

PROBLEMS FACED BY RURAL TOURISM IN ITS DEVELOPMENT IN ROMANIA

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Abstract

Rural tourism represents a key vector for local development in Romania, as it enables the valorization of local agricultural products, revitalizes rural economies and enhances regional visibility. Its emergence responds to the needs of small agricultural households seeking new income sources and diversification opportunities (1). Despite its significant natural and cultural potential, rural tourism development is constrained by shortcomings in infrastructure, service quality, promotion, human resources and public administration. The study identifies the main challenges limiting rural tourism competitiveness and proposes strategic interventions aimed at fostering sustainable development, community involvement and improved territorial governance (2)(3).

Keywords: rural tourism; strategies; investments; sustainable development; community empowerment

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INTRODUCTION

Rural tourism has become an increasingly relevant component of Romania's tourism sector, reflecting broader global trends in which tourists seek authenticity, cultural immersion, natural environments and meaningful interactions with local communities (2). Romania's rural regions offer distinctive advantages such as traditional wooden architecture, folk crafts, ceremonial customs, ethnographic heritage, centuries-old churches and extraordinary landscapes characteristic of regions like Transylvania, Maramureș, Bucovina and the Danube Delta (6). These resources, combined with the hospitality of rural residents, form the foundation of a unique rural tourism identity that differentiates Romania in the European tourism market.

The evolution of rural tourism in Romania was strongly influenced by post-1990 socio-economic transformations, especially land restitution and the reorganization of agricultural holdings, which enabled local households to reorient their economic activities toward tourism diversification (4). As rural economies faced structural challenges—fragmented agricultural land, declining employment opportunities and demographic shifts—rural tourism emerged as an alternative means of generating income and preserving cultural traditions (1). Rural tourism also contributes to strengthening community cohesion by

revitalizing traditional crafts, local gastronomy and intangible cultural heritage.

However, despite its strong potential, rural tourism in Romania is confronted with a number of persistent difficulties related to demographic decline, infrastructure deficits, limited professionalization, weak promotional capacity, administrative barriers and environmental pressures (3, 7, 9). These barriers highlight the need for coherent development strategies and integrated territorial policies. According to Calina's classical criteria for defining a "tourist village," rural destinations must meet minimum standards related to accessibility, infrastructure, environmental quality, cultural authenticity and adequate accommodation capacity (1). The degree to which Romanian villages fulfil these criteria varies widely, leading to uneven levels of development and competitiveness.

The present study offers an in-depth analysis of the structural problems that hinder rural tourism in Romania and proposes a systematic interpretation of their effects on destination performance and sustainability. By connecting empirical observations with evidence from international and national research, the analysis aims to identify critical bottlenecks and lay the foundation for strategic frameworks that support the revitalization of rural destinations.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The research adopts a qualitative analytical approach based on the synthesis of academic literature, policy documents and comparative case observations. The methodological framework follows OECD guidelines for rural tourism analysis, which emphasize infrastructure assessment, human resource capacity, community participation and environmental sustainability as key analytical dimensions (3). Additional conceptual insights derive from classical and contemporary works on rural tourism development, sustainability and destination competitiveness (1, 2, 4, 5).

Data interpretation was structured around three analytical layers:

1. Structural determinants, including demographic trends, infrastructure conditions and institutional frameworks (7, 9).

2. Functional determinants, such as service quality, marketing capacity and entrepreneurial readiness (4, 8).

3. Environmental and cultural determinants, examining heritage protection and ecological pressures (5, 10).

This method enabled the identification of interdependencies between challenges and their systemic effects on rural tourism. The analysis also integrates comparative insights from European rural development models to contextualize Romanian challenges within broader regional dynamics (3, 7).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The research reveals that rural tourism development in Romania is significantly constrained by deeply interconnected structural, functional and environmental challenges. The most critical issue identified is **village depopulation**, driven by youth migration, aging populations and limited local employment opportunities (7). Depopulation results not only in a shortage of labour for hospitality activities but also in the erosion of cultural traditions and the decline of household maintenance, which reduces the visual and cultural appeal of rural landscapes (10).

Infrastructure deficiencies represent a second major barrier. Many rural areas lack modern road networks, reliable public

transport, adequate water and sewage systems, medical facilities or stable internet access (9). These weaknesses reduce accessibility, discourage tourists and restrict the operational capacity of rural businesses. In the digital era, the lack of connectivity also prevents rural destinations from participating effectively in online visibility, reservation platforms and digital marketing initiatives.

The level of service professionalization remains uneven across rural Romania. Many accommodation providers engage in tourism without formal training in hospitality, customer service or destination management, resulting in inconsistent service quality and poorly structured tourist experiences (8). These inconsistencies hinder the development of a coherent brand identity for rural tourism destinations and reduce the likelihood of repeat visitation.

Weak marketing further exacerbates these problems. Numerous rural destinations fail to promote their cultural and natural assets effectively due to limited budgets, lack of expertise and insufficient use of digital tools (2). Without strategic communication, the visibility of rural villages remains low, despite their high tourism potential.

Administrative complexity and limited access to EU funds also restrict rural entrepreneurship. Many rural residents report difficulties navigating bureaucratic procedures, understanding eligibility criteria or securing co-financing for development projects (7). As a result, many valuable initiatives remain unimplemented.

Seasonality contributes to income instability, affecting both service providers and local economies. Concentrated periods of demand—winter holidays, Easter or short summer intervals—limit the viability of long-term business planning and discourage year-round investment (4).

Cultural heritage degradation emerges as another significant concern. Inadequate modernization efforts and the construction of non-traditional buildings risk eroding the architectural coherence and cultural authenticity that form the core identity of rural tourism (10).

Environmental pressures caused by unregulated tourism—overcrowding, waste

mismanagement, landscape degradation—threaten the ecological balance that attracts visitors in the first place (5). Sustainable tourism models require careful regulation and community-based management.

These findings indicate that the challenges are not isolated but mutually reinforcing. Depopulation reduces service quality; poor infrastructure limits investment; weak marketing decreases visibility; administrative obstacles hinder development projects; and environmental degradation compromises long-term sustainability. The result is a structural cycle that limits rural tourism performance.

CONCLUSIONS

The study demonstrates that rural tourism in Romania holds significant potential for strengthening local economies, preserving cultural heritage and enhancing regional development, yet its success remains dependent on addressing multiple systemic challenges. The conclusions highlight that rural tourism cannot develop sustainably unless core structural deficiencies—such as depopulation, infrastructure deficits and limited access to funding—are resolved in conjunction with functional improvements in service quality, marketing and entrepreneurship (3, 7).

A central conclusion is that rural destinations must adopt integrated development strategies that combine infrastructure modernization, human resource training, heritage protection and sustainable environmental management (5, 8). Local communities must be empowered through training, access to investment, participatory governance and the promotion of local crafts, agriculture and traditions. These actions contribute not only to increasing tourism competitiveness but also to strengthening rural identity and community resilience.

The findings underscore the importance of protecting architectural and cultural authenticity, which constitutes a core element of Romania's rural tourism attractiveness (1, 10). Sustainable rural tourism must therefore balance economic development with conservation practices that maintain

traditional landscapes and safeguard intangible heritage.

The study also concludes that digital transformation—improved internet access, online marketing, smart tourism tools—represents an essential requirement for future competitiveness (2). In an increasingly competitive global tourism environment, rural destinations must enhance their visibility through coherent branding, digital communication strategies and strategic partnerships.

Ultimately, solving the problems faced by rural tourism in Romania requires coordinated action among local communities, public authorities, private stakeholders and international institutions. When supported by coherent policies, adequate investments and sustainable management practices, rural tourism can become a key driver of territorial revitalization, economic diversification and cultural preservation, contributing significantly to the attractiveness and resilience of rural Romania.

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