

THE ROMANIAN AGRO-TOURISM ACTIVITIES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract:

In Romania, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a huge impact on the tourism industry due to the resulting travel restrictions. The feeling of health insecurity and the reduction of household income are leading to changes in consumers preferences for the summer 2020. These preferences shifted prominently from mass tourism towards less crowded touristic destinations, and in particular rural and nature tourism. Taking this into consideration, the aim of the paper is to analyze the tourism flow in Romanian agro-tourism boarding houses in order to identify the main trends and changes during the nine months of year 2020 comparative with the same period of year 2019, using the official empirical data and the specific indicators: tourist arrivals and overnight stay by months. The statistical data were completed by information from papers and studies published in specialty books and journals on tourism and rural development. The results showed that in the pandemic times many tourists have turned to domestic tourism, and the agro-tourism boarding houses play a more and more important role in Romania's tourism and their services are more attractive in comparison to other sorts of accommodation units.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, tourism market, agro-tourism, Romania.

JEL Classification: L83, R11.

1. Introduction

Health, social security and economic stability of society are essential in defining life's quality. As result, a sustainable society is a society which is modelling its economic and social system such that the global natural resources and the support systems of life are maintained for the next generations. Tourism is one of the sectors most vulnerable to crises, natural and human - caused disasters (Pforr and Hosie, 2008).

Romania's effort to develop and promote agro-tourism is an important political aim. In the context in which agriculture is still considered "a strategic sector of Romania due to the country's natural advantages and due to the economic and social environment" agro-tourism (an activity as many others, organized and developed in the rural environment by the members of a farm/agricultural household, which means the combination of the agricultural and tourism activities) becomes an alternative source of incomes and labour employment supported financially by European funds, and the Romanian agro-touristic potential represents a component of the sustainable rural development (madr.ro).

Having in view the positive role which is played by the promotion and development of agro-tourism activity as activity complementary to the agricultural one, organically integrated in the farms' economy, as well as benefiting by a non-polluted picturesque environment, and by the touristic natural attractions and the traditions and habits present in the village environment, the paper proposes itself an inventory of the tourism flow in Romanian agro-tourism boarding houses in order to identify the main trends and changes in the pandemic times, during the nine months of year 2020 comparative with the same period of year 2019, using the official empirical data and the specific indicators: tourist arrivals and overnight stay by months. The statistical data were completed by information from papers and studies published in specialty books and journals on tourism and rural development.

2. Overview of Romanian agro-tourism development

In Romania, agro-tourism is a form of tourism emerged from the need to find some solutions for increasing the rural farms incomes by putting into value their economic

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potential. This potential refers both to the existent accommodation potential, prepared and arranged mainly for the guests' receiving, and to the goods and services supplied for consumption to persons coming into the rural environment for relaxing, rest, leisure. The years that have passed since Romania joined the European Union was a time of radical change for the rural areas, with more or less positive effects. Romania received financial European support before and after its accession to the European Union related to the rural tourism and agro-tourism actions and recreational activities in the countryside (Sima, 2018).

According to the legal regulations, the rural households/farms' orienting to the completion of their incomes from the agricultural activities with incomes from touristic activities should be rearranged keeping the rural and archaic specific. The specific manifested through the construction materials, architecture, decorations, furniture must be re-discovered and kept as such, being protected from the urban civilization's contaminations. The main condition for a farm/household to receive the name of agro-touristic boarding house is to have sufficient rooms for its own family and supplementary capacities to accommodate and feed proper hygiene and sanitary conditions, means of information and other comfortable adjacent elements in order to constitute an attraction for the tourists. The licence for the accommodation and feeding of tourists, as well as the certificate for the classification of the comfort degree are granted by the central public institution responsible in the tourism field together with the respecting of the following criteria:

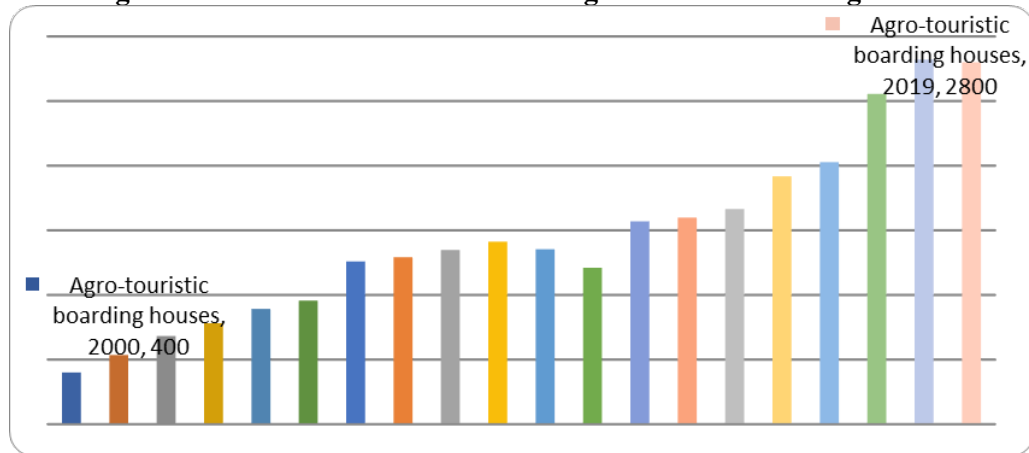
- Spaces and access destined to tourists must be separated from those of the host;
- The accommodation rooms must be detached with direct access from the hall or from the stairs' house, must be spacious, sunny, shiny, with the heating possibility, furniture strictly corresponding to the norms, preferably with simple, traditional rustic furniture, eliminating the objects lacking utility for the tourists;
 - To exist balconies and terraces at the rooms or halls destined to the tourists endowed with lounges, osier armchairs, tables and electric light;
 - To have a day room destined to the tourists for serving the meals, leisure, lecture, games and others;
 - To have sanitary groups endowed with cold and warm water, this must be well kept and perfectly clean;
 - To exist the possibility to prepare the meal by the tourists in a separate space or in the kitchen of the host with the possibility of separating the compartments and equipments for tourists;
 - To exist places and objects for children to play.

The last 20 years has seen a growth in active countryside tourism as increasingly urban populations seek relaxation and leisure in rural areas. The agro-tourism offers a possible solution to some of the problems associated with lost economic opportunities and population decline that accompany the waning of agriculture, and many opportunities including accommodation and other service provision, showcasing of local culture and heritage, and active countryside pursuits, the latter of which may be well-placed to capitalize on the move away from mass tourism products and a consumer desire for more niche and tailored offerings.

The regional and local authorities have embraced agro-tourism as an opportunity to bring new money into rural regions, stimulating growth, providing employment opportunities and thus beginning to halt rural decline. Ranging from traditional countryside pursuits, such as walking, horse riding, and bird watching, to the increasingly popular 'adventure sports' or 'extreme sports', such as snowboarding, windsurfing and kayaking, rural regions offer the required natural resources and quiet, controlled risk and excitement as an alternative to the perceived pressures and constraints of urban life.

The number of agro-tourism boarding houses registered at national level, during 2000-2019 period, indicate an upward trend, exception making the 2010-2011 period, when was registered a decrease (Figure 1).

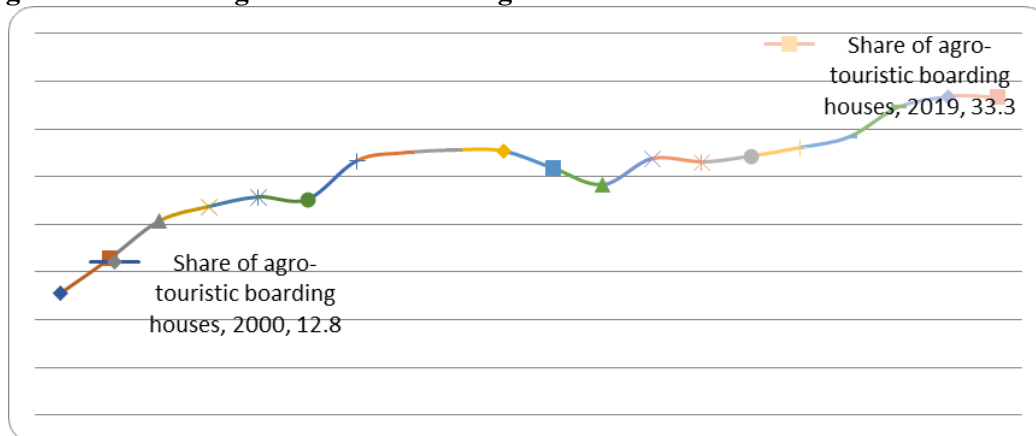
Figure 1: Evolution of the number of agro-tourism boarding houses



Source: Tempo-online database, 2020

The share of agro-tourism boarding houses in the total number of tourism accommodation units have continuously increased from 12.8% in 2000 to 33.3% in 2019 (Figure 2).

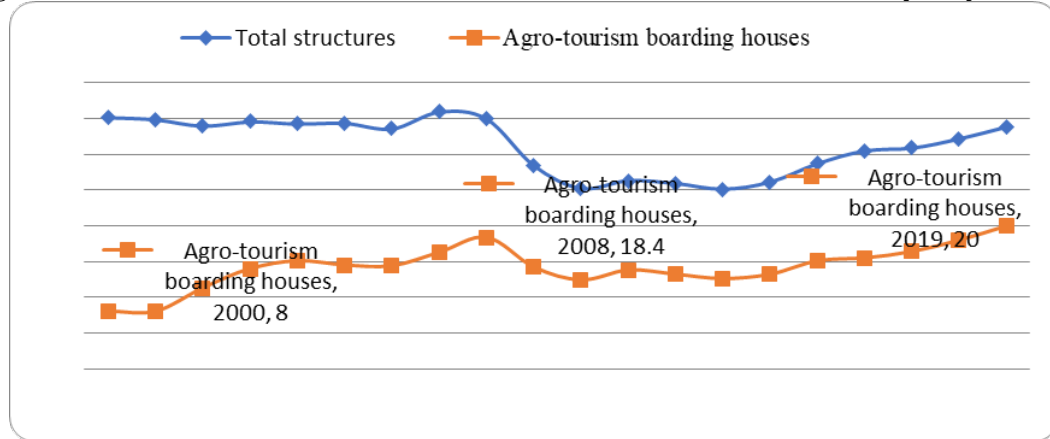
Figure 2: Share of agro-tourism boarding houses in Romania's accommodations units



Source: Tempo-online database, 2020

The flows of tourists have a deep influence on the indices of the net use of the accommodation capacity (calculated by reporting the number of overnight stays to the tourism accommodation capacity in use in a certain period) and tourism receipts. In case of the agro-tourism boarding houses the indices of the net use of the accommodation capacity increased from 8% in 2000 to 20% in 2019 (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Evolution of the utilization indices of tourist accommodation capacity in use



Source: Tempo-online database, 2020

Also, the agro-tourism flow are characterised by seasonality along the year, because the holidays planning mainly in the middle of the year. For example, in August the flow of tourists is 4.5 times higher than in February in agro-tourism boarding houses (Boghean and State, 2014).

But there are differences from a region to another regarding the tourist flows and the indices of the net use of the accommodation capacity in agro-tourism boarding houses. For instance in the Rucar-Bran area and Marginimea Sibiului area, the tourism flows are higher and also the indices of net use of the accommodation capacity are higher (Stanciu et al., 2014).

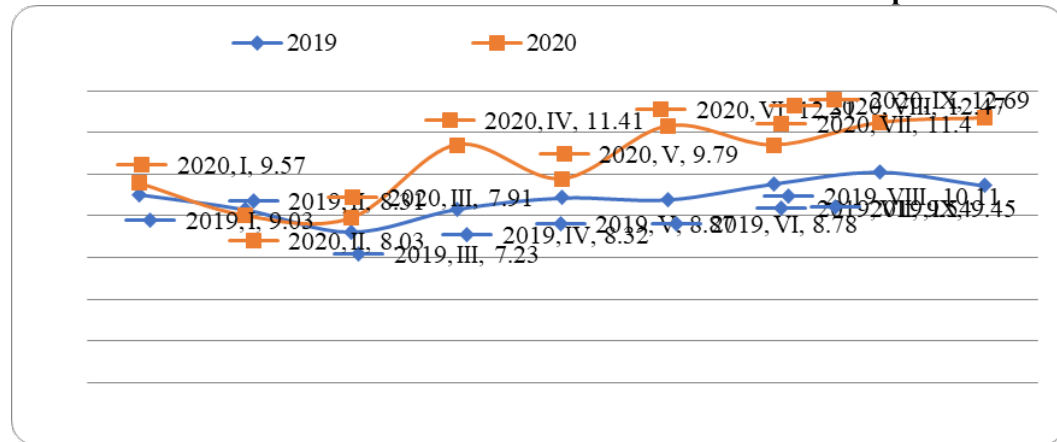
3. Trends and changes in Romanian agro-tourism flow in pandemic times

Between April and May 2020, 100% of all worldwide destinations introduced travel restrictions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, through the closure of borders for tourists and suspension of international flights (UNWTO, 2020).

In Romania, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a huge impact on the tourism industry due to the resulting travel restrictions. Still reluctant to travel abroad and confused about the conditions of travel abroad, which changed from day to day, Romanians opted for holidays in isolated areas or in destinations offering in terms of outdoor activities. Thus, the Danube Delta and mountain areas occupied the first places in the preferences of Romanians. Also, the interest of Romanians towards the seaside remains unchanged compared to last year. The tendency of tourists to book holidays with caution was also observed. About 60% of them preferred last-minute holidays this year, booked even less than 48 hours before the start of the holiday, contrary to the trends of previous years when reservations were made early to take advantage of early booking offers.

In this context, agro-tourism boarding houses offer a pleasant stay to their visitors at lower prices compared to hotels. Tourism demand/flow is measured by the number of arrivals at tourism accommodations establishments. This variable was selected, instead of the number of nights spent at tourism accommodations establishments, because it is more related with accessibility and it is a better proxy for the number of tourist in a territory than the nights spent, which is linked with the duration of the stay. The share of the number of arrivals in agro-tourism boarding houses in Romania's total number of tourist arrivals in the first 9 months of 2020 compared to 2019 registered a more dynamic trend (Figure 4).

Figure 4: The share of the number of arrivals in agro-tourism boarding houses in Romania's total number of arrivals in the first 9 months of 2020 compared to 2019



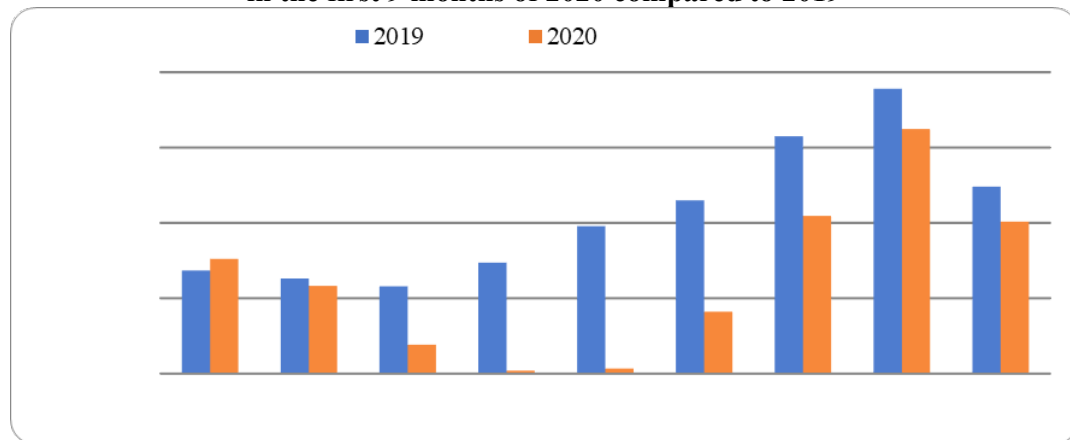
Source: Tempo-online database, 2020

Amid the pandemic, the summer season started late this year, in June. Holiday vouchers and cards were among the main methods of acquiring holidays that contributed to the resumption of domestic tourism.

The period July-August was also intended for holidays, while holidays were booked by Romanians and sometimes paid even a year before to benefit from reduced prices. However, the pandemic has changed, among other things, the behaviour of tourists, who this year prefers to opt for last-minute domestic holidays. After analyzing the evolution of the virus, tourists weighed the advantages and disadvantages of domestic travel in the context of restrictions.

The total number of tourists arrivals in agro-touristic boarding houses decreased in the first 9 months of 2020 compared to 2019 (Figure 5).

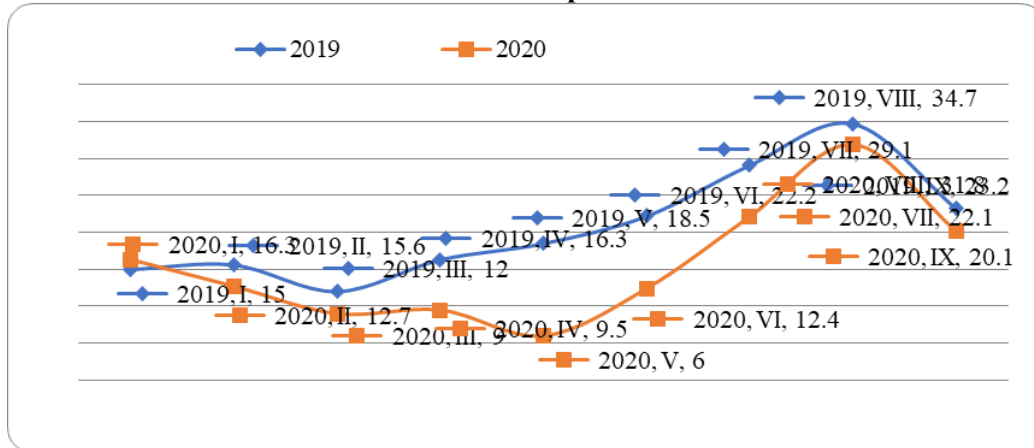
Figure 5: Evolution of arrivals in agro-tourism boarding houses, in the first 9 months of 2020 compared to 2019



Source: Tempo-online database, 2020

A similar decreasing trend was registered at the indices of the net use of the agro-tourism boarding houses, in the first 9 months of 2020 compared to 2019 (Figure 6).

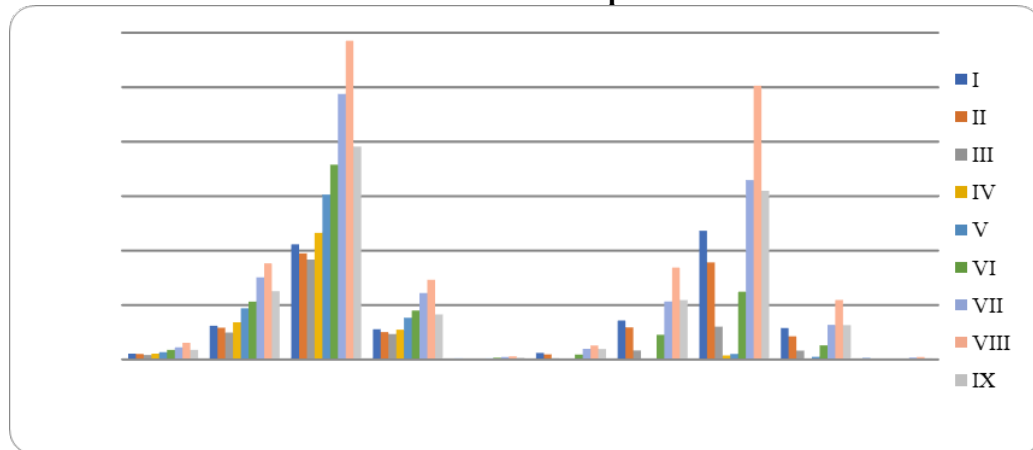
Figure 6: Indices of the net use of the agro-tourism boarding houses, in the first 9 months of 2020 compared to 2019



Source: Tempo-online database, 2020

The agro-touristic boarding houses from category 3 flowers/daisies rest in the preferences in this year and (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Arrivals in the agro-tourism boarding houses by comfort categories, in the first 9 months of 2020 compared to 2019



Source: Tempo-online database, 2020

The main destinations of the rural tourism and agro-tourism in Romania are:

- Maramureș (Sălișteea de Sus, Bogdan Vodă, Săpânța, etc.),
- Transylvania (Arieșeni, Gârda de Sus, Bistrița Bârgăului, Băișoara, etc.),
- central part of Romania (counties Brașov – Bran, Moeciu, Râșnov; Covasna; Harghita – Tușnad, Praid, Sub-Cetate; Sibiu – Sadu, Tălmăcel, etc.),
- the Carpathians and the Curvature Sub-Carpathians (counties Prahova – Poiana Țapului, Cheia; Argeș – Brăduleț, Rucăr; Buzău; Dâmbovița; Vrancea),
- Moldova (county Neamț – Agapia, Văratec; Suceava – Vatra Moldoviței),
- Oltenia (counties Dolj; Gorj – Tismana; Vâlcea – Vaideeni;
- Mehedinți – Ponoarele;
- Hunedoara – Hațeg, Bucium, etc.

4. Conclusions

The last year was a time of radical changes. The world is experiencing an unprecedented situation. As a result of the pandemic, many countries and regions have imposed quarantines, entry bans, or other restrictions for citizens of or recent travellers to the most affected areas. Other countries and regions have imposed global restrictions that apply to all foreign countries and territories, or prevent their own citizens from travelling overseas.

Between April and May 2020, national governments and local authorities had acting to discourage and prevent domestic tourism and people visiting second homes. Destinations have closed to visitors and tourists, the lockdowns have significantly reduced even local travel.

The diversity of impacts and responses will make a recovery for travel and tourism significantly more difficult for travel and tourism than for many other sectors. Amid the pandemic, still confused about the conditions of travel abroad, which change from day to day, the tourist is oriented towards less crowded touristic destinations, and in particular towards rural and nature tourism.

According to our analysis, in Romania, the feeling of health insecurity and the reduction of household income are leading to changes in consumers' preferences for the summer 2020. Thus, the Danube Delta and mountain areas occupied the first places in the preferences of Romanians. Also, the interest of Romanians towards the seaside remains unchanged compared to last year.

The period July-August was also intended for holidays. Holiday vouchers and cards were among the main methods of acquiring holidays that contributed to the resumption of domestic tourism. The tendency of tourists to book holidays with caution was also observed. About 60% of them preferred last-minute holidays this year, booked even less than 48 hours before the start of the holiday, contrary to the trends of previous years when reservations were made early to take advantage of early booking offers.

The agro-tourism boarding houses are representative accommodation units in the Romanian preferences. The numbers of arrivals in agro-tourism boarding houses, in the first 9 months of 2020 compared to 2019 was lower but the share of the number of arrivals in agro-tourism boarding houses in Romania's total number of tourist arrivals in the first 9 months of 2020 compared to 2019 registered a dynamic trend.

The reasons why the agro-tourism boarding houses are considered representative accommodation units in the pandemic times are the following: recreational infrastructure offering access to less crowded and natural areas; small capacity accommodation offering the feeling of health security; the healthy food which can be found there; the managers are more and more focused to increase the comfort level according to the quality standards and to increase clients' satisfaction degree; a pleasant stay at lower prices compared to hotels; traditional countryside pursuits, such as walking, horse riding, and bird watching; the increasingly popular 'adventure sports' or 'extreme sports', such as snowboarding, windsurfing and kayaking. Rural regions offer also the required natural resources and quiet, picturesque settings necessary to enable tourists to controlled risk and excitement as an alternative to the perceived pressures and constraints of urban life in pandemic times.

The higher flow of tourists in rural areas of Romania has determined the alignment of the offer of tourist services in terms of accommodation capacity (establishments and places) so that the ratio demand/offer to be balanced and the economic efficiency in the travel and agro-tourism sector to be higher. This means a better management and strategic planning in agro-tourism offer using innovation and creativeness in assuring infrastructure in close relationship with tourism demand.

Therefore, the analysis led to the conclusion that tourism has been continuing in Romania, a fact confirmed by the preferences of Romanian tourists for seaside and mountain areas. But, the Romanian agro-tourism potential is not enough valorised, there are still

discrepancies between demand and offer, the promotion of agro-tourism need to be intensified, service quality has to be improved to increase the attractiveness of the country for the foreign tourist flow too.

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