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**PROSPECTS FOR DEVELOPING THE ROMANIAN MOUNTAIN  
AREA IN THE EUROPEAN CONTEXT**

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***Abstract***

*Mountain areas with specific characteristics represent a distinct environment which requires a complex approach. The existence of some specific natural resources, ecological fragility, agricultural activities' constraints, implicitly adjacent high costs generate the need for a complex support for the sustainable and inclusive development of mountain areas.*

*According to the Common Agricultural Policy, mountain areas are regarded as disadvantaged, generating a direct action upon rural agriculture and economy. Starting from that belief, the European Union has developed specific instruments supporting the mountainous areas, especially the rural ones, through specific development policies. Therefore, activities with a view to supporting the active farmer, maintaining natural scenery and biodiversity, mitigating climate change consequences, food safety and ensuring higher quality food are conducted.*

***Key Words:*** *ecological fragility, sustainable and inclusive development, specific instruments*

***JEL Classification:*** *Q01*

***1. Introduction***

Conceptually, a mountain area has several meanings. According to the United Nations Organization, a mountain area is defined as a physical, environmental, socio-economic and cultural region where the disadvantages arising from altitude and other natural factors must be taken into consideration in conjunction with socio-economic constraints, spatial and environmental imbalance.

According to FAO, various elements are taken into account in order to define mountains and identify their contours, that is, their natural characteristics (altitude, topography, climate, vegetation) and human factors (food safety, opportunities and obstacles related to land use, interactions between mountains and plains), of which altitude is the most significant criterion, because living conditions at high altitudes are becoming more and more difficult.

In 2008, the European Commission presented the "Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion" defining a mountain area as the degree cell corresponding to a mountain region in which there is a population. The typology was modified with the fifth report on cohesion, so that a mountain area is also the area that has its space inhabited in a non-mountainous area associated with an uninhabited mountain area.

According to the Eurostat/GISCO-JRC, the basic administrative units existing in a mountain area are defined as regions that have a surface of over 50% overlapping the mountain area, or have a population of more than 50% in a mountain area.

The notion of mountain area appeared in France for the first time, with the European Commission applying a compensation programme for natural disabilities in those areas.

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In 1994, the Council of Europe organized in Chamonix for the first time the “European Conference of Mountain Regions”, launching the *Carpathians Project* and promoting the European Charter of Mountain Regions.

In this context, taking account of the diversity of mountain regions at European level, of the economic, social and natural importance, a number of areas have been identified:

- mountain areas that had problems with steep slopes and high altitudes;
- areas threatened by depopulation and low income (high areas in southern Germany, sandy lands in northern European Plain, high areas in Wales, Scotland and northern England);
- areas where it is necessary to maintain rural specificity for tourist activities or other types of activities.

The delimitation of mountain areas in the European Union has been performed both according to the natural conditions (relief, altitude, slope, climate, pedo-ecological issues), but also to the social ones (population density, income level, share of the population employed in agriculture).

According to EC Regulation 1257/1999, “mountain areas are areas characterized by a considerable limitation of the possibilities of land use and by an appreciable increase of the costs of their operation, due to:

- the altitude-based existence of very difficult climate conditions which have the effect of substantially reducing the vegetation period;
- the presence at low altitude, on most of the respective area, of slopes too steep for the use of machinery or which require the use of very expensive special equipment;
- a combination of the two factors above, where the difficulty resulting from either factor taken separately is less serious, but by combining them there is an equivalent difficulty.

In relation to the subsidiarity principle, regional and/or national authorities have had to define their levels and develop a system of mountain area classification. The most common criteria have been:

- very difficult climate conditions at altitudes above 600-800 m;
- steep slopes (with an average gradient of 1-5/km<sup>2</sup>) that require the use of special equipment.

In Romania, there were 3 stages of mountain area delimitation. During the first stage in 2002, mountain areas were thought to be the areas: ”which are characterized by the considerable limitation of the possibilities of land use and by the appreciable increase of the costs of their operation”, due to:

- a. the existence of particularly difficult climate conditions, determined by altitudes of over 600 m, the effect of which is the substantial shortening of the vegetation season;
- b. the presence at lower altitude, on most of the agricultural land, of slopes over 20°, too steep for the use of agricultural machinery or which require the use of expensive equipment; or
- c. the combination of the factors mentioned in letters a) and b), where the disadvantage resulting from either factor taken separately is less acute, but their combination results in an equivalent disadvantage.”

Thus, the mountain area includes 28 counties, 826 TAU’s of which 627 entirely, 21 municipalities, of which 14 entirely, 73 cities of which 53 entirely, 732 municipalities, of which 560 entirely.

Romania’s joining the European Union on 1 January 2007 produced a number of changes regarding the delimitation of a mountain area, taking into account both EU Regulation no.1257/1999 regarding the aid granted by the European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund (EAGGF) for rural development, and also by the provisions of Articles 17 and 18 of EU Regulation 1698/2005, with reference to support for rural development, granted through the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD).

In this context, disadvantaged mountain areas are the areas, delimited at the level of TAU, which are characterized by the considerable limitation of the possibilities of land use and by the appreciable increase of the costs of their operation, due to:

- average altitudes of over 600 meters with particularly difficult climate conditions, whose effect is the substantial shortening of the vegetation season;
- average altitudes between 400 - 600 meters which cause difficult climate conditions, average slopes of over 15%, which make mechanization impossible or require the use of specific expensive equipment.

According to such delimitation, there are no longer 206 TAU's included (of which 84 entirely and 122 partially), namely 6 municipalities, 13 cities and 187 villages, but 37 new TAU's have been included, of which 2 municipalities, 2 cities and 33 villages.

In the last stage, considering the territorial diversity and some isolated issues, the following criteria for delimiting a mountain area have been suggested:

a. *general criteria (physical criteria):*

- average altitude higher than or equal to 500 m;
- average altitude between 350 and 500 m and average slope higher than or equal to 15%;
- altitude below 350 m and average slope higher than or equal to 20%.

b. *criterion of belonging to the Carpathian Convention*, which has included the TAU's that are by at least 50% within the territory comprised by the Carpathian Convention.

c. *combined score criterion*, taking into account the specific situation of a mountain area, based on the following algorithm:

- altitude score (average altitude/500 m) - 30% share;
- slope score (average slope/15%) - share 30%;
- meadow score (pastures + hayfields/agricultural total) - 25% share;
- forest score (forest area/total TAU area) - 15% share.

The TAU's that have obtained a combined score of at least 7 (out of 10 possible) as a result of such operations have also been proposed for inclusion in the mountain area, except for those that do not meet an elimination criterion related to geology (if the share of the quaternary formations is higher than 50% of TAU);

d. *criterion of inclusion in the delimitation of a mountain area within Romania's Territorial Development Strategy (SDTR);*

e. *continuity criterion.* Considering that following the application of the above criteria, the result is that the TAU's that do not meet the criteria but are surrounded by mountain TAU's, resulting in so-called "non-mountain islands", by exception, for continuity, it has also been proposed to include them in the mountain area.

Thus, according to MADR / MADRP Joint Order 97/1332/2019, Romania's mountain area comprises 948 TAU's, as follows:

Table 1. *Delimitation of Romania's Mountain Area*

No.	Indicators	Specification
1.	Total surface(ha)	9.128.102
2.	Population	4.795.020
3.	Number of TAU's included	948, of which the following according to: - physical criteria - 785; - criterion of belonging to the Carpathian Convention -71; - combined score criterion – 47; - criterion of inclusion in the SDTR- 35; - continuity criterion - 10

Source: Processed by the authors based on data provided by ANZM

In conclusion, Romania's mountain area is representative: 38.3% of the country's surface, 25.88% of the agricultural area and 29.8% of the total TAU's.

## **2. Mountain Area Investment Programmes**

The mountain area in Romania is well represented, but it faces a number of problems generated by:

- low development level;
- small number of jobs;
- renouncing traditional mountain rural activities;
- exodus of young people to other more attractive areas;
- reduced access to training and information;
- poorly developed infrastructure, implicitly a relatively high degree of isolation for certain communities;
- weak exploitation of the specific natural and cultural potential.

In order to support the disadvantaged mountain area, Mountain Law no.197/2018 was adopted, which regulates *“the ways of protection and sustainable inclusive development of the mountain area by enhancing the natural and human resources, increasing the living standard, population stabilization, maintaining the cultural identity, increasing the economic power at local and national levels while maintaining the ecological balance and protecting the natural environment”*.

The law contains a programme to encourage activities in the mountain area, aiming at:

- protection of natural resources;
- balanced population density in the mountain area;
- creation and preservation of jobs;
- creation and protection of access infrastructure;
- preparation of policies and regulations to encourage activities specific to the mountain area.

The main activities that can be developed in the mountain area are agriculture, processing industry and tourism. With regard to agriculture, the specific climate and biophysical conditions require sustained support which will contribute in the increase of the living standard in the mountain area and implicitly in stabilizing the young population. The poor endowment and technical equipment of farms, their small size, the continuous decrease of livestock due to the lack of markets for certain products, low prices for some agricultural products, they all require a new approach.

The future objective of sustainable development in the rural mountain environment is the organization of producers in cooperative associations which will have their own processing facilities and implicitly trading. Small farms in the mountain area should be supported in organizing producer groups for collecting, processing and selling products.

The main investment programmes to be carried out in the mountain area are:

- setting up milk collection and/or processing centres;
- setting up low capacity units for animal slaughtering and/or meat processing;
- setting up centres for primary collection and processing of forest fruit, mushrooms and/or medicinal and aromatic plants of the spontaneous flora and/or culture in the mountain area;
- setting up mountain sheepfolds.

The beneficiaries of such investment programmes will be:

- authorized natural persons, sole proprietorships and family businesses set up according to Government Emergency Ordinance no. 44/2008 regarding the conduct of economic activities by authorized natural persons, sole proprietorships and family businesses, approved with amendments and completions by Law no. 182/2016;

- producer groups set up according to Government Ordinance no. 37/2005 regarding the recognition and functioning of producer groups and organizations, for the trading of agricultural and forestry products, approved with amendments and completions by Law no. 338/2005, as subsequently amended and supplemented, and Order of the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development and of the Minister of Environment, Water and Forestry no.358/763/2016 for the approval of Methodological Norms for the application of Government Ordinance no. 37/2005 regarding the recognition and functioning of producer groups and organizations, for the trading of agricultural and forestry products;
- legal entities set up in accordance with the provisions of Law on agricultural cooperation 566/2004, as subsequently amended and supplemented;
- legal entities set up in accordance with the provisions of Law no. 1/2005 regarding the organization and functioning of cooperation, republished, with the subsequent amendments, and the legal entities set up according to the provisions of Companies Law no.31/1990, republished, with subsequent amendments and completions, which carry out activities in agriculture and/or food industry

Implementing the Investment Encouragement Programme in the mountain area will have as main results:

- creation of new jobs;
- stabilization of young population;
- increasing well-being;
- development of mountain tourism, agro-tourism, ecotourism, rural tourism.

### **3. "Mountain Product"- Optional Quality Mention**

The high quality of products from the mountain area is unanimously recognized. Under such circumstances, the European Commission has decided to label the food from the mountain area differently. Thus, the concept of "mountain product" has emerged, an optional quality mention, a product intended exclusively for human consumption.

Manufacturers wishing to acquire the right to use the "mountain product" quality mention for the goods made must comply with the 5 principles of the charter for mountain products:

- raw materials and also feed for farm animals mainly come from the mountain area;
- processing takes place in the mountain area;
- production must integrate local sustainable development concerns;
- production must favour the maintenance of biodiversity and heritage in the mountain area;
- production must ensure information transparency for the consumers.

Thus, plant origin products that will bear the "mountain product" optional quality mention must be grown in the mountain area. Animal origin products must come from animals bred at least in the last two-thirds of life in the mountain areas and be processed in the mountain areas (by derogation, the processing can take place at a maximum of 30 km from the mountain area). It is also possible to obtain the right to use the "mountain product" optional quality mention for products that are obtained from animals bred at least a quarter of life in transhumance and on pastures in the mountain area, too. As to bee products, the right to use the "mountain product" optional quality mention is obtained only if it is proven that the bees have collected the nectar and pollen from the mountain area.

#### **4. Conclusions**

According to the Joint Agricultural Policy, mountain areas are regarded as disadvantaged areas, generating direct action on agriculture and rural economy.

Romania's mountain area is individualized by a specific potential which is human, natural and cultural, which requires sustainable valorisation. The huge mountain potential requires strategic thinking based on the balance between production and consumption implicitly, on the one hand, and also on protection and preservation on the other.

The Romanian rural mountain environment requires specific management in which the results will occur as time passes and it aims at the overall socio-economic well-being, while maintaining attractiveness. The preservation and transmission of traditional crafts, of activities seen only in the "*village in the middle of mountains*" should be a priority in the future strategic orientations.

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