

## DEVELOPMENT OF AGRO-TOURISM IN DOBROGEA REGION, ROMANIA, IN THE CONTEXT OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

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### *Abstract*

*The objective of the present paper is to make an analysis of agro-tourism activity development in Dobrogea – a historical province from Romania's South-East extremity, in order to identify the main trends and changes in the period after Romania's accession to the European Union, using official empirical data and specific indicators: agro-tourism offer in terms of number of agro-tourism boarding houses (they refer only to accommodation in standardized tourist units) and number of places/beds in use (number places-days) in this type of accommodation units; agro-tourism demand in terms of number of tourist overnight stays in the agro-tourism boarding houses; the net utilization index of the agro-tourism boarding houses capacity. The whole volume of information presented in this paper was obtained from national statistics, from governmental and non-governmental sources, as well as from articles and studies published in specialized journals. The results showed that the agro-tourism offers were among the most preferred destination, as most tourists feel safer here and agro-tourism boarding houses services are more and more attractive. However, the agro-tourism potential in Dobrogea should be much better exploited, the demand/offer ratio should be in balance, the agro-tourism boarding houses destinations should be more intensively promoted and service quality should be improved in order to increase the agro-tourism flow and attractiveness of this region.*

*Key words:* rural area, agro-tourism activities, agro-tourist boarding houses, development strategy, Dobrogea

### INTRODUCTION

There is a significantly growing global demand for agro-tourism, as a form of rural tourism, emerged as an alternative to the classic tourism [4, 17, 25].

The free flow of information on the internet and different media, the growing transportation industry, and the decreasing communication costs are all factors supporting the new emerging form of tourism, where accommodation and other hospitality services take place in tourist boarding houses that are integrated in the local farms [3, 15, 16].

In Romania, in the last few years, the analysis of agro-tourism flow has proved that our country becomes more and more attractive as agro-tourism destination, both for the residents and non-residents, with a constant expansion, and a number of arrivals in agro-tourist boarding houses that exceeded for the first time 1 million in the year 2018 [3, 12, 17].

At the same time, in the opinion of many specialists [14, 16, 22, 24, 25] for those who live in the rural area, developing the local tourism activity means improving their social, cultural and economic situation.

Having in view the positive role played by the promotion and development of agro-tourism activity as a complementary activity to farming, organically integrated in the farm economy, the present paper intends to analyse the main trends and changes in the agro-tourism activity in Dobrogea (a historical province from Romania's south-eastern extremity) in the period after Romania's accession to the European Union.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

For the purpose of this paper, data were collected from the National Institute of Statistics, more exactly from Tempo Online Data base, for the period 2007-2020.

The main indicators taken into consideration were the following: (i) *the agro-tourism offer*

in terms of number of agro-tourist boarding houses (therefore, they refer only to accommodation in standardized tourist units) and number of places/beds in use (number places-days) on this type of accommodation units; (ii) *the agro-tourism demand* in terms of number of tourist overnight stays in the agro-tourist boarding houses; (iii) the net utilization index of the agro-tourism boarding houses capacity in operation, calculated according to the following formula:

$$I_n = (N / C_f) \times 100,$$

where:  $I_n$  is the net utilization index of the agro-tourist accommodation capacity in operation;  $N$  is the number of beds in a certain period;  $C_f$  is the tourist accommodation capacity in operation.

In the paper we present the results of the statistical data series for the agro-tourism boarding houses. From the statistical point of view, the urban boarding houses were redefined into tourist boarding houses, and the rural and agro-tourist boarding houses into agro-tourist boarding houses [13].

The agro-tourist boarding house is a independent buildings for tourism destination. These structures ensure, also, in specially designed spaces, the preparation and serving of meals, as well the possibility of tourist participation in household [13, 22].

The methods used in this research were the following: the documented study, the descriptive statistical analysis and logical synthesis of information. This type of documentation aimed to identify and review the main trends and challenges related to the resources involved in agro-tourism activity. The results were tabled and graphically represented and correspondingly commented and the statistical data were completed by information from articles, studies, reports and governmental and non-governmental documents.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Located in the south-eastern part of Romania, between the Danube and the Black Sea, Dobrogea's territory benefits from a

diversified tourism patrimony, with natural and anthropic resources distributed on a total area of 15,570 km<sup>2</sup>, divided between two counties: Constanta (the most urbanized county in Romania) and Tulcea (with 40.55% of its area covered by water: the Danube Delta and the lagoon complex Razim-Sinoe) [5, 6, 23].

In Dobrogea region, agro-tourism is a form of tourism emerged from the need to find solutions for increasing the rural farm incomes by putting into value their economic potential. This potential refers both to the existing accommodation potential, prepared and arranged mainly for tourists' reception, and to the goods and services supplied for consumption to persons coming to the rural area for recreation, rest and leisure. Depending on the natural, cultural, folklore conditions of the region, the agro-tourism services supplied range from the serving of meals, accompanying and guiding tourists on certain tracks or initiation in certain traditional crafts, to practicing some sports or assistance to a series of traditional habits in the locality or region (poems sessions, village dances, carols, religious holidays, traditional fairs, folklore shows, etc) [7, 21].

In Dobrogea, *the natural agro-tourism resource* is determined by:

- The *Danube Delta (the newest land of Europe) and the lagoon complex Razim-Sinoe*, locate in the north-eastern part of the county Tulcea, with a great diversity of water and terrestrial ecosystems [2, 6, 23];
- The *Măcin Mountains*, the oldest relief of the Romanian territory, located in the north-western part of the county Tulcea, maximum 467 m high (Greci-Țuțuiatul peak), fascinating through its unique geomorphology and bio-geography [6, 9, 23];
- The *Romanian Black Sea coastline* is stretching on 245 km (152 miles) between the northern border with Ukraine and the boarder with Bulgaria in the south, where there are excellent beaches facing the east, with lots of sunshine in the summer season [5, 18, 23];
- The *Northern and Southern Dobrogea Plateau*, with agro-tourism potential, yet fully unexplored, with large forests and a rich hunting fund, vineyards, fisheries, bee-

keeping, local agro-pastoral resources, traditional cuisine or horse riding [5, 18, 23]. Analysing the Dobrogea rural space, we will find that this is the keeper and preserver of a priceless treasure of art and architecture, with historical artefacts, vestiges and monuments, as well as a genuine ethno-folklore heritage of unique value and purity, which “*makes out of Dobrogea a genuine museum in open air*” [14, 21].

The **rural settlements with potential for agro-tourism activity development** in Dobrudgea are located in a compact area located in the wet regions and in a hilly and plateau area. The tourism potential is used for the gastronomic, ethnographic, historical, religious and scientific tourism practice [7]. The rural settlements with agro-tourism function identified on Dobrogea’s territory can be classified by main natural resources (Table 1).

Table 1. The main rural settlements with agro-tourism potential identified on Dobrogea’s territory

Rural settlements	Area for tourism practice
Crișan, Jurilovca, Mahmudia, Maliuc, Murighiol, Nufăru, Sfântu Gheorghe,	Danube Delta and the lagoon complex Razim-Sinoe
Greci, Luncavița	Măcin Mountains
Corbu, Tuzla, Costinești, Limanu with 2 villages: 2 Mai and Vama Veche	Romanian Black Sea Coastline
Niculițel, Babadag	Northern Dobrogea Plateau
Ostrov, Oltina	Southern Dobrogea Plateau

Source: own processing [5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 21, 23].

In Dobrogea, **the main activities** developed by the tourists accommodated in the agro-tourist boarding houses are the following:

- *Recreation and summer heliotherapy treatment*: Corbu, Agigea, Tuzla, Vama Veche, 2 Mai, 23 August;
- *Recreation and fishing purpose or nautical sports* for amateurs and professionals, practiced in the Black Sea or in the Danube Delta: Crișan, Caraorman, Mila 23, Maliuc, Murighiol, Mahmudia;
- *Cultural, religious or historical trips*: Adamclisi, Enisala, Istria, Slava Cercheză;

- *Wine tasting trip*: Murfatlar, Măcin, Niculițel, Ostrov;

- *Gastronomic trip* for tasting a range of appetizing and delicious food products: Sfântu Gheorghe, Costinești etc. [2, 5, 6, 8, 21, 23].

Most of these activities require an animator to coordinate the spare time of tourists. The animator of the agro-tourist boarding houses is a person responsible for the group of tourists to whom he proposes an active agro-tourism activities which exploit the natural landscape and opportunities in rural areas, facilitating relationships between members of a group [26].

In the rural area of Dobrogea, **the agro-tourism offer** is growing and the quality of agro-tourist boarding houses and services has steadily improved after Romania’s accession to the European Union [8, 14].

According to the National Rural Development Programme (NRDP), co-financed by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), **the main operational programmes** with financing possibilities in the agro-tourism activities are the following:

- NRDP 2007-2013 by Axis 3 “Improvement of life quality in the rural areas and rural economy diversification” with Measure 313, as well as the LEADER Axis providing diversification of economic activities for creating alternative jobs and new income opportunities for farmers [10];

- NRDP 2014-2020, which provides financial support to private investments for tourism supply diversification in the rural area [11].

Moreover, **the indirect effects** for agro-tourism activity development come from the following structural programmes:

- The Regional Operational Programme known as REGIO with finances projects in three fields of intervention: restoration and lasting capitalisation of the cultural and historical patrimony, as well as creation/modernisation of the related infrastructures; creation, development, modernisation of specific infrastructure for lasting capitalisation of natural resources and for the increase of the quality of tourist services, and promotion of the tourist potential, and creation of the necessary infrastructure with the purpose of increasing

Romania’s attractiveness as a tourist destination [19, 20].

The *eligible investments* for agro-tourism activity development supported by the European funds targeted:

- increasing, improving and diversifying the small-scale tourism accommodation facilities (agro-tourism boarding houses and private investments in the leisure tourism infrastructure);
- developing and promoting the agro-tourism services;
- guiding and training in agro-tourism services provided to the rural inhabitants;
- developing the local on-line biking systems for the rural tourism accommodation facilities in the rural area connected to regional and national systems [1, 10, 11].

The *direct beneficiaries* of the financial support are the following:

- natural persons (with the commitment that by the date of signing the financial contract they will get the certification of authorized natural persons);
- farmers or members of certain agricultural enterprises who wish to diversify their basic farm activity by developing a non-agricultural activity in the rural area in the already existing enterprise that falls under the category of micro-enterprises and small-sized enterprises, except for the non-authorized natural persons;
- existing and newly established micro- and small-sized enterprises in the rural area;
- local communities, local public authorities, non-governmental organizations and professional associations [1, 10, 11].

The *indirect beneficiaries* are tourists staying overnight and visitors who love to combine the pleasure to live outdoors far from the civilization of the cities, to enjoy learning about traditional occupations of the people from Dobrogea, tasting traditional food, meeting folk customs, but also having contact and taking part in agricultural works and playing with farm animals etc. [1, 10, 11].

There is a multitude of actors involved in agro-tourism development in Dobrugea. Some of them play a more important role than others. At the moment, by close collaboration at ministerial level the non-governmental

organizations with tourism profile can play a very important contribution on education and the agro-tourism can become an alternative for the local economy [22, 23].

In the period 2007-2020, the share of the number of Dobrogea agro-tourism boarding houses in the total number of agro-tourism boarding houses existing in Romania were different throughout the years, from 4.3% in 2007 to 4.3% in 2020, with the highest share of 5% in the year 2018 and the lowest share of 0.7% in the year 2017 (Fig. 1).

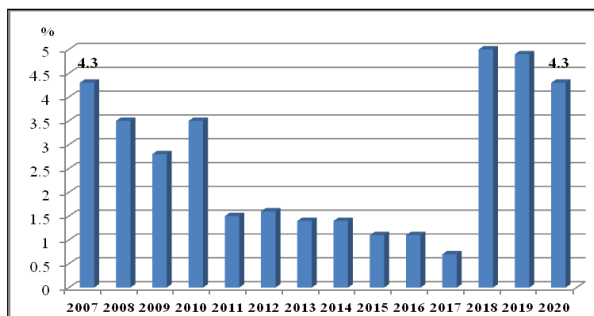


Fig. 1. Share of Dobrogea agro-tourist boarding houses in total number of agro-tourist boarding houses in Romania, 2007-2020 (%)

Source: NIS, Tempo-online, 2021 [13].

The share of the number of agro-tourism boarding houses in total number of tourism structures in Dobrogea fluctuated in the analysed period, from 5.1% in 2007 to 11.1% in 2020, with the highest share of 12% in the year 2018 and the lowest share of 1.9% in the year 2017 (Fig.2).

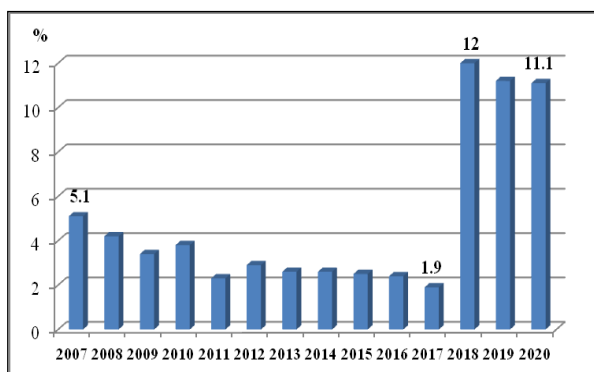


Fig. 2. Share of agrotourist boarding houses in total number of accommodation structures in Dobrogea, 2007-2020 (%)

Source: NIS, Tempo-online, 2021 [13]

The number of agro-tourist boarding houses had a different trend in Constanta county compared to Tulcea county (Fig.3).

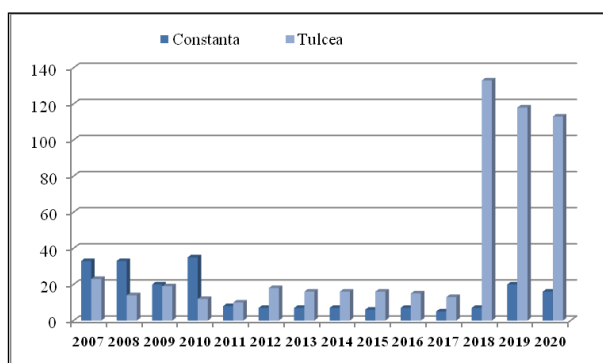


Fig. 3. Evolution of the number of agrotourist boarding houses in Constanta and Tulcea counties, 2007-2020  
 Source: NIS, Tempo-online, 2021 [13].

In the case of Constanta county, there was a declining trend from 33 agro-tourist boarding houses in the year 2007 to 16 agro-tourist boarding houses in the year 2020, with the highest number 35 in the year 2010 and the lowest number 5 in the year 2017. In the case of Tulcea county, the trend fluctuated each year, from 23 agro-tourist boarding houses in 2007 to 113 agro-tourist boarding houses in 2020, with an obvious increase in the year 2018 to 133 agro-tourist boarding houses.

The number of beds in the agro-tourist boarding houses increased in the last three years of the analysed period, because farmers were interested in increasing their incomes by tourists' accommodation and also by traditional meals (Fig. 4).

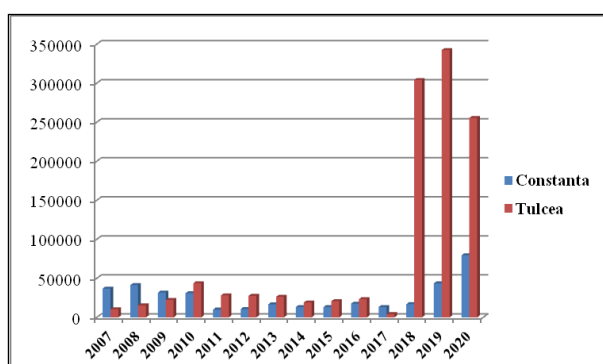


Fig. 4. Evolution of the accommodation capacity in use on agro-tourist boarding houses in Constanta and Tulcea counties, 2007-2020 (number places-days)  
 Source: NIS, Tempo-online, 2021 [13].

The numbers of overnight stays in agro-tourist boarding houses have a similar trend with the evolution of number of beds used in the agro-tourist boarding houses (Fig.5).

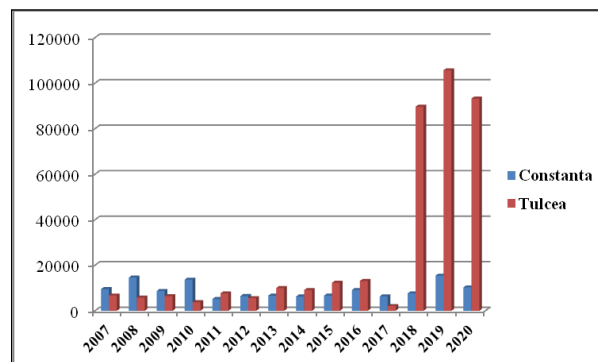


Fig. 5. Evolution of the overnight stays in the agrotourist boarding houses in Constanta and Tulcea counties, 2007-2020 (number)  
 Source: NIS, Tempo-online, 2021 [13].

In Tulcea County, after 2017, the number of beds on agro-tourist boarding houses had a more dynamic trend in the last three years of the analysed period, as the number of overnight stays on agro-tourism boarding houses increased. This is explained by the attractive accommodation in a rustic style and leisure services at lower prices compared to other accommodation units, and also by the promotion of the beauty of the scenery from the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve or from the National Park Macinului Mountains.

In the analysed period, there was a very small number of foreign tourists who stayed overnight in the agro-tourist boarding houses in Dobrogea, with a slight increasing tendency in the year 2019 (Fig.6).

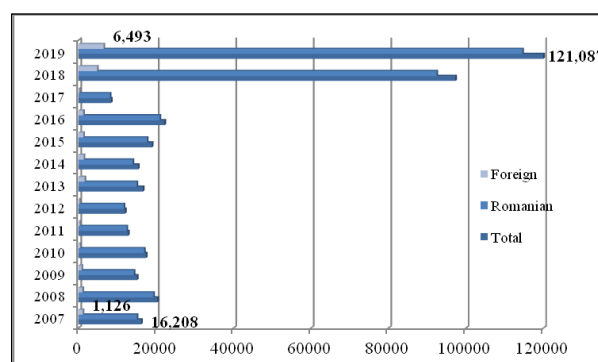


Fig. 6. Evolution of the number of tourists' overnight stays on the agrotourist boarding houses in Dobrogea  
 Source: NIS, Tempo-online, 2021 [13].

The flows of tourists are characterized by seasonality along the year and have a deep influence on the net use of the accommodation capacity and tourism receipts. In the Dobrogea agro-tourist boarding houses, these indices varied year by year (Fig.7).

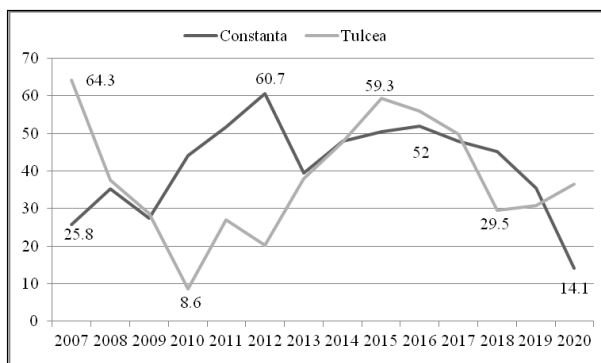


Fig. 7. Evolution of the net utilization index of the agro-tourist boarding houses capacity in Constanta and Tulcea counties

Source: NIS, Tempo-online, 2021 [13].

This is explained by planning the holidays mainly in the middle of the year, the desire of tourists to shorten the period of stay and the limited money allocated to holidays in close relation to the family budget. In this way, the managers of agro-tourist boarding houses cannot cover the entire capacity.

## CONCLUSIONS

For most of us, Dobrogea means the Black Sea shore with its resorts or the Danube Delta with its priceless biodiversity. Between the Danube River and the Black Sea coastline there is more reason for a travel.

In Tulcea County, the Danube Delta was and remains an important tourism objective, and the Măcin Mountains are not very well-known. The best-known tourism rural settlements in Danube Delta are: Crișan, Maliuc, Mahmudia and Murighiol, and the locality Jurilovca, on the bank of lake Razim; the localities with most tourist circulation are Jurilovca and Murighiol.

In Constanța County, the agro-tourism management focuses on the coastal area, the localities along the Danube and the localities with archaeological sites and religious objectives. The highest variety of tourism

receival structures and most of the seasonal tourism activity is found in the commune Costinești, with the villages Schitu and Costinești, and in the commune Limanu, with the villages 2 Mai and Vama Veche.

Summing up the main characteristics of agro-tourism activity in Dobrogea, during the period 2007-2020, we can draw the following conclusions:

- The number of agro-tourist boarding houses had a different trend in Constanta county compared to Tulcea county;
- The number of places on agro-tourist boarding houses increased in the last three years of the analysed period;
- The number of overnight stays on agro-tourist boarding houses has a similar trend with the evolution of number of places on agro-tourist boarding houses;
- The net use of the accommodation capacity and tourist receipts varied year by year;
- The tourist accommodation facilities and public food catering are less developed, which limits the number of tourists in the region.

This variation registered by agro-tourist boarding houses activity is explained by the desire of tourists' who planning holiday mainly in the middle of the year, with an average duration of stay of one day limited by the money allocated for spending the vacation which is in close relation to the family budget. In this way, the managers of agro-tourist boarding houses cannot cover the whole capacity.

Also, the insufficient promotion of agro-tourism potential, the limited collaboration between the most important actors, the lack of coherence and absence of a strategy at central authorities level, the lack of a coherent vision for the development of agro-tourism, the lack of State interest in the development and promotion of agro-tourism, the lack of funding programs and special offers organized by the employers' associations in agro-tourism, represent the reasons out of which the agro-tourism activity in the area of Danube Delta, Northern and Southern Dobrudgean Plateau, and the Black Sea coastline is not considered a representative tourism product.

Therefore, the agro-tourism potential in Dobrogea should be much better exploited, the demand/offer ratio should be in balance, the agro-tourism boarding houses as a tourism destination should be more intensively promoted and service quality should be improved in order to increase the agro-tourism flow and attractiveness of this region.

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