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RURAL TOURISM AND TERRITORIAL DEVELOPMENT IN ROMANIA

ELENA SIMA¹

Abstract: *Rural tourism in Romania has significant potential. The Romanian effort to develop and promote tourism in the rural area has been completed by the support provided by the European Union funds. In this context, the objective of this paper is to highlight the territorial development of the rural tourism market after the Romania's accession to the European Union. The methodology used is based on the synthesis of information from articles and studies published in specialty journals, in Government documents as well as in other development strategies on tourism and rural space. The results reconfirm that the supply of tourist accommodation in rural areas has shown a general upward trend, despite a slight decline during the global financial crisis, and the investments in rural tourism activity have a great advantage, i.e. job creation and maintaining the local (rural) labour, revitalization of rural localities, mainly those from the less-favoured and remote rural areas.*

Keywords: *rural development, rural tourism, competitiveness, regions, Romania.*

JEL Classification: *Q01, L83, R10, Z30.*

INTRODUCTION

The rural tourism is a segment of the tourism sector. This includes tourism-related practices, while facilitating people's coming into contact with the beauty of nature, earth's richnesses and local people's hospitality. The natural and anthropic tourism resources of a certain area generate specific tourism forms, which complete each other within the different destination categories.

The rural tourism is a niche of the Romanian tourism, insufficiently exploited at present. Our country's territory has a great variety of cultural-historical values (folk art, ethnography, folklore, traditions, historical relics) located in a harmonious natural environment, with a various and picturesque landscape. (1)

In the context in which the physical-geographical potential and the available human resources are the strengths of the conditions in promoting and development of rural tourism, to which the financial and information support from the European Union is added, the small-scale business development in this sector is acknowledged as the most important source of income-gaining jobs in the rural area. (7, 8)

Tourism development on boarding houses located in the rural area depends on the specific characteristics of each region – folklore, ethnography and agricultural products. At regional level, rural tourism development largely depends on the existence and quality of tourist accommodation structures and on the presence of various types of activities, i.e. folklore, ethnographic/cultural heritage and farming and vine growing practice (agro-tourism). (2, 3, 4)

Having in view the positive role which is played by the promotion and development of agro-tourism activity as activity complementary to the agricultural one, organically integrated in the farms' economy, as well as benefiting by a non-polluted picturesque environment, and by the touristic natural attractions and the traditions and habits present in the village environment, the paper explores how the Romanian rural tourism market was approached in tourism policies; how the rural economy reacted and developed due to the sustained promotion and development of rural tourism; and how it can further develop and help rural communities in the Romanian area. (5, 6)

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MATERIAL AND METHOD

The methodology adopted for this study consists of secondary data analysis. Secondary data is data that was previously collected and processed and has been reanalysed to satisfy the needs of this study. The analysed information was collected through the documentary study of the works on the approached theme. The statistical data on which the analysis was based covered the period 2000-2019 and had the following sources: NIS statistical data available online; other online sources with information from articles and studies published in specialty magazines, as well as the National Rural Development Plan (NRDP) and non-governmental reports and documents.

The development potential of tourism activities in the Romanian rural area is analysed at the level of the eight development regions taking into account the evolution of the following statistical indicators: the number of agro-tourism boarding houses, the accommodation capacity, the arrivals and overnight stays of tourists in this type of accommodation, both in whole region and in whole county and rural locality.

The number of agro-tourism boarding houses is an indicator showing that the number of tourist reception structures with tourist accommodation functions together with the specific infrastructure and the tourist fund make up the real tourist offer of an area. The existence of accommodation units signals the presence of tourist activities and reveals a certain degree of development of the sector in the area. The indicator is particularly relevant in the case of mountain locations or those located in areas where tourism is an important component of the local economy. Related to the number of arrivals, the indicator shows even better the tourist attractiveness of the area.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The Romanian effort to develop and promote tourism in the rural area has been completed by the support provided by the EU funds since the year 2000, in conformity with the priorities and rural development directions of the National Rural Development Plan (NRDP), established in close connection to the community priorities and in relation to the analysis of the socio-economic and environment situation, obtained on the basis of available statistical data.

After Romania's accession to the EU (in the year 2007), the financial support for the development of tourism in Romanian rural areas has focused on investments in

- the tourist reception infrastructure and leisure activities (both actions related to the construction, modernization, enlargement and endowment of the tourist reception structures, and private investments in the tourism leisure infrastructure, independent or dependent on the tourist reception structure),

- the small-scale infrastructure (such as the tourism information centers, installation of tourism signs/tourist routes, etc.),

- the development of the marketing of tourism services related to rural tourism (design of promotional materials, information materials, etc.).

The beneficiaries of the financial support are the following:

- existing and newly established micro- and small-sized enterprises in the rural area;
- farmers or members of certain agricultural enterprises who wish to diversify their basic farm activity by developing a non-agricultural activity in the rural area within the already existing enterprise that falls into the category of micro-enterprises and small-sized enterprises, except for the non-authorized physical entities;

- communes as defined in conformity with the current legislation;

- NGOs as defined in conformity with the current legislation;

- religious establishment in conformity with the current legislation;

- authorized physical entities/commercial companies, B class into their administration.

The specific eligible costs are the following:

- construction, enlargement and/or modernization and endowment of buildings;

- procurement and installation costs, under leasing inclusively, of new equipment and installations;
- non-tangible investments: procurement or development of software and procurement of licenses, permits, copyright, trademarks;
- rehabilitation, preservation and endowment of buildings/monuments from the immovable cultural patrimony of local interest, class B;
- construction, enlargement and/or modernization of the access roads of monastic establishments, class B;
- rehabilitation, preservation and/or endowment of monastic establishments, class B;
- modernization, renovation and/or endowment of cultural community centers.

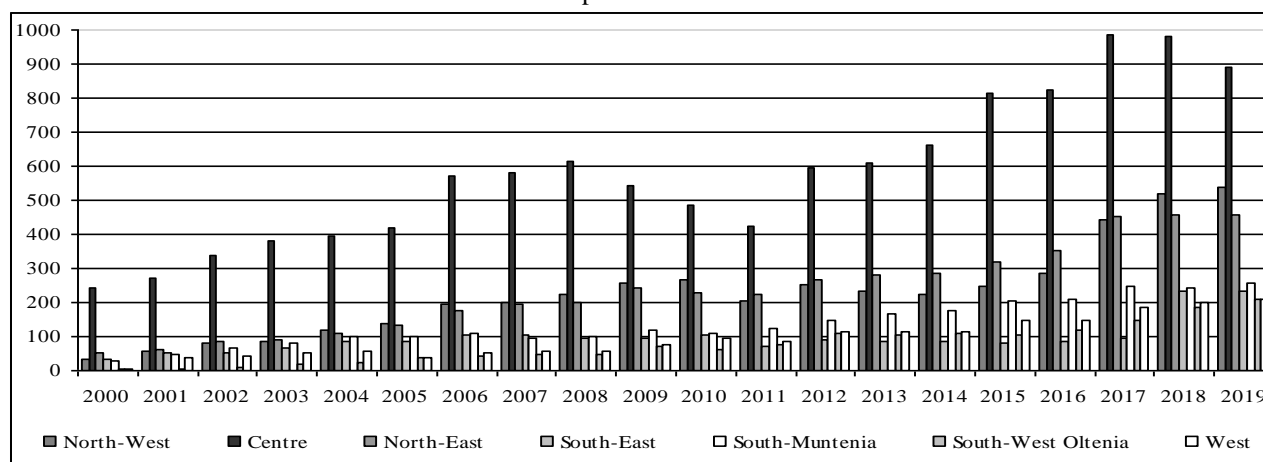
The selection criterion for infrastructure investments on the agro-tourism reception units, leisure activity projects is based on the principle of stimulating the tourism activities in the sense of prioritizing the agro-tourism activities developed in the areas with high tourism potential/ eco-tourism destinations, natural protected areas, which were established in conformity with the National Land Management Plan. The selection criteria for the investments in the rehabilitation and preservation of the cultural heritage of local interest is based on the tourism potential principle, in the sense of prioritizing the projects in the rural localities with tourism development potential.

The Romanian agro-touristic potential is also supported by the variety of natural and anthropic resources determined by the proportionality, concentric disposal and the exposure in amphitheatre form of the three major relief forms (mountains, hills, plains), as well as the maintaining of cultural traditions (literary, musical, popular art, folk art, gastronomy, religious habits, etc.). The agro-tourism is a form of tourism emerged from the need to find some solutions for increasing the rural farms incomes by putting into value their potential. This potential refers both to the existent accommodation potential, prepared and arranged mainly for the guests' receiving, and to the goods and services supplied for consumption to persons coming into the rural environment for relaxing, rest, leisure.

In function to the natural, cultural, folklore environment of the region, *agro-touristic services* offered can vary from meals' serving, accompanying and touristic guide on certain tracks or initiation in certain traditional crafts, to the practicing of some sports or assistance to a series of traditional habits in the locality or zone (poems sessions, village dances, carols, church holidays, traditional fairs, folklore shows, etc).

The European funds contributed to the development of services related to rural tourism and to the increase of the living standard of the rural people, through the development of the rural economy and of the entire rural space. Thus, in the period 2000-2019 the evolution of the number of agro-tourism boarding houses by development regions continuously developed (Fig. 1).

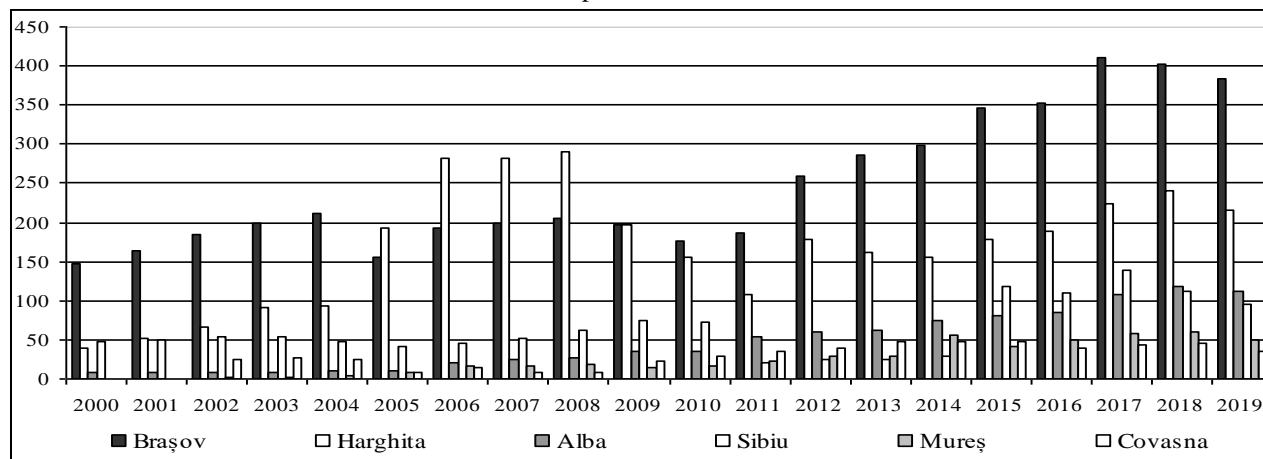
Figure 1. Evolution of the number of agro-tourism boarding houses by development regions, in the period 2000-2019



Sources: Tempo-online database, 2020, <http://www.insse.ro/>

The main Romanian agro-touristic destinations are mainly situated in the region Centru with mountain and hilly zones in the counties: Braşov (Bran, Moeciu, Fundata), Harghita (Tuşnad, Praid, Zetea), Alba (Arieşeni, Râmetea, Garda de Sus), Sibiu (Răşinari, Sadu, Tălmăcel), Mureş (Corunca, Saschiz), Covasna (Arcuş, Bixad).

Figure 2. Evolution of the number of agro-tourism boarding houses by counties of the region Centru, in the period 2000-2019



Sources: Tempo-online database, 2020, <http://www.insse.ro/>

According to statistical data, at regional level, in 2019, the number of agro-tourism boarding houses registered higher values, exceeding 200 in Braşov, Suceava and Harghita counties and lowest values are registered in the counties with modest touristic resources (Table 1).

Table 1 The clasification of counties based on number of agro-tourism boarding houses in 2019

Over 200 agro-tourism boarding houses	Braşov (389), Suceava (235), Harghita (215)
Between 150 - 200 agro-tourism boarding houses	Cluj (164), Argeş (161), Neamţ (152)
Between 100 - 150 agro-tourism boarding houses	Maramureş (147), Bihor (127), Tulcea (118), Alba (113)
Between 50 - 100 agro-tourism boarding houses	Sibiu (96), Caraş Severin (86), Vâlcea (78), Gorj (76), Buzău (62), Hunedoara (59), Bistriţa-Năsăud (57)
Under 50 agro-tourism boarding houses	Mureş (49), Prahova (45), Mehedinţi (41), Arad (39), Bacău (39), Covasna (36), Dâmboviţa (36), Sălaj (31), Vrancea (30), Timiş (27), Constanţa (20), Satu Mare (12), Iaşi (19), Vaslui (11), Dolj (10), Olt (4), Galaţi (3), Călăraşi (2), Giurgiu (2), Teleorman (2), Botoşani (2), Ialomiţa (2), Brăila (1)

Sources: Tempo-online database, 2020, <http://www.insse.ro/>

In Romania, the quality of agro-touristic services presents important differences within the territorial profile. These differences are due to several factors:

- the quality of the communication and transportation infrastructure varies across different regions and locations;
- there are significant differences regarding the quality of the natural touristic resources and the purpose built tourism resources across different regions;
- quality standards aren't implemented and respected across all regions in the same way.
- the agro-tourism strategy for development and marketing is not clearly defined nationally or locally; attention is paid more to other forms of tourism that might include agro-tourism activities;
- the lack of a strategic management system regarding agro-tourism development in Romania.

In the last decades, the world of the Romanian village was in a continuous transformation process leading to the modification both of the rural localities specific, and of the demographic, occupational, values coordinates of the population.

In this context, agro-tourism proved to be an antidote of the subsistence agricultural production structures, a privilege of the economic phenomenon of pluriactivity and a promotor of founding of a rural society the socio-economic basis of which is represented by the middle class.

For the analysed period, the European programs for the financing the investments in the Romanian agro-tourism represent an opportunity insufficiently put into value, although in the zones in which agro-touristic activity developed, this had a strong favourable impact not only upon the economic and touristic framework of the localities, but also upon their social, cultural, spiritual and ecologic framework.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the territorial distribution of the agro-tourism activities emphasized the causes which determine certain significant differences. The quality of the transport and communication infrastructure contributes to the different development of the touristic areas, representing, in several situations, the essential condition for starting an investment project in the agro-tourism field.

The Romanian agro-tourism sector is adversely affected by the lack of organization, promotion and dissemination of information on the tourism centers and by the limited number of these centers activating at local level. Rural tourism is not fully developed so as to meet the market needs at national and international level, while the tourism infrastructures in particular do not comply with the requirements and needs with regard to the accommodation and recreational structures, from the qualitative and quantitative point of view.

Agro-tourism attracts a wide range of people from all social classes with many interests and motivations. The agro-tourism sector benefits greatly from further support and increased regulations. Further financial support, technical support, land-use guidelines and developing a platform for agro-tourism business owners to share success stories are just some of the tools and measures that could be used to enhance this type of tourism in Romania.

From the annual reports about progresses regarding the implementation of the National Rural Development Programs in Romania made by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development it results an average level of financial absorption of measures encouraging rural tourism and implicitly agro-tourism because of lack of own resources of the stakeholders and the difficulties with which they are confronting to obtain the loans ensuring the co-financing necessary to projects' implementation, as well as because of the long period of financing and implementing the integrated infrastructure projects. The reasons for the slow development of the Romanian agrotourism are also holding to the up to bottom approach of the different strategies, to the non-implication of authorities and rural communities, to the systematic non-allocation of funds initially foreseen and to the lack of any priorities to be maintained on a sufficiently long term.

As a consequence, the strategic direction of action for the next years must ensure the legislative foundation from which the whole system of institutional-legislative instruments should start, meant to foster tourism development and diversification in Romania, as a strong and efficient platform for guaranteeing the sustainable economic and social development.

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