

INNOVATIVE METHODS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL TOURISM IN ROMANIA

Avram Daniel (author for correspondence, avram89@yahoo.com)

Bălan Alina Mihaela

The Academy of Economic Studies in Bucharest, The Faculty of Business and Tourism

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Abstract

Innovations are considered the engine of economic growth, because they serve as a basis for obtaining the competitive advantage. Tourism is one of the most profitable and dynamic sectors of economy, occupying the second position in the international trade after oil. Rural tourism also has major implications in the economic, social and cultural development of villages.

This study presents an analysis of the fluctuation of the number of employees and of the number of accommodation units specific to rural tourism in Romania, between 2007-2014. To this end statistical data from the National Statistics Institute has been used.

Volunteer tourism, the development of national portals for presentation of vacant jobs in the tourism sector and the development of human resources by absorption of European funds, are the three suggestions presented in this study, which have the purpose of reinvigorating rural tourism in Romania.

Key words: *innovations, human resources, rural tourism, hotels*

JEL Classification : *L83, Q18, O18, O15*

Introduction

At the moment, Europe is a point of attraction for millions of tourists from all over the world, supporting an intense competitive market based on innovation. However, there are major differences in the innovation rates level in Romania as compared to those in Europe.

But Romania's prospects are favorable in terms of natural and human potential. The spectacular landscapes, climatic conditions, landforms configuration, but also potential flora and fauna provide the possibility of practicing various forms of tourism such as: rural, spa, adventure, mountain, relaxation, sports and fishing. Rural tourism is a less exploited niche in Romania considering the opportunities available. Among the advantages of the latter we may mention the small fares and the possibilities of leisure which do not affect the quality of the natural environment.

The "GAL Orizonturi" Association mentions in a study from 2012 that about 50% of Romania's population lives in the rural areas where the standard of living is still quite low. This aspect leads to the emergence of increasingly larger social unrest. And that is why, having regard to the benefits of rural tourism, it is easy to understand that its development is more than necessary. (The Association "GAL Orizonturi" 2012, Analysis of rural tourism and agrotourism in the area "GAL Orizonturi" 2012 for highlighting the endogenous potential)

Analysis of the specialized literature

The term of *rural tourism* has been defined in several ways over time. In 2008, Nistoreanu has defined rural tourism as being "a concept that includes all tourist activities taking place in rural areas" (Nistoreanu, 2008, p. 20). The World Tourism Organization, describes rural tourism as "a form of tourism which includes any tourism activity organized and conducted in the rural area by local people, exploiting local tourism resources (natural, cultural, historical and human), as well as the facilities, tourist structures, including agrotourism pensions and farms" (Soare and Costache, 2013, p. 128).

Stănciulescu, Lupu and Țigu (2002, p. 180) define in the paper entitled "Lexicon of touristic terms" the term of *rural tourism* as being "a form of tourism focused on destinations in the rural area, featuring a functional structure of accommodation and other heterogeneous services."

Tourism demand for visiting rural areas increases regularly for the villages with a rich heritage in resources and traditions, leading to the preservation of trade and local services. Although rural tourism is currently in full expansion, the accurate assessment of tourist traffic in this industry is quite arduous (Niță and Niță, 2008, p. 99).

Life in the villages must hence adapt to the tourist activities, without a destabilization of the local daily life taking place (Bran, 1997, p. 95). Economic implications of rural tourism development have a positive effect particularly on local people, this implying the creation of new employment opportunities and also a market expansion for their own products. However, rural tourism influences the social, cultural and environmental aspects as well, specialists in the field indicating that changes may occur in the scale of the inhabitants' values, or in the lifestyle or in the community structure (Botezat, 2009).

In Romania, in 1972, the Research Center for the Promotion of International Tourism has identified and selected 118 representative villages which could be placed in the domestic and international tourism circuit. Of these, only 14 have been declared a year later as being tourist villages, among them being found: Lerești and Rucăr from Argeș, Fundata and Șimea from Brașov, Sibiel from Sibiu, Tismana from Gorj (Cândea and Simion, 2007, p. 215).

For the purposes of rural tourism, the local community (population, associations and local governments) must have knowledge of the effects that the development of a tourism activity generates on economic, cultural and social levels, and for this they must have a minimum training relating to the way in which a business is started and is carried out, about funding and lending sources (Surgiu, 2008, p. 156).

The tourism industry in Romania, in particular that of rural tourism is considered to be a less innovative industry, dominated by small and medium-sized companies. These companies, having no special financial possibilities, must resort to the development of distinctive managerial solutions, which are based on the current state of development of Romanian villages (Rădulescu, 2013).

This is why, over the past few decades, companies have focused their attention more on developing innovative management solutions and less on developing products and services for tourists that require radical innovations, since they involve risks and quite high costs (Susan et. al, 2013).

Methodology

The study is a retrospective analysis of Romanian rural tourism from the perspective of the specific number of accommodation units (agrotouristic pensions) and human resources employed. In this regard, the statistical data available at the National Institute for Statistics (TEMPO series of data) for the period 2007-2014 has been used. The analysis has been carried out in October and November 2015.

The research intends to propose solutions for enhancing rural tourism, solutions that can be implemented in a short period of time and which can generate real economic effects.

In the rural areas, the main form of accommodation is the agrotouristic pension. Through this study, we strive to do an analysis on the dynamics of the number of agropensions in Romania from 2007 and up to the year 2014, in order to see to what extent the opportunities arising from the integration in the European Union have had an influence. In view of this desideratum the trend of this period was followed, as well as the values recorded each year.

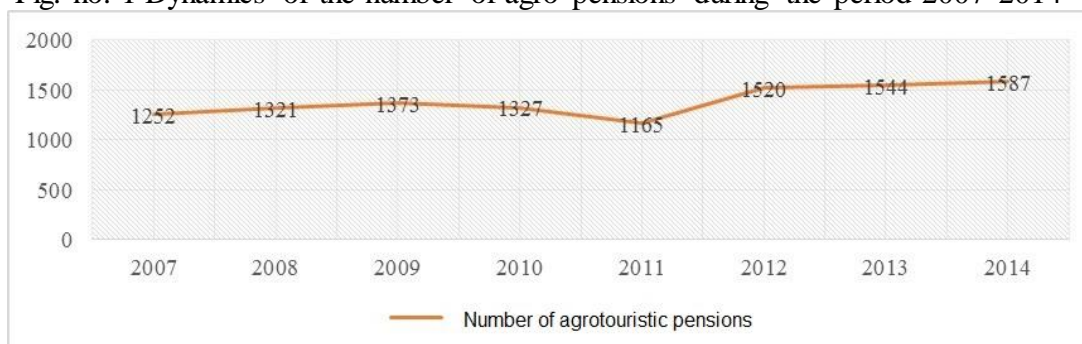
Results and discussions

2007 is a reference year for the Romanian economy, Romania's integration into the European Union bringing numerous growth opportunities. For tourism, one of the most important advantages is the free movement within the European Union, travellers being able to travel without a visa from that date. As far as rural tourism goes, this constitutes one of the strengths of Romania (not modernized areas), attracting internal and international tourists with different motivations such as: the desire to discover new customs and cultures, the desire to relive moments from childhood, the curiosity for the places least promoted, but with a remarkable potential.

Among the most important aspects which help to strengthen Romanian rural tourism are the accommodation units and human resources. They have a decisive role in the formation of tourist behavior inclined toward this niche, being indispensable together with the natural resources.

Thus, the number of agro-pensions, in the first 3 years registers increases, (Figure no. 1) evolving from 1,252 units in the first year under analysis, to 1,321 in 2008 and reaching 1,373 in 2009.

Fig. no. 1 Dynamics of the number of agro-pensions during the period 2007-2014



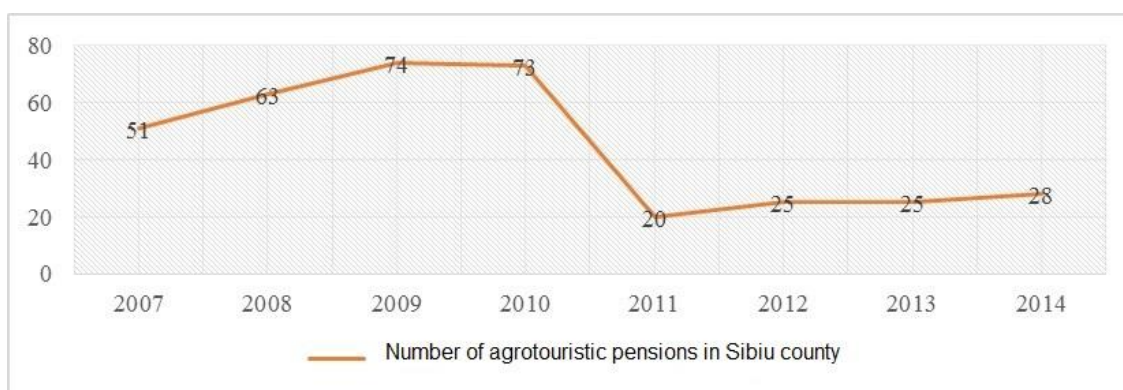
Source: Carried out by authors on the basis of: <http://statistici.insse.ro/shop/>

2011 is a reference year for the analyzed series of data, by registering the lowest level of the number of agro-pensions at national level. The fact that the total number of accommodation units of this type is smaller than that of 2007, shows the unstable economic situation of this year, a fact that has generated both new investments to stop and the shutting down of some existing pensions.

Starting from 2012, increases are visible and constant. The number of pensions in Romania reaches 1,587 in 2014 from a number of only 1,252 in the first year of membership in the European Union.

One of the representative regions of the country for rural tourism is the one around Sibiu County. The number of agrotouristic pensions in this county follows a trend similar to that at national level for the years 2007-2014 (Figure no. 2). The increases in the first 3 years are due to the culture, tradition and customs in this county. It is worth mentioning that Sibiel is the first tourist rural locality in Romania which has been awarded a distinction at world level (Golden Apple).

Fig. no. 2 Evolution of the number of agrotouristic pensions in Sibiu County



Source: Carried out by authors on the basis of: <http://statistici.insse.ro/shop/>

In 2010 there has been a significant decline of approximately 73 percentage points in the number of pensions, the same trend being found in the nationwide situation also. This situation may be due to the measures adopted by the government which have resulted in massive closures of businesses. Other determining factors may be: the severe degradation of transport infrastructure and the lack of human resources motivation. The presence of a close link and of a direct proportionality between them and the quality of tourist services affects tourists' loyalty to a large extent.

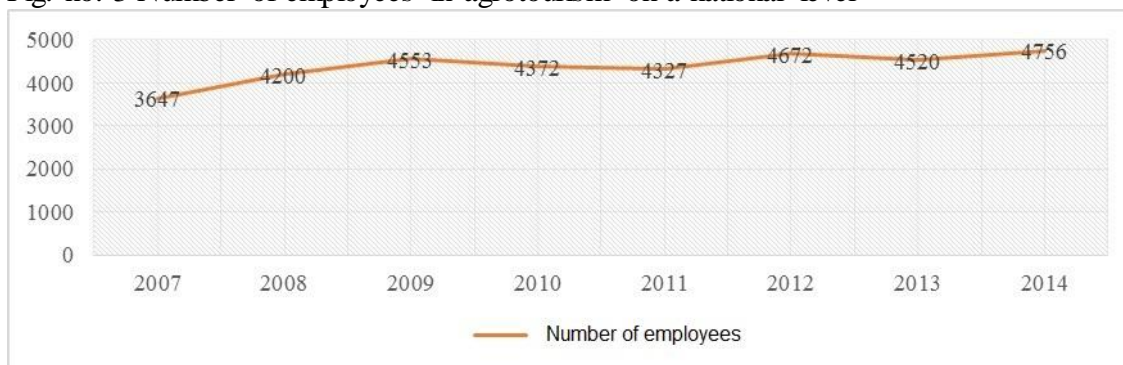
Recent years of the analyzed data 2012-2013-2014, show an increasing trend compared to the same period last year. There are no further records of increases like in the first years of the time series, although on a national level numerous projects in support of this segment were carried out. The possible causes for this situation are the lack of infrastructure, low financial motivation of human resources in the area in question and consumers changing their preferences.

They have headed to other counties in the country, with very much to offer in terms of tourism, such as Alba or Braşov, which have benefited from intense media support. A crucial factor for changing preferences regarding tourism demand is also the lobby made by Prince of Wales, owner of a house in such an area (Viscri village).

In respect of the staff in agro-tourism, in the time series analyzed, its level does not register a constant trend, fluctuating from year to year. In the year 2007, the number

of employees in hotels and restaurants in Sibiu County was of 3,647. The level has increased over the next 2 years, reaching in 2008 to 4,200 and in 2009 to 4,553 (Figure no. 3). Subsequently, the level registered a slight decrease of approximately 5 percentage points, reaching the level of 4,327, which caused the closure of businesses in the industry or company restructuring.

Fig. no. 3 Number of employees in agrotourism on a national level



Source: Carried out by authors on the basis of: <http://statistici.insse.ro/shop/>

In the last 3 years, the number of employees dropped from 4,372 in 2012 to 4,520 in 2013 and reached 4,756 in 2014. Thus an evolution between the original number from the year of Romania's integration in the European Union and the year 2014 can be observed - an increase of around 27%. This increase in the number of jobs is due to the deployment of large national and regional projects which encourage investments through the creation of new jobs (POSDRU, REGIO, PNDR etc).

The analysis of the number of agrotouristic units on a national level, at the level of Sibiu County (reference area for rural tourism in Romania) and of the human resources in the industry shows that the period 2007-2014 did not bring increases from year-to-year in investments and stability of employment. Problems such as the low degree of absorption of European funds, economic problems with which Romania was faced, fiscal policies which have contributed negatively to the appropriate development of this form of tourism.

Innovative methods of improving tourism services

Given the potential of Romania in the field of rural tourism and increasing tourists demands, it is necessary to develop and implement measures to increase competitiveness. Thus 3 innovative ways which may contribute to the development of this niche have been identified.

Hundreds of foreigners worldwide receive free accommodation and meals in pensions, farms or hotels in Romania if they are willing to work. In other words, to be in charge of serving, cleaning or working on the fields. This way, the owners of the accommodation units are exempt from the payment of certain expenses, and volunteer tourists receive the chance to travel and get to know the culture and the people of the country in question directly.

This type of exchange, in the interest of both parties is promoted and practiced in the countries of Western Europe. For this purpose, there are sites with multiple data and news, such as: www.helpx.net, www.wwoof.net or www.workaway.info. The postings

contain useful information where those interested can find out which are the necessary steps, what experiences can be expected, which are their rights and obligations. These activities are part of a new form of niche tourism, called **volunteer tourism**. In Romania, there were a few attempts to promote these activities, especially in hostel-type accommodation units.

For rural tourism, this way to attract human resources for short periods of time is beneficial and with a high degree of novelty. People in rural areas are often isolated from the new trends in tourist behavior, and such an experience for the entrepreneurs in the industry will bring a fresh view, but without impairing the specific of rural culture.

Furthermore, this form of tourism is also a great way of promotion on an international level. Those who go through such an exchange achieve a multiplier effect for the destination, the spreading of the descriptions of the places and unique customs in Romania can take place with remarkable ease at present, social networks becoming in the last few years a promoter of tourism trends.

Another way of improving and promoting the services of rural tourism in Romania, this time on national level, is to develop a **national portal of seasonal tourism job vacancies**. This must contain aspects such as: the legislation in force, European Directives, rights and obligations of employees and jobs available for exchanges depending on seasonality.

In this way the solutions found so far would be combined, those of improving the human resources in the tourism sector, going thus further to the next step, by bringing together the supply and demand of employment in the industry. Human resources are one of the key elements in the service sector, and the tourism sector many times represents the first contact of customers with the tourist destination. Seasonality has adverse effects on the personnel also, the breaks during the year which sometimes last several months being harmful as far as the level of professional training goes. Such a portal would reduce these harmful effects, by enabling the outsourcing of jobs with requirements that match the applicant's skills.

Another solution for keeping and attracting human resources in rural tourism is the **absorption of European funds**. This should be done taking into account the market needs and Romania's history in this regard. Previous program experience, 2007-2013, with its weak points, must be regarded as a starting point. So, consideration must be given to issues such as: excessive bureaucracy, compliance with the time limits for the reimbursement of funds, simplifying of forms, rapidity in settling disputes.

Axes of the Human Capital Operational Program (HCOP) which can be accessed for the period 2014-2020 are: PA 1: Jobs for young people initiative, PA 2: Improving the situation of young people in NEETs category, PA 3: Jobs for everyone, PA 4: Social inclusion and combating poverty, PA 5: CLLD - Integrated measures intended for the communities at risk of poverty and PA 6: Education and competences. Therefore, in order to improve tourism services by developing human resources, financing programs which have this aspect as a reference point can be accessed (table no. 1).

Table no. 1 Financing programs for human resources (2014-2020)

Program	Axis	Specific objectives
HCOP	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Customized services for purposes of information, advice and guidance for the identification of the best support options - education, training, employment or, where this is possible or necessary, a combination of the three support options; - Vocational training programs; - Assessment and certification for recognition of the competences acquired in informal and non-formal context;
HCOP	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Financial incentives for employers, in order to create jobs for NEETs young - young people who are not professionally employed and do not follow any educational or training program; - Financial support for the setting up of enterprises; - Advice and training in entrepreneurship; - Financial support for young people who find a job in another area/region by gratifications for mobility and/or installation;
HCOP	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Improvement of participation in the labor market for persons in search of a job and of those inactive, aiming in particular towards the long-term unemployed, older workers (55 to 64 years), people of Roma ethnicity, people with disabilities, people living in rural areas and other vulnerable groups - Increasing employment by encouraging entrepreneurship and the setting up of enterprises - Stimulating the participation of employers in the vocational training of employees - Adaptation to the change of workers, enterprises and entrepreneur

Source: Carried out by authors on the basis of: www.fonduri-ue.ro

During the period between 2014 and 2020, a main program aimed at developing human resources has been identified, the latter having several representative axes depending on the aim pursued. Human Capital Operational Program (HCOP), through axis 1, concerns vocational training programs, assessment and certification of competences, as well as counseling. Axis 2 aims at the financial aspects for employers, and axis 3 focuses its attention on people who are part of vulnerable groups: Roma, the unemployed or people with disabilities.

For these initiatives to be successful it is necessary to reduce bureaucracy or to seek to obtain results with clear purpose of respecting payment periods. Subsidized training of personnel in the tourism sector contributes directly to the increase of Romania competitiveness in this sector. Thus, attracting European money and their absorption must constitute a priority both at micro and macro level.

Limitations and advantages.

The main limit of this study consists in the fact that a single representative region for the Romanian rural tourism has been included, namely Sibiu County area. Given the potential for rural tourism in Romania, extending this approach to the level of the others regions is required.

The main advantage of this research is represented by the analysis of the 8 years time series, having as initial year the year of Romania's European integration. Therefore, the data was analyzed for a recent period, relevant to the development of tourism.

Conclusions

In a country marked by the transition from one political system to another, decrease of the population growth, of the standard of living and by the approximately 5 years of economic crisis which has resulted in the loss of jobs and mutations in the socio-economic system, rural tourism may represent a point of reference in the development of Romanian villages.

The time series under analysis shows that the number of agrotouristic pensions at national level has preponderantly undergone an increase. In 2011 the lowest level of the indicator was recorded, both at national level as well as at the level of Sibiu County, among the causes identified being the infrastructure's degradation, the lack of motivation among human resources and seasonality.

In order for a sustained growth of this niche to take place, it is necessary to impose certain measures that will lead to an increase in the quality of products and services provided in the agrotouristic pensions. Measures identified for the development of areas with high agrotouristic potential in Romania are: volunteer tourism, development of national portals for the presentation of vacancy jobs in the tourism sector and accessing European funds for human capital development. They were designed to meet the demands of today's tourists (always aware of the latest trends) and of the human resources. Workers in the tourism sector are the main point of contact between services and tourists, therefore a great attention regarding their improvement is required.

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