

## AGROTOURISM AS A VECTOR OF ECONOMIC DIVERSIFICATION AND REVITALIZATION OF RURAL AREAS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

MICULA IOANA-ALEXANDRA<sup>1</sup>, VUȘCA CLAUDIA<sup>1</sup>, BACTER RAMONA-VASILICA<sup>1</sup>,  
GHERDAN ALINA EMILIA-MARIA<sup>\*1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Faculty of Environmental Protection, University of Oradea*

\*Corresponding author's e-mail: miculaalexandra25@gmail.com

***Abstract:** Agritourism is an expanding phenomenon in current rural economies, with the capacity to significantly contribute to the diversification of economic activities and to the revitalization of communities affected by demographic and socio-economic decline. This paper analyzes the role and impact of agritourism as a rural development tool, starting from the premise that it is not limited to offering accommodation or mass services, but becomes a complex strategy of capitalization of local resources, cultural and natural heritage, as well as human capital. The study compares successful models and challenges in the Romanian and European rural areas, highlighting similarities and differences in public policies, community involvement and the perception of rural tourism consumers.*

**Key words:** agrotourism, România, vector, Toscana, Europa

### INTRODUCTION

Demographic decline, population ageing, and the decreasing competitiveness of traditional agriculture constitute factors that have generated significant transformations in European rural regions [15]. In this context, economic diversification becomes an essential condition for maintaining the viability and attractiveness of rural settlements.

Agrotourism, defined as a tourism activity carried out on farms or within rural households, combines the productive dimension of agriculture with the recreational dimension of tourism [8]. It brings numerous advantages, including increasing farmers' income, strengthening entrepreneurial initiatives, and revitalizing cultural identity [9, 4].

International studies highlight that the success of agrotourism is influenced by the degree of professionalization and by the capacity of rural communities to develop a coherent and competitive tourism offer [1,17]. In Italy, particularly in Tuscany, agrotourism has evolved into an international brand, integrating gastronomy, wine production, and cultural heritage into a comprehensive tourism product [9]. In Romania, despite the presence of significant resources, the level of organization and promotion remains low [5, 7].

The methodology is grounded in a qualitative analysis of the academic literature and recent statistical data [10,14], complemented by a comparative analysis of two regions with deeply rooted rural traditions and promising tourism resources: Northwestern Romania and Tuscany, Italy. The study results indicate that agrotourism not only generates additional income for farmers but also contributes to job creation [3,17], as well as to the strengthening of local identity and environmental preservation through sustainable practices [2,16].

The discussions show that, while in Italy agrotourism has developed into a well-regulated and attractive sector [12], in Romania it remains in a developing stage, requiring more integrated policies and effective public-private partnerships [5, 7].

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research is based on an analysis of the relevant academic literature [1,4,6] and statistical data provided by Eurostat (2023) and INS (2023). The methodology included:

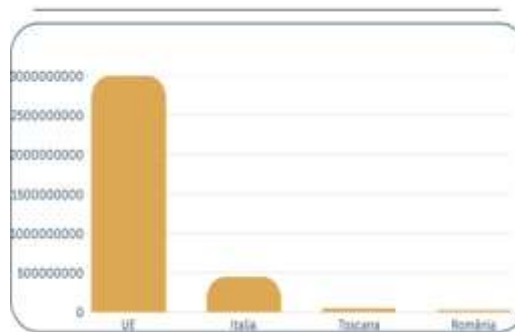
-analysis of the theoretical framework concerning agrotourism and rural development [8,9];

- selection of the regions under comparison: Northwestern Romania and Tuscany, Italy;
- evaluation of secondary data from official reports [13,16]
- comparison of success factors and existing barriers [3,17].

### RESEARCH RESULTS

In the northwestern part of Romania, regions such as Maramureş have distinguished themselves through an authentic agrotourism offer; however, development remains fragmented and uneven [5]. The absence of adequate infrastructure and promotion limits the region’s potential, and many rural households lack the necessary training in tourism management [7].

In contrast, Tuscany represents a successful model in which the integration of farms, gastronomy, and cultural heritage has led to the creation of a globally recognized tourism brand [6,12]. At the level of the European Union, the year 2023 marked a significant recovery in tourism following the declines caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to data provided by the European Commission [10], the number of overnight stays in tourist accommodation facilities reached approximately 2.9 billion, representing an increase of 6.1% compared with 2022.



**Figure 1. Comparative chart of tourist overnight stays (2023)**

This evolution confirms the full recovery of European tourism, approaching the record levels of the pre-pandemic period. According to the annual report published by the National Institute of Statistics [11], Tourism Activity in 2023, Romania’s tourism sector recorded steady growth. The total number of tourists and overnight stays increased compared with 2022, reflecting both the revival of domestic tourism and the heightened interest of foreign visitors. Eurostat likewise reports an increase of approximately 23% in the number of international tourists in Romania compared with the previous year.

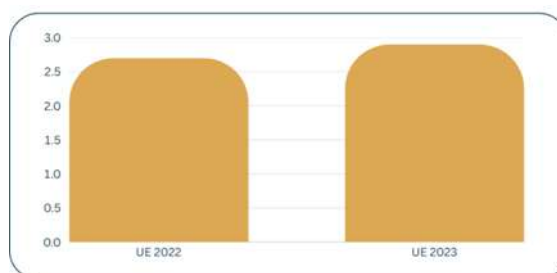
The territorial distribution of accommodation capacity reveals that the North-West Region (the counties of Bihor, Cluj, Maramureş, Satu Mare, Sălaj, and Bistriţa-Năsăud) holds a significant share of the country’s rural tourism offer, due to its abundance of agrotourism guesthouses and the diversity of its natural and cultural attractions.

Agrotourism in Italy benefits from legislative support, professional promotion, and efficient infrastructure [1,4].

By comparison, Romania possesses similar natural and cultural potential, yet fails to fully capitalize on it through a well-defined national strategy. Fragmented public policies and bureaucratic barriers constitute significant obstacles [15,16].

In Italy, the year 2023 was regarded as a peak year for the tourism sector. Data provided by ISTAT and the Italian Ministry of Tourism indicate that more than 134 million arrivals and approximately 451 million overnight stays were recorded nationwide. Regarding the Tuscany region, the report issued by IRPET (Istituto Regionale per la Programmazione Economica della Toscana, 2023) shows a total of approximately 52

million overnight stays in accommodation facilities, marking a complete return to pre-pandemic levels. Tuscany continues to be one of the most visited regions in Italy, owing to its unique combination of cultural heritage, rural landscape, and a rich offer of agrotourism products.



**Figure 2. Turism evolution 2022-2023**

Italy holds a leading position in Europe in the field of agrotourism. According to a survey conducted by ISTAT (2023), there were 26,129 active agrotourism enterprises in Italy, representing an increase of 1.1% compared with 2022. The value of agrotourism production rose by 15.4%, indicating a strengthening of the sector.



**Figure 3. Graph of the Number of Tourism Enterprises (2023)**

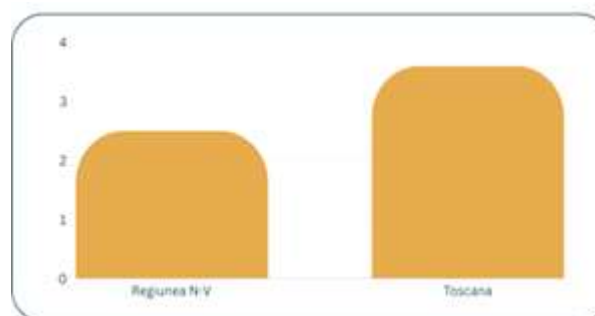
Regions such as Tuscany, Umbria, and Trentino–Alto Adige concentrate the largest share of the agrotourism offer, benefiting from modern agricultural infrastructure and coherent regional policies.

In Romania, the concept of agrotourism is represented primarily by agrotourism guesthouses, which are officially classified by the Ministry of Economy, Entrepreneurship and Tourism ([turism.gov.ro](http://turism.gov.ro)) and reported by the National Institute of Statistics. At present, there is no unified reporting system for agrotourism enterprises similar to that in Italy; however, the North-West Region has one of the most developed networks of rural guesthouses in the country.

Nevertheless, the efficient use of European funds could contribute significantly to the development of the sector [10,11]. Agrotourism generates a favourable socio-economic impact by creating jobs [17], increasing farmers' income [3], revitalizing cultural identity [9], and supporting environmental protection [2]. In Italy, emphasis is placed on the integration of local products such as wine, olive oil, and regional gastronomy, which enhances attractiveness [12]. In Romania, the integration of such products is still in its early stages [7].

An essential factor in the development of agrotourism is the agricultural structure. In Romania, agriculture is characterized by a significant number of small, often family-owned farms—approximately 3.5 million holdings, most of which have an area of less than 5 hectares [10]. This fragmentation creates opportunities for the development of

complementary activities such as rural tourist accommodation and agro-educational experiences.



**Figure 4. Structural Chart. Regional Population (2023)**

Conversely, Italy benefits from a more consolidated agricultural structure, with medium- and large-sized farms capable of investing in integrated tourism infrastructure (accommodation facilities, restaurants, local product tastings, etc.). Regarding demographic characteristics, the North-West Region of Romania has an estimated population between 2.7 and 2.9 million inhabitants, while Tuscany has approximately 3.6 million inhabitants (2023).

The higher population density and the intense tourist flow in Tuscany generate greater pressure on resources but also provide opportunities for enhanced economic valorization.

## CONCLUSIONS

Agrotourism represents a key driver of economic diversification and rural revitalization. The comparative analysis between Romania's North-West Region and Tuscany highlights both notable differences and shared characteristics. Tuscany benefits from a consolidated model of integration between agriculture and tourism, supported by coherent public policies, well-developed infrastructure, and a strong entrepreneurial culture. By contrast, the North-West Region of Romania is in a stage of consolidation, yet it possesses significant natural, cultural, and human resources capable of sustaining accelerated agrotourism development in the coming years. In a favourable European context, marked by a steady increase in demand for rural, sustainable, and authentic tourism, Romania has the opportunity to capitalize on Italy's successful experiences by adapting them to national specificities. The implementation of transnational partnerships and the efficient use of European funds especially through LEADER programmes and the Common Agricultural Policy can accelerate rural development and support the modernization of the tourism sector.

The integration of local products into the rural tourism offer significantly enhances destination attractiveness and strengthens community identity. The valorization of traditional food, artisanal, or cultural products enriches the visitor experience and transforms agrotourism into an effective instrument for promoting gastronomic and cultural heritage. At the same time, this form of tourism plays an important role in stabilizing the rural population by generating employment opportunities, diversifying incomes, and reducing migratory pressures.

European funds constitute an essential instrument for supporting rural development, provided that they are managed strategically, transparently, and in a manner adapted to local needs. A coherent vision oriented towards sustainability, professional training, and cooperation between farmers and tourism operators can generate long-term economic and social benefits.

Romania requires an integrated national strategy for agrotourism development, one that unifies existing initiatives and establishes clear directions for action. Such a strategy should aim to improve service quality, develop infrastructure, promote natural and cultural heritage, and, importantly, strengthen a coherent image of Romania's rural destinations. Building a strong national brand and implementing professional marketing can differentiate Romania on the European market, offering it a clear, authentic, and attractive identity.

The experience of Tuscany provides a valuable example of best practices, demonstrating the importance of cooperation among authorities, farmers, and local communities. However, to achieve comparable results, the Italian model must be adapted to Romania's socio-economic realities. Through a flexible approach and close collaboration among institutions, the private sector, and civil society, agrotourism can become a genuine pillar of sustainable development in Romania's rural areas, contributing to community revitalization and the strengthening of the local economy.

### REFERENCES

- [1]. **CAWLEY M., GILLMOR D.**, 2008, Integrated rural tourism: Concepts and practice. *Annals of Tourism Research*. Nr. 4
- [2]. **CIOLAC R.**, 2020, Agritourism – A Sustainable Development Factor for Improving the 'Health' of Rural Settlements. *Sustainability*. Nr. 2
- [3]. **FLEISCHER A., PIZAM A.**, 1997, Rural tourism in Israel. *Tourism Management*
- [4]. **HALL D., ROBERTS L., MITCHELL M.**, 2003, *New Directions in Rural Tourism*. Ashgate. Nr.8
- [5]. **IORIO M., CORSALE A.**, 2010, Rural tourism and livelihood strategies in Romania. *Journal of Rural Studies*. Nr.113
- [6]. **LANE B., KASTENHOLZ E.**, 2015, Rural tourism: The evolution of practice and research approaches – towards a new generation concept? *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*
- [7]. **PĂUNESCU C.**, 2019, *Agroturism și dezvoltare rurală în România*. Editura ASE.Nr.57
- [8]. **PHILLIP S., HUNTER C., BLACKSTOCK K.**, 2010, A typology for defining agritourism. *Tourism Management*. Nr. 89
- [9]. **SHARPLEY R.**, 2002, Rural tourism and the challenge of tourism diversification: the case of Cyprus. *Tourism Management*. Nr. 5
- [10]. \*\*\* **EUROSTAT**, 2023, *Tourism statistics – nights spent at tourist accommodation establishments*
- [11]. \*\*\* **INSTITUTUL NAȚIONAL DE STATISTICĂ**, 2023, *Activitatea de turism în anul 2023*. București. <https://insse.ro>
- [12]. \*\*\* **MINISTERO DELLE POLITICHE AGRICOLE ALIMENTARI E FORESTALI (MIPAAF)**, 2021, *Rapporto sull'agriturismo in Italia*
- [13]. \*\*\* **MINISTERUL ECONOMIEI, ANTREPRENORIATULUI ȘI TURISMULUI**, 2023, *Lista structurilor de primire turistică cu funcțiuni de cazare*. <https://turism.gov.ro>
- [14]. \*\*\* **NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF STATISTICS ROMANIA**, 2023 *Statistical Yearbook*
- [15]. \*\*\* **OECD**, 2020, *Rural Well-being: Geography of Opportunities*. Paris: OECD Publishing
- [16]. \*\*\* **UNWTO**, 2019, *Tourism and Rural Development Report*
- [17]. \*\*\* **WILSON S.**, 2001, Factors for success in rural tourism development. *Journal of Travel Research*