

A BRIEF HISTORY OF EUROPEAN CHRISTMAS MARKETS. CASE STUDY: THE CITY OF CRAIOVA (2020-2024)

O SCURTĂ ISTORIE A PIETELOR DE CRĂCIUN DIN EUROPA. STUDIU DE CAZ: ORAȘUL CRAIOVA (2020-2024)

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Abstract: The study «A brief history of European Christmas Markets. Case Study: The City of Craiova (2020-2024)» aims to present a brief history of Christmas markets in Europe and to identify how these seasonal events have become, in recent years, a real entertainment industrie, with application on the Craiova Christmas Market. The Christmas markets began to appear in the early Middle Ages for economic reasons: in winter, the food merchants recorded modest sales and began to sell their products near churches, where residents met for Christmas services. The meat sellers were joined by the pastry shops, the confectioners, the toy manufacturers, the ornaments producers, etc. The authorities encouraged and regulated these markets, established the venues, the period, the objects that can be sold. The locals were joined by visitors from other localities, which contributed to the increase in income from these events. At the end of the 19th century, in the Germanic space, the cradle of Christmas markets and the promoter of the decorated tree, the Christmas markets were increasingly numerous and the period of their holding was extended. In the following century, also in Germany, the use of luminous decorations, the specific music, the aromas of mulled wine and gingerbread was imposed, which contributed to the creation of the "Christmas atmosphere", much exploited commercially today. The Craiova Christmas Market began to become a symbol of the city every winter season. The organizers aim every year to exceed their limits in terms of elements of novelty and uniqueness, to bring to the attention of the public varied themes that would attract tourists of all ages, from all social categories and even from abroad. The visibility of the event has increased year by year thanks to intense promotion on radio and television, the written press, but also on Facebook, Instagram or TikTok platforms.

Key-words: *Christmas Market, event, tourists, case study, Craiova.*

Cuvinte cheie: *Târg de Crăciun, eveniment, turiști, studiu de caz, Craiova.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The month of December and the end of the year are awaited with excitement and enthusiasm in all corners of the world. In recent years, Christmas Markets have become an occasion for joy, novelty and socialization, becoming large events with a rich cultural, spiritual and commercial component. Moreover, due to the

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excessive promotion of this type of event at local and national level, the markets represent a new opportunity to plan a short vacation (a city break) in a new location or, why not, in the same city, just to follow the themes and special arrangements of that year. We could say that a new type of tourism is developing, that of the Christmas markets, a matter that is confirmed by the number of tourists that increases from year to year in almost all cities where these events take place.

But what is the origin of these events held during the Winter Holidays? First, there is reference to Advent and its beginning (the Catholic calendar, the period of four weeks before Christmas, the beginning of the Roman Catholic liturgical year), then follows the Feast of Saint Nicholas (December 6), Christmas Eve (December 24), Christmas Day (December 25), Saint Stephen's Day (December 26 and 27, depending on the religion) and we can continue until after the New Year with Epiphany (January 6). However, there is no precise answer, and regarding the period in which Christmas Markets were first reported, the dates are also uncertain.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the phenomenon at the European level and to determine whether in Romania, specifically in the city of Craiova, Christmas markets can become a tradition, a tourist brand for this urban settlement.

In the first section of the research, a brief history of the emergence of this type of event at the continental and local level was developed, following the evolutionary stages, and then, the implications that Christmas markets have developed over time are discussed. The second section refers to the data and methods used in this analysis. During the third section, statistical data on the number of tourists who visited the Craiova Christmas Market during the period 2020-2023 and the number of existing rooms in tourist reception structures with tourist accommodation functions (including those in cottages) in Dolj County in the period 31.07.2020-31.07.2024 are analyzed. The last part, the fourth, is intended for conclusions.

1.1 The emergence of the Christmas Markets at the continental and local level

1.1.1 The first Christmas markets in Europe

In the paper «A brief history of Christmas Markets» from the Smithsonian Magazine, the author noted that the Christmas markets appeared in the late 13th century in Vienna, Austria (specifically in 1296), when Duke Albrecht Ist allowed the organization of a two-week market (Djinis, 2022). Almost a century later, in 1384, in Bautzen, the King of Bohemia, Wenceslas IV, accepted the organization of a market that aimed to sell meat until December 24. This moment proves to be a crucial one in the whole process that continues to this day because it represents the debut of the Christkindelsmarkt or Christ child market (Spennenmann & Parker, 2021). It thus becomes quite difficult to identify the beginning of this type of event, the same authors stating that such markets were reported in Dresden in 1434, and then in Nuremberg in 1628. One thing is certain, however: the appearance of these events took place for the first time in Europe, in Austria and Germany, the trend then spreading to the German-speaking parts of Italy, France and Switzerland.

Christmas markets are rooted in Christian tradition and adhere to different levels of spirituality, depending on the confessional affiliation. The commercial dimension, oriented towards consumption, has become dominant, because it also offers the consumer a social experience.

In addition to the economic component of the markets, represented by supply and demand, the symbol around which these events have taken shape is the Christmas tree, decorated classically or modernly, depending on the theme chosen by the organizers. Regarding the spread of this custom at a global level, that of decorating the tree, the origin of this practice seems to be also in Germany, in Mainz, in the year 1527, as indicated by the Reverend Robert Kolb (Djinis, 2022).

Historians believe that the custom of giving gifts was associated, in the medieval period, with the day of Saint Nicholas, the patron saint of children. The holiday of Christmas represents the end of the Advent calendar, a period in which fasting and prayer are essential, and, at the same time, the beginning of the 12 days of celebration from the end of the old year to the beginning of the new. Later, the practice of giving gifts at Christmas takes us back to Martin Luther, a German Protestant priest from the 16th century.

With the passage of time and the transformation of the practice of giving gifts into a custom that corresponded to the Christmas period, a series of criticisms also appeared. Specifically, some members of society, namely the Puritans, claimed that the holiday was beginning to lose its religious, pious character, transforming into something rather frivolous, an occasion to party excessively, through excesses of all kinds.

Despite these criticisms, over time, most cities in Europe have considered organizing Christmas markets, and their popularity has grown exponentially. In the 17th and 18th centuries, these markets are reported near places of worship, a location that proves to be strategic in order to attract the Christian population to buy the products sold – groceries, ornaments, various products (Spennenmann & Parker, 2021). It should be noted that the commercial activity in the markets was always authorized, the spaces where the events took place were regulated, and the periods in which they took place were strict.

Germany is one of the emblematic countries when it comes to Christmas markets, because in many cities, events of this kind end up taking place in multiple locations, as is the case of Berlin, which in 1750 organized the event in two very important areas, including Breite Strasse. In addition to Berlin (Fig. 1), Christmas markets are reported at the beginning of the 19th century in cities such as Nuremberg, Frankfurt and, of course, Dresden (Wozel, 2009). In addition to the popularization of this type of event, we must also mention the expansion of the number of exhibitors, tables and stands, from approximately 50 in 1650 to over 550 in the mid-19th century (Spennenmann & Parker, 2021). This massive growth denotes the wealth of the community, as well as the desire to buy, socialize and belong to such an activity. The commercial aspect thus becomes evident through the variety of products and offers, but also through the purchasing capacity of the visitors. Moreover, buyers satisfied with the products purchased become loyal

customers of the butcher, greengrocer or pastry chef discovered in one of the Christmas markets (Hirschfelder, 2014).



Fig. 1 Woodcut by Richard Knötel depicting the Prussian Kings Friedrich Wilhelm III and Queen Louise at the Berlin Christmas Market (18th century)

(Source: Spennenmann & Parker, 2021)

The organizational aspects, as well as the hustle and bustle, the agitation and the disturbance of public peace in urban centers, attract the attention of the authorities who are often forced to move Christmas markets from central areas to the outskirts, thus managing to reduce the imbalance of pedestrian traffic or public transport circulation, as happened in Berlin, towards the end of the 19th century (Spennenmann & Parker, 2021). Once this precedent was created, competition with large department stores, which sold products manufactured at a macro level, accessible, diverse and present on the shelves throughout the year, becomes increasingly evident, if we refer to the usual ones – butchery, bakery and bread, household products, etc. (Kammerhofer-Aggermann et al., 2003).

Despite these obstacles and regulations, Christmas markets continue to operate sporadically in the European space in Frankfurt, Magdeburg, Halle, Leipzig, Vienna or Hamburg. The stalls' offerings are becoming increasingly diverse, segmented by age group and consumer needs, from wooden, ceramic or textile toys, ornaments for the Winter Holidays, sweets – gingerbread, marzipan candies –, fruits, vegetables and in some places, fish products, sausage specialties or alcoholic beverages (Schrakamp, 1912). We can say that the end of the 19th

century saw a decline in the performance of this type of activity, with the purchasing power and interest of citizens being visibly more weighted and they proving to be intimidated by the strict rules that the market organizers and the local administration had implemented.

Starting with the 20th century and throughout it, things change from one year to another. If by 1930 Christmas markets had lost their significance and popularity, with the emergence of the National Socialist German Workers' Party, the situation changes because, as Willy Liebel, the mayor of Nuremberg in 1933, argued, the population must return to the "wonderful German custom", that of organizing such events. Thus, in addition to commercial activity, during this period, events such as ceremonies, carol performances and speeches are also organized in the Christmas markets in the German space. However, most of them had a propagandistic character and were designed with the idea of attracting new followers for the party (Spennenmann & Parker, 2021). A series of regulations followed during this period, with many of the markets being relocated to central areas, whereas in the past they were located on the outskirts, and commercial activity had to include exclusively thematic products – decorations, books, Advent calendars, etc. Moreover, lighting elements were also introduced – garlands, lights, special ornaments – which attracted even more people, and stalls selling specific foods became even more popular. The same trend is also noticeable in Vienna or Krakow, a sign that the trend to refresh and diversify the offer present in Christmas markets in Germany had crossed the borders, becoming extremely interesting (McGrath, 2022).

The historical events of the mid-20th century, the outbreak of World War II, massively decreased the popularity of markets due to the political and economic crisis. Most markets disappeared, but after the end of the war and the collapse of the Nazi Party (1945), thanks to consumerism, the presence of markets became constant and lasts to this day.

Starting from the origin of this type of event, we observe the complexity of the phenomenon, the dynamic aspect of the markets and the survival character. Going through the history of Christmas markets, we identify several essential aspects: the reason for celebration, the desire to buy, the social involvement and the experience offered. Christmas markets are present today on all continents, in every state and urban center, regardless of its size.

The Christmas celebration provided the opportunity, and the market represents the space in which, for a few days or weeks, all the components lead us to think about the celebration of the event (Brida et al., 2017).

The fame of the Christmas celebration has attracted the popularity of Christmas markets, which today have become a reason for travel, discovery and involvement in the communities where these events are organized. In the age of technology and globalization, man is becoming increasingly attracted to everything that happens around him, he wants to be an active part of society, to discover and possess goods (Marcher et al., 2019; Egresi et. al., 2021).

For this reason, the organizers of Christmas markets undoubtedly manage to meet these needs: they offer varied products, provide spaces for spending free time during the event (stalls, tents, restaurants, pubs) and create scenes and shows that are meant to offer a unique experience to visitors (Peters & Vetterlein, 2003).

If we refer to the desire to buy, it intensifies around the winter holidays. At the same time, the commercial nature of Christmas markets is also the core of their development, the basic element that triggered the emergence of these events in the 13th century. Where there is demand, the supply is essential, and this is the foundation of the organization of Christmas markets since time immemorial and in all urban centers around the world (Brida et al., 2013).

The desire to socialize is one of the main reasons why people are attracted to visit a Christmas market, most often, meetings with friends during that period taking place in the market, at one of the spaces specially arranged for serving a hot drink or a gastronomic product.

The last component of this phenomenon, the experience, is also the calling card of the Christmas market because, thanks to the visual, auditory and olfactory elements, a concept, a whole, is created that attracts like a magnet the population eager to visit such a place. Most of the time, visitors witness unique shows, whether we are talking about lights, 3D representations (Fig. 2), choirs of carolers, flash mobs or nice smells of gingerbread or mulled wine.



Fig. 2 A 3D representation in one of the Christmas Markets in Wien, Austria
(Source: Author's personal photo archive, 2023)

These primary stimuli are amplified by tactile and thermo-sensory ones on the skin exposed to the cold. The experiential dimension is often called the "Christmas atmosphere" (Wölflé & Schnorbus, 2019).

1.1.2 The first Christmas markets in Craiova

The city of Craiova has stood out nationally for several years as a large urban center, with rich human and economic resources. The investments in the city are booming, which has also attracted the need for residents to spend more and be present in cultural life. Regarding the organization of the Christmas market, the first official edition took place in 2019, even though in previous years many of the central areas of the city had been festively decorated and commercial activities were carried out at a more limited level. Craiova is thus aligning itself with the European and national trend of offering residents a new opportunity for joy by organizing this type of event. The most famous Christmas markets in Romania were held until recently in the country's major cities and in the capital (Bucharest, Sibiu, Cluj Napoca, Timișoara, Oradea, etc.), the event in the heart of Transylvania (Sibiu) being the one that held the supremacy in terms of the number of visitors for many years in a row.

With rapid steps, Craiova is becoming the leader of Christmas markets in the country, starting in 2022, when the organizers propose all kinds of themes, intended to attract as many Romanian and foreign tourists as possible. The proposed themes were of the most diverse: The Ice Kingdom, Santa Claus' Land or the Traditional Christmas. It should be noted that the organization of the spaces was done not only in the central area of the city - Mihai Viteazu Square, William Shakespeare Square, the Park around the Saint Dumitru Cathedral, etc. -, but also in the neighborhoods of the city. From year to year, both the beginning and the end of this event were marked by grandiose performances in which the most popular artists in the country participated.

At the most recent edition of the city's Christmas Market (November 2024 - January 2025), local authorities claim that several national and European records were recorded, namely:

- the element of national uniqueness: The Santa's flying sleigh
- the largest event in terms of surface area: approximately 280,000 sqm
- over 2 million lights distributed both in the spaces allocated to the event, but also on the main traffic arteries
- the Christmas Tree in the shape of a stage, where the carol concerts took place
- 4 story concepts: The Beauty and the Beast, The Traditional Christmas, The Galactic Christmas – a theme inspired by the Star Wars movies- and last but not least, Santa's Village
- approximately 2 million Romanian and foreign visitors (many of them from the Bulgarian and Serbian cross-border areas)

From the point of view of promoting the event, the Craiova Christmas Market was widely talked about in the national press, on Social Media channels - Facebook, Instagram or Tik Tok, but also at the European level, the city entering three years in a

row in the "Most Beautiful Christmas Market in Europe" competition, organized by the European Best Destinations committee (Statista, 2025).

In each of the years 2022, 2023 and 2024, the Craiova Christmas Market was on the podium, taking second place twice (Mediafax, 2025).

2. DATA AND METHODS

The analysis of the study «A brief history of European Christmas Markets. Case Study: The City of Craiova (2020-2024)» started from the identification of events of this kind at European level, using the available bibliographic sources (scientific articles, articles from the international, national and local press, travel blogs, etc.). The results and discussions section used information obtained with the support of local authorities, as well as statistical data on the existing tourist accommodation capacity, extracted from official publications from the period 2020-2024. An analysis of social media platforms was also conducted - Facebook, Instagram and Tik-Tok, to track the novelty aspect brought by the Craiova Christmas Market in 2024. It should be noted that this study represents part of a complex analysis in which the transformation of events of this type - The Christmas and The Easter Market - into a future local brand will be discussed.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In analyzing the phenomenon of the emergence and development of Christmas markets in the city of Craiova, several indicators were taken into account, to demonstrate the evolution of this type of event, as follows:

- THE ACCOMMODATION CATEGORY: Number of tourists in November and December from 2020-2023, Number of rooms in tourist reception structures with tourist accommodation functions (including those in cottages) in Dolj County on 31.07.2020-31.07.2024

- THE PROMOTION CATEGORY: Visibility on media and social media channels

3.1 The Accommodation Category

3.1.1 The number of tourists in November and December (2020-2023)

Table 1 The number of tourists in November and December (2020-2023)

MONTH	2020	2021	2022	2023
NOVEMBER	3763	5455	12995	17000
DECEMBER	4179	5313	15498	20930

(Source: Olaru, 2023, Gazeta de Sud, <https://www.gds.ro/Actualitate/2023-05-03/cati-turisti-a-adus-oficial-targul-de-craciun-al-olgutei-vasilescu/>)

Considering the data in the table above (Table 1), an increase in the number of visitors to the event is observed. This also leads to an increase in the number of reservations in accommodation units, which demonstrates that the phenomenon is a constant one, with tourists finding more and more elements of attraction and novelty. These refer to:

- the unique theme proposed each year
- the routes that tell a story
- The Santa's flying sleigh - an element of uniqueness and novelty in 2024 at the national level (Fig. 3)
- the diversity of spaces allocated to the Christmas Market
- the rich and varied offer of events, which meet the expectations of tourism consumers of all ages and from all social categories - street shows, recitals, light shows, ice rink, carol concerts or the ones held by the nationally renowned artists, magic acts, etc.
- the identity component is represented by the presence of a growing number of local producers and traders of international products - meat products, pastries, confectionery, chocolate, alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages etc.

It should be noted that the statistical data does not include tourists who do not stay in the city during the event.

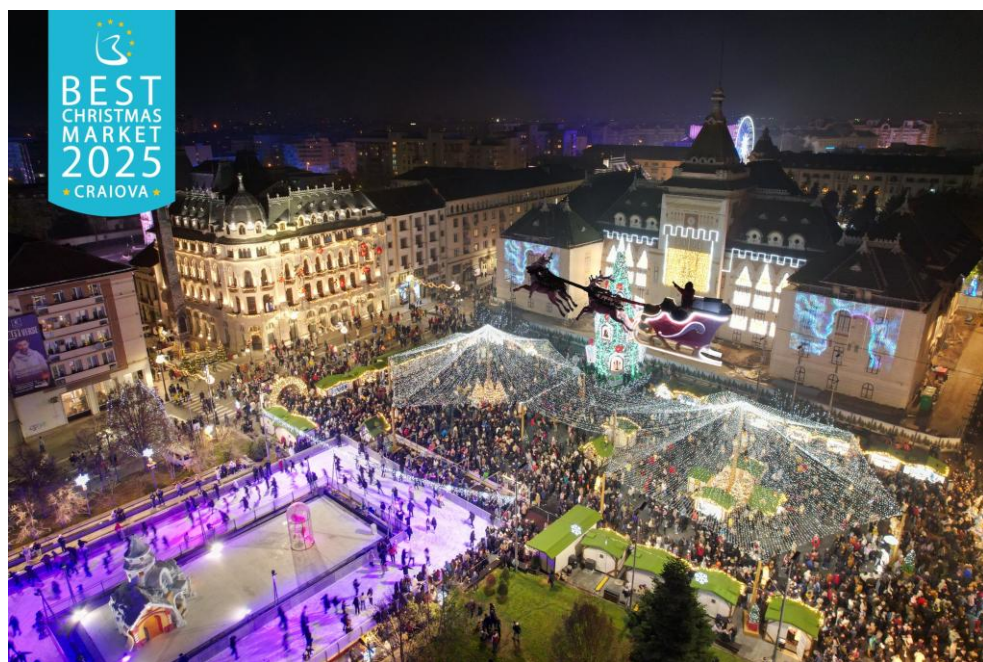


Fig. 3 The Official Photo of the Christmas Markets in Craiova with The Santa's flying sleigh

(Source: Târgul de Crăciun Craiova, 2024, [cover photo]. Facebook.

[https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1088650729723030&set=a.589167496338025, 2024\)](https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1088650729723030&set=a.589167496338025, 2024)

3.1.2 The Number of existing rooms in tourist reception structures with tourist accommodation functions (including those in cottages) in Dolj County in the period 31.07.2020-31.07.2024

The second indicator considered in this analysis refers to the number of rooms existing in tourist reception structures with tourist accommodation functions (including those in cottages) in Dolj County in the period 2020-2024 (Table 2).

Table 2 The number of existing rooms in tourist reception structures with tourist accommodation functions (including those in cottages) in Dolj County in the period 31.07.2020-31.07.2024

TYPES OF ACCOMMODATION UNITS	YEAR				
	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
HOTELS	1063	516	970	1031	1037
HOSTELS	112	68	113	99	99
MOTELS	83	127	58	38	38
VILLAS	10	109	10	10	10
GUESTHOUSES	127	349	90	87	79
OTHERS	71	779	90	90	123

(Source: The National Institute of Statistics, Data referring to the existing tourist accommodation capacity during 2020-2024)

It is noted that:

- the total number of rooms is comparable in 2020 and 2024, 1466 rooms, respectively 1386
- most of them are in hotels 1063 in 2020, respectively 1037 in 2024
- the fewest rooms are in villas, 10 in each of the two years
- in hostels, a decrease in the number of rooms is recorded from 112 in 2020 to 99 in 2024
- the largest differences are recorded in motels: 83 in 2020 and 38 rooms in 2024, respectively in guesthouses: 127 in 2020 and 79 in 2024

In 2021 and 2022, in the global context of the pandemic, the statistical data are contradictory:

- a decrease in the number of rooms in hotels, 516 in 2021 and 970 in 2022, compared to 1063 in 2020
- hostels also recorded a dramatic decrease in 2021, 68 rooms, but a rebound in 2022 with 113 rooms, 14 more than in 2024 (99)
- regarding the situation in motels, a significant increase is observed in 2021, 127 rooms and a decrease in 2022 to 58 rooms
- the number of rooms in villas recorded the highest increase in 2021, ten times higher than the previous year, reaching 109 rooms, compared to 10 in the other reference years
- the guesthouses and other forms of tourist accommodation maintained the upward trend: for guesthouses, 349 rooms in 2021 and 779 in other forms of accommodation. In the following years, the number of rooms ranged between 90 and 123 (2024) respectively.

This analysis shows that the number of rooms in hotels, hostels and motels has not increased as the event itself has developed, tourists also have other booking platforms at their disposal, such as Booking or AirBnb, where accommodation

spaces in studios or apartments owned by private owners are listed. Most often, tourists choose a minimum stay of two nights, which is beneficial for the city both from an economic point of view and for contributing to the growth and affirmation of the local and county brand, also proposed in the Dolj County Tourism Strategy for the period 2021-2027-, MORE THAN YOU IMAGINE (Strategia de Turism a Județului Dolj 2021-2027, 2021).

We note that an exhaustive analysis of this indicator is impossible to achieve, which obviously influences the legal taxation of these spaces. Certainly, this phenomenon can be brought into the area of legality as the Christmas Market matures, and forms an infrastructure that works permanently for this event.

3.2 The Promotion Category

The promotion of the event is an extensive process, carried out through campaigns in the local, regional, national and international press. In addition to the usual press releases, conferences, etc., in recent years, local authorities have participated in tourism fairs abroad (London, 5-7.11.2024), where they made the offer of the Craiova Christmas Market known. Moreover, during November-December 2024, on the streets of London, stickers on city buses were visible, presenting the Craiova Christmas Market.

Social networks - Facebook, Instagram or Tik-Tok - have contributed decisively to increasing the popularity of this event. In addition to the posts made by the people responsible for promotion in the local administration, a series of influencers, travel bloggers, etc. had an important say in the visibility of the event. An analysis of the situation represented by the Instagram platform shows that many tourists did not limit themselves to visiting the Christmas Market exclusively, but also discovered other elements related to the city's cultural life, such as: The Art Museum and The Constantin Brâncuși Center, The Oltenia Museum - The History and Archaeology Section, The Ethnography Section and The Natural Sciences Section, The Romanian Book and Exile Museum, The Marin Sorescu National Theater - or the green spaces: The Nicolae Romanescu Park and The Alexandru Buia Botanical Garden.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Considering the aspects analyzed in the study, it is worth mentioning certain elements that can be improved in the future, in order to attract even more fans of such events and why not, to facilitate access for more categories of tourists. These elements refer to:

THE TRANSPORTATION:

1. The road and parking infrastructure – even though the access to the city is easy, especially with the inauguration of the Dex12 expressway, during the market there are frequent traffic jams both in the central area and on the related arteries. To streamline traffic, it is advisable to reorganize the spaces intended for parking cars and buses in peripheral areas, from where public transport to and from the areas where the Christmas Market is held can be provided. We note that in the zero zone

of the city there is a single underground parking lot on two levels and a series of other parking spaces distributed on the surrounding roads. All of these become insufficient from year to year, and this is annoying both for tourists who spend a lot of time finding a space to park their car, but also for locals who are forced to find other solutions, the parking spaces they have being occupied most of the time.

2. The public transport infrastructure – is rarely used by tourists, but is varied – buses and trams-, and can become a suitable means of transport for busy periods during the Christmas Market

3. The railway infrastructure – even if the situation of the railway lines in Romania is uncertain, with trains frequently delayed, there are connections between the major cities in the country and the city of Craiova

4. The air infrastructure – the presence of Craiova International Airport is extremely beneficial, and with the completion of the second terminal (2025), the city will be connected with other urban centers in Europe and hopefully also in the country.

THE ACCOMMODATION:

1. The accommodation units in the city – hotels, hostels, motels, villas, guesthouses, etc. – prove to be insufficient during the Christmas Market. In this regard, in 2025, a new hotel from the Hilton chain will be inaugurated in Craiova, followed by other accommodation units developed by local businessmen. An extremely important element is taxation and the fact that tourists who stay in such units are included in the statistical data provided by the National Institute of Statistics

2. The private accommodation spaces – these types of accommodation have developed greatly in recent years and are listed on platforms such as AirBnb or Booking. The major problem with these spaces is the legislative factor, with both accommodation service providers and beneficiaries often feeling disadvantaged. Unfortunately, this element is extremely difficult to verify, legalize and tax, so tourists who choose to stay in such spaces cannot be included in any quantitative analysis regarding the number of tourists or the number of nights spent.

THE POLLUTION:

1. The air and noise pollution – emissions from cars and food stands are a delicate issue and can be remedied by implementing spaces exclusively dedicated to these activities, but also by imposing restrictions on road traffic in the areas where the Christmas Market is held. The same thing can be done regarding noise pollution, which has proven to be a real problem for the city's residents.

2. The waste management – one of the usual concerns of the local administration, which, however, becomes disturbing during the event because there are not enough garbage bins or spaces for food waste from the stands where such products are prepared and sold.

Taking into account the details discussed in the Results and Discussions section, the Craiova Christmas Market may become a symbol of this type of event at the Eastern European level in the coming years. Moreover, the locals may

become beneficiaries of such a process if it is taken into account that, from year to year, the logistics and infrastructure for the event align with European norms.

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