



More than churches
*An approach to develop strategies
for the economical future of the
villages of Transylvania*

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An approach to develop strategies for the economical future of the villages of Transylvania

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1. Preamble

When I started thinking about the project, Romania, Transylvania and the Saxon villages I had the idea that food could be the key to boost tourism, economy and living standard in the villages. It should be a program or a programmatic intervention which connects all the villages in some way. I thought all these villages are probably very similar to each other and only covering the area with one big idea would attract enough people to achieve a good performance. But after all the experiences I had in the region, in the villages, with the people and the more I thought about them, my conclusion shifted from accentuating the similarities to developing the differences. Maybe the villages are similar, but the strategic focus should switch from the similarities (fortified churches) to differences, which do not even have to be very distinct already. There are so many possibilities originating from cultural traditions, landscape, handcrafts and so on. The goal has to be to create a network of possibilities, generated from the uniqueness of each single village while avoiding separation. Also I want to note that these possibilities do not have to focus on tourism exclusively, but rather be strategies to strengthen the economy and quality of life in the villages. Tourism will develop additionally because requirements such as landscape and cultural heritage are given.

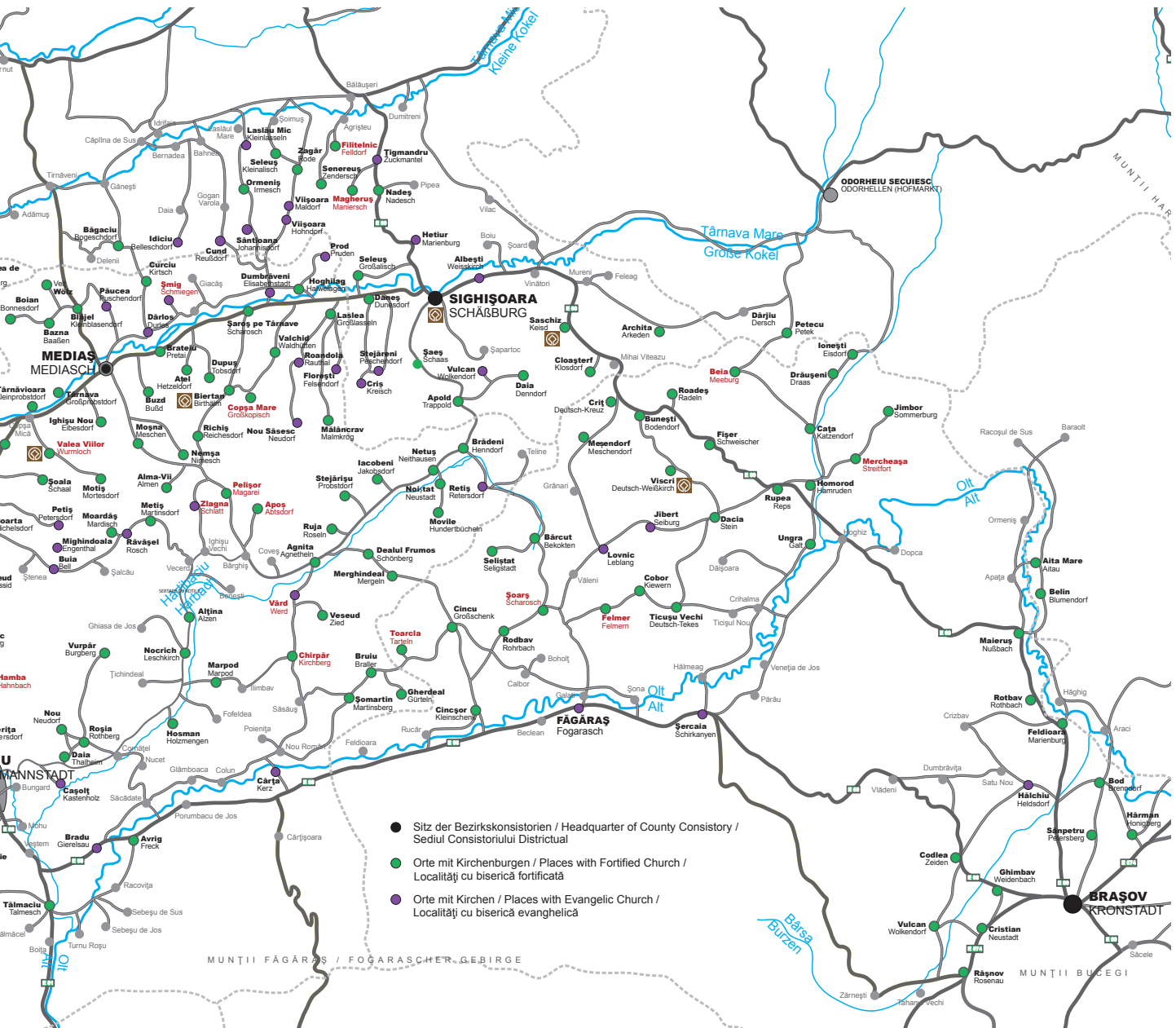
2. The Saxon villages

More than 160 fortified churches and fortress churches can be counted in Transylvanian towns and villages, accompanied by several normal churches built by the Transylvanian Saxons. Also Szekely fortified churches can be seen in some villages. Seven fortified churches are included in the UNESCO World Heritage.

Since most Saxons left Transylvania from 1990 to 1992 the left-behind houses and churches fall into disrepair more and more. While the houses are now used by Romanians and Roma, the fortified churches often are vacant and unused since there is nobody left to maintain the buildings and a lot of financial resources are necessary to make repairs and keep the churches in good condition. Since 2015 "Stiftung Kirchenburgen", a foundation founded in Germany, is in charge to conserve the cultural heritage of the Saxon fortified churches.

In the map all Transylvanian villages with saxon churches and fortified churches, as well as churches which are part of the UNESCO World Heritage are tagged.





source: kirchenburgen.org

3. The perception triangle

When coming into an unknown environment the discovering of it is a process which normally starts at a specified point. In the case of Transylvanian villages it often is the Saxon fortified church - since this is the place why most people will visit the village. Depending on how much time the visitor has available he will discover the nearest surroundings and neighborhood. If he is openminded and interested he may even get in touch with the people living there and trying to find out about there lives. So for me in the case of the most Transylvanian villages there are three steps of perception:

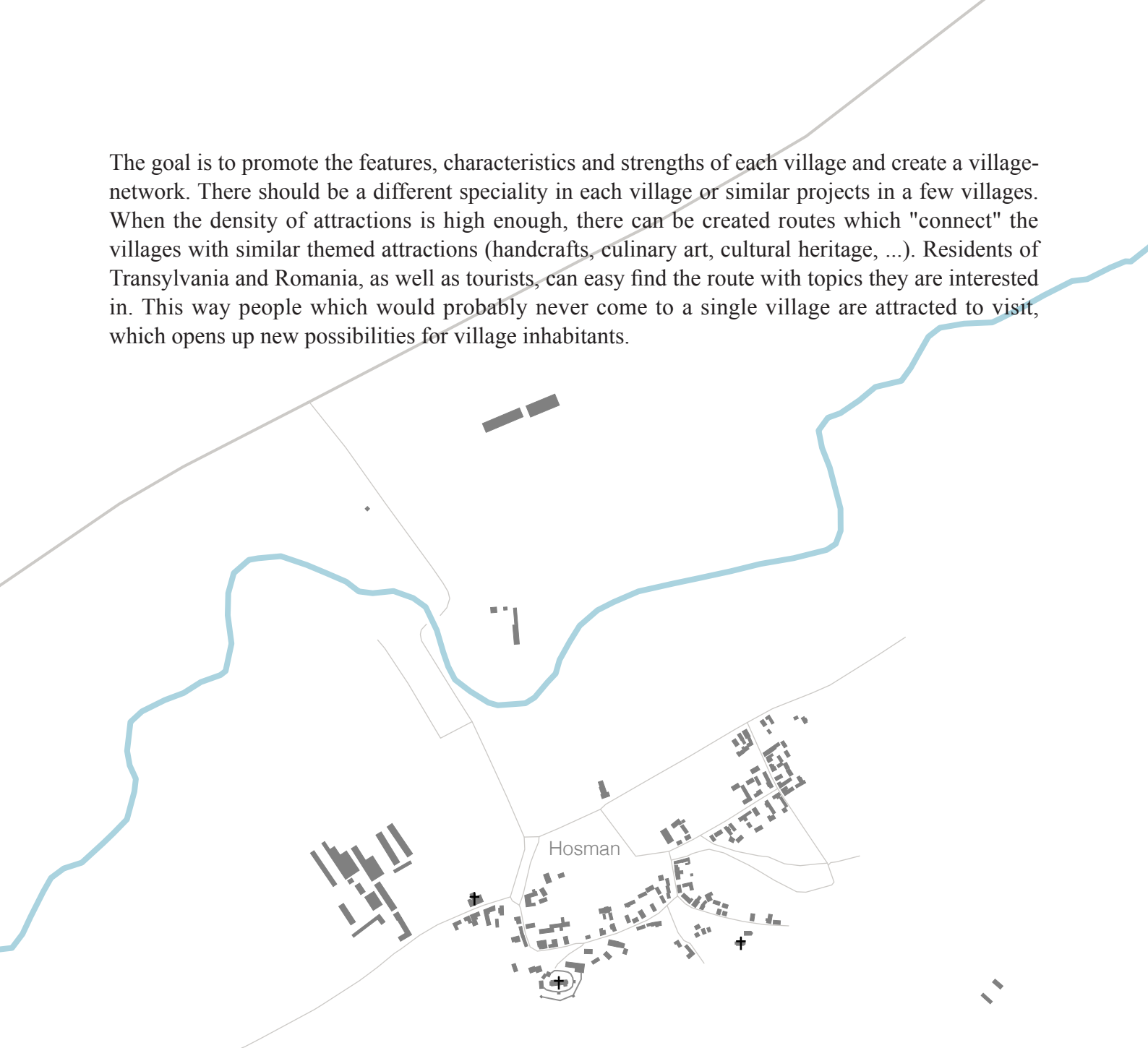
- the church
- the village
- the people

Transylvanian villages seem to be recognized in this order from outstanding people or tourists. For someone who has never been in a transylvanian village, the first impression will of course be affected by the fortified church in most villages. Since especially tourists who are visiting the rural areas get in contact with informations about the Saxon cultural heritage and their fortifications. But what about others, about residents especially - what is their perception on their living environment and habitat? What counts are the people which live in the villages - they know best what they need, what they like about their village and what it lacks.

Though the identity of the fortified churches is strong and they influence their surroundings and landscapes around, fortified churches as a single tourism attraction won't be enough in small villages as an economical perspective. Of course there will come individual people who are interested but to function as a sight and as a museum the fortified church probably has to be located in a bigger village or town, or be recognizable by its condition, size or something which makes it especially unique.

So to overcome this one-dimensional situation, small villages should focus as well on handcrafts, culinary traditions or cultural heritage and try to use side buildings of the fortified churches for these purposes. This way there will be an wider range of attractions within the church sites and also vacant buildings will get a new usage.

The goal is to promote the features, characteristics and strengths of each village and create a village-network. There should be a different speciality in each village or similar projects in a few villages. When the density of attractions is high enough, there can be created routes which "connect" the villages with similar themed attractions (handcrafts, culinary art, cultural heritage, ...). Residents of Transylvania and Romania, as well as tourists, can easily find the route with topics they are interested in. This way people which would probably never come to a single village are attracted to visit, which opens up new possibilities for village inhabitants.



4. Possible project topics for development

There is wide range of topics which could be interesting for the economical development of the Transylvanian villages. They range from agricultural subjects to traditional handicrafts and educational purposes. Some of them are described in the following paragraphs.

There is a long and diverse tradition of agriculture within Transylvania. Some products which have been produced or still are produced in some places are: schnaps, buffalo milk, vegetables such as cabbage, tomato, beetroot, carrot, onion, spinach, garlic, salad, radish, pumpkin and maize, parsley, feedgrain and lucerne. But there is also animal farming with poultry, guinea fowls, sheep/lambs, cows, pigs, water buffalos and horses which are traditional in Transylvania. An evidence for the manifold traditional farming are rare breeds such as the Mocanitz cattle, the Carpathian buffalo or the Bazna pig. All of these plants and animals offer opportunities for the Transylvanian inhabitants. Jobs and vocations could be for example tomato cultivator, goji berry cultivator, buffalo breeder, or distiller for plum, apple or pear brandy (Pálinka, Țuică).

Allegedly numerous villages in Transylvania include the word apple in their name. A proof of how important the "Arboreta of Europe" in Transylvania once were. But there are still a lot of other products made in Transylvania as wine, milk, cheese, buffalo milk cream and plum jam.

Transylvania is well known for the many hayfields and meadows. The variety of the Transylvanian flora and fauna is a huge opportunity. Many herbs like sorrel, snapdragon, gentian, marjoram, thyme, meadow salvia can be found here. But this kind of wildlife is also very delicate and is in need of cautious handling. A very important role in this cooperation of sustainable agriculture and nature is the peasants sensitive handling which is managed without pesticides as they are used in big scale agriculture.

These cultivated landscapes are not only important for the peasants, as they feed them. They are also important for all kinds of plants, birds and animals. This unique diversity of flowers, herbs and grasses could be a very interesting opportunity for peasants and residents of the village, as they can often be used as medical plants. The harvesting of herbs could be an interesting source of income, and another alternative to the forestry industry which is run by big international companies which in many cases are ruthlessly deforesting the romanian landscape.

But not only herbs are prospering in the transylvanian countryside, also broadleef trees such as

the walnut are widespread. Romania already is one of the biggest producers of walnuts within the European Union and maybe there is also a market for regional grown walnut products.

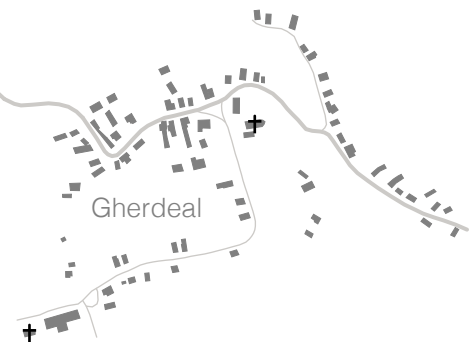
Another nice effect of the great plurality of herbs and flowers is that bees really appreciate it. Which is why there are more and more beekeepers in the past years. There is even a beekeeper centre in one village which is located in an formerly vacant Saxon school building.

But there is not only food and agricultural products produced in Transylvania, there is also a rich tradition of handcrafting. After wool processing was nearly forgotten a company is establishing factories in small villages and employing residents. The wool is processed there in spinning mills and woven for carpets (Heltau, Bogatu Roman). But in other facotires also wool products such as socks, slippers, traditional sheperd hats and wool sweaters are produced (Viscri). In Romania 10 million sheeps are kept, that is the third highest number within the EU after Spain and Great Britain. A lot of these, mostly lambs, are being exported in arab countries such as Jordan (up to 1 million per year), Iraq and Libya every year, while still having about three million small farmers with only a few acres or less than an acre of land each.

There are also producers of handmade birchwood brooms (Coveş) and producers of baskets and brooms out of bast fibers in Transylvania. In Nocrich there is a group of scouts producing traditional pottery. Traditional Houses and fortified churches are built with traditional construction methods and materials such as natural stone, sand, clay, chalk, bricks and wood. All of these materails have been produced in the region in the past and still could be produced here.

For some of these topics there are already projects in a few villages.

Like the bakery in Hosman which was founded with the help of an initiative called Hosman Durabil whose goal is the revitalisation of the village economy by helping small family farms with collaborative engagement. But concepts like this can work in many villages and also are needed there. It is really a good example that it can work and it is not that hard - but of cours it needs idealistic people who want to change something. Initiatives like this can also be the beginning of village renewal processes leading also to public interest and a boost in tourism and economy.



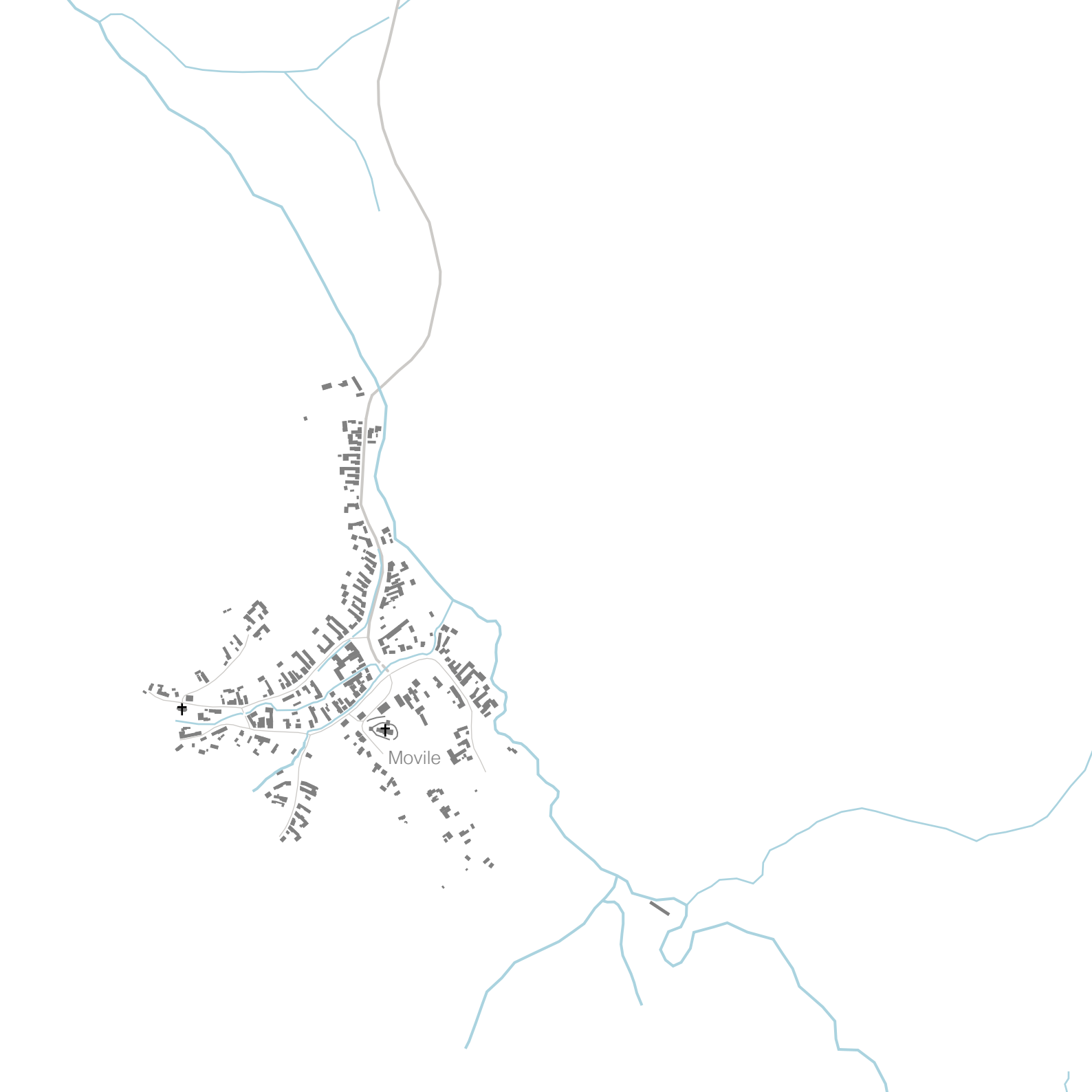
5. Education and knowledge supply

Of course many of the people do not have the knowledge about many of those things anymore, especially in handcraft. But there still are some who know and which pass on this knowledge to next generations. So this is all about creating the frame conditions where knowledge can be given from one inhabitant to another. There can be workshops and classes in the fortified churches and buildings, where people are shown how things are made in traditional ways. For the younger generations, but also for people who may decide to come back from cities. This way the village inhabitants can learn about self-sufficiency and it is really a asset which they may not even know the importance of.

The educational program can contain courses on traditional handcrafting, as carpentry or masonry, so people are able to renovate their own houses and barns, but also on bakery or distilling. This is the chance to create a new community spirit where everybody can participate and bring their personal ideas in. For these causes side buildings of the fortified church can be renovated and used as educational rooms, but also as manufacturing spaces for handcraft start ups.

Non-Profit association like "HOG Schönberg" in Dealu Frumos are helping families with donations in kind which directly or indirectly support educational purposes. With workshops, summer schools and other learning opportunities where children can participate, can support this need for education too and complement the contributions of non-profit associations. There may be possibilites to even expand their support and since they are from the Saxon community improve the relationship between population groups and figure out a way to deal with the utilisation of resources such as unused fortified churches.

With this transfer of knowledge there can be founded workshops, factories and local farmer stores with regional specialities which will also stimulate agrotourism. Activities like these create jobs, fortigied churches are serving a new purpose and also tourism will be stimulated. There will be new possibilities for further development. The people, the village, the churches - everybody wins. But also using fortified churches as a hotel or guesthouse is realistic in a few cases.



6. How to create and establish projects

Several steps, including studies and groundwork are necessary to figure out which intervention or project could be the right one to boost the development of each village.

- *Research*

In a first step it is important to get opinions from residents, from young and old. This can be happening in interviews, group meetings or at festivities where all kind of residents can be asked. What is unique or special in the village - it may be based on legacies or even on legends. What does their vision for the fortified churches future look like, how do they imagine the village in the next years. What counts is that the public participation is as high as possible. The more ideas there are created the better. In the end of this process the evaluation of what could be realizable possibilities and ideas for the future lead to further development.

- *Vacancy*

Figuring out which buildings are needed. What should they offer, how much work and money is needed to fit the purpose. Eventually there are possibilities for an agreement with the owner which will help both parties. There are many vacant buildings in the villages of Transylvania, not only those within the fortified churches, therefore a different building maybe fits the new function even better.

- *Connect*

Getting in touch with people who already started similar initiatives in the villages of Transylvania or around - there are a lot! Introducing these projects to the residents to show them what is possible could prevent distrust and eliminate fears. The know-how of them could help to set up new initiatives and projects. The projects offer possibilities for all ethnic populations in terms of new income potentials and community strengthening. New residents may be attracted as well.

- *Partnerships*

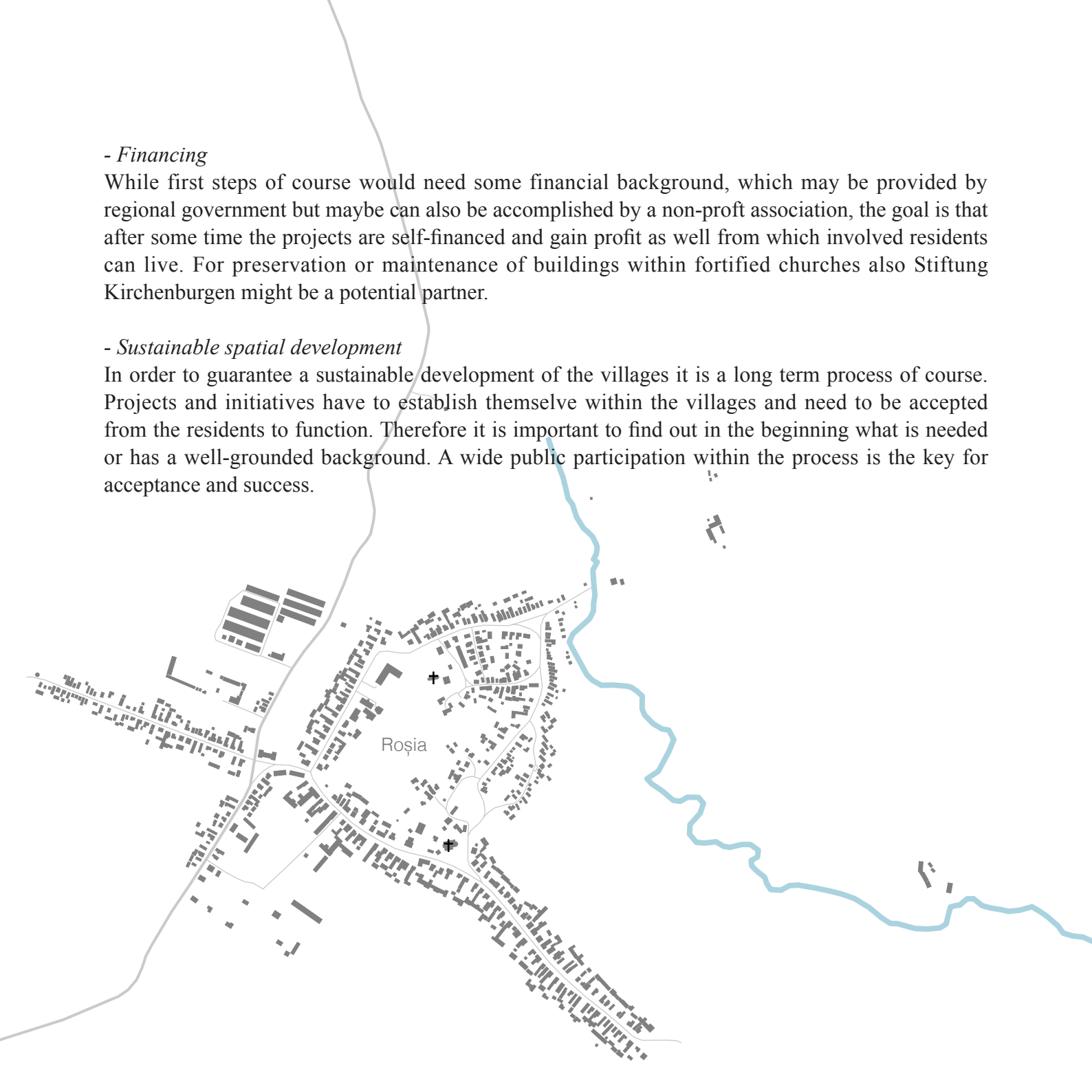
Trying to get companies into partnerships for projects. There may be a lot of potential and human resources within the villages. There are already some projects, which are showing how this could work on a fair basis for all of the involved persons. (*Links can be found under References*)

- Financing

While first steps of course would need some financial background, which may be provided by regional government but maybe can also be accomplished by a non-profit association, the goal is that after some time the projects are self-financed and gain profit as well from which involved residents can live. For preservation or maintenance of buildings within fortified churches also Stiftung Kirchenburgen might be a potential partner.

- Sustainable spatial development

In order to guarantee a sustainable development of the villages it is a long term process of course. Projects and initiatives have to establish themselves within the villages and need to be accepted from the residents to function. Therefore it is important to find out in the beginning what is needed or has a well-grounded background. A wide public participation within the process is the key for acceptance and success.



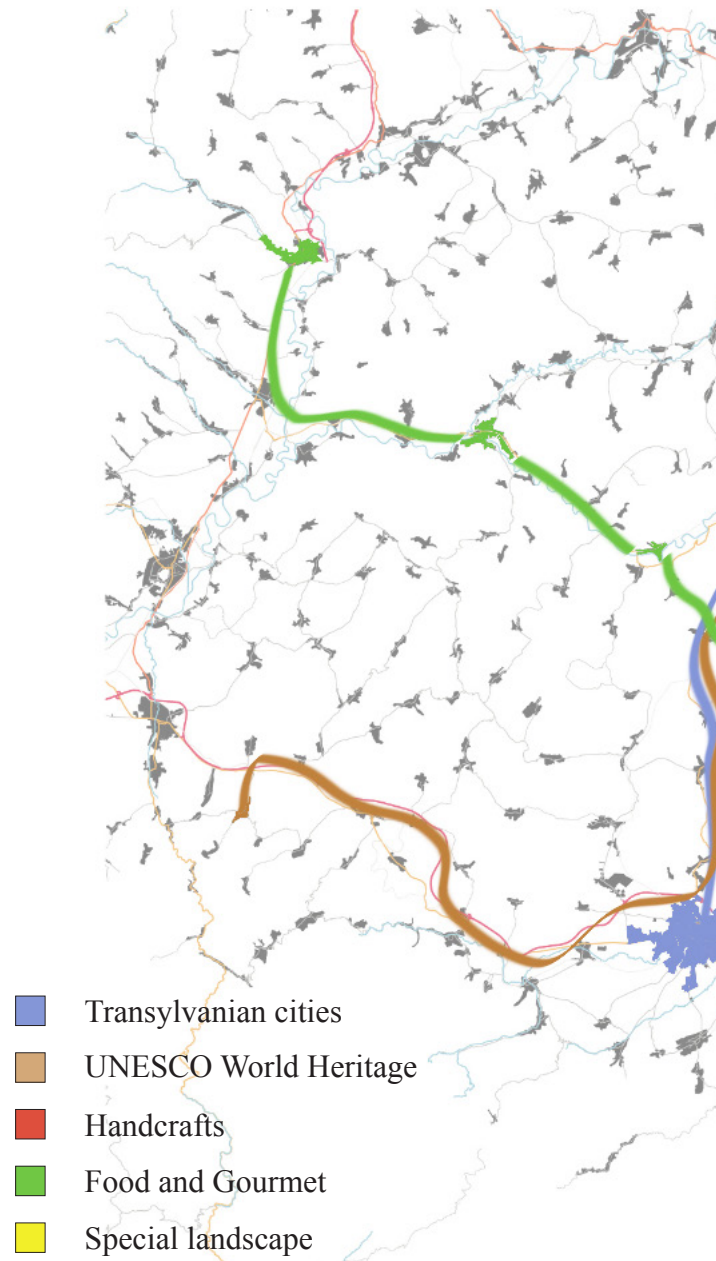
7. Themed regional routes

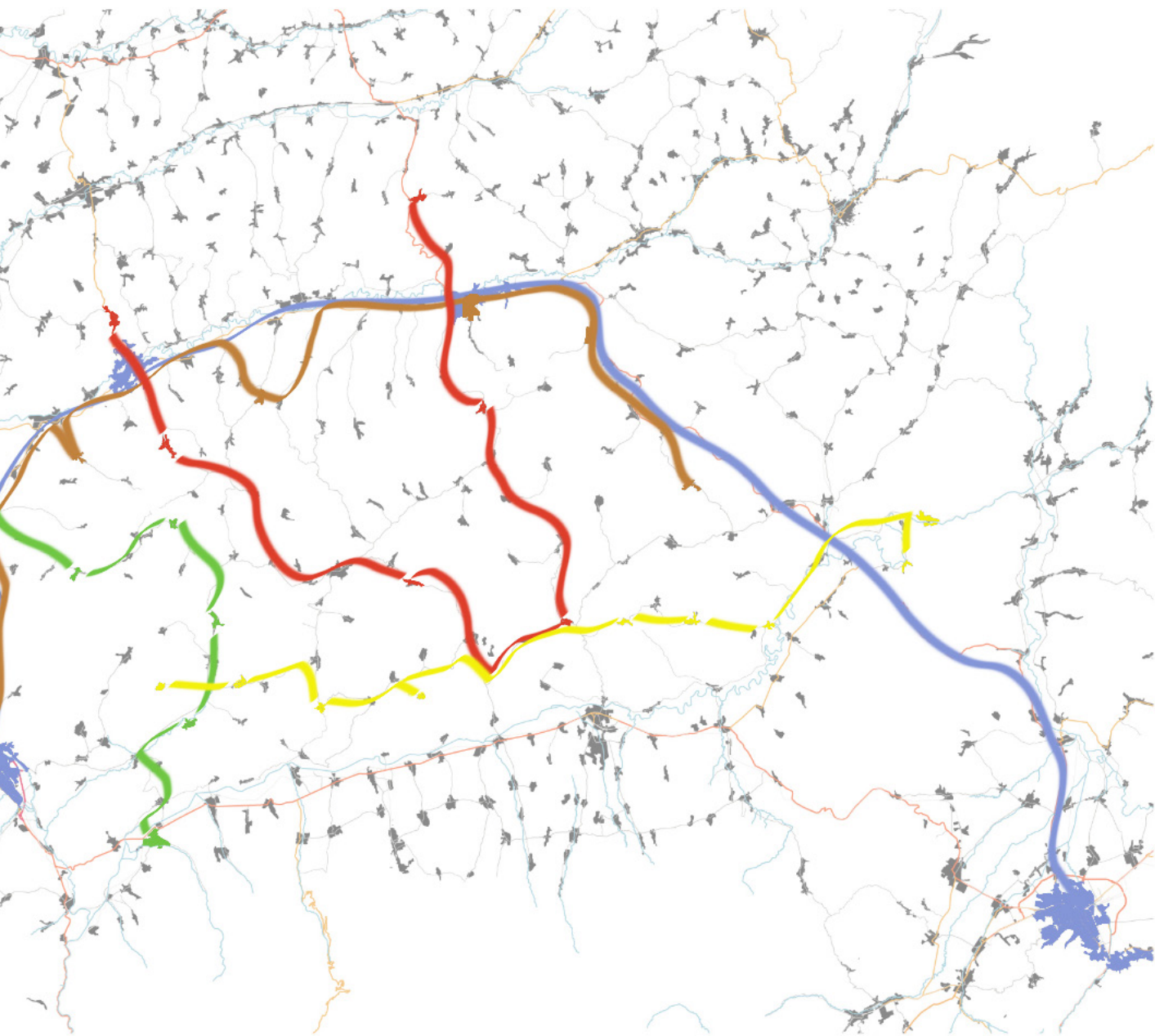
The routes consist of projects from different villages which have a similar theme. The routes can be updated from time to time when there are new projects available and can increase with time. The more variable the themes of the routes are, the better to address a wide range of interested people.

The variety range of the routes can last from those who are focussing on agricultural themes cultural heritage, handcrafts, architectural topics to routes which are serving food tourism for example with regional delicacies, specialities or special herbs. There actually are no limits to ones imagination.

On the right there are some suggested routes and how an overview of these routes could look as a map. But of course these aren't final since the projects have yet to be realised.

In the following steps of the realization of this routes, it would be necessary to locate and index already existing potential projects as well as additionally necessary projects. This can be implemented in following student works as for example as a diploma work or also in organized field studies by universities.





8. Conclusion

Agriculture and farming is what unites the people and the landscape in Transylvania. Many of the food and groceries consumed are produced by peasants in manual work without agricultural machinery. These small-scale farms are valuable for food and landscape and should be appreciated. Products of Transylvanian rural areas often are produced in ecological farming and the landscape they are produced in should be protected and supported so traditional farming communities can maintain their work and also to save their economic future. To achieve this goal this written approach suggests the further development of community strengthening projects and a regional networking concept which shall also allow a sustainable development of tourism and agrotourism.



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