

## **RURAL TOURISM - AN ECONOMIC ALTERNATIVE FOR DEPOPULATED VILLAGES IN ROMANIA**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Romania has the greatest share of rural population in the European Union and according to the statistics, the risk for extreme poverty is four times higher in rural areas than in urban areas; also the depopulation trend is found in most rural areas. Romania has a rich natural and cultural potential in rural areas, which is a great advantage for attracting tourists to rural tourism and agro-tourism. The development of private property in Romania, after 1990, has led to an increase in accommodation capacity in agro-tourist boarding houses. This increase is due to the demand for holidays in rural areas, especially the demand from foreign tourists. The aim of this paper is to reveal a few proposals for an economic alternative of the depopulated villages through the revival imposed by rural tourism.*

**KEY WORDS:** *rural tourism, agritourism, economy development, villages, Romania.*

**JEL CLASSIFICATIONS:** *R0, R1, Z3.*

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Rural tourism aims to include and benefit rural communities, while preserving their environmental and cultural assets. It brings economic development to rural areas by creating additional income and employment (Buia & Nimară, (2016). Tourism development can also improve the social wellbeing in rural areas, for example by stimulating improvements in infrastructure, sanitation and electricity networks. It is closely related to:

- nature and eco tourism;
- adventure tourism;
- community-based tourism;
- cultural and heritage tourism.

Rural travellers participate in activities, lifestyles and traditions of rural communities. This way they get a personalised experience of the countryside. They

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usually rent rural accommodation, which they can combine with (rural) activities and attractions, preferably using the local social, cultural and natural resources. Examples of rural accommodation are a: campground or tent, community lodge, family-run guesthouse, farm, local family or homestay, rural bed & breakfast or small hotel.

The common activities include: animal observation, boat trips, using cycling or walking trail, horse riding tours (e.g. village, coffee, tea or wine tours), workshops (e.g. cooking or handicraft). Popular attractions include: archaeological or heritage sites, cultural centres or museums, cultural, gastronomic, heritage and other routes/trails, landscape sceneries or wildlife sanctuaries, local agricultural or craft organisations, markets.

Rural tourism and agritourism are two different concepts, although some authors consider them identical. These concepts are identified up to a certain level, after which they are differentiated (Glăvan, 2003).

*Rural tourism* has a larger coverage area, including agritourism. But, unlike rural tourism, agritourism must comply with a series of criteria related to consumers, such as: staying in a peasant household, consuming agricultural products obtained in that household, participating, as far as possible, in various household activities. Rural tourism is a form of tourism that includes any tourist activity organized and conducted in the rural area by the local population, capitalizing on local tourist resources (natural, cultural-historical, human), as well as facilities, tourist structures, including guesthouses and agro-tourism farms.

*Agritourism* represents the form of tourism, practiced in the rural environment, based on the provision, within the peasant household, of the following services: accommodation, meals, leisure and others. Through agritourism, the natural and anthropic resources of the area are capitalized in a superior way, contributing to raising the standard of living of the rural population. Unlike rural tourism, agritourism involves: accommodation in the peasant household (pension); consumption of agricultural products from the respective household; participation to a greater or lesser extent in specific agricultural activities.

Rest, fresh air, eating fresh food, tasting wines, some dishes from peasant gastronomy, are solid arguments for practicing rural tourism. Folk art, religion and ancient Christian customs and traditions, the possibility of being in the middle of events specific to the place (festivals, celebrations, fairs, festivals etc.) even physical work therapy are equally points of attraction. Likewise, hunting, sport fishing, hiking, resting at rivers and lakes are a reason to spend your vacation in a different kind of conditions.

It is certain that Romania has a strong rural character, with the highest share of rural population in the European Union (44.9%) and by a very low density. There are significant geographical differences from the perspective of population distribution. The settlements having less than 50 inhabitants/ km<sup>2</sup> are concentrated in the western part of the country, whereas in the south and east, most of the settlements have larger population densities, reaching 50-100 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup>. The rural area presents a negative increase as the rural society began to modernize as a result of demographic, economic and social factors. The demographic decline is associated with the

continuous degradation of age structure, with a significant ageing process, in the future the young population shrinking continuously to the benefit of the elderly people.

After 1990, rural tourism started to develop in Romania. The core was the Moieciu-Bran area and then the phenomenon spread throughout the country, as tourists began to prefer unpolluted air and tranquility in rural areas instead of hotels (Sima, 2018).

The development of private property in Romania has led to an increase in accommodation capacity in agro-tourist boarding houses. This increase is due to the demand for holidays in rural areas of Romania, especially the demand from foreign tourists. This growth is based on investments made in rural areas in order to start a family business as a source of permanent income generated by rural tourism or as an additional income from agrotourism.

## **2. TRENDS OF RURAL TOURISM ON EUROPEAN MARKET**

In the European Union countries, the promotion of rural tourism and agritourism is based on two main elements: offering a product specific for the rural area, with all its advantages, and developing a network in order to provide a better accessibility to the targeted population that wants to consume rural tourism and agritourism (Bran, et al., 1997).

Rural tourism perfectly suits the trend of European travellers seeking authentic, unique experiences and local lifestyles. European rural travellers want to experience natural, unspoiled landscapes and stay in authentic accommodation. Rural communities in developing countries often have great resources to offer such experiences. Cultural experiences and interaction with locals are increasingly popular, as well as agritourism and farm stays. The main trends and offers of rural tourism on European market are:

➤ European travellers include elements from the local culture in their holidays. They are looking for experiences, rather than going sightseeing. During these experiences, they like to interact with local people. Many developing countries have interesting rural areas with their own cultures and traditions. This offers opportunities for rural tourism providers;

➤ agritourism and/or farm stays are increasingly popular. This is a good way for European travellers to experience and participate in local culture. They often combine their agritourism or farm stays with volunteering on and around the farm;

➤ online research is a trend that has increased exponentially over the past years. Although growth has peaked, the use of internet to research tourism will continue to increase. It is predicted to remain the most important research channel for years to come. European rural travellers increasingly research and plan their trip online. To gather information and share experiences they use:

- peer review sites, like TripAdvisor and Zoover;
- travel forums, like Lonely Planet's Thorn Tree forum;
- social media, like Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

Rural tourism is especially popular among Europe's relatively large older age group of 50 - 70. They have more free time and money than other groups. Often their children have moved out, or they are entering retirement. These are usually

experienced travellers that enjoy rural, quiet environments and look for new experiences. They want high value for money and are willing to pay more for authentic experiences. Older travellers generally seek higher levels of comfort than younger groups.

Younger rural travellers are the second largest segment. They have often travelled as children and/or studied abroad. This group is interested in exploring new destinations further away. There are two groups of younger travellers:

- young professionals with high incomes but limited time to travel. They are mostly between 30 - 45 years old and often travel in couples, although there is also a singles market in this age group. These travellers are looking for unusual "once in a lifetime" experiences and want to fit as much into their holiday as possible. Comfort is important to them;

- backpackers and gap year travellers, this group is mostly between 18 - 30 years old. Their daily budgets are small but they travel over extended periods of time. These travellers choose cheaper accommodation. They want to engage with local communities and experience local life. Some are interested in volunteer work on community or conservation projects.

Family travel is a large, growing segment. It includes parents and grandparents with children or grandchildren, or sometimes several generations travelling together. Rural tourism is popular among families. In Germany, for example, families are one of the largest market segments for rural tourism. Families are becoming more quality-conscious and price-conscious. They want good facilities and wish to balance safety and fun. Families like rural holidays to combine fun and excitement with cultural enrichment and higher-end experiences.

### **3. PROPOSALS FOR SUSTAINABLE RURAL TOURISM IN ROMANIA**

Rural tourism has been practiced in Romania for a long time in an unorganized way, resulting from the need for tourists to find an accessible way of accommodation with a higher level of comfort than in the case of campsites or cabins, during their vacations. After 1989, the need for an organization of these accommodation spaces was manifested, through their homologation and classification. The range of services has improved, expanded and, thus, more and more villagers have opened their houses to receive tourists.

As a result of these transformations and the trend of modernization and improvement of rural tourism activities, rural tourism occupied an important place in the tourist offer in Romania, representing for many of us an attractive alternative for spending vacations and holidays. Rural tourism and agritourism have seen a significant development in Romania, and it can be said that they are more and more in line with European standards in this field.

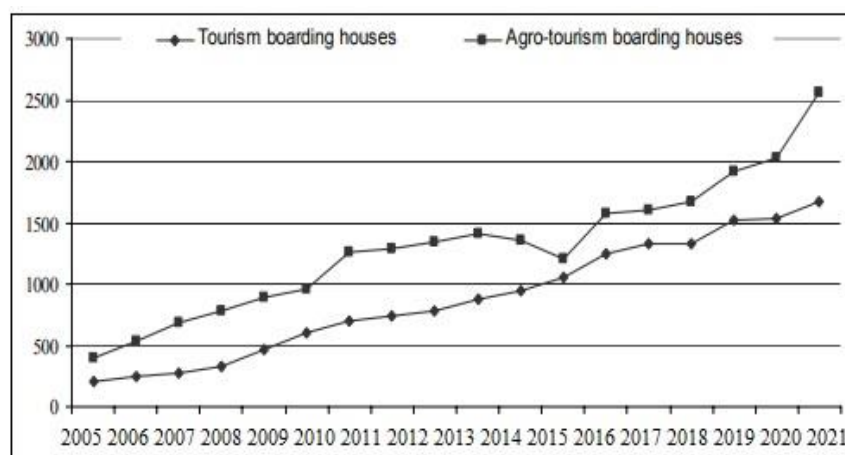
The depopulation trend is found in most rural areas in Romania. According to data from National Institute of Statistics, in Romania, during the period 1992- 2021, the population living in the rural areas decreased by 5.25%. This massive decline in the rural area population can lead to the disappearance of some rural communities that have lasted and developed for hundreds of years (Oțiman, 2012).

In Romania, rural settlements with a tourist function, namely tourist villages, are not homologated and legalized by legislation, therefore they have not been identified, organized, arranged and promoted. In the rural area only the rural tourist boarding houses is promoted, without mentioning the ethnographic area it belongs to. Therefore, in many rural areas, rural tourist boarding houses were built without respecting local specific architecture and without the use of environmental friendly building materials. This is very dangerous for rural tourism because it leads to the loss of local identity and the transmission of specific elements of urban settlements (Marian, 2017).

The main areas, where the rural tourism is promoted in Romania are: Moldova, Bucovina, Dobrogea, Muntenia, Oltenia, Maramures, Crişana and Banat, Transylvania.

Moving from the general to the particular, the notion of *tourist village* appears. Establishing the types of tourist villages consists in identifying and revealing the specifics of localities and grouping them into some fundamental types, in order to promote in each locality, the most appropriate forms of tourism, depending on the main geographical, social and economic characteristics, as well as the main motivations and opinions of the categories of tourists who visit the respective locality. Also, the establishment of the types of tourist villages is a means of selecting tourists, they grouping themselves into one village or another, depending on their main motivations and tourist options. Finally, the establishment of the types of tourist villages allows the realization concrete and specific propaganda, de-advertising and advertising, depending on the particularities of each type of tourist village (Nistoreanu & Gheres, 2010).

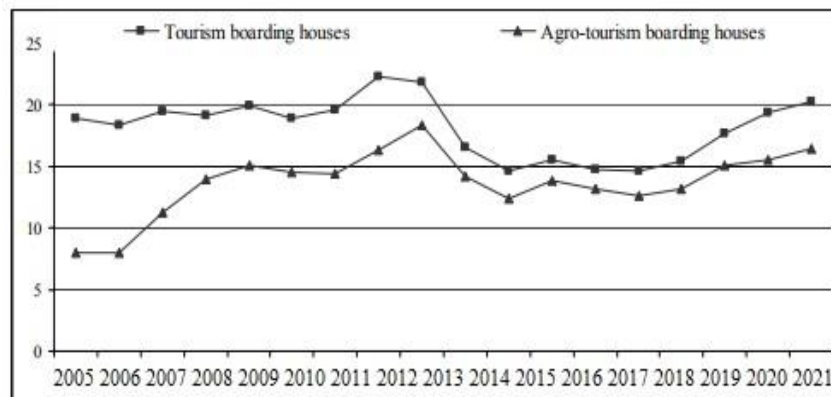
The tourism accommodation structures represent the most important component of the specific technical-material base, as it responds to one of the fundamental needs of tourists, i.e. rest and lodging. The rural areas are destinations where the number of tourism and agro-tourism boarding houses has significantly increased (figure 1).



Source: <http://www.insse.ro>, 2022

Figure 1. Evolution of the number of tourism and agro-tourism boarding houses

The net utilization indices of tourism and agro-tourism boarding houses capacity in use (calculated as ratio of the number of overnight stays to the tourist accommodation capacity in use in a certain period) fluctuate from year to year. The following factors affected the results of the actions targeting rural tourism development: low infrastructural facilities, decreasing public resources, depopulation trends, adverse weather conditions, low economic profitability of certain agricultural activities, lack of transport infrastructure and services in the countryside (figure 2).



Source: <http://www.insse.ro>, 2022

**Figure 2. Evolution of the utilization indices of tourist accommodation capacity in use**

The main types of tourist villages in Romania are:

- ethnographic-folklore touristic villages: Bogdan Vodă, Leresti, Sibiel, Vama;
- touristic villages of artisanal and artistic creation: Tismana, Marga;
- climatic and scenic tourist villages: Fundata, Bran, Sirnea;
- fishing and hunting tourist villages: the villages of Vișeu and Bistrița Valleys, Gurghiu and the Danube Delta;
- wine and fruit-growing tourist villages: Recaș, Agapia, Vânători-Neamț;
- pastoral tourist villages: Vaideeni and Jina;
- tourist villages for practicing sports: Fundata, Sirnea.

Special attention must be paid to the promotion of the rural tourism product, which requires the publication of newsletters, the establishment of a newspaper or a profile magazine, the annual edition of a catalogue, to European standards, the development of media programs and the establishment of an information and dissemination office. On the other hand, it is required:

- the training within the professional associations of a body of experts capable of providing technical assistance;
- presentation of courses on marketing issues, arrangement and compartmentalization of accommodation spaces, meal preparation and serving, classification, approval and quality standards;
- presentation of the notion of catering and some rules for serving the meal;
- establishing the hygiene and ecology conditions that must be respected;

- creation of an informational system / operational records, reservation system;
- specification of the behaviour to be adopted in relations with tourists and some communication principles.

Also, the main decision makers in rural tourism should take into account the following necessities:

- quality management is an important tool to understand and meet travellers' needs and requirements. Develop a quality management system to check the customers' expectations and satisfaction levels. To improve the quality of tourism offering, it could be used visitor surveys and feedback from employees, tour operators and journalists, as well as a suggestion book or a guestbook;
- focus on offering high-quality services by investing in skills training, hiring experienced guides, offering additional services and working with reliable partners.
- offer a wide range of accommodation types, at various prices;
- deliver quality in each accommodation type and price range;
- provide trails and routes of different lengths and difficulty to meet the needs of a wide range of rural travellers;
- invest in road networks and the accessibility of destination by public transport. Consider, for example, offering long-distance bus services, especially in the tourist season;
- make sure that the transport is safe and comfortable, the routes are well planned and timetables are being kept;
- involve local authorities in the development of accessible trails and better signposting. Maintain a logical and consistent signposting system for visitors throughout the whole area.

Offering vegetarian food is a must when offering packages for Europeans. Of the European population, 4.6% is vegetarian or vegan, and among highly educated and Western European travellers, this is even higher. Germany, the Netherlands and Austria are the countries with the highest percentages of vegetarians.

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

Rural tourism is an important form of sustainable tourism, because it has a low negative impact on the natural environment, capitalizes and protects natural and cultural resources and contributes to the welfare of local communities. In Romania, after 1990, the transition from the centralized economy to the market economy based on private property determined the development of rural areas and consequently of rural tourism, including the development of agritourism.

The current rural economy is the result of spontaneous development and it is not based on government policies and strategies. According to some researchers, the Romanian rural areas are characterized by no farming activities on large agricultural fields, depopulation, ageing and low skills of the rural workforce and by the almost disappearance of craftsmen.

Romania has a rich natural and cultural potential in rural areas, which is a great advantage for attracting tourists to rural tourism and agro-tourism, but the tourist heritage is insufficiently exploited, and the rural tourism product is in the process of

decrystallization. At the moment, the rural tourism product takes the form of households or settlements that offer primary tourist services, at the same time, generously donating the richness of the values of Romanian villages. Quality rural tourism requires quality services and benefits. It is understood that rural tourism equipment must have modern sanitary equipment, comfortable conditions for both accommodation and public catering, access roads and civilized means of communication.

In order to maintain the characteristics specific to the Romanian rural tourism, all measures must be taken to preserve unaltered and to protect the natural and cultural resources specific to rural areas and to establish strategies at central and local level for the promotion of rural tourism and agro-tourism, both internally as well as internationally.

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