

TOURISM – AN OPPORTUNITY FOR THE ECONOMIC INVIGORATION OF RURAL AREAS IN ROMANIA?

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The Romanian rural area is a space that, in the context of the transition from centralized economy to market economy, has accumulated multiple dysfunctions, whose resolution requires the identification of viable solutions, matching local potential and at the same time preserving traditional specificity. In terms of cultural, historical, natural and economic values, the Romanian village has proved to be a highly original tourism product. The article analyzes the evolution of Romanian rural tourism, highlighting the stages of its development, and paying special attention to the current stage that witnesses the solid consolidation of the extant niche of rural tourism as part of Romanian tourism. This consolidation led to several rural tourism destinations in Romania standing out on the international market (Bran-Moeciu, Maramureș, the Danube Delta, the Banat, Bucovina).

Key words: rural tourism, sustainable development, tourist villages, Romania.

Introduction

Almost half a century of domination of mass tourism, significant changes occurred late in the 20th century, in the sense of the increasingly intense manifestation of the “new forms of tourism”, rural tourism being one of them (Dinu 2002, Saule 2004). Factors such as the decrease of working time, urbanization and development of communications means give the opportunity for other kinds of tourism to develop (Dinu, 2002).

Cavaco (1995) quoted by Dinu considers rural tourism as “a meeting place where rural culture meets with urban culture, the latter being extremely sensitive to the nature of the bucolic element”.

The World Tourism Organization considers rural cultural heritage is a key feature of tourism products. The specific feature of rural tourist products consists in that tourists are offered customized contacts, they benefit from the human and geographical environment of the rural space and participate, as much as possible, in the activities, traditions and lifestyle of the local population (Surugiu, 2008, p. 12).

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Rural tourism has been identified as a vehicle for safeguarding the integrity of the countryside resource, enhancing the rural economy and maintaining rural ways of life (Lane, 1994, Hall and Jenkins, 1998, Roberts and Hall, 2001 *apud* Garrod, Wornell, Youell, 2006, p. 118), especially of disadvantaged rural area (Saule, 2004). Rural tourism takes the authenticity as the core attraction for sustainable development (Xu F. Lu Q., Quin Xn, 2010). One of the primary challenges facing rural tourism management is to establish a profitable and environmentally sustainable industry (Ferrari, Mondejar-Jimenez, Vargas-Vargas, 2010).

The complexity of rural space, in terms of the variety of the resources available to certain rural areas, has favored in time the association of rural tourism with other forms such as cultural tourism, environmental tourism and green tourism.

The Romanian rural reality is characterized by the underdevelopment and the disparities between the different rural areas (Paul, 2010, p. 389). The issue of the Romanian village is remarkable through the complexity of aspects and the multitude of dimensions (Popescu, 2010, p. 405). There is a large and profitable market out there that the tourism industry has been largely ignoring for a long time (Souca, 2010). Substantial changes in the Romanian countryside accompanied by the need for more robust economic activities have caused some families to turn to tourism as an economic diversification strategy (Iorio, Corsale, 2009). For this purpose, rural tourism must be considered like a complex plurality of multi-faced activities, contributing both to growth of other activities in rural areas and to improvement of life quality for local inhabitants, all this as part of an effective rural development integrated system (Naghiu, Vázquez, Georgiev, 2005).

Methodology

The first part of the current paper work is focused on making of a historical evolution of rural tourism in Romania taking into account the negative influence of political factor that had interrupted its evolution until 1989, emphasizing the changes in '90 as a results of the efforts made for its unlimited developing. The second part of the article is focused on the analysis of the complexity of the Romanian rural tourism evolution taking into account a series of tourist statistical indicators (number of tourist accommodation units and the evolution of tourist arrivals) applied in several case studies. A series of statistics data were used and then have been stored in a geodatabase. It was used ArcGis Desktop 9.2 software with applications ArcMap and ArcCatalog with which the raw data were processed. Data processing consisted in according of symbols to certain quantitative criteria (e.g. numbers of tourists), were labeled fields (name of the county).

The Romanian Model for Development of Rural Tourism

The first steps to organize rural tourism in Romania were conducted as early as during the Communist regime (1972). At the request of the Ministry of Tourism, the Research Center for International Tourism Promotion, 118 villages typical for Romania were identified and selected that were eligible for introduction in the domestic and international tourist circuit. One year later, 14 of them were experimentally declared tourist villages: Lerești and Rucăr in Argeș County, Fundata and Șirnea in Brașov County, Vaideeni in Vâlcea County, Sfântu Gheorghe, Murighiol and Crișan in Tulcea County, Sibiel in Sibiu County, Tismana în Gorj County, Poiana Sărată in Bacău County, Racoș in Timiș County, Bogdan-Vodă in Maramureș County, Vatra Moldoviței in Suceava County. Nevertheless, the touristic villages remained outside service in the international tourist circuit, because in 1974 a decree banned the accommodation of foreign tourists in private homes. Only a few villages that had managed to rapidly sign contracts on the foreign market, by way of ONT Carpați Bucharest, managed to conduct such operations on an international scale, and only that year (Rucăr, Crișan, Murighiol and Sibiel) (Glăvan, 2003, Căndea *et al.*, 2004).

Rural tourism was revived in the '90, a time when it reaches its peak in development. The first households included in the rural tourism circuit were those in the Moeciu-Bran-Rucăr region; later on, at an accelerated pace, more than 3000 households spread across the land of the Bârsa, Dorna and Maramureș regions, in the Western Carpathians, and close to Sibiu and Cluj, opened their gates to accommodate tourists (Glăvan, 2003, p. 46).

One factor that had a positive influence on the development of rural tourism was the establishment of associations of tourist service suppliers in rural regions. Among the associations that played a special part in supporting and developing this sector, one should make a special mention of the Romanian Federation for Mountain Development (FDRM), the National Association for Rural, Environmental and Cultural Tourism (ANTREC) and the Center for Training and Innovation for Development in the Carpathians (CEFIDEC).

ANTREC is an organization, a member of the European Federation of Farm and Village Tourism (Eurogites), which was established in 1994, and currently has a network of 38 branches in as many counties. ANTREC's purpose is to identify and promote rural tourism potential, by means of seminars, short- and long-term courses, know-how exchanges between ANTREC and similar organizations in Romania and abroad, dissemination of information concerning rural tourism to the entire ANTREC network and to institutions directly or indirectly involved in the promotion and development of rural tourism, organizing campaigns advertising the classified and homologated units, even inside the network, by means of the mass-media, participation to specific important events, both in Romania (at the regional and national scale),

and abroad (tourism fairs and markets). ANTREC also publishes “Vacanțe la țară” magazine on a monthly basis, whose main purpose is to promote rural tourist destinations in Romania. Each issue of the magazine is dedicated to a particular rural touristic destination, capturing, in an organized and synthetic manner, the tourist attractions of the area selected, the tourism infrastructure, a presentation of ways to spend leisure time (traditional festivals are promoted, such as Sheep’s Descent in Bran, as well as the most recent festivals in rural areas: the Sarma Festival in Praid).

Alongside the development of rural tourism, a state that was also favored by the involvement of certain institutions or specialized entities, research studies were also initiated that created the theoretical framework of rural tourism and highlighted its mechanisms and forms of development in Romania. A nationwide classification of tourist villages was also conducted, meant to capture the diversity of types of tourist villages (Glăvan 2003, Căndea, Simon, Tătaru, 2007).

Nevertheless, one can state that this classification of touristic villages is short of several relevant aspects that would contribute to an improved implementation of rural tourism development policies in Romania. This state of things is determined, on the one hand, by the absence of an analysis of leisure assets at the level of rural areas included in tourist activities, an especially important matter in the superior organization of rural tourism in other European countries where rural tourism is well-developed. Although it is the existence of the touristic patrimony assets that underlies the development of tourism in rural regions with a rich natural and cultural-historical potential, leisure assets should complete the tourist offer.

Evaluating tourist potential is a first phase in the policies for the development of rural tourism; it needs to be joined to actions meant to enhance the tourism resources of the rural space, promoting them and not least of all creating forms of leisure in rural areas.

Another criterion that must be factored in the rural tourism development policy is the change in the motivation of tourists, the socio-cultural trends that express the main expectations of tourists, which tourism agents and/or tourist accommodation facility owners face at all times. Rural tourism responds to the numerous motivations of tourists eager to escape urban areas, to get in touch with the local rural population, to get acquainted with its culture, and not least of all, for the recreational activities.

The Particularity of the Tourist Offer of Rural Tourism in Romania

Romania is one of the few European countries where rural space covers a vast area and it has developed on all types of landforms, while preserving, at its core, original elements of local rural culture with a typically archaic lifestyle.

The distribution of Romanian rural space on all types of landforms favored acquiring an especially important element for tourism, that is, the positioning inside a picturesque, bucolic landscape, unique in Europe: the “mioritic” space. The preservation of a vast rural space with its physical and cultural features in their original form, even in the current period, dominated by the process of urbanization, has allowed certain authors to consider that Romania is one of the very last surviving remnants of “old Europe” (Iorio, Corsale, p. 154).

The presence of several sites included in the UNESCO World Heritage List (the Danube Delta, the Fortified Churches of Transylvania, the Painted Monasteries of northern Moldavia and Bukovina, the Fortified Historic Centre of Sighișoara, the Wooden Churches of the Maramureș Region and the Dacian Fortresses of the Orăștie Mountains) and the establishment of a large network of protected areas (13 national parks, 13 natural parks, 617 natural reserves, 234 natural monuments, 55 scientific reserves, three biosphere reserves and one large Ramsar site in the Danube Delta), covering 7.1% of the national surface, further strengthens the potential attractiveness of the country (Iorio, Corsale, p. 154).

Tourism promotion was the key element that eased the internationalization of Romanian rural tourist offer. The image of the Romanian village was captured in its manifold aspects in various tourist promotion programs organized by the Ministry of Tourism by way of the General Department for Tourism Promotion and Marketing. The Millennium program, launched in 2000, had “Romania, the last destination of the millennium” as its theme; it relied on three coordinates: the spiritual dimension – Romania is the owner of a unique spiritual treasury, the cultural dimension – the experience of the mystical in the cultural space, the natural dimension – the experience of the beautiful in a timeless space (folk doina, the music of the Romanian landscape). According to the themes planned, the tourist products were: agritourism products, cultural and religious tourism products, among others (Ban, 2007, p. 363-364). A different program, “Romania – Simply Surprising”, was launched in 2004; in order to promote it the Ministry of Tourism conducted a large-scale four-phase project meant to organize events that would catch the attention of foreign tourists and focus it on Romania as a destination (Ban, 2007, p. 365). During this program, the image of Romanian rural space continued to be represented by the most important rural cultural destinations: Maramureș, Bucovina, Transylvania and the Danube Delta as prototypes of tourist destinations of outstanding natural beauty. The latest program of Romanian tourist promotion abroad, called “Romania Land of Choice”, was designed as a video, with a symmetrical structure: it starts off and ends with snapshots of the Danube Delta, and also features snapshots of the most representative tourist destinations in Romania, most of them located in rural areas, such as the fortified churches in Transylvania, and the monasteries in northern Moldavia.

Types of Tourist Villages

In the past few decades, several criteria have been used in Romania and abroad to distinguish among tourist villages; also, this allowed to select among potential customers and improve offer-and-demand mechanisms. There were identified in Romania several categories of tourism villages considering complex criteria (ethnographic value, traditional crafts, existing general and civil infrastructure, tourist-attraction potential, geographical positioning and accessibility, environment quality (Glăvan, 2003; Căndea, Simon, Tătaru, 2007; quoted by Iancu, 2008). The nationally-acknowledged classification was adapted from the point of view of the structure of tourism and technical heritage; in the end main types of tourist villages were identified:

– *landscape and climate villages* are characterized by the presence of an attractive natural scenery, with numerous and diverse elements of tourism potential, that favor spending time out. Tourist settlements of this type, located in hill and mountain regions, as well as on the seaside, relatively remote from major traffic thoroughfares, are suited to holiday tourism, as they offer opportunities for outdoor walks, heliotherapy, backpacking: Fundata, Șirnea (Rucăr-Bran Pass), Pocuia-Tismana (Gorj), Brădet (Argeș), Botiza (Maramureș), Vama Veche, 2 Mai (Constanța).

– *balneal villages* support local – and less frequently regional-scale balneal tourism, banking on a series of “tourism resources” used and capitalized on: carbonated mineral waters, mofettes, saltwater springs or lakes, mud: Zizin (Covasna), Bala (Mehedinți), Oglinzi and Bălțătești (the Moldavian Piedmont), Coștiui (Maramureș), Călacea (Timiș), Săcelu (Gorj).

– *sports-activity tourist villages* are typical of mountain regions with enduring snow layers, special declivity favoring winter sports (Fundata, Gărîna – Caraș, Arieșeni – Alba etc.), but also of lowland regions where water bodies support water sports (Murighiol, Mila 23 – The Danube Delta);

– *pastoral tourist villages* (Vaideeni – Vâlcea, Prislop, Jina – Sibiu) are typically located in mountain regions, where the locals’ staple activity is breeding sheep and cattle, and they can win over tourists by means of dairy-based foods. As entertainment, tourists can be taken on tours of sheepfolds, in order to get them acquainted with regular sheepfold activities and the dairy production processes;

– *fishing and game-hunting villages* offer various forms of special leisure for tourists – hunting, fishing, safari – while at the same time ensuring opportunities for accommodation and fish or game specialty cuisine services: Crișan, Sfântu Gheorghe, Murighiol (the Danube Delta), the villages in the Vișeu and Bistrița valleys, among others.

– *arts and handicraftsmanship tourist villages* (Margina – Suceava, Oboga – Olt, Marga – Caraș, Corund – Harghita, Săpânța – Maramureș etc.) are

known for the numerous tourists' interest in arts and handcraftsmanship, as well as their desire to buy such items from the very source, the artisans themselves.

– *ethno-folkloric tourist villages* group rural settlements that have a wealth of ethno-folkloric background, of outstanding value, represented by ethnographical museums, exceptional folk architecture, folk costumes etc., Curtișoara (Gorj), Avram Iancu (Alba), Rășinari, Sibiel (Sibiu), Vama (Suceava), Năruja (Vrancea), Bănița, Crivadia (Hunedoara), Sasca Montană (Caraș), Bârsana (Maramureș).

– *villages with assets of scientific interest* have various kinds of natural reserves that win over numerous tourists, by means of their novelty, uniqueness and beauty: Andrieșeni (Vrancea), Cîreșu (Mehedinți), Mitocul Dragomirnei and Bosanci (Suceava), Chiuzbaia (Maramureș), Gârda de Sus (Alba), Mânzălești, Medelic and Pâcelele (Buzău).

– *villages with historical, artistic and architectural monuments* of outstanding value, well-known nationally and even internationally, are typical of Moldavia, with an impressive string of 15th-17th century monasteries (Sucevița, Putna, Dragomirna, Agapia, Văratec), the Southern Carpathian piedmont (Aninoasa, Cotmeana, Cozia, Polovragi), southern Transylvania, with the well-known fortified churches (Hărman, Prejmer, Biertan, Feldioara, Cristian), the Southern Carpathian range, with the complex of Dacian forts grouped in the Orăștie mountain region: Costești, Blidaru, Bănița.

– *orchard and vineyard tourist villages* where tourism is an all-year-round option, both during harvest time and after harvests, thanks to the availability of fruit, grape and derived produce: Recaș and Giarmata (Timiș), Șiria (Arad), Agapia (Neamț).

Although the classification presented above was conducted with the goal of highlighting a nationwide typology of tourist villages, nevertheless there are several villages that do not feature clear-cut characteristics, with one category possibly featuring characteristics typical of the other categories: for instance the villages of Botiza and Sibiel are located inside an attractive natural landscape, but they can also be included among ethno-folkloric villages because of the architectural and folklore elements, present in profusion, and the villages of Bănița and Crivadia (Hunedoara) are at the same time pastoral villages, landscape villages (they are located in a region with a dominantly karst landscape) and their territory encompasses historical, artistic and architectural monuments (the medieval tower in Crivadia, the Dacian fort in Bănița) (Merciu, 2011, p. 137-138).

Rural Space Development Policies Implemented on a National Scale

An important perspective for rural tourism between 2007-2013 is represented by structural funds, i.e. money that is allotted for the development of two operational programs of the Government of Romania. After Romania's

integration in the European Union, tourism has benefited from important non-returnable funding, in the form of structural funds; there are numerous possibilities for attracting European finances, be it in the form of direct investment in the infrastructure, in order to increase the quality of tourist services, or the training of the personnel in the field, or the development of leisure services, as well as the capitalization, protection and preservation of the natural heritage (Petrea, Marușca, Filimon, 2008).

A study by the Ministry of Agriculture, on the national rural space, identified the villages with a high tourist potential. By the end of this assessment, some villages had been included in the category of villages with very high tourist potential, scoring 10 out of 10 points maximum, alongside other villages such as Desești (Maramureș County), Orăștioara de Sus, Boșorod and Bănița (Hunedoara County), Săsciori (Alba County), (*Annex 10: List of rural commune with tourism potential*, www.apdrp.ro). This classification is useful because it allows villages with high tourist potential to benefit from high scores when the local population files fund application projects, with a view to building tourist boarding houses. Boarding houses set up in localities whose potential was rated 7 to 10 points receive an additional 20 points for financial support applications for the creation and modernization of boarding houses and microenterprises in rural areas. Feasible projects are funded by County Bureaus for Rural Development and Fishing Payment as part of the project “Encouraging Tourist Activity”, included in Direction III “Improving Living Standards in Rural Areas and Diversifying Rural Economy”; its general goal is to develop tourist activities in rural areas, which would contribute to raising the number of jobs and alternative sources of income, and raising the attractiveness of rural areas (Payments Agency for Rural Development and Fishing).

The special objectives included among the steps meant to encourage tourist activities in rural spaces are:

- creation and preservation of jobs by means of tourism-related activities, especially jobs for the youth and women;
 - enhancing the added-value of tourism activities;
 - expanding, improving and diversifying the infrastructure and touristic services;
 - raising the number of tourists and extending the duration of the stays;
- Among the operational objectives, one may include:
- expanding and improving the tourist accommodation facilities on a small scale;
 - developing the systems for tourist information and promotion;
 - creating the recreational facilities in order to ensure access to natural areas of interest to tourists.

Evolution of Romanian Rural Tourism

In order to capture the complexity of the process of evolution of rural tourism in Romania, several case studies were selected, using the criterion of representativeness, which was determined, on the one hand, by the asset's seniority as a tourist destination, and on the other hand by the dynamics of the number of tourist accommodation facilities and the evolution of tourist arrivals. On average two villages were selected as typical for tourist activity in each of 7 regions of Romania that have managed to stand out as rural tourist destinations, internationally: the Bran-Moeciu Region, the Western Carpathians Region (the villages of Arieșeni and Râmetea), the Banat (Zăvoi and Turnu Ruieni), the Maramureș (Botiza and Vadu Izei), the Bucovina (Sucevița and Vama), the Danube Delta (Sfântu Gheorghe and Crișan), northern Oltenia (Peștișani and Polovragi), Vrancea (Tulnici and Golești).

Two tourism indicators were analyzed, in order to review the evolution of rural tourism in Romania in the past few years, i.e. the number of tourist accommodation facilities and the evolution of arrivals, respectively. As far as the dynamics of tourist accommodation facilities is concerned, one notices that Brașov region, one of the foremost rural tourism destinations, witnessed an exponential growth of accommodation facilities in the three years of reference in the case of both villages analyzed.

One can notice the growth rate in Moeciu was lower than compared to Bran's (*fig. 1 & 2*), in terms of the dynamics of accommodation facilities, but by 2008 Moeciu managed to reach a number of accommodation units roughly equal to that of Bran (*fig. 3*). It is noticeable that the dynamics of arrivals will later turn into an upwards one, reflecting the changes that occurred in rural tourism as a result of heavy promotion of Romania's image as a predilect rural tourist destination. It can be seen also that the ratio of tourists in the case of the village of Bran – in the first two reference years – is net higher than in the case of the Moeciu, which can be explained by the presence of a particularly important cultural-historical asset (The Bran Castle).

As far as the evolution of tourist arrivals is concerned, that the number of tourists in the first reference year is inversely proportional to the number of tourist accommodation facilities, a situation that can be explained by the relatively recent inclusion of the two settlements in the rural tourism circuit, as well as by the inadequate tourist promotion.

In the case of the villages in the Western Carpathians, the late inclusion of certain rural settlements into the tourist circuit and the absence of promotion brought about a low level of tourist infrastructure and tourist arrivals in the early part of the period analyzed. Although the village of Arieșeni is the best-known among tourist villages in the Western Carpathians, the first tourist accommodation facilities were only built in 2008, unlike other villages that, although they feature outstanding natural and cultural tourism potential, are less

known by tourists, but are better organized in terms of the tourism infrastructure (for instance, by 2001, the village of Râmetea featured the highest levels in tourist accommodation facilities) (*fig. 1*).

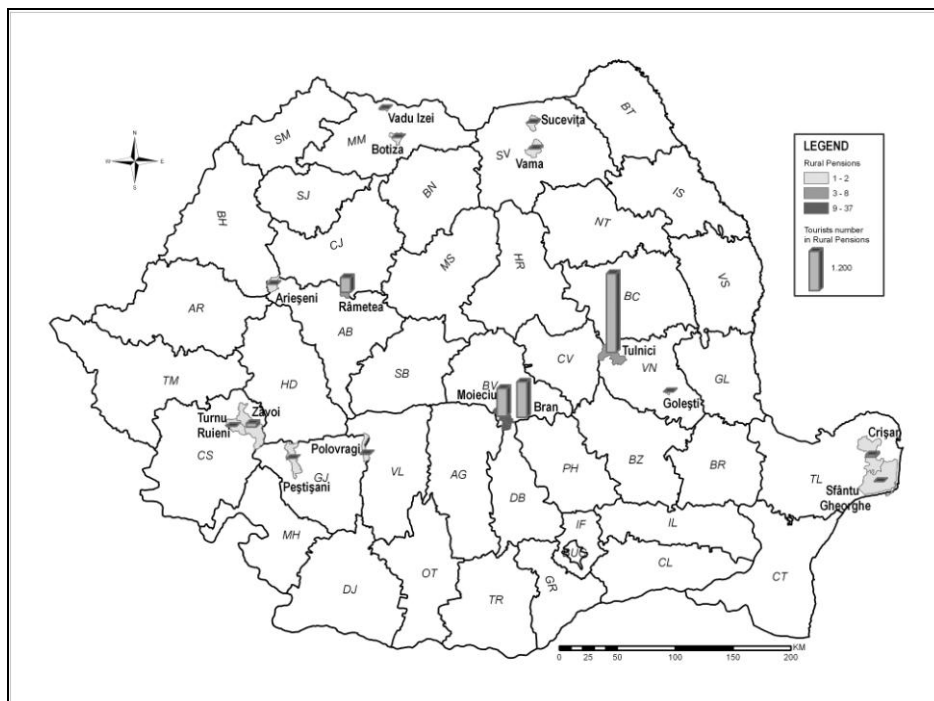


Fig. 1. The dynamic of rural accommodation facility and arrivals in Romania (2001)
(Source: Authors' elaboration on ArcGis based on calculation of statistical data)

A change in the evolution of tourist accommodation facilities in the Western Carpathians could be observed in 2008, when new rural tourism centers begin to emerge, in terms of tourist facilities, such as Arieșeni or Garda de Sus.

As far as the evolution of tourist arrivals is concerned, it can be seen that during 2001-2004, the village of Râmetea registered the highest number of tourists, and that late in the time period analyzed, other villages such as Arieșeni dominate in terms of arrivals (*fig.1 & 2*).

The high inflow of tourists in Arieșeni is partly explained by the extant forms of leisure (ski tracks) that add to the tourist offer and win over an important number of tourists.

Although Maramureș is the most tradition-bound region in Romania, where traditions and customs were preserved in the original form, one can notice a fluctuation in the number of accommodation facilities in the first two reference years, with a significant drop in their number registered in 2004 (*fig. 1 & 2*).

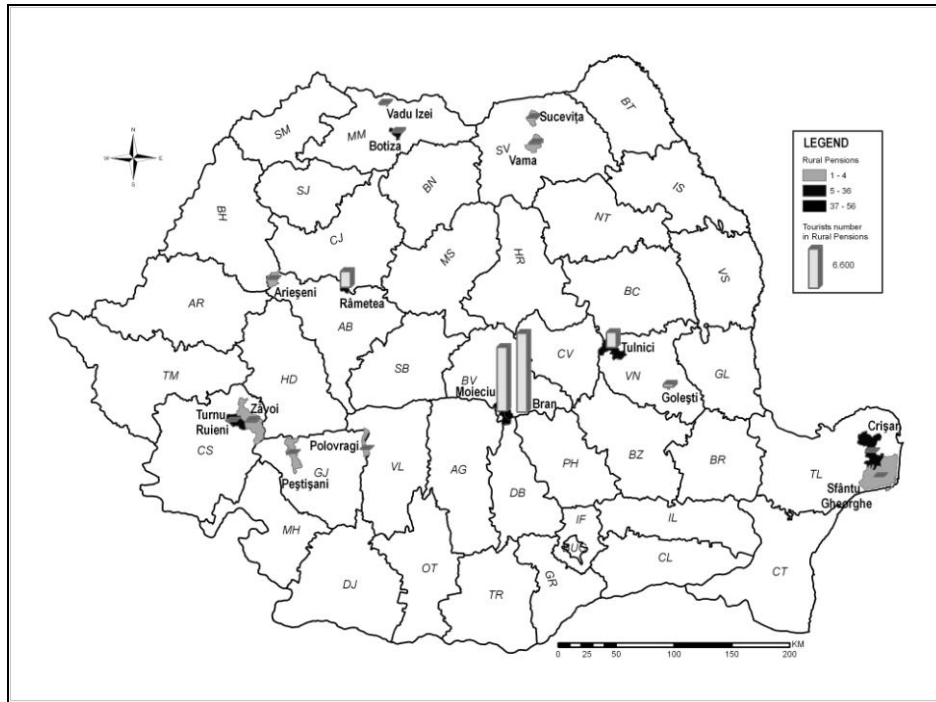


Fig. 2. The evolution of rural accommodation facility and arrivals in Romania (2004)
 (Source: Authors' elaboration on ArcGis based on calculation of statistical data)

After 2004, tourism infrastructure in the Maramureş villages surveyed picks up. This is explained by the Maramureş region's emerging as a tourist destination during 2004-2008, a time which also saw an upwards trend in the construction of tourist accommodation premises.

Maramureş villages that stand out thanks to a high rate of tourist infrastructure are Botiza and Vadu Izei, rather than the well-known villages of Săpânţa or Bârsana (fig. 3).

The same fluctuating trend can be noticed at the level of tourist arrival evolution, with very low values in the number of tourists standing out early during the period of time analyzed, followed by an exponential rise of the number of tourists (predominantly Americans) in the past few years as Maramureş grew into an international tourist destination.

The fluctuating trend of the former half of the survey is mainly due to the limited promotion of Maramureş as a rural tourism destination, which meant its relegation to a secondary position, later on followed by its rediscovery as a tourist destination, as a result of the heavy promotion of its original tourist offer, which contributed to increasing the number of tourist arrivals.

In the case of villages in northern Moldavia the evolution of accommodation facilities parallels the dynamics of tourist arrivals; early in the time period analyzed one can notice low levels in tourist accommodation facilities, with a slight increase in 2004 (*fig. 1 & 2*).

The steepest growth in accommodation facilities was registered in the village of Vama. One can notice an exponential increase in the number of accommodation facilities in all of the analyzed villages located in Suceava County, late in the time period analyzed, with the villages of Sucevița and Vama particularly standing out. As far as tourist arrivals are concerned, the same upwards trend is visible, starting off from very low values in 2001, followed by a slight increase by 2004, and then by a significant increase in the number of tourists in all moldavian villages analyzed by 2008, with the highest arrival levels registered in the village of Vama (*fig. 3*).

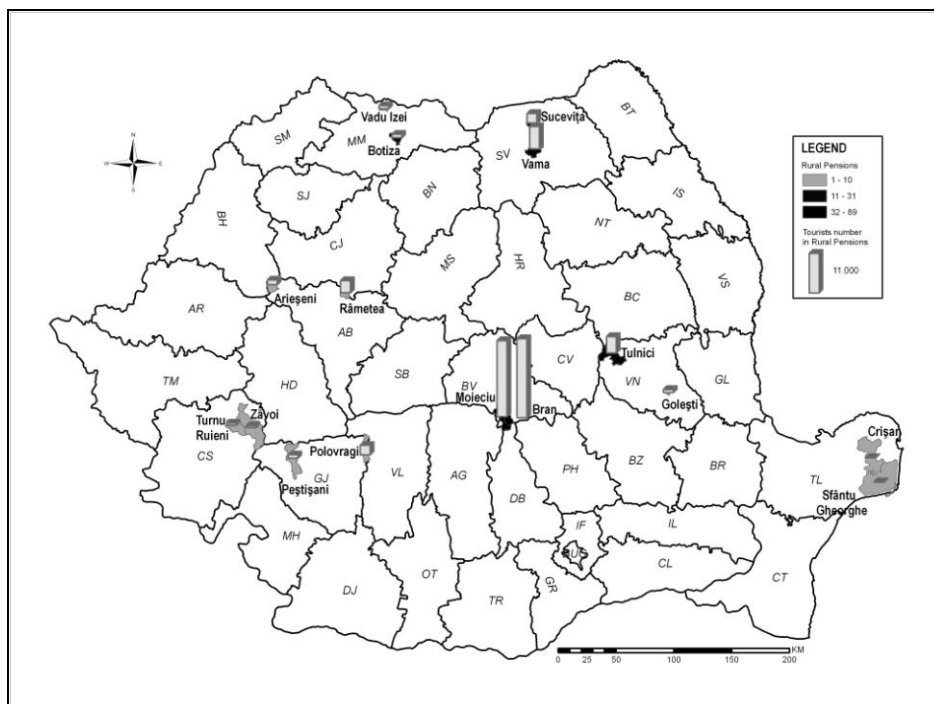


Fig. 3. The dynamic of rural accommodation facility and arrivals in Romania (2008)
(*Source:* Authors' elaboration on ArcGis based on calculation of statistical data)

In the case of villages in Gorj County one can notice a constant trend of multiplication of the accommodation facilities. Gorj villages feature high or very high values ever since the beginning of the time span analyzed, and this continues throughout the entire period, with a significant increase registered late in the

interval. Although the volume of accommodation units was high, the evolution of arrivals indicated very low figures through most of the time span analyzed, with the exception of the last year, when one can notice an increase in the number of tourists. The very high values of tourist arrivals in the village of Polovragi can be explained by the association of rural tourism with religious tourism, the presence of the Polovragi monastery being one of the reasons for the region's attractiveness.

In Vrancea county, in terms of tourism infrastructure the village of Tulnici is worth a special mention, as it held a dominant position throughout the entire period of time analyzed. One can also notice, in the past few years, a slight increase in the number of tourist accommodation facilities in the village of Golești. The evolution of the number of tourists indicates the same pattern as in the case of the evolution of tourism infrastructure. One can notice an increase from one year to the next of the number of tourists in the Vrancea village of Tulnici, which registers a peak in tourists in 2008 (4,498) during the time period analyzed (2001-2008), thus registering a doubling in the volume of arrivals as compared to 2004 (2,531 tourists) (*fig. 2 & 3*). The high levels of tourist arrivals in the village of Tulnici are correlated with the tourist attractions related to the association of rural tourism with wine and vineyard tourism, as the Vrancea region is the starting-point of the "wine road" in Romania.

In the case of the Danube Delta the evolution of tourist accommodation structures registered a series of fluctuations during the period of time analyzed, 2001-2008. While by 2001 the only accommodation facilities registered were found in the village of Sfântu Gheorghe, by 2004 one could notice a good distribution of accommodation facilities in all Delta villages analyzed (*fig. 1 & 2*). By 2008 there is a drop in the number of accommodation units in the case of the villages of Sfântu Gheorghe and Crișan; the number of accommodation units remained therefore constant (*fig. 3*).

As far as the evolution of tourist arrivals is concerned, the only figures available for 2001 were registered in the village of Crișan. In 2008 the number of tourists increases in both villages (*fig. 3*).

In the Banat region, the evolution of accommodation structures features a trend of slight increase in the early part of the time period analyzed (by 2001 the only accommodation facilities were located in the village of Zăvoi, but by 2004 Turnu Ruieni village stands out among the settlements with a tourism infrastructure) (*fig. 1 & 2*). By 2008 one could notice an increase in the number of accommodation facilities in the villages of Zăvoi and Turnu Ruieni (*fig. 3*). In this period another villages (Sasca Montană and Văliug) are registered as villages with tourism infrastructure.

As far as the evolution of tourist arrivals is concerned, it can be seen a slow increase in the number of tourists in the first two years of reference (2001-2004), with an important increase in the number of tourists registered late in the time period analyzed, with the village of Sasca Montana standing out as registering the highest figures (926 tourists), followed by Văliug (710 tourists), Turnu Ruieni (647 tourists) and Zăvoi (538 tourists).

The lower values in tourist flows in the early part of the analysed time period are explained by the predominance during that interval of ancestry tourism (*tourisme des racines*) meaning the return to stay with the relatives, during holidays, of ethnic Germans who used to live in the Banat region. There is no official record-keeping of this tourist flow because these travels are included in the category of trips to relatives.

Conclusions

Nowadays rural tourism has been an activity that can contribute to the development of rural areas, especially of less favoured ones affected by the decline of traditional agrarian activities.

Due to its natural landscape and cultural heritage, Romania owns a great potential in order to develop rural tourism activities.

The evolution of rural tourism in the past few years reflects growth in terms of both tourism facilities and in terms of tourist circulation, a state that shapes the favorable outlook of further growth. The development of rural tourism in Romania is favored on the one hand by the outstandingly diverse natural and cultural tourism potential, and by the hospitality of the local population, on the other hand. These attributes are typical of the entire Romanian rural space, a fact that is bound to favor, in the future, the development of new rural destinations where rural tourism is nowadays little developed or actually absent. This state might also be achieved by the nationwide efforts to encourage and support tourism entrepreneurship in rural areas by means of development projects financed by European funds.

There are numerous rural areas in Romania where subsistence agriculture is an activity that limits the potential of development of those areas, and rural tourism is the mean to support a diversified economy, able to ensure at the same time a sustainable development of the rural space. The rich tourism patrimony of the Romanian rural space has favored rural tourism's association with other forms of tourism: cultural, environmental and green tourism.

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