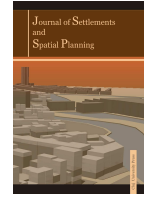




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# Certainties and Uncertainties in the Development of a Rural Tourism Destination. The Case of Oltenia Region, Romania

**Mirela MAZILU<sup>1</sup>, Amalia BĂDIȚĂ<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> University of Craiova, Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Geography, Craiova, ROMANIA

E-mail: mirelamazilu2004@yahoo.com, amalia.badita@gmail.com

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## ABSTRACT

Oltenia Region benefits from a great tourist potential due to its natural and cultural resources. Along with the great landscapes in Gorj, Olt and Mehedinți Counties, there are also a great number of cultural sites such as: monasteries, convents and wooden houses that are still very well preserved and represent the history of the places. The traditions are permanently transferred from one generation to another. Thus the whole beauty of nature, history and tradition of the region needs to be promoted and to become more visible for a large touristic target; the rural tourism can trigger the economic development of Oltenia and can bring real benefits to its inhabitants. The paper aims at analyzing the tourism in South-West Oltenia region, mainly focusing on the rural tourism perspectives and opportunities. The rural tourism product is analyzed in an attempt to create and adopt proper tourism development strategies in the studied area. We used quantitative and qualitative methods such as processing and analysis of statistical data in tourism and analyses of European and national documents and literature. Some strengths of the rural tourism product of Oltenia are underlined and these elements can become competitive on the national tourism market.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

It is certain that Romania has a strong rural character, with the highest share of rural population in the EU (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/sq km 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/sq km. 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. 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. The promotion of European tourism is focused on the quality element, which can represent a success of the two tourism forms. Consequently, the experience gathered during the European Year of Tourism has led to the support, creation and selling of rural tourism and agritourism products [1].

Rural space cannot any longer be considered as being destined only for agriculture, since it has been increasingly used for the construction of second homes or for the entertainment of people living in the crowded urban areas, picturesque villages having a special appeal to tourists. Consequently, there has been extensive research on the various issues involved by rural tourism [2].

The current rural economy is the result of spontaneous development and it is not based on government policies and strategies [3].

According to Otiman (2012) 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 [4].

Bessi re, J. (1998) has stated that tourists are seeking friendly relationships, but also true and genuine values during their holidays [5]. They can find all these in rural areas, spaces which offer the opportunity to socialize and to discover the community identity.

The main objectives of the study are: (1) to analyze the rural tourism potential of Oltenia Region (2) to discover the best assets of a successful rural tourism product which can be developed in the studied area and (3) to find some strategies to better place the product on the national market.

## 2. THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

In the literature the rural Romanian space had different approaches from various domains such as museology, anthropology, statistics, management or rural marketing (Bran et al. (1997), Bran and Istrate (1995), Mitrache et al (1996), Nistoreanu (1999), Bucur Sabo (2006), Mazilu (2006, 2010, 2012)). The study area has certain demographic characteristics that can even better underline the idea that the rural space occupies an important place in the local economy. The non-agricultural activities should revitalize this sector and one of the main opportunities is represented by rural tourism of agritourism (Table 1).

Table 1. South-West Oltenia Development Region - administrative- territorial organisation.

South-West OLTEȚIA	Number of towns and municipalities	Out of which: municipalities	Number of communes	Number of villages
2007	40	11	408	2070
2008	40	11	408	2070
2009	40	11	408	2070
2010	40	11	408	2070
2011	40	11	-	-

The demographic ageing is much more severe in the rural areas than the urban ones. At the beginning of the 1990, the population aged 65 and over accounted for 13.5% of the rural population, while in 2012 it reached 18.3% (Table 2 and 3).

Following the ageing process, the share of women in the total old population has significantly increased, triggering the so-called phenomenon of

'feminization of elderly rural population'. According to the demographic prognosis, the number of rural population will diminish slowly by 2015, and seriously by 2050 due to the decline of birth rates and increase of death rates, on the one hand, and negative migration on the other hand.

Table 2. Age-group population in July, 2012 for South-West Oltenia Development region.

South-West Oltenia	Total	Age groups		
		0 - 14 years	15 - 59 years	60 years and over
2007	2279849	339644	1457785	482420
2008	2262274	331957	1443610	486707
2009	2250565	325173	1433754	491638
2010	2238643	320107	1421156	497380
2011 <sup>1)</sup>	2225108	313257	1411685	500166

Table 3. Natural dynamic of the South-West Development Region (rates per 1000 inhabitants) (2011).

Indicators	Total	Urban	Rural
Birth	8.0	8.5	7.5
Death	12.7	8.6	16.4
Natural increase	- 4.7	- 0.1	- 8.9
Marriages	4.4	5.7	3.3
Divorces	1.06	1.4	0.74
Born dead	2.7	2.2	3.2
Dead below the age of 1 year / 1000 born alive	9.3	-	-

At present, for the rural area under study, the main phenomena with a specific dynamics, impacting on the region are as follows:

a). *The de-ruralisation process* in Romania is generally slow, with different rates of population decrease, depending on regional peculiarities. There are some 'rural enclaves' where the rural population still holds a large share of the total population (as it is the case with the North-Eastern and South Regions), areas where it holds average values (the north-Western regions where it is 46.7%) and regions with low rural share (Bucharest-Ilfov). In Oltenia South-Western Development Region, the rural population has a share of 52.06%, higher than the situation at national level (55.07% urban and 44.93% rural). Considering the perspective of the demographic decrease, this phenomenon will lead to the incapacity of the rural area to perpetuate its own structures, with an ever significant demographic decrease. On the whole of the rural area, during the 1990-2002 period, the population decrease was not alarming (-750,000 persons), the number of population that carried on agricultural

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activities being higher (-800,000 persons in ten years [14] (table 4).

b). *The demographic ageing* is a selective process caused by a complex of social and demographic factors, with different influence depending on the economic and territorial characteristics. The following major characteristics can be seen: demographic ageing depends on the geographical location (the rural

population in the western and south-western part of the country faces the most severe ageing process). From the gender perspective, the proportion of young women is shrinking. Considering the fact that the average age of rural population is 40.2 years, i.e. 1.7 years higher than for the urban population (38.5 years), the average age of women in the rural area is 3.3 years higher than the male population.

Table 4. Structure of active population, on age groups and economic activities in South-West Oltenia Development Region (2011).

South-West Oltenia	Total employed population (thou)	Total 15-64 years	Out of which, on age groups (years), in (%)					
			Out of which:					65 years and over
			15-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	
Total	1024	91.7	7.0	23.0	28.4	19.7	13.6	8.3
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	488	82.6	9.8	17.4	20.7	15.2	19.5	17.4
Mining	29	100.0	0.7	16.9	45.8	31.8	4.8	-
Manufacturing	114	100.0	3.6	24.3	36.9	28.2	7.0	-
Production and distribution of electric, thermal energy, gas, water	34	100.0	0.2	19.2	30.8	39.3	10.5	-
Water distribution, waste management	7	100.0	-	22.1	31.9	31.7	14.3	-
Constructions	40	100.0	8.7	28.2	31.0	25.7	6.4	-
Retail	96	100.0	5.7	37.9	33.8	18.0	4.6	-
Transport and depositing	36	100.0	4.4	25.6	40.9	18.6	10.5	-
Hotels and restaurants	11	100.0	10.0	28.5	31.2	14.8	15.5	-
Information and communication	7	100.0	-	44.2	29.0	20.6	6.2	-
Financial activities	7	100.0	4.3	42.6	36.8	10.8	5.5	-
Real estate	<sup>1)</sup>	100.0	23.5	22.1	11.5	33.2	9.7	-
Professional, scientific and technical activities	14	100.0	1.5	47.8	26.0	14.2	10.5	-
Administration	15	100.0	10.8	25.1	44.6	15.0	4.5	-
Public administration and defense; social insurance	44	100.0	2.7	32.0	35.3	20.6	9.4	-
Education	31	99.9	2.9	26.2	30.9	24.2	15.7	0.1
Health	37	98.8	1.6	21.1	37.2	26.1	12.8	1.2
Cultural activities	<sup>1)</sup>	100.0	13.7	43.0	32.4	8.2	2.7	-
Other activities	10	99.5	19.4	19.4	40.4	12.0	8.3	0.5

Source: Survey on household force labour (AMIGO).

c). *Demographic vulnerability.* The demographic changes lead to a significant restructuring of the regional rural population, impacting especially the age structures and occupations. This way, the social and economic efficiency of the productive activities have registered a set back at regional level, and especially for the rural economies.

d). *The Romanian rural economy* is a predominantly agrarian one, since in Romania, the agriculture accounts for 60.5% of its economy, compared to only 14.1% in the European Union. The seriously distorted structure of the Romanian rural

economy causes a similar structure of the rural population involved in economic activities (primary sector includes 64.2%, out of which 56.6% agriculture, secondary sector holds 18.5%, while the tertiary sector just 17.3%).

For the Romanian rural area, the non-agricultural economy (SMEs with industrial, services activities) has a low share, and rural tourism, in all its forms, except for few mountain areas (Bran-Moeciu, Apuseni, Maramureş, Bucovina) and the Danube Delta, practically does not exist (approximately 5,000 rural boarding houses in 2014) (table 5).

Table 5. Structure of rural economy, (%).

Type of rural activities	Romania	EU
Agriculture	60.5	14.1
Food industry	15.8	20.5
Tobacco industry	1.7	3.2
Fishery	0.1	2.5
Food and agriculture industry	(78.1)	(40.3)
Forestry	(6.3)	(8.2)
Mining	2.6	4.1
Manufacturing	3.1	5.2
Industry	(5.7)	(9.3)
Agritourism	0.1	4.4
Other services	9.8	37.8
Services economy	(9.9)	(42.2)
Non-agricultural economy	(21.9)	(59.7)
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

The Romanian rural economy has a predominantly agricultural (approx. 2/3) or agricultural-food character (more than three quarters). In the European Union, the tertiary sector predominates even in the rural economy, with a share of 42.2%, which is 2% higher than the agricultural and food economy.

The methodology of the study is focusing on the quantitative statistical analysis by processing statistical data of the tourism phenomenon in the region and also on the qualitative assessment of various rural tourism products, which can represent competitive elements for this type of tourism in Oltenia Region, and also the analyses of several European and national documents from the literature.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To this date, although there are some positive signals that rural tourism and mountain agritourism are extending, there are some restrictive factors that limit the spreading of this activity to capitalize all the resources offered by landscape and traditional culture. These restrictive factors are: poor infrastructure (roads, railways, bank services, post, fast and secure telecommunications); low living standard and modest dwellings (that are below the expectations of the least demanding tourists); lack of proper training of householders (minimum knowledge, if any, about tourism, local specific gastronomy, no foreign language); lack of safety and security feeling, etc. The fact that agritourism generates only 0.1% of the Romanian rural economy compared to 4.4% in other EU countries, makes it clear that the Romanian agritourism is quite incipient. Therefore, it is obvious

that important investments (education, financial, infrastructure etc.) are highly necessary for mountain agritourism, in order to highly manage tourism resources.

The national policies for agritourism, which are part of the strategy for rural development in general and for the mountain area in particular, should emphasize the advantages of rural tourism and offer some facilities for its development, such as lower taxes, lower fiscal fees on the whole in order to lower the prices and maintain traditional clients (urban dwellers with lower income, foreigners keen to experience rural traditions, children from the towns, etc).

Supporting and spreading rural tourism and agritourism practices in the mountain areas also imply a significant education component, mainly related to experiencing new cultures and traditions, getting to know the spiritual, historic, architectural or even landscape characteristics and values of the rural area.

So far, rural tourism is an important sector of the Romanian tourism, in 2013, the accommodation facilities specific for rural tourism (tourist and agrotourist boarding houses) accounting for almost 45% of the total accommodation facilities in Romania. Still, the number of tourists did not exceed 360,000 persons, which, at national level, stand for only 6.1% of the Romanian tourists and just 1.6% of the foreign tourists. The low number of tourists means a weak capitalization of tourism resources, the occupation rate being of just 13.8% for the rural boarding houses (below the national level of 26.3%) (table 6 and 7).

Table 6. Accommodation structures for Oltenia region in 2012.

South-West Oltenia	2012
<b>Total</b>	<b>377</b>
Hotels and motels	116
Chalets	10
Camping facilities	11
Tourist villa	50
Students campsites	4
Tourist boarding houses	87
Agritourism boarding houses	74
Halts	5
Hostels	20

The creation of a competitive tourist destination, in our case, Oltenia, depends on the way the following elements, which are interconnected, will be developed:

- accommodation facilities and restaurants – the primary component of the tourism product that provides a quality stay;

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- attractions: landscape, historic, cultural resources;
- communication infrastructure: access way, transport means, telecommunications, transport services (included in the tourism product or not);
- human element: education, professional knowledge, hospitality;
- entertainment facilities;
- entertainment activities, cultural, artistic, commercial activities (fairs, exhibitions, festivals etc.).

Table 7. Tourist accommodation capacity and activity-South-West Oltenia Region.

South-West Oltenia	Accommodation capacity		Number of tourists (thou)	Overnights (thou)	Indices of net using the capacity in function (%)
	Existing (facilities)	In function			
2007	15219	4107	403	1674	40.7
2008	14973	4197	429	1730	41.2
2009	16349	4233	366	1442	34.1
2010	16410	4227	337	1290	30.6
2011	18274	4761	427	1486	31.2

Rural tourism in Oltenia has not been sustainably developed and it was not correlated with the transport infrastructure, services and entertainment facilities. Tourism infrastructure is still poor: scarce tourism signalling, few chalets and boarding houses, low accessibility for natural and historic monuments. The development of tourism infrastructure in the protected areas should be carried out in such a way that tourism would not harm the environment, and the local people could benefit directly from the investments made.

The existence of a functional network of protected areas and national and natural parks may strengthen the development of eco-tourism, animal and plant watching, or nature contemplation in general, provided that the tourism infrastructure will improve in those particular areas.

It is widely acknowledged that the development of rural tourism often triggers the development of additional services (shops for traditional products, transport network etc.), rural population becoming familiar with the concept of multi-activity (tourism becomes a supporting sector for agriculture if this integrates local agricultural products, part-time labour from the farms etc.); through the

promoted tourism products, rural tourism plays a direct role in the conservation of nature, landscapes, cultural inheritance.

The Romanian village in general, and the one from Oltenia, in particular, is the centre of the cultural inheritance (traditions, customs, crafts, skills, churches, archaeological sites, historical vestiges etc.), the traditional values and gastronomy has managed to attract not only gourmand tourists. The best example is Cetate Harbour, where Mircea Dinescu knew how to create a small tourist paradise, offering year after year the gastronomic specialities of the Danube area, moistured with the local wine and music played by the already well-known *Mambo Siria* band. Identity in rural tourism is used both in activities, as a resource and marketing tool, to get a competitive advantage, as well as for (ethnic or geographical) entities so as to strengthen confidence, self-esteem or to attract investments or tourists [15] (fig. 1).

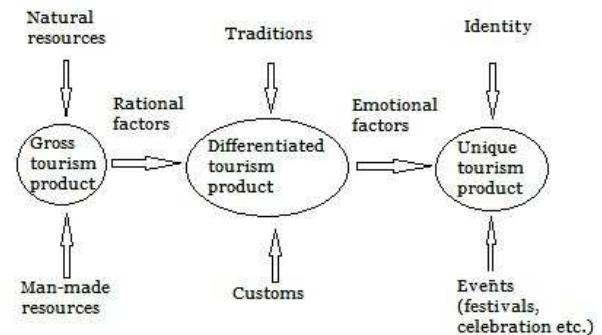


Fig. 1. Identity of rural tourism product.

Oltenia's tourist attractions are remarkable. From immemorial times, there has been a strong rural tradition and culture. The customs and folklore are the elements found everywhere in the rural lifestyle.

The attractions of the region are the beautiful landscapes (mountains, lakes, forests etc.), history and famous persons, commercial areas, cultural attractions, possibilities for entertainment and leisure time, sport arenas, events, buildings, monuments and many others [16]. Actually, this analysis – the attractiveness audit – forms the basis for setting up the regional marketing objective and the marketing programme for this particular region.

We strongly believe that the components of rural tourism must take into consideration the relationship between the four compulsory, interconnected coordinates: the existence of rural settlements, preservation of specific cultural identity, conservation of the traditional way of life and keeping the rural functions, which actually offer the charm and authenticity of the rural area. Following proper policies targeted at rural areas, these elements should become sustainable tourist attractions (fig. 2).

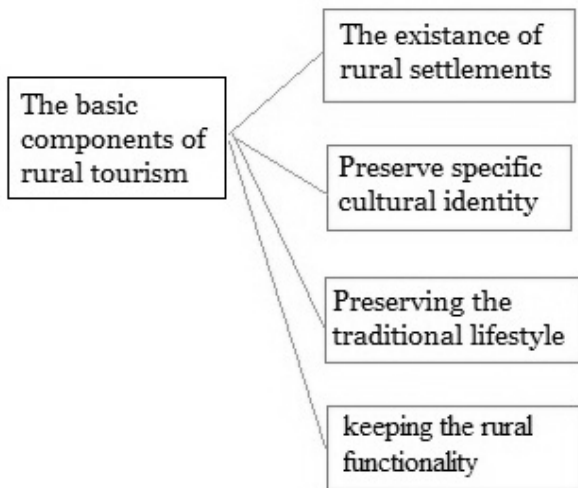


Fig. 2. The 4 elements of success for the development of rural tourism.

The advantages they may bring about refer to:

- attraction towards tourist activities held in the authentic rural area;
- consolidation of specific elements, such as small handicrafts, enterprises, tourist attending areas, direct contact with nature, genuine cultural inheritance, traditional attitudes;
- small-scale social and economic activities;
- contact with the traditional way of life;
- possibilities for development and keen monitoring, that may be controlled on the long run;
- a variety of tourist actions offered by the complex rural area;
- development of rural communities focused on a real alternative offered by traditional handicrafts;
- economic increase supported by a greater capitalization of the existing resources, improvement of social structures and decrease of the poverty level for the rural households, stimulation of economic development by capitalizing the crops to the use of tourists, maintaining alive old skills, customs and fairs (fig. 3).

For the traditional Oltenia, be it food or rural art, a proper promotion of traditional products may bring considerable advantages to the rural economy, especially in the remote areas, by increasing the income of farmers and keeping population from migrating to towns. From the traditional house made of (Fig. 4), to the Oltenia folk costume (fig. 5) traditional rural household, crafts and local food, there are many reasons for tourists to come, and, at the same time, tourism products that may become the regional brand of Oltenia.

The peasant household characteristic for this region has emerged in historical times, being influenced by the historical, social and economic conditions. Perhaps the most beautiful peasant architecture developed in Gorj County. The Oltenia carpets are one of the finest examples of Romanian art. People from

Oltenia knew to wave and sew, but they were also remarkable potters, to mention here just Hurezu, a pottery centre that emerged after the construction of Hurez Monastery in the time of Constantine Brâncoveanu, as well as Sisești, well known abroad after the exhibition that was organized in Brussels airport in 2013. Here takes place a fair called Pots and stuffed cabbage leaves, which gradually becomes a tourist attraction, representatives of the Mosna settlement, from Serbia also taking part in the event.

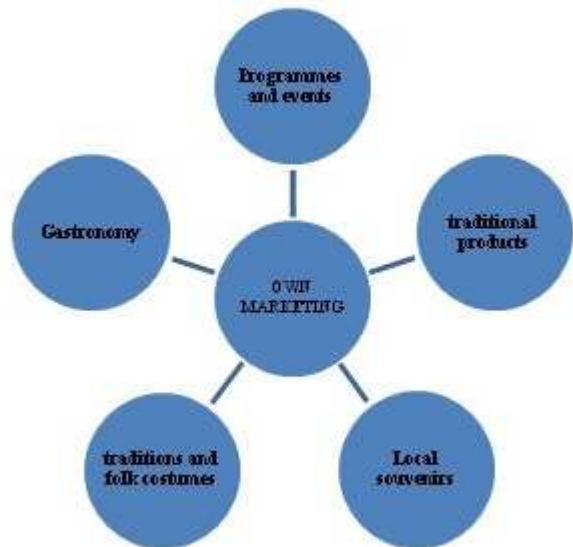


Fig. 3. Sustainable rural marketing.



Fig. 4. Traditional house in Oltenia.



Fig. 5. Folk costumes from Romanai and Dolj.

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In Craiova, in February 2014, the World Vision Romania celebrated the end of the project *The handicraft workshop*, which targeted the rural communities within Oltenia. The main goal of the project had economic implications – families in the countryside, with the help of traditional handicrafts, could succeed in lowering the dependence on agriculture and increase their revenues, thus offering a better living standard to their children. Approximately 60 villages from Dolj, Olt, Vâlcea and Mehedinți took part, with more than 150 craftsmen teaching them how to weave.

The gastronomic values from Oltenia and the local identity are public goods that may be easily capitalized by the locals, bringing extra revenue, the ever increasing importance of gastronomy for the world tourism being recognized by World Tourism organization as well in 2013 (fig. 6).

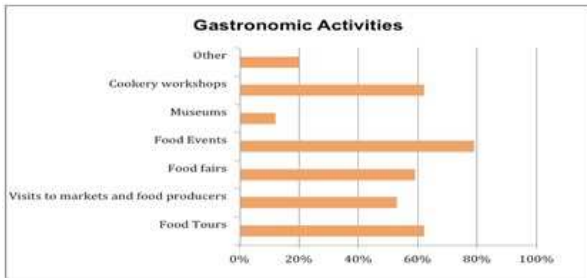


Fig. 6. Gastronomic activities (source: OMT, 2013).

The festival "Pots and stuffed cabbage rolls" (Romanian "Oale and sarmale"), a tradition that became a tourist attraction in Șișești commune, with stuffed cabbage rolls cooked in clay pots, is held every year on May 8 with the participation of representatives of Moșna village in Serbia which are twin villages. Also it was very new and remarkable that World Vision Romania Foundation celebrated in Craiova, on February 2014 at the Oltenia Museum the successful completion of the "Craft workshop" project, conducted for the benefit of the communities in the rural Oltenia. The main economic objective of the project was that through traditional crafts the rural households can reduce their dependence on agriculture and can supplement the income, to offer a better life to the rural children. This initiative was attended by about 60 villages in the counties of Dolj, Olt, Vâlcea and Mehedinți, which learned from over 150 people of Oltenia, famous craftsmen and passionate by tradition, and they have acquired the qualification in manual weaving and the skills of eventual future entrepreneurs.

Unfortunately, one single traditional product from Oltenia, originating from Olt County, is certified by the Ministry of Agriculture – the bread baked in clay oven, using a recipe hundreds of years old by a family from Scărișoara commune. However, there are seven more applications submitted at the Department for

Traditional products within the Commission for Agriculture and Rural Development Olt, prepared by a family from Giuvărăști: apricot, peach and plum jam, sour cherries comfiture, tomato juice and vinegar cucumbers.

According to the information provided by Dolj officials, the first traditional certified products were the Oltenian cheese with leek, Oltenia cheese with dill and pepper, followed by six meat products and bread products. Actually, the first certification for a traditional product issued by the Ministry of Agriculture, General Commission for Food industry in March, 2014, was for a bread product.



Fig. 7. The label for the Romanian traditional product (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development).

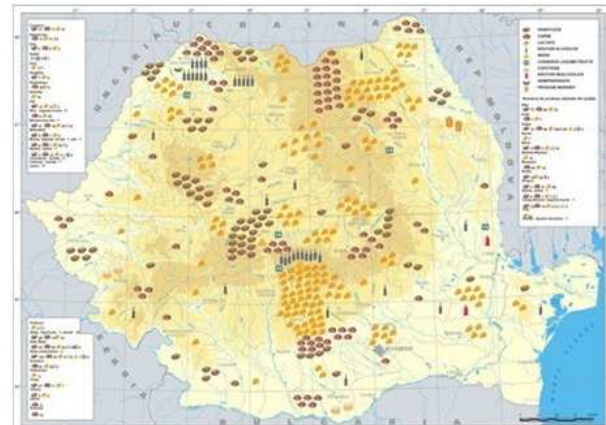


Fig. 8. Distribution of traditional food products. (Source: MADR, 2014)

Table 8. The distribution of manufacturers by product category.

Product categories	No. of products
Dairy products	1.073
Meat products	728
Bread products	492
Honey	7
Alcoholic drinks	231
Non-alcoholic drinks	9
Vegetables and fruits products	79
Other food products	65
<b>Total</b>	<b>2.684</b>

(Source: MADR, 2014)

Most probably, Romania will have only several hundreds of traditional products registered at the

Ministry of Agriculture, out of a total of 4,200 at present, but they will be evaluated again considering the European legislation. The meat and milk products are the most numerous – 1541 and 1535, respectively, followed by bread and patisserie products (750), beverages (285), comfiture and jams 193 and fish products 11. Still, for now Romania has just one product with Protected Designation of Origin, i.e. the plum jam of Topoloveni. The National Office for Traditional and Ecological Products had made a very interesting map of the traditional food products [17] (fig. 8. and table 8).

Regarding the immaterial cultural patrimony from Oltenia, it includes traditions, social practices, rituals, and handicrafts, all these representing another set of ambivalent opportunities: preserving the traditional elements and a source of local development by enhancing traditions. The elements of the immaterial cultural patrimony within Oltenia included in the UNESCO list are:

- Călușul (riding horses) beginning with 2005;
- Doina beginning with 2009;
- Horezu pottery, from 2012.

The rural cultural and natural heritage could be capitalized mainly by promoting several forms of tourism and forest products, as well as agricultural traditional products.

Here are the trends for the preservation and handing down rural traditions:

- the continuous process of registering the essential elements from the cultural, immaterial and natural heritage on the UNESCO Heritage List;
- the revival of some celebrations and customs, that should be included in the traditional calendar of the local rural feasts;
- the increase of the number of markets for traditional food and forest products in the urban areas;

Unfortunately, there are ever more numerous negative phenomena, such as lack of interest for handicrafts and traditional technologies from the villagers, the pervading urban values in the rural areas as well. The strategies for the revitalization of the rural area in Oltenia, following the preservation of the cultural heritage should include measures and determinant actions for stopping the negative cultural phenomena (adhering to urban values, that are not according to the specific of rural life, change of use for some rural cultural institutions), structural distribution of budget for cultural upgrading, preservation and protection of cultural inheritance.

*The strategic directions* that meet the cultural needs of the rural areas should focus on the mitigation of the cultural fragility and preservation of cultural patrimony. The initiatives for cultural preservation must be accompanied by a consistent planning, including not only the conservation, but also the restoration of historical objectives, maintaining the traditional architectural style and historical settlements.

Among the strategic directions for the development of Oltenia region, there are worth mentioning:

Creating a networking system, where the associations for the development of ecotourism will be interconnected by a web platform, which will function as a communication means, and, at the same time, will coordinate the activities for the promotion of destinations with ecotourism potential.

Encouraging authentic local economy, by supporting traditional activities, Ecotourism should be integrated in the local development plans of the settlements within ecotourism destinations.

Modernization of rural infrastructure for a better marketing of caves, the Dacian fortresses, medieval sites and other destinations that will be part of ecotourism tracks. Various forms of entertainment should be supported, beginning with sleigh rides to photo-hunting and via ferrata. Eco-museums should be created, and the architecture in the ecotourism areas should be limited to 15 to 25 models of buildings, considering the type of the autochthonous houses.

It is also worth mentioning here the most important projects for rural tourism within Oltenia South-Western Development region for the 2014-2020 period: Development of entertainment infrastructure within Mălăia, Vâlcea tourist area (ski tracks and adjacent infrastructure), Sustainable capitalization of cultural heritage, Costești-Nicolae Bălcescu commune, Renovation and preservation of historical monuments from Grădiștea, Vâlcea, Capitalization of natural, historical and cultural heritage in order to attract tourists – Voineasa, Vaideeni settlements; creation of a hotel complex at Bala balneary resort for capitalizing natural resources, creation of a tourist complex on Simian island, around Ada-Kaleh fortress, Mehedinți; creation of holiday villages along the Topolnița and Coșuștea valleys, Izvorul Barzei, Ilovăț, Izverna and Sisești communes, Mehedinți county; opening caves for tourist visits in Ponoarele and Cîreșu communes; capitalization and promotion of the vineyards in Mehedinți; creation of bicycle route along the Danube; projects for stimulating the development of handicrafts and small industries totalling almost 30,000 lei in the framework of the multiannual national Programme 2002-2012, projects aimed at keeping the traditions alive and promoting tourism in the framework of Romania - Bulgaria cross-border cooperation programme.

The main resource for the Romanian rural tourism is the existence of some areas of extreme beauty, with enclaves of rural civilization. The uniqueness of Oltenia beauty does not lie in the Danube Gorges or Hurez monastery, which are well-established brands, but in the ethnographic characteristics of the places. Tourist, be it from Maramureș, Bucharest or France, will search for settlements with specific architecture, traditional gastronomic products, different from his area of origin, painted monasteries that



highlight a different perception of religion, picturesque holidays together with unspoiled nature.

The Cork Declaration and the European Chart of Rural Areas are considered as reference points, the principles included in these documents becoming an integral part of the European Union objectives. The main objectives of the Cork declaration are: prevention of rural exodus, fight against poverty, creation of new jobs, and elimination of disadvantages, meeting the ever increasing needs for health, work conditions and rest.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Romania has the greatest share of rural population in the European Union, and according to the national institute of Statistics, in 2012, the risk for extreme poverty is four times higher in rural areas (8.8%) than in urban areas (2.2%). as for regional disparities, the regional analysis indicates that North-East, the south-western part of Oltenia, South-East and Southern part of Muntenia are the regions with the highest number and proportion of persons risking poverty and social exclusion. West and Bucharest-Ilfov register the lowest number. Moreover, West region is characterised by a stable rate, while the South-western region experienced a downward trend, from 55.4% in 2007 to 21% in 2011.

The southern parts of Moldavia, Muntenia and Oltenia have been for quite a long time the poorest areas in Romania. If we consider the number of persons with the minimum guaranteed income, Vaslui ranks first, with 2.7% of the total number of inhabitants, followed by Buzau, Mehedinți, Dolj and Teleorman. All these counties possess large agricultural areas, most of the inhabitants practising subsistence agriculture.

There are several reasons for the poverty in Oltenia; Dolj and Mehedinți counties have grown poor during the last 10-15 years, depending greatly on agriculture; once the irrigation systems did not function, it relied completely on rainfall. The migration abroad was another process that seriously affected the region, in many villages remaining only the elderly. Still, in some cases, migration abroad had a significant contribution for currency inflow, as it was the case between 2005 and 2008, when approximately 8-9 billion \$ entered the country.

One solution might be diversification, and rural tourism is not such a difficult task. According to the European Chart of Rural Areas, development programmes must focus on the local advantages and regional factors, support private initiative and promote through all means the development based on endogenous forces. Rural tourism is a concept that includes the tourist activity and conducted by the local population, based on a strong relationship with the

environment [18]. The study area has favourable factors for the development of rural tourism, which can capitalize better the rural non-agricultural space. Some rural cultural elements were underlined and can contribute to the shaping of a genuine rural tourism product of the region. The European experience showed that products with a proper marketing and promotion can become competitive and occupy an important place on the European/national market.

The successful transformation of an area into tourist destination is closely connected to the identification of tourism resources, the more attractive and highlighted they are, better chances they have to attract more tourists. Man-made attractions, tourist and technical infrastructure are the main elements that can be improved in order to gain some advantage on the market.

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