



Uptake of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) by European SMEs and Start-ups

Good Practice Document



Sano Touring seeks to make travelling in Romania accessible to all



Approximately 15% of the global population experiences some form of disability, while older persons with various health difficulties constitute an increasingly growing group. Yet, this population segment is still experiencing a lack of accessibility to social and cultural life, including tourism. Sano Touring, a Romanian travel agency, addresses this issue by offering customized services for seniors and people with various kinds of disabilities. The company's employees are deeply involved in the non-profit sector, which allows them to better understand the needs of their clients, as well as educate other Romanian businesses about accessibility.

Sano Touring is the only Romanian travel agency that addresses inbound travel specifics for persons with disabilities, seniors or families travelling with children. The company provides travel services, namely tours and travel packages for visitors. For instance, Sano Touring offers travel packages to groups of seniors from Israel, who often come to Romania's SPA and rehabilitation facilities. Other services are more customized to individuals and their families – this may include provision of wheelchair-friendly transportation, arranging arrival details with hotels or leisure facilities, and even recommending restaurants that have accessible restrooms. Their clients include foreign tour-operators in need of local expertise to assist their clients during the journey, as well as companies, NGOs or fully independent travellers, looking for authentic experiences in Romania.



Romania, Bucharest



Tourism and hospitality industry



2 employees (+5 external workers)



Revenue: 60 000 EUR in 2019 (activities were on hold due to Covid-19)



Established in 2015

Cristina Căluianu, the founder of Sano Touring, previously worked as a Marketing Manager at one of the top travel agencies in Romania. In 2004, she decided open her own business, *Marketing Development SRL*, and focused its activities on consulting and management of EU-funded projects. In 2013, Cristina was doing some research on travelling for seniors and stumbled upon the topic of accessible tourism. She became fixated on the idea and, one year later, decided to develop a second line of business – a travel agency that would address accessible tourism. At the time, this was a new and unfamiliar concept not only in Romania, but in neighbouring countries as well. To this day, Cristina claims that Romania is lagging far behind some other EU countries with respect to disability awareness, acceptance, and integration. Although there are laws and regulations in Romania that require to ensure equal access to infrastructure, culture, tourism etc., these provisions are poorly enforced. Despite these barriers, a few other like-minded travel professionals joined Cristina's team in 2015, and Sano Touring started its operations.

Today, Cristina is proud of what Sano Touring has managed to achieve in five years. She believes that the quality of their services compares to that of similar agencies operating in countries with highly-developed regulatory frameworks and strategic approaches towards accessibility. Sano Touring has put Romania on the world map of accessible tourism, as it is now a member of the European Network for Accessible Tourism (ENAT), and is listed on *Lonely Planet's* "Accessible Travel Online Resources" collection. The team is putting effort into learning more about the needs of their clients, discovering accessible locations around the country and sharing their knowledge with other organisations.

Accessibility audits

Sano Touring has a closely-knit partnership with a non-profit organisation, *Association CED Romania*, focused on supporting the rights of individuals with disabilities in terms of universal access in physical and virtual environments. In 2016, the Association **launched a website called *AccessibleRomania.com***, which seeks to inform both Romanian and foreign travellers about accommodation, food and beverage services and tourist locations that can be comfortably visited by persons with special needs and seniors. However, the actual conditions must be carefully checked at each destination. For instance, hotels that are marked as accessible on *Booking.com* in reality are often only partially adapted to wheelchair users. For restaurants, the most common problem is the lack of space in the restrooms. Museums and cultural venues have to adapt to all kinds of disabilities, not only in terms of infrastructure (parking spaces, ramps, flooring) but also in terms of the activities offered (descriptions in Braille, adjusted lighting, special programmes for the intellectually disabled, etc.).

For this reason, Irina Schvab, who works as a Travel Manager at *Sano Touring* and project manager of the website *AccessibleRomania.com*, **organises and performs on-site assessments**. Only those locations that fulfil most criteria (such as accessibility for motor impairments) are then placed on the website. The Association has a network of volunteers – persons with various kinds of physical disabilities – that provide their feedback during these audits. This includes wheelchair users, slow walkers, blind and vision impaired, deaf or hard-of-hearing persons. The on-site assessments provide Romanian persons with disabilities an opportunity to visit new places, participate in social and cultural life, and benefit from adapted transportation, which they are often deprived of due to a lack of financial support from the state.

The results of these assessments feed into *Sano Touring's* activities, such as creating the accessible travel guides "Accessible Romania" and "Accessible Bucharest"⁵³. Moreover, direct contact with volunteers allows travel agents and guides to better understand the needs of persons with disabilities, and thus contributes to *Sano Touring's* quality of services. However, while the infrastructure-level concerns are rather evident, the team is less familiar with disability-friendly activities and cultural events. Previously, they contributed to an initiative "Help Me Be a Rockstar", which included music performances in sign language. Further collaborations like this would allow the team to get more knowledge in this area.

The actions of the Association are supported by *Marketing Development SRL*, partner organisations (such as associations of persons with disabilities), and sponsors identified through the Association's efforts. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the sponsorship from private companies was minimal throughout 2020 and 2021. While *Sano Touring's* tour operations remain suspended, the development of the database of accessible locations and potential partners has become one of the main activities of the team.

Partnering with other organisations through EU-funded projects

The team keeps in close contact with similar organisations abroad, as well as international networks, including ENAT and *Destination Everywhere*. Membership in such platforms gives access to information on their projects and provides opportunities to be invited as project partners. Today, *CED Romania Association* is partner in two ongoing projects financed under different funding mechanisms:

⁵³ Available at: <https://www.accessibleromania.com/tours-daytrips/>

- **Strategic alliance project “AYO Accessibility in Youth Organisations”⁵⁴**, funded under *Erasmus+ Key Action 2*, the aim of which is to share good practices on accessibility in youth organizations from Spain, Portugal, Greece, Sweden, and Romania and to carry out an analysis that will be reflected in a subsequent guide to make European youth entities more accessible.
- **Mobility project “Best Practices in Inclusion for Adult Education”⁵⁵**, funded under *Erasmus+ Key Action 104*, the aim of which is to facilitate an exchange of good practices between Spanish and Romanian entities and institutions working in the field of disability (this includes exchange visits to facilities in Spain that are built in accordance to universal design principles).

Sano Touring is partner in the ongoing **R&D project “Tourism 4.0 for the Black Sea (T4BS)”**, funded under the European Maritime Fisheries Fund, the aim of which is to demonstrate the potential of data analysis for tourism development with the purpose to reduce the negative environmental and social impact of tourism and improve local socio-economic performance⁵⁶.

Barriers and opportunities for engaging in CSR and sustainability practices

During their close work with businesses, the team has identified various barriers in relation to accessible tourism:

- **Misconceptions about the demand for accessible infrastructure and services.** Tourist locations do not see the business case of improving accessibility. For example, hotel managers claim they almost never receive visitors that have special needs, hence upgrading their infrastructure would not pay-off. Business owners do not take into account that persons with disabilities and seniors represent a significant part of the population, and statistics show ever growing rates. They also do not consider that persons with disabilities seldom travel alone, which means that the hotel dismisses not one, but at least two potential customers. The accessibility audits provide an opportunity to at least briefly present these arguments to service providers.
- **Misconceptions about the costs of improving accessibility.** Business owners often believe that the costs of adding accessibility installations are higher than they actually are. For example, installing tactile flooring for visually impaired people costs relatively little. Cristina claims that accessibility can be easily improved while implementing infrastructure modernisation projects that receive funding from the state. Such financing programmes generally have specific requirements for accessibility, however, this aspect is commonly overlooked. Therefore, Cristina’s business consultancy firm *Marketing Development SRL* suggests options for their clients to actually take accessibility into account when applying for grants (e.g. planning the plumbing). For example, they offer consultations with architects and designers that specialise in universal access.
- **Lack of government support.** As mentioned before, the laws and regulations connected to accessibility are not followed by enforcement mechanisms. The government authorities are more focused on funding social services for persons with disabilities, rather than inclusiveness and integration, which could be fostered through awareness-raising and training activities for society and businesses.
- **Negative stereotypes that surround Romania.** Cristina notices that the country lacks a positive reputation abroad, which prevents *Sano Touring* from finding more international partners, as well as attracting more tourists in general. In this sense,

⁵⁴ Available at: <https://oretaniaciudadreal.es/index.php/areas/proyectos-internacionales/erasmus-plus;https://rightchallenge.org/en/ayo/>

⁵⁵ Available at: <https://cfcecas.ro/bune-practici-in-materie-de-incluziune-pentru-educatia-adultilor/>

⁵⁶ More information available at: www.t4bs.eu

she believes that a national strategy for tourism, including a large-scale marketing campaign, would perhaps alter these perceptions.

Cristina believes that the aforementioned barriers can be overcome via **information and training campaigns** for local businesses. The team's current efforts, limited by scarce resources, are not enough to raise awareness and make a change in mentality among tour operators, tourist destinations, event venues, hotels, and restaurants. Cristina considers training to be a beneficial solution,

however, businesses would be reluctant to pay for it themselves. For this reason, the team is currently working on *Erasmus+* and other grant applications. The material collected during the on-site assessments will feed into the design of the training programmes. Receiving the grants would also allow to diversify *Sano Touring's* and the *Association CED Romania's* sources of income, which is especially relevant considering the pandemic-induced financial uncertainty.



Credit: Sano Touring

Key takeaways

Sano Touring provides an example of a company that greatly benefits from strategic collaborations with non-profit organisations. Continuous efforts in mapping disability-friendly locations and building thematic expertise allowed the team to increase the quality of their own travel services. Today, the team is ready to turn this knowledge into a mission of helping other businesses and organisations become more accessible. *Sano Touring* may also encourage other SMEs to get involved in various partnerships and make use of EU-funding both for the good of society and the environment, as well as for their business. Diversification of activities and involvement in such projects has also made *Sano Touring's* team more resilient to the pandemic.