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SUSTAINABLE RURAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH TOURISM ACTIVITIES IN ROMANIA

ABSTRACT

The sustainable rural development of the Romanian rural area requires reaching a balance between the need to preserve the rural economic, ecological and cultural space and the tendency to modernize the rural economic activity and life. The pleading for the promotion of tourism activities in the rural area starts from the need for rural economical diversification. In general, no rural development program can be conceived in the absence of an essential role played by agriculture. In this context, the paper presents the tourism potential of the rural localities from Romania and the rural tourism development from the perspective of European integration. The statistical data were completed with information from papers and studies published in specialty books and journals, in governmental documents, as well as in other development strategies related to tourism and rural development. The volume of information in this paper resulted from the investigation of relationships that exist between the environmental and social factors at local level, making it possible to define the necessary mechanisms for the sustainable development of tourism activities.

Key words: sustainable rural development, development strategy, rural tourism.

JEL Classification: L83, R10, Q01.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sustainable development of the rural areas is a fundamental direction of the European Union policy targeting a balanced economic development of rural areas, a high level of social cohesion based on a high quality of life as well as environmental protection. In Romania, the sustainable rural development requires reaching an equilibrium between the need to preserve the rural economic, ecological and cultural space and the tendency to modernize the rural economic activity and life. The pleading for the promotion of tourism activities in the rural area starts from the need of rural economical diversification. In general, no rural development program can be conceived in the absence of an essential role played by agriculture. The rural economy is more developed and more dynamic if it has a more diverse structure, and if the non-agricultural economy has a higher share in total economy.

2. STATE OF KNOWLEDGE

Rural area in Europe has a significant weight; it represents the source of most of the raw resources needed by the people. For this reason it is essential to focus on rural development and on the diversification of economic activities in the rural area, on the development of rural tourism inclusively. Tourism can solve some of the economic and employment problems that the rural population is facing.

The advantages resulting from rural tourism activities can be of economic, social and cultural nature. Among them, it is worth mentioning the following:

- the creation of new jobs for all categories of the population, but particularly for young people and women (categories in which the unemployment rate is high);
- multi-activity development, involving alternating agricultural occupations with handicraft, etc., so as to eliminate the seasonal labour employment as much as possible;
- saving additional revenue for the local budgets;
- reducing internal and external migration to minimum by stabilizing the population;
- improving local services related to tourism (trade, transportation, telecommunications etc.);
- restoration and conservation of property heritage;
- conservation and promotion of local customs and traditions;
- attracting new native or foreign private investors etc.

However, the process of developing rural tourism must take into account a series of requirements such as: identifying suitable rural areas, through the resources they hold, through tourism activities; development of transportation and accommodation infrastructure; identifying and providing tourists with complementary programs related to basic tourist services; intense promotion of rural tourism and attracting various segments of tourists, etc.

3. MATERIAL AND METHOD

The paper presents the tourism potential of the rural localities from Romania and the rural tourism development from the perspective of European integration. The statistical data on rural tourism development come from the National Institute of Statistics (NIS). The statistical data were completed with information from the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD), as well as from articles and other scientific studies in this field.

The rural tourism patrimony is evaluated according to the normative acts into effect. These refer to tourism organization, coordination, promotion and development, as well as the management of tourism resources in conformity with the principles of equity, competitiveness, sustainability and sustainable development. The Romanian

rural tourism is put into value and developed on the basis of and within the annual/multi-annual programs for the development of tourism destinations and products, elaborated by the Local and Central Public Administration Authority in charge of tourism and approved by Government's Decision.

The rural tourism patrimony elements are listed in the General Register of Tourism Patrimony, owned and administered by the Central Public Administration Authority in charge of tourism. The list of natural and anthropic resources is found in the National Cultural Heritage of Romania and is maintained and periodically updated by the Ministry of Culture, Cults and National Patrimony of Romania.

The natural landscape and the way of "living in the countryside" are closest to the traditional image that could be preserved in Western Europe. The patrimony of the Romanian rural tourism can be approached from the experts' point of view, i.e. geographers and economists, tourism phenomenon researchers or analysts, who include the following in the patrimony concept: the natural and anthropic tourism potential, the tourism technical-material base (tourism endowments and tourist reception structures with accommodation functions), the tourism services and the general technical infrastructure.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Romania has a harmonious and diverse landscape and in tourism terms it can be considered one of the beautiful and resourceful places in Europe and at the same time it also has a rich tradition and culture.

It is agreed that Romania has a huge rural tourism potential due to its geographical position and its complex natural and anthropic environment: the *Danube Delta*, the *Black Sea*, the beautiful *Carpathians*, the citadel churches of *Transylvania*, the painted churches from *Bucovina* – Moldavia and the wooden churches of *Maramures*, etc.

These could be added to another long list of beautiful villages. The list could become even longer when we add the local and regional traditions, unpolluted and picturesque rural landscape, cultural traditions (literary, musical, folk art, handicraft, gastronomy, religious habits, etc.), accessible and adequate local services, good living standard, qualified labour force, etc.

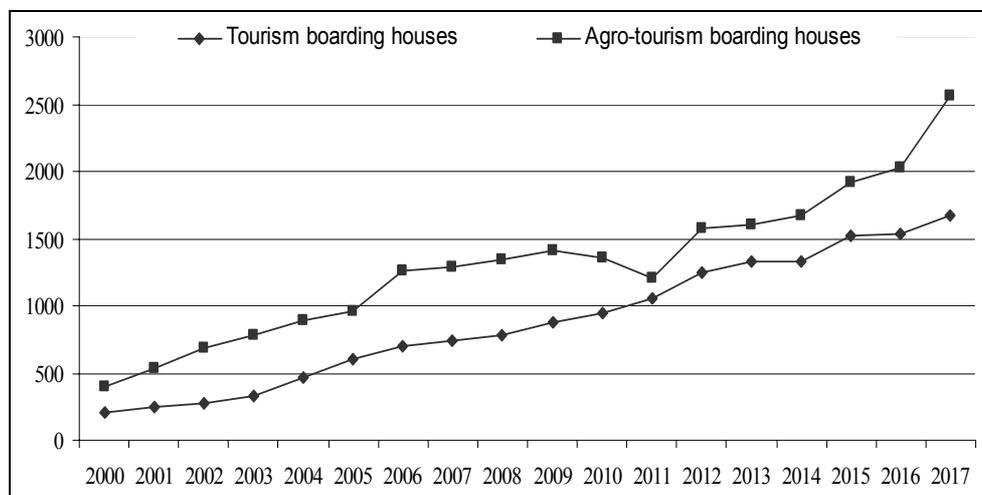
The development of tourism in rural areas has taken place through the contribution of individual investors and financing under the pre-accession and post-accession governmental programs (SAPARD, NRDP 2007-2013 and NRDP 2014-2020), as well as through the activity of certain organizations, such as ANTREC, which provide support to the rural suppliers of tourism services to enter the market and help the rural communities to appreciate the significance of tourism and

understand the advantages they can get from this activity. The general objectives have been to develop the tourism activities in the rural areas, which can contribute to the increase of the number of jobs and alternative incomes, as well as to the increase of rural space attractiveness.

The direct beneficiaries are: natural persons (with the commitment that until the date of signing the financial contract to acquire the status of authorized natural persons); farmers or members of certain agricultural enterprises who wish to diversify their basic farming activity by developing a non-agricultural activity in the rural area within the already existing enterprise that falls under the category of micro-enterprises and small-sized enterprises, except for the non-authorized natural persons; local communities; local public authorities; non-governmental organizations and professional associations. The indirect beneficiaries are tourists staying overnight and visitors who have benefited from financed recreational facilities.

According to the governmental sources, the financial support envisages investments for infrastructure related to accommodation facilities, leisure activities, small-scale infrastructure and development of tourism services.

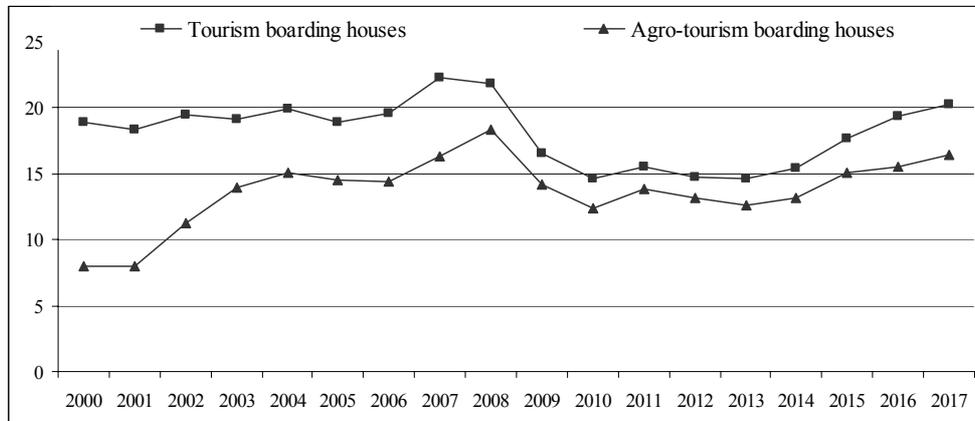
The tourism accommodation structures represent the most important component of the specific technical-material base, as it responds to one of the fundamental needs of tourists, i.e. rest and lodging. The rural areas are destinations where the number of tourism and agro-tourism boarding houses has significantly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



Source: Tempo-online database, 2018, <http://www.insse.ro/>

Figure 2. 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.



Source: Tempo-online database, 2018, <http://www.insse.ro/>

Figure 3. Evolution of the utilization indices of tourist accommodation capacity in use

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.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Essential component of rural development policy, rural tourism is perceived as a priority for the continuous and sustainable development of the rural community, as well as for the preservation of the rural landscape and its heritage.

The clear and unequivocal inflow of European Union funds contributed to the development of the rural economy and of the entire rural space and to the increase of the living standard of the rural people.

Rural tourism is an important vector of sustainable rural development, generating alternative incomes in the countryside, which can be developed given the natural, ethnographic potential, folk traditions, farming, and special architecture of Romanian villages as well as the inhabitants' great hospitality.

Romania has a great rural tourism potential, but unfortunately this potential has not been explored enough. The reasons why the rural tourism is not considered a representative product for the Romanian tourism are the following: insufficient promotion of rural tourism activities, limited collaboration between the most important actors, lack of investments in this sector and absence of tourism policies,

repeated blocking of local authorities' projects in local tourism, lack of coherence and absence of a strategy at central authorities level, lack of a coherent vision for the development of Romanian tourism, the lack of successive governments' interest in the development and promotion of Romanian tourism.

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