

RURAL TOURISM–REALISTIC SOLUTION FOR SUSTAINABLE SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT: CASE STUDY OF VÂLCEA COUNTY, OLTENIA REGION

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Abstract:

Rural tourism is characterized as a form of self-initiated tourism, which has, in the foreground, the involvement of the local population, which helps considerably in supporting and promoting traditions, crafts, and customs. The methodology of this research is based on the study of the specialized literature by investigating a case study regarding the tourist activity of rural tourism in Vâlcea County. The research hypotheses forecast and serve the general objective of the study, namely presenting that rural tourism can be a realistic solution for the sustainable socio-economic development of Vâlcea County. This work aims to identify the main development areas of Vâlcea County where the trends of development and practice of rural tourism are significantly important for the Oltenia Region as a first step towards unique research for promotion, sustainability, and socio-economic development in rural areas.

Keywords: *Rural tourism, sustainable development, Vâlcea County, forms of tourist, tourist reception structures.*

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1. Introduction

Tourism development has become a policy agenda in developed and developing economies to enhance economic growth by generating new jobs, increasing tax revenue (Khan et al., 2023), and providing new opportunities to develop sustainably, enhance the field of entrepreneurship (for example, online marketing, the use of digital technologies, virtual tours, and the development of artificial intelligence in the hospitality sector), and develop a resilient and sustainable future from an economic, social, and environmental point of view (Filho et al., 2022).

In the context of the epidemiological situation due to the new contagious virus SARS-CoV-2, tourism was one of the most affected activities (Burlea-Schiopoiu et al., 2022). On the other hand, there is currently an increasing desire among tourists to travel post-COVID-19, and the most sought-after tourist destinations are those with small accommodation spaces (Gössling et al., 2021; Palacios-Florencio et al., 2021). Thus, these accommodation spaces are identified in secluded or less noisy areas, where the tourist can relax in peace, admire the landscapes of the natural environment, exploit the environmental resources, and, as a result, practice rural tourism in the Vâlcea County area.

The research aims to investigate the socio-economic aspects of the sustainable development of tourism in the rural environment of Vâlcea County in the Oltenia Region. The methodological approach of this research is based on the study of the specialized literature, which investigates a case study regarding the tourist activity of rural tourism in Vâlcea County. Therefore, the research is based on the analysis of secondary statistical data provided by the National Institute of Statistics (NIS).

2. Literature Review

Rural tourism represents the tourist activity that can create experiences related to tourism products based on nature, agriculture, a healthy lifestyle, and fishing, which are found in the rural environment of every tourist destination globally (UNWTO, 2019; Tănase et al., 2023). This form of tourism has in the foreground the involvement of the local population, which contributes significantly to promoting this type of tourism (Crăciun et al., 2022) and, at the same time, to the specific traditions of the Valcan area.

The current changes in the field of tourism have determined a renewed concern for the rural tourism of Vâlcea as a factor of socio-economic growth and, at the same time, the revitalization and relaunch of rural areas. Rural tourism is the engine of sustainable local development (Hall and Boyd, 2005; Jucan and Jucan, 2013; Ibănescu et al., 2018) largely because local tourist attractions, either natural or cultural, are quite popular and thus, the stage investments for the introduction of these local touristic objectives in tourism systems at the international level is relatively low (Wanhill and Buhalis, 1999), compared to other countries. On the other hand, social innovation is considered to be a key factor that influences the sustainability of the local community because it has the potential to offer realistic solutions (Burlea-Schiopoiu and Remme, 2017; Idowu et al., 2017; Burlea-Schiopoiu and Popovici, 2024) for sustainable socio-economic development.

The main factors affecting the impact of tourism on rural areas in Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries are (1) fragmented and unrealistic promotional

advertisements oriented towards short- and medium-term results (Roberts and Hall, 2001; Hall, 2004) and (2) inadequate tourism infrastructure (Sladek et al., 2002). Concerning Romania, extremely little attention has been given to the positive role of tourist activities in the rural area of Vâlcea, taking into account that this form of tourism was not the main problem or interest of the regional and national authorities (Ibanescu, 2015; Stoleriu and Ibanescu, 2015; Stoleriu and Ibănescu, 2014), even if a national sustainable development strategy had been planned for 2030. Therefore, Romanian rural areas were appreciated as vulnerable spaces, taking into account their accessibility difficulties (Tudora and Eva, 2014), problems in attracting foreign investments (Ibanescu, 2015), and a general low development index (Tudora, 2010).

3. Research objectives

The research was carried out with two research hypotheses, followed by the objectives corresponding to the analysis of the study:

Hypothesis 1: The demography of Vâlcea County represents a very important element in the development and support of tourism activity in the rural area.

Hypothesis 2: Tourist reception structures and agro-tourism guesthouses are sufficient to satisfy the need of tourist demand.

Objective 1: Analysis of the demographic evolution of Vâlcea County.

Objective 2: Identification of the main types of tourist reception structures in the rural environment (agri-tourism guesthouses) as an evolutionary trend in rural tourism.

Objective 3: Investigating the forms of tourism for the sustainable socio-economic development of the rural area in Vâlcea County.

The hypotheses of the previously presented research forecast and serve the general objective of the study, namely presenting that rural tourism can be a realistic solution for the sustainable socio-economic development of Vâlcea County.

3.1 Methodology of research – Study area

Vâlcea County is located in the central-southern part of Romania (Figure 1), more precisely in the Southwest Oltenia Development Region (Vlăduț et al., 2011; Dumitrașcu et al., 2017; Vlăduț et al., 2023; Drăguleasa et al., 2024).

Regarding the natural setting, Vâlcea County is located in an area with varied relief that is highly enjoyable for tourists. Thus, the relief of Vâlcea County is developed in steps, in the north–south direction, starting from the maximum height of the peak of Ciortea (2422 m) in the Făgăraș Mountains and up to the lowest height in the meadow of Olt. This complexity of the Vâlcean relief implicitly determines the existence of natural ecosystems, which, combined with the agriculture practiced in the area and, at the same time, with the specific traditional, cultural–artistic elements, form a perfect framework for sustainable socio-economic development for the practice of rural tourism.

Last but not least, it is important to mention that one of the most important factors that can positively or negatively favor the activity of partying and relaxing on vacation is the climate.

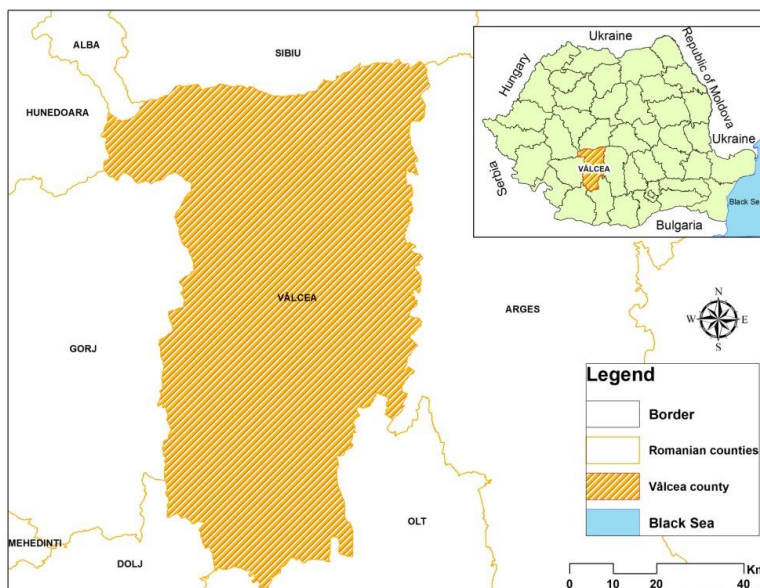


Figure 1. The location of the county in the national context

Source: authors' processing GIS

A rich hydrographic network of waters crosses Vâlcea County. The main axis of the entire hydrographic network is the Olt River, which has numerous tributaries, the most important of which is the Lotrul.

3.2 Data sources

Bowen (2009) described the method as evaluating printed and electronic documents to produce new empirical knowledge and develop new findings about the area under review.

The "case study" research technique was selected as a comprehensive method to understand complex phenomena in their contextual environment better (Durkin et al., 2023), i.e., rural tourism in Vâlcea County, Oltenia Region.

The case study, Vâlcea County, was conceived and designed using documentary research methods and national statistics and databases regarding the number of inhabitants in Vâlcea County, the resident population on July 1, 2022, categorized by residence (urban and rural), but also by the number of tourist reception structures (agri-tourism guesthouses in rural areas; statistical data provided by the National Institute of Statistics).

All these previously mentioned aspects were analyzed both at the level of Vâlcea County and at the level of rural areas in order to ascertain the past and present involvement of tourist activity in Vâlcea County.

All maps were made with the help of the Geographical Information System (GIS), which, according to Constantinescu et al. (2023), represents a "software that can provide users with a combination of geospatial information management tools and methods that allow researchers to collect, analyze, edit and visualize geospatial data". In our case, it is development data for rural tourism in Vâlcea County.

4. Results and discussion

Following the data analyzed at the level of Vâlcea County, a decrease in the number of inhabitants is observed in the period between 1992 and 2023 (Figure 2). A decrease in population was felt quite clearly in the period between 2020 and 2022 due to the unexpected appearance of the coronavirus, which caused a decrease in the birth rate.

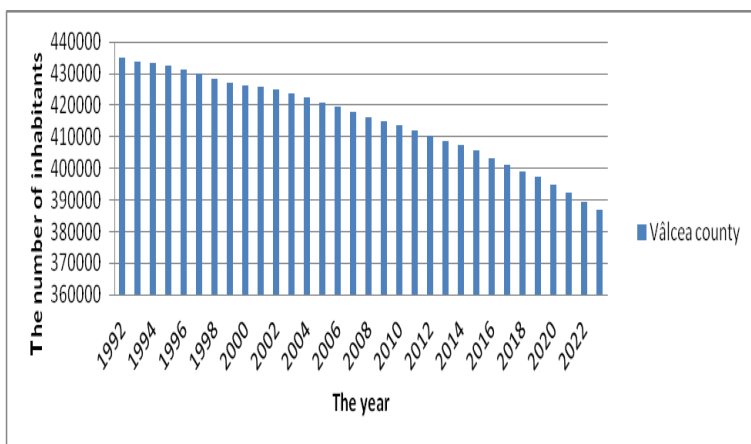


Figure 2. Numerical evolution of the population in Vâlcea County between 1992 and 2023

Source: authors' processing based on NIS data

Analyzing the resident population on July 1, 2022, via residence environment (Figure 3), we observe that 55% of the population is rural and 45% in urban areas. Concretely, in 2022, there were 187,991 people in rural areas and 153,363 in urban areas.

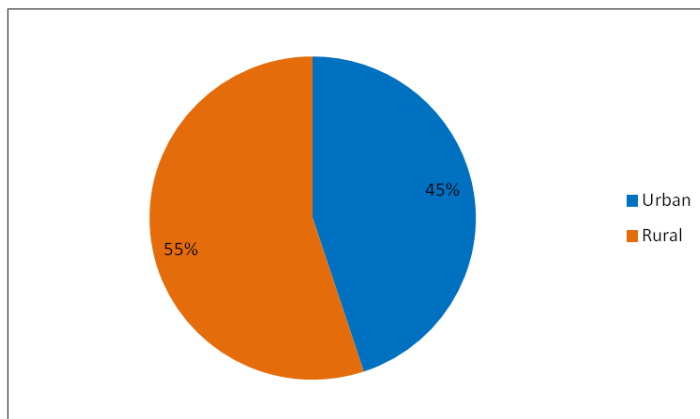


Figure 3. Population by average residence on July 1, 2022

Source: authors' processing based on NIS data

The number of agri-tourism guesthouses in the rural area of Vâlcea County (Figure 4) varies yearly for the analyzed period between 2010 and 2023. Most agri-

tourism guesthouses are in Voineasa and Malaia communes. Analyzing the data for the commune of Voineasa, an increase in the number of agro-tourism guesthouses is noted between 2020 and 2023. Thus, despite the appearance of the COVID-19 virus, we can say that it was not an obstacle in developing new agri-tourism guesthouses.

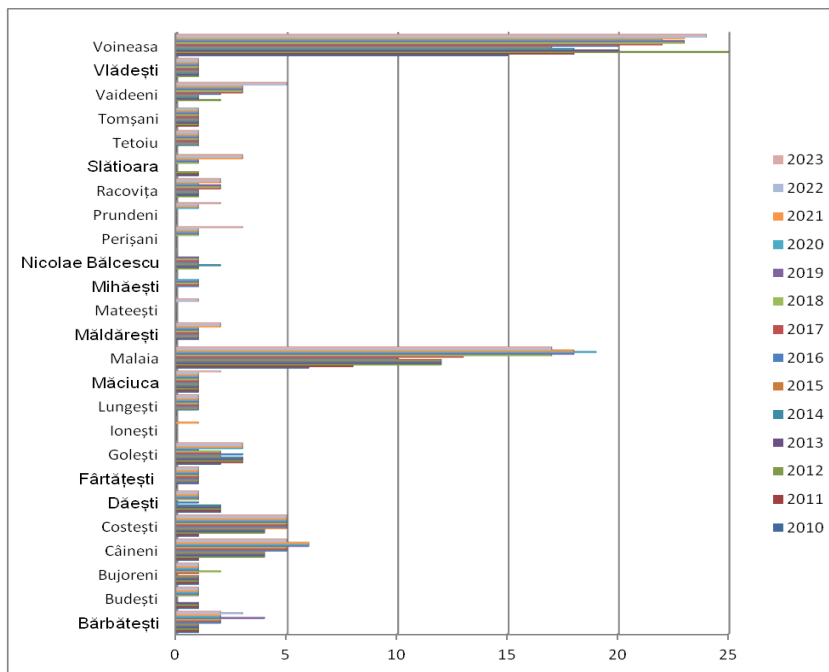


Figure 4. The number of tourist reception structures (agri-tourism guesthouses in rural areas)

Source: authors' processing based on NIS data

Also, in Vâlcea County, crafts were not forgotten because the Ceramics Fair "COCOSUL DE HUREZ" has attracted the eyes of the curious since 1971 (<http://www.orasul-horezu.ro/cocoul-de-hurez0>). The Vâlcean Village Museum has been open for tourist purposes since 1974, and on the surface of 8 ha, there are 42 household units and over 12,000 museum pieces with traditional Vâlcean specifics (<http://www.muzee-valcea.ro/index.php?f=museums&m=3>).

We observe, therefore, a diversity regarding the leisure activities that can be carried out in Vâlcea County, in nature or its immediate vicinity. Thus, in a study carried out in 2022, it was found that rural tourism can be very well associated with other forms of sustainable tourism, such as rural tourism, ecotourism, mountain tourism, religious tourism, and spa tourism, but also with winter sports (Niță and Drăguleasa, 2022).

Rural tourism can also mean revitalizing local communities, referring not only to the financial support obtained but also bringing into discussion the possibility of repopulating the Romanian rural space. Rural tourism is practiced in the communes of the central-northern part of Vâlcea County (Figure 5); they have numerous tourist reception structures with tourist accommodation functions.

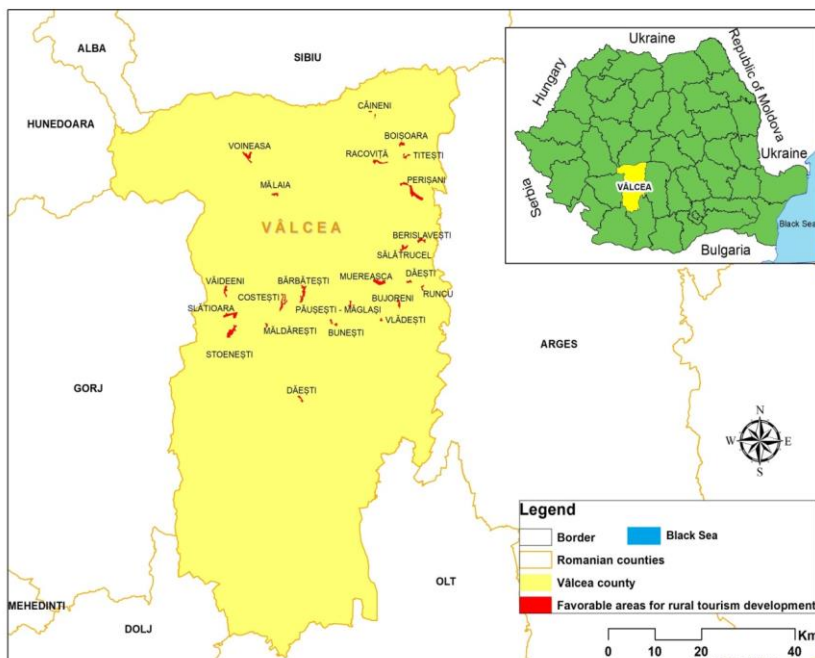


Figure 5. Rural tourism practice areas

Source: authors' processing GIS

Vâlcea County can benefit from economic development and ecotourism that focuses on wildlife and is community-based, which can bring profit to the rural population (Kredens and Vogt, 2023). Additionally, ecotourism contributes to the maintenance of the ecosystem because it increases the degree of awareness among tourists (Wuddivira et al., 2023) when they arrive at their destinations.

In addition to ecotourism, special forms of tourism, for example, adventure, educational, recreational, event, and business tourism, are mentioned in the literature as significant factors for developing sustainable tourism in protected areas (Trišić et al., 2023).

Leisure activities are also notable for active tourism, such as a ski and snowboard resort on Transalpina–Voineasa, which totals 6.1 km of slopes (Ski Resort Transalpina–Vidra/Voineasa <https://www.skiresort.info/ski-resort/transalpin-a-vidravoineasa/>, Figure 6).

Ecumenical tourism is also present through monastic settlements such as Bistrita, Arnota, Bradu, Boia, Bistrita, Dobrusa, Dintr un Lemn, Cozia, Corneț, Jgheaburi, Iezer, Hurezi, Govora, Frasiniei, Saracinesti, Patrunsa, Pahomie, Ostrov, Mamu, Turnu, Surpatele, and Stanisoara (Figure 8). All this is full of beautiful history, architecture, and traditions. A walk through the courtyards of trees laden with fruit and flowers emanating pleasant scents is like a relief for the soul and provides relaxation and harmony.

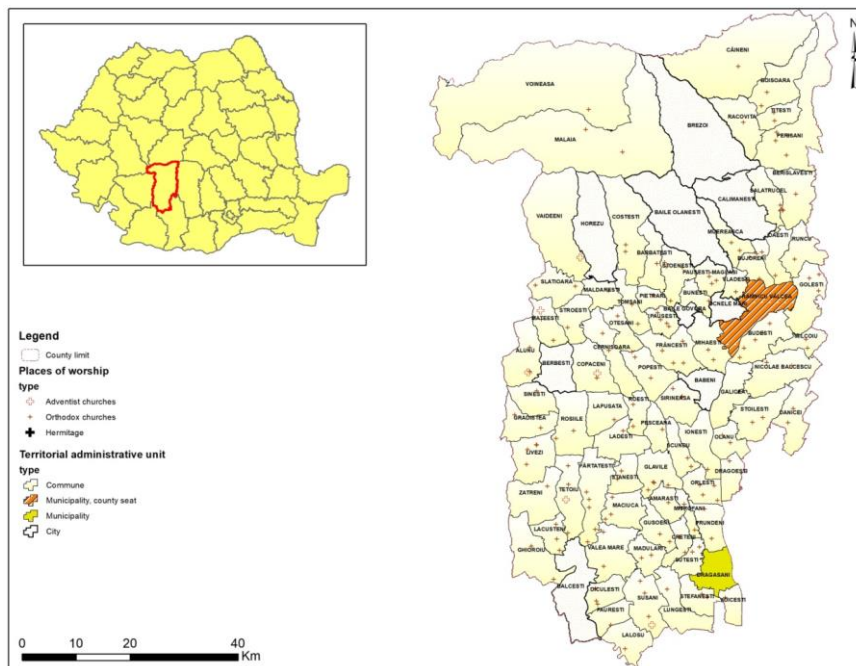


Figure 8. Localization of places of worship in the territorial

Source: authors' processing GIS

5. Conclusions

Without deviating from the principles of ecotourism, we see rural tourism as the "good side" of the COVID-19 pandemic. The economic crisis generated by the COVID-19 virus may represent the key to the development and valorization of rural spaces for local communities because, during the period of travel restrictions, most tourists chose to spend their holidays in rural areas (Mazilu et al., 2023).

Moreover, greater involvement of the local population and local authorities (mayors, local and county councils, schools, churches, managers of accommodation and public catering units, and NGOs) would contribute to the creation of a competitive tourist area in Vâlcea County on the international market, because we are talking about a county where the elements of natural tourism potential combine harmoniously with the elements of anthropogenic tourism potential.

In conclusion, Hypothesis 1, the demography of Vâlcea County represents a very important element in the development and support of tourism activity in the rural area, is confirmed, and Hypothesis 2, tourist reception structures—agri-

tourism guesthouses are sufficient to satisfy the need for tourist demand, is confirmed, because it is necessary to build new guesthouses within the communes where their number is extremely small or even non-existent. Tourist reception structures (such as hotels, motels, holiday homes, tourist guesthouses, agro-tourism guesthouses, and so on) represent the elements of the tourist infrastructure that must satisfy the need of tourist demand in terms of accommodation services and, at the same time, food public.

Future research directions could be developed to investigate research variables in correlation with new research hypotheses. At the same time, we aim to analyze the tourists' perception of rural tourism in Vâlcea County by applying the Delphi method. Another research direction is investigating the number of tourist arrivals for the entire county.

The main limitation of the research is that no data are available for all tourist reception structures in rural areas. The second limitation is that the study only focuses on the analysis of a single county in Romania, and the third limitation of the research is represented by the small number of hypotheses formulated by the authors to be tested for their validity.

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