

## DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL TOURISM IN THE EUROPEAN CONTEXT

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### ABSTRACT:

*In the last two decades, in many European Union member countries, rural tourism is considered as a strategy for the future, which can contribute to economic and social development of local communities, of less favored regions alike, in order to create jobs and reduce migration. At the same time, rural tourism has the advantage that it acts for the purpose of opening new investment prospects. Thus, it must be regarded as an economic activity that contributes to regional development and, consequently, to the overall economic growth.*

**Key words:** rural tourism, rural development, rural area

**JEL Classification:** A1, O1

### 1. Introduction

Rural tourism is a relatively new concept for our country, but for European countries, and in particular for the Member States of the European Union, rural tourism is not a new phenomenon, since it has registered a major expansion in the last years, especially under the auspices of travelling opportunities and growing financial resources of the population.

At the same time, rural tourism, in light of the fact that it is a component of the big economic-tourism sector and it is also part of the economic base of rural settlements, must be regarded as an economic activity generating multiple benefits.

All further development which a rural tourism registers at European level can be placed on the existence of two major motivations, namely: rural sector development and recovery, as well as the fact that this type of tourism is an alternative to traditional mass tourism. From this point of view, we are witnessing, more and more, a rethinking of strategies for rural development, with measures of development of rural tourism to the foreground.

From this point of view, rural tourism includes those activities and services offered to residents of rural areas through which they seek to attract tourists and increase revenue.

Rural tourism development involves a series of immediate consequences both locally and at the macro-and meso-economic level:

- rural areas, natural resources, cultural heritage, rural buildings, traditions are turned to profit successfully from the tourist point of view;
- rural tourism contributes decisively to a sustainable local development
- rural tourism constitutes a response to the requirements of relaxation felt by the modern society
- promotion and application of local brands – as a symbol for regional identity, etc.

The coverage of rural tourism is very extensive. Thus, synthetic, rural tourism includes all activities that are carried out in rural areas. In a broader sense however, rural tourism can include a number of independent activities or in many cases, interrelated activities: agritourism, holidays in nature, theme festivals in rural areas, production and marketing of traditional products, etc.

Rural tourism aims to improve living standards in rural areas; helps preserve the inherited culture and at the same time reduce the phenomenon of migration.

### 2. Prerequisites for the development of rural tourism in Romania

Turning to profit the potential of rural areas represents a concern which has been made aware at EU level for a long time. The situation and the specific profile of rural areas characterized by a substantial reduction of income from agriculture, the ageing of the population, increased requirements relating to the protection and preservation of the environment recommends rural tourism development as a stimulator for the rural economy.

At the level of our country, from a more detailed analysis of rural areas, a couple of motivations that underlie the need for rural tourism development can come off:

- the tendency of extinction of some small and traditional farms under the auspices of the new economic and legislative conditions in Europe;
- there was an increase of the abandoned parcels, as well as of the specific rural tasks;
- the migration of young people from rural areas to urban areas;
- low income derived mainly from the agricultural activity;
- difficulties in marketing agricultural products supplied by farms;
- increase in the phenomenon of migration especially, of external migration.

On account of the motivations of economic and social order mentioned above, other conditions leading to the need to develop rural tourism can take shape:

- the disappearance of crafts and the loss of traditions;
- the increasing number of houses within rural areas that are not inhabited or up-kept;
- carelessness and negligence in managing primary resources etc.

However, it should be noted that there are a number of factors that stimulate the development of rural tourism:

- Extending the time dedicated to relaxation. A particular aspect that has consequences upon rural tourism is the multiplication of short periods allocated to entertainment. In addition, there is the possibility to go on vacation, spread over a number of months. Correlating this with other factors such as the duration of transportation, the cost of the holiday, the lack of short term travel solutions, there results that the perspectives for choosing the rural environment as holiday space are widening, at least for short periods of time;
- The increased interest in maintaining health registers spectacular growth. Even though today, in our country, the way of obtaining food, is fortunately less artificial as compared to the case of other industrialized nations, it is not less true that stress factors generated by economic precariousness, by the disturbance and pollution of big cities, affect more and more the health of the population. The visible orientation of the holiday towards leisure activities, sports activities, relieving the daily tension is natural and falls within a more or less deliberate strategy to maintain health;
- Authenticity – represents a quality that is increasingly requested. In many cases it comes from a medium dominated by powerful industrialized products, monochrome urban images, collective, impersonal relationships, the tourist appreciates more authenticity, the naturalness of life in the countryside, the kindness specific to small rural communities. Researches carried out by the British Tourism Office, reveal that it is placed as runner-up after the quality of landscapes, among the motivations that underlie the option to spend the holiday in the countryside;
- The psychic tranquility and comfort are the most wanted elements by many tourists, and this is not surprising, given the level of stress experienced especially by the majority of active individuals.

### 3. The vision and initiatives of the European Union with regard to the rural tourism

The European Union's concerns regarding the need to develop the rural environment and tourism have a long existence. Thus, in 1990, the European Year of Tourism, the Council of Europe has produced a guide for promoting 'intelligent tourism', namely to promote a tourism that protects the environment and provides an additional source of funds for the rural population, and, therefore, an important factor for stopping the depopulation of villages.

In the same year, the EU Commission has adopted a new initiative for rural development, entitled the LEADER, which is aimed at encouraging the integration of rural development at the local level.

At the same time, the Commission of the European Union, through the report *The Future Of The Rural World*, as well as due to the reform of the structural funds and their impact on the development of rural tourism, emphasizes the importance that should be given by the Commission to the economic sector. Operational programs from almost all regions and most business plans of local development groups within the LEADER initiative contain innovative projects and demonstrate that the 'local' actors (touristic service providers) are involved in the seamless development of high level rural tourism.

Integrated, balanced and long-term development - the so-called sustainable or intensive development - implies the existence of Community policies to support “green tourism” for turning the rural space to profit. In this regard it is worth mentioning *The plan of community actions in favor of tourism* and the *Community program of policy and actions regarding the environment and sustainable development*. Structural funds were also allocated (the Structural Development Fund and the Regional Fund) for touristic development of rural areas and for professional training in this field.

Even within the policy of regional development promoted by the European Union, achieving the objectives of the rural environment development occupies an important place. Special attention will be paid to the measures that encourage

rural tourism and vocational training in the field of tourism. This involves financing investments designed to create tourism facilities, accommodation at farms, development of natural parks, and various sports activities, etc.

In order to promote rural tourism, in European Union countries and in others, there has been developed a number of programs, among which is worth mentioning the following:

The program '*EXPERT*', with the objective to encourage the development of rural tourism in participant regions and countries, is based on the principles of innovation, transferability, sustainable development and profitability. The targeted sector was that of 'specialized tourists' such as: professional organizations, schools, universities, groups with a specific vocation. After the first year of operation the Rural Tourism Development Association (ATRAC) was created, with the purpose of encouraging cultural and rural tourism and continuing the projects of the program '*EXPERT*'.

The program "*THE VILLAGE I LOVE*" organized by EUROTER has 51 project models. This program is a trilingual publication (German, English and French) and deals with issues related to rural tourism by organizing competitions. This action should serve as an example to those who seek to implement activities of rural tourism.

The program "*DATA BASE ON RURAL TOURISM SERVICES*". Taking into account the importance of new technologies, the people in charge of this project have developed a computer program to collect relative information about our services on the rural tourism market. This information indicates the companies that provide tourist services, the elements of art and culture specific to each region, the characteristics of the environment. The project is aimed at harmonizing the information available with the services necessary for rural tourism, in order to facilitate contacts between the suppliers of services of rural tourism and agencies. The program has been tested in the regions of Friuli-Venezia-Giulia and it was offered to other regions by the Italian Ministry of Tourism.

The program "*EUROPEAN RURAL TOURISM NETWORK*", organized by EUROGÎTES in collaboration with 12 organizers of rural tourism in 9 European countries and EUROTER. This project involves three elements: technical assistance for the development of a chain of tourist lodgings in Germany, Spain, Portugal, Hungary, Czech Republic and Romanian. In addition, it assures knowledge of the European rural tourism market and assists in the creation of a program for information and promotion of accommodation in each country. The activities of the Federation propose sending experts in these countries, training those who guarantee the tourist activity of the villages and of the owners of farms and guesthouses. This project contributes to maintaining rural life in Europe and also assists countries in Eastern Europe and Central Europe in their rural development efforts.

The program for integrated development of rural tourism is the third phase of the EU strategy for sustainable development of rural tourism, based on actions at local level, which benefits from the strategy LEADER and from structural funds. This program aims at diversifying the economies of certain countries by developing tourist activity throughout the year and thus, creating new jobs in periods of low season and promoting a rural tourism product.

#### 4. Effects of rural tourism development

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 that due attention should be given to rural development, by default, referring to the development of rural tourism. Tourism can solve some of the economic and employment problems faced by the rural population.

The advantages obtained as a result of rural tourism 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 and female persons (categories known for having a very high unemployment rate);
- multi-activity development involving alternating agricultural occupations with handicraft, etc., so as to eliminate as well as possible the seasonal character;
- saving additional revenue for the local budgets;
- reducing internal and external migration to a minimum by stabilizing the population;
- improving local services related to tourism (trade, transportation, telecommunication 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 tourist activities; development or, where appropriate, 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.

## Conclusions

Rural tourism, through the intense natural resources it contains, is an important vector of rural development. Moreover, it represents a means to support the development of rural society.

Rural tourism is a guarantor of stability and viability of rural areas, a relevant alternative for agriculture and also a factor in the development of local communities.

Decision-making factors through national agri-tourist policies, components of rural development strategy should stimulate the development of rural tourism for the purposes of exemption from duties and taxes, reducing fiscal pressure, as a whole, in order to reduce prices and maintain traditional clients (people in urban areas with more modest incomes, foreigners keen on discovering the rural traditions of the area, children in urban areas etc.).

At the same time, supporting and expanding rural tourism and mountain tourism has an important educational component which refers to the recognition of cultural, spiritual traditions or historical, architectural values or landscapes from the rural space.

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