### **3.2. Data Collection and Analysis**

The data collection process involved the following steps:

a) field survey of the village Poiana Negrii, conducted on 8 November 2025, during which all tourist signage elements in the locality were mapped (n = 26), accompanied by metadata (photographs, attributes associated with the identified signage). The mapped elements were also validated through observations retrieved from Google Street View. Field Maps software was used as the mapping tool for tourist signage elements, and, in addition to signposts,

relevant photographs were inventoried (n = 27). For selecting signage typologies, the ISO 7001 standard was used as a reference (Neves et al., 2017).

b) collection of statistical data from the Ministry of Economy, Entrepreneurship and Tourism (accommodation units, food service units, local-interest tourist resorts, certified mountain trails, approved destination management organisations, designated ecotourism destinations - all retrieved for 2025) and the National Institute of Statistics – Tempo Online (arrivals, overnight stays for 2015-2024). Data were collected for Dorna Căndrenilor, and for certain specific indicators, data collection was extended to the Suceava County level.

c) netnographic analysis of the locations listed within the administrative area of Poiana Negrii (accommodation units, religious buildings, trails) on the Google Maps platform (n = 9), and retrieval of user-generated content (UGC) for each location. A total of 3339 Google Maps reviews were collected for the period 2018-2025 (Table 1).

**Table 1. Number of Reviews Associated with Google Maps sites in Poiana Negrii**

| No.        | Location Name                           | Total Google Maps Reviews | Reviews Associated with Via Transilvanica |
|------------|-----------------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| 1.         | Cabana Magura – Local gastronomic point | 252                       | 6                                         |
| 2.         | Pensiunea 12 Apostoli Poiana Negrii     | 49                        | 1                                         |
| 3.         | Casa Edi                                | 126                       | 10                                        |
| 4.         | Casa de oaspeți Măriuca                 | 123                       | 28                                        |
| 5.         | Pensiunea agroturistică Casa Nicușor    | 25                        | 1                                         |
| 6.         | Pensiunea Poiana Negrii                 | 92                        | 2                                         |
| 7.         | Pensiunea Miruna                        | 90                        | 1                                         |
| 8.         | Pensiunea la Bella Vista                | 736                       | 1                                         |
| 9.         | Anastasia Bucovina                      | 57                        | 1                                         |
| 10.        | Pensiunea agroturistică Poiana          | 1459                      | 344                                       |
| 11.        | Pensiunea Casa Moldovanului             | 25                        | 2                                         |
| 12.        | Poiana Bucovineană                      | 121                       | 0                                         |
| 13.        | Pensiunea Poiana Munților               | 2                         | 0                                         |
| 14.        | Casa Darius                             | 2                         | 0                                         |
| 15.        | Dor de munte                            | 2                         | 0                                         |
| 16.        | Valea Piatra                            | 1                         | 0                                         |
| 17.        | Dealul Obcinei                          | 1                         | 0                                         |
| 18.        | Forest road Gliqu 2                     | 1                         | 0                                         |
| 19.        | Buna Vestire Monastery                  | 19                        | 10                                        |
| 20.        | Schitul 12 Apostoli                     | 98                        | 46                                        |
| 21.        | Stâncile Lucaciu                        | 8                         | 2                                         |
| 22.        | Stâncile 12 Apostoli                    | 36                        | 16                                        |
| 23.        | Saint Dumitru Church                    | 7                         | 2                                         |
| 24.        | Orthodox church I                       | 7                         | 5                                         |
| <b>25.</b> | <b>Total</b>                            | <b>3339</b>               | <b>476</b>                                |

*Source: Google Maps (2018-2025)*

A case study was also used to identify elements of tourist signage, namely at Poiana Negrii, a rural settlement integrated into the Via Transilvanica route.

Multiple methods were employed for data analysis. The elements mapped in FieldMaps were spatially represented in ArcGIS Pro, highlighting the density of tourist signage elements in Poiana Negrii. Statistical data were processed by calculating indicators (arrivals, overnight stays) and presented graphically. Additionally, a qualitative evaluation of the identified tourist signage elements in Poiana Negrii was conducted using a Likert scale based on four variables: aesthetics, content, functionality, and maintenance.

For the review analysis, thematic content analysis was applied. After collecting the reviews, they were manually coded in Microsoft Excel. The codes were associated with themes related to the settlement's identity and ethnographic landmarks, as well as the Via Transilvanica route (n = 8). The most relevant lexical expressions (quotes) were recorded in terms of their frequency of use by tourists.

## **4. RESULTS**

### **4.1. Specific Elements of the Traditional Village Poiana Negrii**

Poiana Negrii, an integral part of the Dorna Basin and Țara Dornelor, stands out for preserving the authenticity of rural life and maintaining traditional architectural and material culture elements. The village landscape is characterised by scattered homesteads, harmoniously integrated into the natural scenery and adapted to the mountainous topography. These homesteads, along with traditional clothing and local customs, define the community's cultural identity, preserving the ethnographic specificity of Țara Dornelor (OAR, 2016; Mihalca, 2015).

The traditional architecture in Țara Dornelor reflects a balance between necessity, functionality, and aesthetic symbolism. Buildings are predominantly made of fir and spruce wood, locally available materials that provide good thermal insulation and a natural integration into the landscape (OAR, 2016). Traditional log-joining techniques - such as the "dovetail," "growth," or "cat's paw" methods - demonstrate the craftsmanship of local artisans and ensure continuity of woodcraft across generations (Mihalca, 2015).

The traditional houses from this area are distinguished by simple volumes and discreet but deeply symbolic ornamentation. The rectangular plan, four-pitched roof, porch, and carved veranda are defining elements of local architecture, frequently found in Poiana Negrii as well (Mihalca, 2015). Depending on the evolution of the homestead, several types of dwellings can be identified (single-cell house with vestibule and pantry; two-room house with central vestibule; house with veranda; house with reinforced annex) (Mihalca,

2015; OAR, 2016). Today, only a few houses partially retain these attributes, as most have undergone modifications.



**Fig. 3. Traditional Architectural Landmarks in Poiana Negrii**  
*Source: the author (2025)*

At the centre of the homestead is the access gate, a symbol of openness and protection, made of solid wood using traditional techniques. This is complemented by fir-log fences that delimit functional spaces and maintain the compositional coherence of the homestead (OAR, 2016). It is worth noting that, in the current vernacular of the area, certain traditional elements are now found only fragmentarily. Carved decorative motifs and large gates with sculpted posts are no longer present in the new houses of residents but remain in tourist and agritourism guesthouses that attempt to recreate the traditional atmosphere. Additionally, a few tourist signage panels still exist to preserve collective memory, illustrating stylistic elements specific to the local historical architecture. In contemporary rural architecture, these elements have become more symbolic landmarks than functional components of the homestead.

A defining element of Dornean architecture is the *prispă* (porch), which has both functional and decorative roles. It provides a transition between interior and exterior while also serving as a canvas for the artistic expression of local craftsmen. Decorative motifs - such as the rhombus, sun, rosette, rope, fir tree, or horse head - are commonly found on posts, brackets, and railings and carry apotropaic and cosmic meanings (Mihalca, 2015; OAR, 2016). Thus, the traditional Dornean house is not merely a functional space but also a material expression of local spirituality and identity.

Alongside vernacular architecture, the Dornean folk costume represents another defining element of local identity. Women's attire is characterised by richly decorated shirts (*cămașă cu altiță*), black skirts (*catrință*), and red belts, while men's attire includes white trousers (*cioareci*), long shirts, and black hats (Mihalca, 2015). The restrained colour palette - white, black, and red - reflects the sobriety typical of the mountain environment and the balance between simplicity and refinement.

Local traditions, such as summer festivals (*Nedeile*), winter customs, and New Year carolling, complement the cultural landscape of Poiana Negrii. These events strengthen community cohesion and transmit moral and spiritual values across generations (Mihalca, 2015). Together, the ensemble of elements - architecture, clothing, customs, and craftsmanship - defines the ethnographic specificity of the traditional village in Țara Dornelor, offering a model of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature.

## 4.2. Tourist Signage in Poiana Negrii

An overview of tourist accommodations and heritage sites in the Poiana Negrii region was combined with average Google Maps ratings with representative review excerpts (Table 2). Overall, the locations show consistently high levels of visitor satisfaction, with most ratings ranging between 4.5 and 5.0 stars. The reviews highlight recurring themes such as exceptional hospitality, high-quality traditional food, peaceful rural settings, and attractive natural landscapes. Several entries emphasize the importance of the Via Transilvanica trail as a catalyst for tourism, bringing both domestic and international visitors. The feedback also indicates that cultural and religious sites contribute significantly to the region’s touristic appeal, particularly due to their scenic surroundings and architectural value. Collectively, the data reflect a strong and coherent positive tourist experience, suggesting a well-developed hospitality culture and a high potential for sustainable rural tourism development in the area.

**Table 2. Tourist Accommodation and Points of Interest in Poiana Negrii and Surrounding Areas: Google Maps Ratings and Representative Review Excerpts**

| No. | Location Name                           | The average rating | Examples                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|-----|-----------------------------------------|--------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1.  | Cabana Magura – Local gastronomic point | 4,7                | “Fairytale landscape, wonderful hosts, traditional food, hiking. Exceptional!” (I.T., 2019)                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| 2.  | Pensiunea 12 Apostoli Poiana Negrii     | 4,5                | “A place with an excellent view, peaceful and quiet like in the countryside, just like at our grandparents’ back in the day!” (I.S., 2020)                                                                                                                                   |
| 3.  | Casa Edi                                | 4,5                | “The location is right on the Via Transilvanica trail (for those interested). The rooms and bathrooms are clean and well arranged. There is a small shop downstairs where you can buy food and drinks. The kitchen is well equipped and clean. I recommend it.” (C.R., 2025) |
| 4.  | Casa de oaspeți Măriuca                 | 5                  | “We stayed one night at Casa Măriuca while hiking on Via Transilvanica. It was one of the best guest houses that we stayed at. The room was very clean, and we got treated with tasty                                                                                        |

|     |                                       |     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|-----|---------------------------------------|-----|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|     |                                       |     | meals along with a lot of hospitality.” (F.W., 2021)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| 5.  | Pensiunea agroturist ică Casa Nicușor | 4,8 | “We came based on friends’ recommendations. I thought they were exaggerating with the praise. But no - it was extraordinarily good, and we will return whenever we can find the cabin available. A Bucovinian culinary treat, with products from their own farm, and dreamlike scenery.” (D.P., 2024)      |
| 6.  | Pensiunea Poiana Negrii               | 4,9 | “Perfect hospitality, traditional culinary delights, beautiful scenery, etc. Everything at the highest level!!!” (C.D., 2023)                                                                                                                                                                              |
| 7.  | Pensiunea Miruna                      | 4,6 | “We stayed here overnight during our hike along the Via Transilvanica. The owners speak English, and the guesthouse is located right on the trail. They even reminded us via WhatsApp that the guesthouse does not serve food. There is a shared kitchen. We had a pleasant and quiet night.” (P.H., 2025) |
| 8.  | Pensiunea la Bella Vista              | 4,7 | “Nice place with excellent quality and with traditional dishes.” (C.G., 2018)                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| 9.  | Anastasia Bucovina                    | 4,9 | “I recommend it to anyone who wants to disconnect from urban life and arrive in an absolutely wonderful place! The villa has all the necessary amenities, and the interior and exterior design fits perfectly with the surroundings!” (M.D., 2018)                                                         |
| 10. | Pensiunea agroturist ică Poiana       | 4,7 | “Nice and friendly people. Good service, good food. Traditional dishes. Nice surroundings. Sauna and other facilities available.” (E.R., 2022)                                                                                                                                                             |
| 11. | Pensiunea Casa Moldovanului           | 5   | “For those who love peace and quiet, who know how to appreciate beautiful landscapes, and who want an unforgettable experience, we warmly recommend this place. We will definitely return.” (F.C., 2025)                                                                                                   |
| 12. | Poiana Bucovineană                    | 4,5 | -                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| 13. | Pensiunea Poiana Munților             | 5   | “A wonderful place! An oasis for relaxation! Peace, fresh air, welcoming hosts. Clean and beautiful location with stunning views! Highly recommend!” (A.D., 2025)                                                                                                                                          |
| 14. | Casa Darius                           | 5   | -                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| 15. | Dor de munte                          | 4   | -                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| 16. | Valea Piatra                          | 5   | -                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| 17. | Dealul Obcinei                        | 4   | -                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| 18. | Forest road Gliqu 2                   | 5   | -                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| 19. | Buna Vestire Monastery                | 4,8 | “What can you say about a place that seems torn from heaven! The human mind is not                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |

|     |                      |     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|-----|----------------------|-----|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|     |                      |     | capable of evaluating it. Pure humility!” (I.B., 2025)                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| 20. | Schitul 12 Apostoli  | 4,7 | “An unforgettable experience. The road is very good, even though it’s a forest road. The scenery is spectacular, and the hike to the reserve offers an unforgettable experience!” (A.D., 2024)                                                                                    |
| 21. | Stâncile Lucaciu     | 4,9 | “Dreamlike scenery! If you reach this area, you absolutely must take this trail! You will definitely return and be just as impressed!” (A.A., 2024)                                                                                                                               |
| 22. | Stâncile 12 Apostoli | 5   | “An easy trail with scenery that literally takes your breath away for a few seconds, making you appreciate even more what you see.” (D.E., 2025)                                                                                                                                  |
| 23. | Saint Dumitru Church | 4,3 | “A very beautiful, small, and quiet place. The architecture and the position of the church in such a fairytale landscape make everything exactly as it should be for the local community in Țara Dornelor. I recommend visiting as many similar places as possible.” (A.C., 2025) |
| 24. | Orthodox church I    | 4,6 | “It’s fine, nicely decorated, worth visiting.” (P.S., 2019)                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |

*Data source: Google Maps*

In Poiana Negrii, a diverse network of signs can be observed, serving both to guide visitors and to promote the local identity and the Via Transilvanica cultural route. Within the study area, there is a notable density of signage elements and tourist infrastructure, often located off the main road and near intersections (Fig. 5). Based on the field survey, several types of signs were identified - from entrance panels to the village and Via Transilvanica markers, to directional signs for accommodation units, facilities, heritage sites, and advertising panels (Table 3).

**Table 3. Evaluation of Tourist Signage in Poiana Negrii**

| Type                           | Aesthetics       | Content | Functionality | Maintenance |
|--------------------------------|------------------|---------|---------------|-------------|
|                                | 1-5 Likert scale |         |               |             |
| Village entrance/exist signs   | 5                | 5       | 5             | 5           |
| Via Transilvanica milestone    | 5                | 5       | 5             | 5           |
| Accomodation signs             | 4                | 5       | 5             | 5           |
| Tourism, culture and herritage | 3                | 4       | 5             | 3           |
| Facilities                     | 5                | 5       | 5             | 5           |
| Via Transilvanica signs        | 5                | 5       | 5             | 5           |
| Advertisments                  | 2                | 5       | 3             | 5           |

*Data source: Direct Observations by the Author, Field Mapping*

The qualitative evaluation of the different types of tourist signage in Poiana Negrii, conducted using a Likert scale (1 = basic, 5 = relevant), highlights significant variations across the analysed categories, particularly in aesthetics and maintenance. Signs intended to promote accommodation units received lower scores for “Aesthetics” because some are made from rudimentary materials, consisting solely of hand-inscribed wooden arrows. This type of construction results in low visibility and an inconsistent appearance, negatively affecting visitors’ perception of the quality of tourist infrastructure.

For the “Tourism, Culture, and Heritage” category, lower scores in both “Aesthetics” and “Maintenance” reflect the advanced state of deterioration of some informational panels, especially those detailing local tourist routes. Exposed to prolonged weathering, some of these panels have faded or been damaged, significantly hindering the readability of the text and reducing their informational value (Fig. 4). Therefore, despite their important role in guiding tourists, these panels urgently require rehabilitation interventions.

Regarding the “Advertisements” type of signage, the low scores in the aesthetic criterion can be explained by their placement and presentation: many local advertisements are attached to fences, limiting visibility, especially for drivers. However, their positioning is strategic from a pedestrian flow perspective, as they are located near a bus stop. The large announcement panel, placed at the village exit in front of the cultural centre, occupies a visible area but has no posters at the time of the survey. This space could be utilised more effectively by integrating a village tourist map that highlights main attractions and facilities, thereby enhancing both informational coherence and visual appeal.



**Fig. 4. Tourist Signage Elements in Poiana Negrii: Trail Marker, Accommodation Sign, Information Panels (from left to right)**  
*Source: author (2025)*

Beyond the identified limitations, the analysis of tourist signage also reveals numerous examples of good practice. A significant portion of the panels is of high quality, both in design and functionality. They incorporate complex

visual elements (maps, directional arrows, service descriptions, QR codes, etc.), contributing to a more informed and accessible tourist experience. A notable feature is the use of the “gate” form in the construction of some panels - a traditional architectural element specific to the area - which provides visual unity and coherence with the local identity. This approach is also reflected in how several guesthouses mark their entrances (Fig. 4).

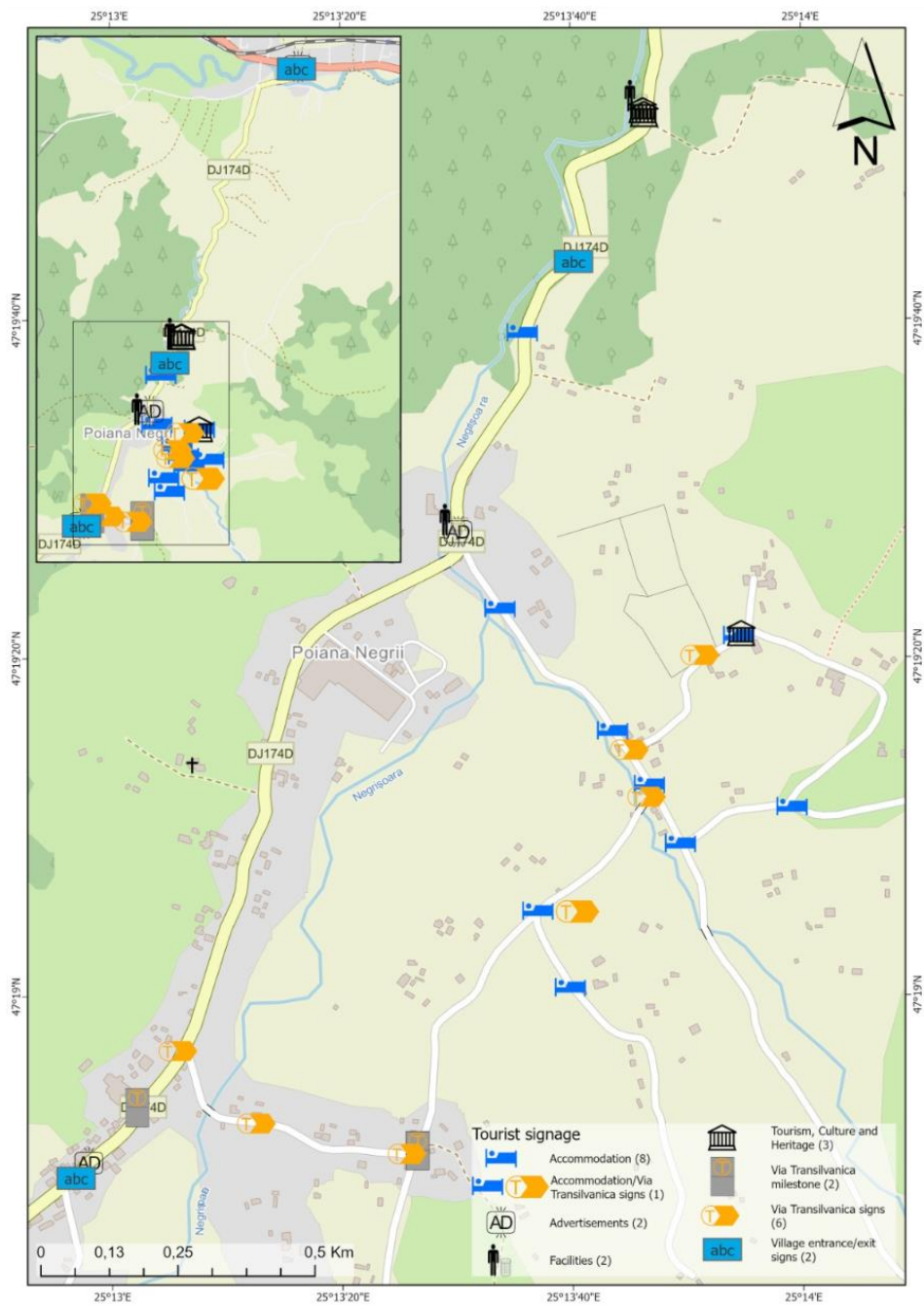
One of the central panels promoting local identity, aimed at highlighting the village's belonging to Țara Dornelor and presenting specific tourist experiences, stands out for the diversity and quality of its content. It includes maps, images, information on activities, thematic routes, and a QR code, serving as a valuable tool for visitor orientation. However, its placement is suboptimal: the panel is located in a less visible spot, partially obscured by other signs, and the small text size limits readability from a distance.

The detailed analysis also highlights an uneven distribution of informational and promotional signage in Poiana Negrii. Regarding accommodation units, dedicated panels were mapped for Pensiunea Agro Poiana (4 panels), La Bella Vista (4 panels), and Casa Miruna (3 panels), which are the only tourist accommodations properly signposted. In total, only 3 of the nine accommodation units, along with one food service unit, have visible or legible signage on site. This low percentage indicates insufficient local promotion, potentially affecting both the visibility of tourism operators and visitor orientation.

Other types of signage were also identified: 1 sign directing to a church, 2 panels associated with the village's inclusion in the “Țara Dornelor” Ecotourism Park, and 2 panels for religious sites - Schitul Buna Vestire and Schitul Sfântul Ilie. Additionally, Via Transilvanica route signage is well represented with eight markers, highlighting the village's integration into this national tourist circuit. There are also two entrance/exit panels, four advertising panels, two cleanliness panels, and two signs for local tourist trails.

However, the imbalance between the actual number of tourist facilities and those signposted indicates a significant deficiency in local information infrastructure. The absence of panels for most accommodation units can limit tourists' orientation, reduce visibility of local offerings, and affect internal tourist flows. Therefore, there is a clear need for a coherent strategy to develop and enhance tourist signage that accurately reflects the village's true potential and supports an optimal tourist experience.

The distribution of tourist signage shows that most panels and markers are located off the main road, diverted toward secondary streets. This arrangement is influenced by the village's morphological configuration, in which homesteads and tourist infrastructure are predominantly located on slopes or on side roads leading to hilly areas. Consequently, access routes to facilities and tourist attractions naturally develop outside the central road axis.



**Fig. 5. Density of Tourist Signage Elements in Poiana Negrii**

On the main road, tourist signage is limited, despite it being theoretically the area with the highest traffic. At the village entrance, a cluster of panels is placed at an intersection, providing general information for visitors. At the opposite end, at the village exit, there are only two signage elements: a panel specific to the Via Transilvanica route and an exit sign. Apart from these, the main road remains relatively poorly marked, highlighting a significant contrast between traffic intensity and the actual level of available tourist signage.

This situation suggests the need to optimise panel placement so tourists can easily access information along the main transit route.

### **4.3. Tourist's Perceptions of Poiana Negrii**

The analysis of lexical frequencies associated with tourists' perceptions of Poiana Negrii indicates a strong visitor orientation toward the traditional identity values specific to the Țara Dornelor ethnographic area (Table 4). Terms such as “quiet” (n=135) or “view”/“dreamlike landscapes” (n=72) confirm that the village's main appeal derives from its natural capital and the authenticity of its rural setting, perceived as a refuge from urban environments. Additionally, consistent references to “host” (n=47), “hospitality” (n=35), and “exceptional service” (n=33) highlight the social dimension of the tourist experience, where direct interaction with locals and the ethos of Bucovina hospitality are key elements of the village's identity.

The gastronomic component is also strongly represented: phrases such as “traditional food” (n=34) and “homemade products” (n=44) indicate a significant interest in consuming local foods, validating Poiana Negrii as a space for authentic agritourism. Mentions of “own farm/household” (n=12) further confirm the persistence and visibility of the peasant homestead as a structural element of the local cultural landscape, suggesting that tourists value the continuity of traditional lifestyles.

The presence of terms such as “hot tub/sauna/gazebo/pool” (n=41) indicates an adaptation to contemporary tourism demands, in which traditional household functions are complemented by modern recreational infrastructure without compromising perceptions of authenticity. The frequent mention of “dornean” (n=27) and references to the Via Transilvanica route (n=37) confirm the village's integration into the broader regional identity, reinforcing Poiana Negrii's status as a point of interest on cultural and mountain itineraries.

Overall, the distribution of terms reveals that tourists perceive Poiana Negrii as a space representative of Bucovina's ethnographic identity, where natural, architectural, gastronomic, and social heritage are coherently articulated.

**Table 4. Frequency of Themes Associated with the Content of Reviews for Locations in Poiana Negrii**

| No. | Themes                             | Key words                                    | Frequency of keywords |
|-----|------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1.  | Ethnographic area (Țara Dorneilor) | Bucovina                                     | 2                     |
|     |                                    | Dornean (inhabitant of this area)            | 7                     |
|     |                                    | Dreamlike landscapes                         | 2                     |
|     |                                    | Location (peace and quiet, scenic views)     | 35                    |
| 2.  | Vernacular architecture            | Traditional architecture                     | 1                     |
|     |                                    | Local resources (wood, stone)                | 3                     |
| 3.  | Tourist services                   | Ambiance                                     | 3                     |
|     |                                    | Host                                         | 7                     |
|     |                                    | Exceptional services                         | 3                     |
|     |                                    | Kids-friendly                                | 0                     |
|     |                                    | Hospitality                                  | 5                     |
| 4.  | Local gastronomy                   | Hot tub/sauna/gazebo/pool                    | 1                     |
|     |                                    | Traditional food                             | 4                     |
|     |                                    | Good food                                    | 9                     |
| 5.  | Tourist trails                     | Home-grown products / locally produced goods | 4                     |
|     |                                    | Hiking / mountain trails                     | 1                     |
| 6.  | Traditional household              | Farm / traditional household                 | 2                     |
| 7.  | Via Transilvanica                  | Via Transilvanica                            | 7                     |
| 8.  | Loyalty                            | Recommend / would return                     | 7                     |

*Data source: Google Maps (2018-2025)*

## 5. DISCUSSIONS

The research results indicate that tourist signage in Poiana Negrii is at an intermediate stage of development, characterised by a combination of well-executed elements (Via Transilvanica markers, thematic panels) and deficient areas (deteriorated cultural information panels, lack of signage for most accommodation units). According to the literature, a coherent, accessible, and aesthetically designed signage system is an essential tool for visitor orientation and for maximising the local tourism potential (Wan, 2022). In this regard, the situation in Poiana Negrii highlights the need to align informational infrastructure with universal design principles and current standards of visual communication.

An important aspect emerging from the analysis is that signage can directly contribute to the village's development, both by facilitating internal mobility for tourists and by reinforcing local identity. Panels incorporating traditional architectural motifs help convey the destination's visual coherence and strengthen the "rural brand," a key element for a locality located on a significant cultural route such as Via Transilvanica. At the same time, the absence of signage for most guesthouses reduces the village's economic potential, affecting the visibility of tourism operators and limiting visitors' ability to explore the complete local offer.

Furthermore, results from the netnographic analysis confirm that tourist loyalty is a strong element of Poiana Negrii's image, as evidenced by reviews that

use terms such as “recommend” or “*we will return*” (n=87). This loyalty is closely linked to service quality, hospitality, and the authenticity of the rural environment - elements consistently highlighted in visitor feedback. Several tourist statements reinforce this aspect, indicating both the quality of the experience and the desire to return: “*Personally, I will come back*” (M.C., 2022), “*Top-notch guesthouse... We will gladly return*” (A.T., 2023), “*We will always return with pleasure*” (I.R., 2024). Such declarations suggest that an emotional connection with the place is already established, and improving the signage system could further enhance visitor satisfaction and loyalty.

However, to capitalise on these advantages in the long term, it is necessary to develop an integrated tourism marketing strategy that includes not only the promotion of attractions and services but also the standardisation and updating of tourist signage throughout the village. Integrating continuous visitor feedback - through surveys, regular review collection, or local communication platforms - can support ongoing monitoring and adjustment of the tourism product. Additionally, placing orientation maps, revitalising deteriorated panels, and including bilingual or multilingual information can increase accessibility and attractiveness.

Poiana Negrii possesses strong natural, cultural, and social resources, and enhancing the tourist signage system, aligned with a coherent strategy for identity-based valorisation, can significantly contribute to the sustainable development of the locality, increase its visibility on major tourist routes, and consolidate the already strong visitor loyalty.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The study investigated the impact of tourist signage on a traditional village located along a cultural route, using Poiana Negrii - the last settlement in the Bukovina section of the Via Transilvanica trail - as a case study. The findings confirm the research aim and provide direct answers to the research questions.

Regarding the density of tourist signage, cartographic analysis and qualitative evaluation indicate that Poiana Negrii has a relatively limited, fragmented, and unevenly distributed network of markers. Signage is concentrated mainly near secondary intersections, with low visibility along the main road. Well-maintained elements, such as the Via Transilvanica markers and certain thematic panels, coexist with deteriorated or rudimentary informational panels. This aligns with the literature, which emphasises that a lack of visual and functional coherence can negatively affect visitor experience and reduce destination attractiveness.

Concerning the relationship between rural tourism in Poiana Negrii and Via Transilvanica, the results demonstrate a significant correlation. The presence of eight trail markers, thematic panels, and numerous trail-related online reviews

highlights the village's integration into the tourist flows generated by the route. Frequent visitor references to traditional experiences, tranquillity, personalised services, and natural landscapes indicate that Via Transilvanica fosters slow tourism, enhances local authenticity, and encourages longer stays. These findings support recent literature that positions cultural routes as tools for rural revitalisation and increased tourism mobility in peripheral areas.

Another important finding is the strong tourist loyalty, evidenced by the high frequency of return intentions. Visitor statements confirm the role of local identity, hospitality, and service quality in establishing a positive relationship with the destination. According to existing research, loyalty is closely associated with authentic experiences and effective orientation systems, which reduce visitor anxiety and improve comfort. In Poiana Negrii, while incomplete signage does not appear to undermine loyalty, it limits development potential, particularly for accommodation units that are not easily visible.

Future directions for leveraging these results include the development of a unified signage system aligned with international standards, creating an integrated marketing strategy for the village in which signage becomes an identity component, introducing low-impact digital solutions (e.g., QR codes or interactive maps), and expanding research to include perceptions of both residents and tourists, enabling continuous adjustment of tourism infrastructure. Comparative studies with other villages along Via Transilvanica could also identify replicable models and relevant best practices.

Theoretical implications of the study include expanding knowledge about the role of tourist signage in enhancing visitor experience. The research contributes to the literature by integrating concepts such as universal design, heritage interpretation, and slow tourism in an underexplored rural Romanian context. The practical implications are significant for tourism operators, destination management organisations, local administrations, and cultural route managers, underscoring the need for standardised signage, improved visibility of accommodation units, and continuous feedback mechanisms.

Limitations of the study include its focus on a single case and the subjective nature of user-generated content. Additionally, the research does not incorporate the perspectives of residents or trail administrators, which limits a complete understanding of the relationship between signage and tourism development. Including these perspectives could be a valuable avenue for future research.

Overall, the study confirms the strategic importance of tourist signage in enhancing visitor experience and leveraging the cultural and economic potential of traditional villages along cultural routes. In the case of Poiana Negrii, a coherent orientation infrastructure, combined with integrated promotion of local identity and community involvement, can transform the visibility provided by Via Transilvanica into a tangible engine for sustainable rural development.

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During the preparation of this work, the author used Grammarly in order to improve language. After using this tool, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and took full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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