

ECOTOURISM, AGRO-TOURISM AND RURAL TOURISM IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

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Abstract

Ecotourism, agro-tourism, rural tourism are forms of tourism that emerged in the last century, becoming increasingly important sectors of the tourism industry worldwide. The new kinds of life-style, the evolving tourist behaviour and continuously changing customers' preferences coupled with the widespread concern about environment, industrial heritage and sustainable development are all factors that led to the expansion of these niche market types of tourism. The objectives of this paper are to research important implications and identify significant trends of ecotourism, agro-tourism and rural tourism in the European Union, focusing on the New Member States area, as there is a lot of potential for the expansion of these forms of tourism in the region. The Old Member States earn significant income from agro-tourism, while in the New Member States this is rather an unexploited opportunity, despite the fact that the cultural heritage and number of unspoilt natural areas is much more abundant than in the West. This paper will also look at the policies in this field, as the European Union is very interested and active in supporting agro-tourism and sustainable development, and many policies, programmes and initiatives address the three types of niche tourism. Key features, economic, environmental and socio-cultural benefits, as well as current and future challenges for ecotourism, agro-tourism and rural tourism in the entire European Union, but more thoroughly in the New Member States will also be addressed, with the purpose of creating a comprehensive paper, able to convince the scholars and practitioners in the field to pay more attention to this rather new topic, as a proactive approach can enable investments and attract more tourists to the area.

Keywords

Ecotourism, agro-tourism, rural tourism, sustainable development, EU policies, niche tourism.

JEL Classification

Q01, Q2, Q5, R11, Z32

Introduction

Sustainable development is not only a trend, but rather a necessity, expanding to all the social and economic fields of our life, including tourism, as this is "an industry of resources, dependent on the natural and human potential, cultural heritage of a society" (Dorobanțu & Nistoreanu, 2012). According to Nistoreanu (2006), the objectives, principles and requirements of sustainable tourism development are most common to ecotourism, rural tourism, agro tourism and cultural tourism, these tourism forms actually representing "the desire for tourism to be not only a positive, dynamic development factor, but also a viable solution to keep the environment untainted" (Dorobanțu & Nistoreanu, 2012, p. 21). Besides, they stimulate the development of other activities, such as crafting, local food production or agriculture, leading to increased revenue in the corresponding areas.

In this regard, the present paper aims to provide an overview of rural tourism and its most popular forms, agro-tourism and ecotourism in the European Union, but with a focus on the thirteen New Member States, trying to identify key countries and destinations. The policies, programmes and initiatives in the field, as well as the number of nights spent at tourism accommodation establishments in rural areas were analysed in order to fulfil the desired outcome.

1. Literature review

Even though everything started like a simple, cheap and not so popular form of tourism, rural tourism is now considered sophisticated, modern and addresses to highly educated, well-travelled and from higher socio-economic groups people (Centre for the Promotion of Imports, 2016). The term "rural tourism" has been defined in a number of ways, it varies from country to country, and it is rather difficult to find a universal definition, due to its complex multi-faceted nature, being not only a "farm-based tourism", as it is often considered (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 1994). European Commission adopted this

collocation for “tourism in areas with a low density of population” (European Commission, 2000, p.15), rural areas and villages. Rural tourism, agro-tourism and village tourism are more often than not used as synonyms and, even though there is no widely applicable and universally accepted definition for this form of tourism, everyone does agree that it offers “unique and specific experiences [...] authentic ones, in which the promoted lifestyle is primordial” (Sasu & Epuran, 2016). Besides, rural tourism is considered a stress releaser, an opportunity to take advantage of clean air, raw environment, a pleasant “back to origins” experience (Nistoreanu, 2006).

Over time, the rural regions have witnessed the development of the so-called “routes”, for example the silk route, the wine route, or the amber route – some of these are still popular among specific types of tourists. The Roman or Turkish baths, the journeys to Jerusalem, Mecca or Mont Saint Michel are also proofs that rural tourism goes back many centuries ago, being a viable alternative to mass market tourism. Yet, as it “attracts more specialist, niche market tourists with an interest in culture and the environment, destinations offering rural tourism holidays are unlikely to suffer from the disadvantages associated with mass market tourism destinations (World Tourism Organization, 2002, p.4). Besides, it does not have a “distinct image”, one that would “entice the potential customer to rush out and buy a holiday” (Keane, 2013, p.120). Ultimately, according to Barbu (2013, p.128), who analysed various definitions of rural tourism written over the past 25 years, “we can conclude that rural tourism is the kind of tourist services in rural areas, services involving investors, tour operators, local and central governments. These services include accommodation, meals (with a focus on traditional local cuisine) and all leisure activities according to the desires of tourists”, but does not have the same significance in all the EU countries.

On the other hand, agro-tourism is a more recent term that emerged in the late twentieth century, directly related to agricultural activities. It uses the farm as the main place for tourism, the tourists “spending the night in the peasants’ households and not in specially arranged accommodations, such as guesthouses or hotels” (Sasu & Epuran, 2016, p.120). This form of rural tourism is usually a secondary activity, agriculture remaining farmers’ main source of income and occupation (Darău et al., 2010). Furthermore, research proved that “agro-tourism appeals to a target group that is eager to have ostensibly intimate, personalized, and ethically correct experiences in their holidays” (Daugstad & Kirchengast, 2013). The meaning of „agro-tourism“, as the one of rural tourism, also varies among different geographical regions, but in the EU it is widely defined as “the economic multidimensional development of agricultural farms and multidimensional development of rural areas” (Zoto et al., 2013, p.210), and includes agricultural, social and economic policies in the Union.

Besides, agro-tourism is often considered as part of ecotourism, “for both are related and subject to natural attractions” (Zoto et al., 2013, p.212). Yet, in the case of ecotourism, “the main motivation of the tourists is the observation and appreciation of nature and local traditions related to the nature” (Dorobanțu & Nistoreanu, 2012, p.4), while raising awareness towards the conservation of natural and cultural assets, minimizing negative impacts upon the environment, providing employment and generating economic benefits for local communities (World Tourism Organization, 2002). Therefore, “ecotourism differs from other forms of tourism by the closeness to nature, a rational exploitation of tourism resources” (Nistoreanu, Dorobanțu, & Tuclea, 2011, p.34) and has the great potential to persuade key players in the tourism industry and local communities. The main goals are to create support and conserve protected areas, increase standards of living in the region and encourage economically viable tourism, idea supported by Neil and Wearing (1999).

The main characteristics of each of the three types of tourism presented above are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Main characteristics of rural tourism, agro-tourism and ecotourism

Rural Tourism	Agro-tourism	Ecotourism
All forms of tourism that take place in rural areas or rural communities	Tourism activities directly related to agriculture	Nature-based form of tourism, the main motivation of the tourists being the observation and appreciation of nature as well as the traditional cultures prevailing in natural areas
Practiced in small family-owned establishments	Practiced in a farm or household as a secondary source of income	Service providers tend to be small, locally owned businesses

Rural Tourism	Agro-tourism	Ecotourism
Highlights natural areas, local practices, culture and gastronomy	Educational activities are undertaken, aiming at highlighting and explaining aspects of agricultural lifestyle	Has educational and interpretation features, increasing awareness towards the conservation of natural and cultural assets
Often referred to as “agro-tourism”, “nature-based tourism”, “farm-based tourism” and “village tourism”	Often referred to as “farm-based tourism”, “rural tourism” and “village tourism”	Often referred to as “sustainable tourism”, “responsible tourism” and “green tourism”
Independent activity integrated in the tertiary sector of the economy, alternative/complementary form of mass-tourism	Entirely integrate within rural tourism	Perfectly described as “niche tourism”, differs from rural tourism by the closeness to nature and the more rational exploitation of tourism resources.
Potential customers are nature-lovers	Potential customers are interested in farming, crafting, folklore, natural agricultural products and gastronomy	Potential customers are interested in meaningful community participation, slow travel, high-quality experiences, picturesque, nature-made elements, gastronomy, traditions and routes that allow them to feel as if they were locals

Source: author's conception

All things considered, rural tourism, agro-tourism and ecotourism have common points in what regards the type of tourists who choose this kind of holidays, the quality of time they aspire to, but also in terms of trends, conditions and principles the bodies and communities involved tend to be guided by.

2. Research methodology

To carry out this research, whose main objective was the identification of significant trends of ecotourism, agro-tourism and rural tourism in the European Union, focusing on the New Member States, the number of “Nights spent at tourist accommodation establishments by degree of urbanization” was considered to be the most relevant indicator. The main source of data for the present study was Eurostat database.

“Nights spent at tourist accommodation establishments by degree of urbanization” refers to the number of nights a guest/tourist (resident or non-resident) actually spends (sleeps or stays) or is registered (his/her physical presence there being unnecessary) in a tourist accommodation establishment by the degree of urbanization of the area where the accommodation establishment is actually located in. Data comprises the overnights spent in hotels, holiday and other short-stay accommodation, camping grounds, recreational vehicle parks and trailer parks (World Tourism Organization, 2017).

The selection of this indicator has been made after reviewing already available literature related to this topic and based on availability of data, given that statistical databases for the New Member States are not always up-to-date or complete, and that hard data on the size and growth of markets for rural tourism are still difficult to find. The number of overnight stays is considered to be a good reflection of a destination popularity, of tourism performance and impacts, and clearly reflects changing trends in destination preferences, being “a direct and objective means of assessing success in tourism, with the difference between one year’s figure and the next being a transparent and easily conveyed way of showing growth or decline” (Dupeyras & MacCallum, 2013, p.22).

The identification of general trends will be sketched analyzing data longitudinally and a comparison between Old Member States (OMS) of the European Union and New Member States of the European Union will be conducted using statistical analysis as the main quantitative research method. Qualitative review of the statistics gathered, case studies, historical research, observations, as well as European laws and regulations analysis were considered suitable complements to our purpose.

As per the latest statistics released by Eurostat (2017), 3.4% less nights were spent in tourism accommodation establishments in the EU-28 in March 2017 compared to March 2016, 10 of the 28 Member States reporting decreases, most of them being Old Member States with well established tourism industries, such as Spain (-9.6%), Austria (-9.4%) or Denmark (-9.1%). However, the most severe drop was reported by Croatia, down 11.1%. On the other end, Cyprus was the Member State with the highest increase in the number of nights spent at accommodation establishments in March 2017 compared to March 2016, +12.4%.

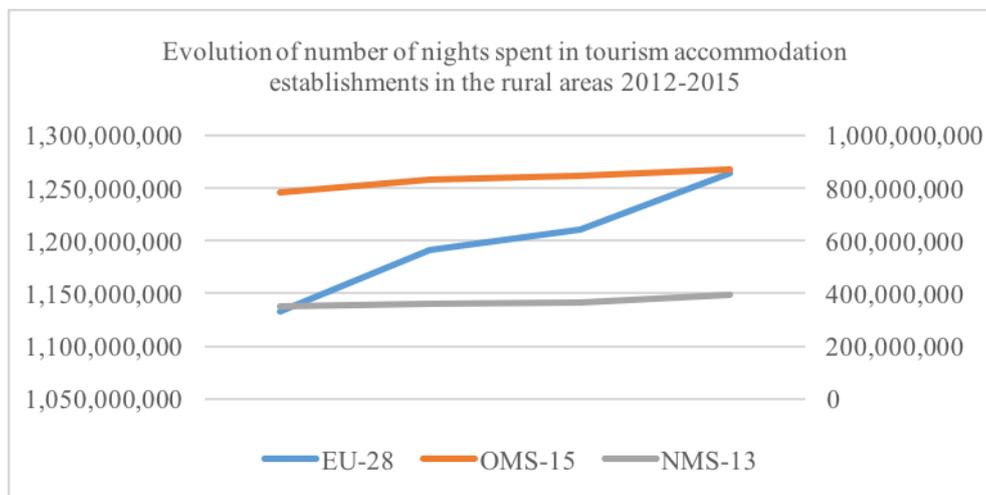
However, when we compare the number of nights spent in tourism accommodation across the EU in 2016 with the data from the previous year, an increase of +2.4% was reported, only 4 out of the 28 Member States recording negative values, this being Old Member States, namely United Kingdom, Belgium, France and Luxembourg, while in Bulgaria, Cyprus and Slovakia statistics were positive, +17.7%, +14.8%, +14.7 in this specific order.

Yet, Europe is still the most visited continent and, in term of international tourism receipts, Europe saw the largest increase in absolute terms, accounting for 41% of the total number (the indicator refers to expenditures undertaken by international inbound visitors, including payments for international transport). Chinese and Americans are the top spenders in international tourism and more likely to take into consideration visiting Europe, while Europeans have been less interested in leaving the continent. Of the whole Europe, roughly 80% of the total arrivals in 2015 were reported within the EU-28, approximately 15% of these can be attributed to the New Member States of the European Union (NMS-13), which are, in chronological order, the following: Malta, Cyprus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Hungary (2004), Bulgaria, Romania (2007) and Croatia (2013).

3. Results and discussion

In this section we will analyse the tourism statistical indicator previously mentioned, with the purpose of identifying general and specific trends in rural tourism in the EU-28, but also the countries with the biggest number of overnight stays in the two well-known groups of states in the Union, the Old Member States – OMS15 – and the New Member States – NMS-13. Comparisons and parallels between these two will be conducted and key countries and regions for the rural tourism in the New Europe will be determined and briefly characterized.

Figure 1. Evolution of number of nights spent in tourism accommodation establishments in the rural areas 2012-2015

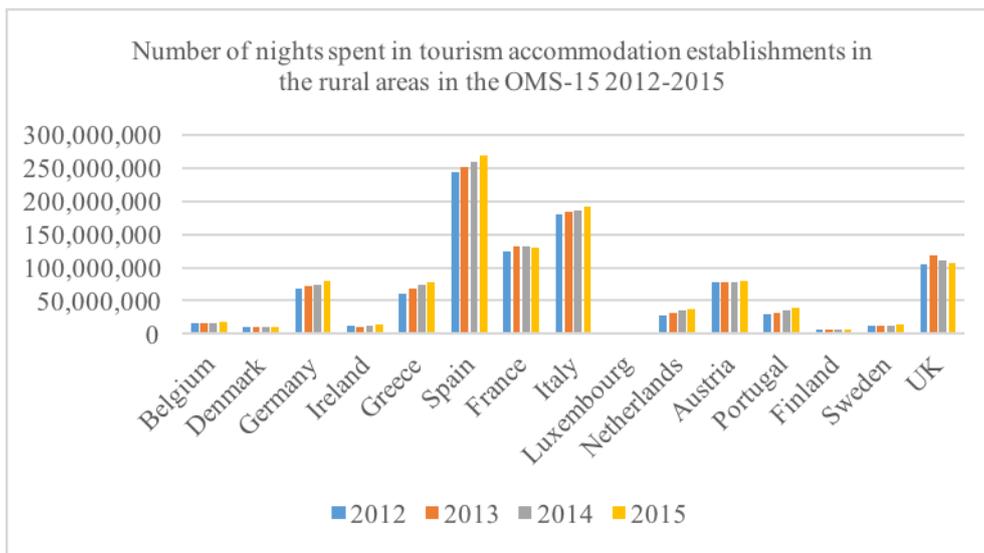


Source: author's conception, based on data from Eurostat

According to Eurostat (2017), the number of nights spent in tourism accommodation establishments in the EU-28 in the period 2012-2015 increased by 12% in 2015 compared to 2012, from 1.13 billion nights to 1.26 billion nights, both groups of countries following similar trends, OMS-15 reporting a 11% increase and NMS-13 a 12% increase in 2015 compared to 2012. These evolutions are represented in Figure 1. Apparently, roughly 15% of the total accommodation capacity of Europe is represented by rural tourism establishments.

Figure 2 illustrates year-by-year the evolution of the number of nights spent in tourism accommodation establishments the OMS-15 from 2012 to 2015. All of the countries except for Finland saw their numbers increasing in terms of nights spent at rural tourism accommodation establishments, indicating an ascendant trend and growing interest for this form of tourism. The most impressive rise was reported by Portugal, +34% in 2015 compared to 2012, but Spain is definitely the leader of rural tourism in the EU-28 in the period 2012-2015, reporting two times more nights spent in tourism accommodation establishments in the rural areas than the next one in top, Italy, closely followed by France. Illes Balears in Spain, southern Belgian region of the Province Luxembourg, the western part of Zeeland Dutch area, Burgenland in eastern Austria, Cumbria in north-west England and the Highlands and Islands region of Scotland are the rural localities that recorded the highest number of overnight stays spent in rural tourism accommodation establishments.

Figure 2. Number of nights spent in tourism accommodation establishments in the rural areas in the OMS-15 2012-2015



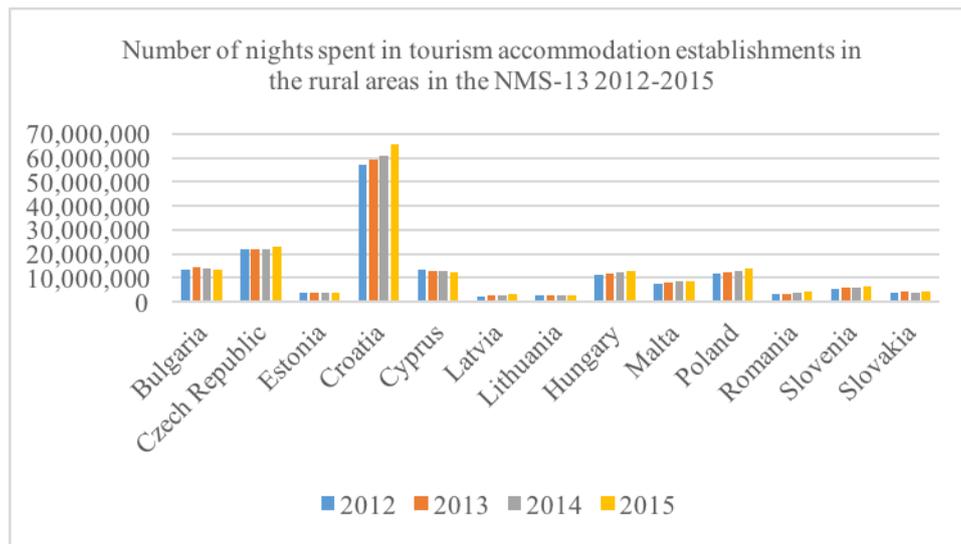
Source: author's conception, based on data from Eurostat

The number of nights spent in tourism accommodation establishments in the rural areas in the other group of countries, the New Member States of the EU is represented in Figure 3. In absolute terms, Croatia is by far the leader, followed by Czech Republic (three times less overnights reported in the period 2012-2015), Bulgaria, Cyprus and Hungary with approximately the same figures recorded for the same time period. Jadranska Hrvatska in Croatia is the region with the highest number of overnight stays spent in rural localities in the whole Europe in the period analyzed, not only among the New Member States. This area was actually the 6th most visited place in EU-28.

Jadranska Hrvatska is often called "Dalmatia" and attracts many nature lovers, providing them with various active recreation opportunities, natural diversity, numerous national parks, traditional food, fine wines, and UNESCO-protected areas. Croatia's outstanding performance can be partially attributed to the fact that here, "rural area occupies 91,6% of total territory" (Tubic et al., 2014), but also to the country's current tourism strategy, whose main objectives are to diversify touristic offerings, so to decrease seasonality, increase tourism expenditure, create new jobs, decrease turnover rate and improve quality by organizing cultural, sport and gastronomic events, as well as setting up and promoting thematic parks and cycling routes.

In what regards the rural tourism in the Czech Republic, this sector seems to enjoy unprecedented prosperity and to become a popular trend, as the current marketing campaign focuses on rebranding the country and increasing its competitiveness by focusing on journeys of discovery the country through unique cultural elements, gastronomy, traditions and customs (Czech Tourism Office, 2017). Horse farming is the most common form of rural tourism in Czech Republic.

Figure 3. Number of nights spent in tourism accommodation establishments in the rural areas in the NMS-13 2012-2015



Source: author's conception, based on data from Eurostat

European Union policies, programmes and initiatives for rural, agricultural and ecotourism

Up to the Lisbon Treaty that entered into force on the 1st of December 2009, the European Communities did not have specific attributions in the tourism field, and there was rather a set of actions and initiatives developed at European level, but with voluntary implementation. The European bodies were rather helping the tourism stakeholders undertake responsibilities for sustainable tourism development by creating useful instruments, the main aim being the exchange of best practices, information dissemination, co-operation and networking between stakeholders across the Union (Cismaru et al., 2015).

One of the central pieces developed by the European bodies in the sustainable tourism field, often called the second pillar of the Common Agricultural Policy, is the "Rural development 2014-2020" Policy, worth 100 billion EUR and funded through the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development – EAFRD (European Commission, 2017). EAFRD is complemented by the European Regional Development Fund – ERDF – and the European Social Fund – ESF -, their focus being agricultural sector competitiveness, sustainable management of natural resources and climate action, but also a balanced territorial development of the European rural areas. All these objectives are also shared by the EU cohesion policy, but tourism is of direct interest for ERDF. As per European Commission (2014), the fund "supports the competitiveness, sustainability and quality of tourism at regional and local levels", this sector's allocation being about 8 billion EUR. On the other hand, through EAFRD, the Commission can support, among other things, the establishment of businesses active within rural tourism, the development and promotion of agri-tourism and capitalisation on the cultural and natural heritage of rural regions, including mountain areas" (European Commission, 2010). For the promotion of tourism, Article 52 and Article 55 from the 3rd axis of the EAFRD might also be of interest, as "encouragement of tourism activities" was listed as one of the measures that can diversify the rural economy, through: "a. small-scale infrastructure such as information centres and the signposting of tourist sites; b. recreational infrastructure such as offering access to natural areas, and small-capacity accommodation; c. the development and/or marketing of tourism services relating to rural tourism" (The Council of the European Union, 2005, p.24). The Amendment of this Regulation, Regulation 1305/2013 of 17 December 2013 is the policy currently in force and indicates that "projects that bring together agriculture and, rural tourism through the promotion of sustainable and responsible tourism in rural areas, and natural and cultural heritage should be encouraged" (European Parliament, Council of the European Union, 2012). Last, but not least, "LEADER" programme was launched in 1991 and ever since, it has provided EU rural communities "with the necessary resources to enable local partners to actively engage and direct the local development of their area, through a community-led local development" (Pobal, 2017), proving itself to be of significant importance of rural tourism. A great range of projects and activities can be undertaken and funded via LEADER, the implementation of rural tourism being among the most popular (Lehmeier, 2010).

Being classified as a “cross-section issue” (Lehmeier, 2010, p.123), tourism sector is influenced and supported by various sectoral policies, but the EU’s goals in the tourism field seem to be addressed by the Direction General “Enterprise and Industry” – DG ENTR. One of the main initiatives initiated by DG ENTR is the “European Destinations of Excellence” – EDEN – award, which finances distinguished tourist destination in Europe. EDEN was launched in 2007 and ever since, 140 “EDEN” destinations have been elected, based on given themes and aiming at promoting sustainable tourism, “drawing attention to the values, diversity and common features of European tourist destinations” (European Commission, 2010b). The themes put forward so far have suited best rural types of tourism. The project started with “Best emerging rural destination of excellence” (2007), followed by “Tourism and local intangible heritage” (2008), “Tourism and protected areas” (2009), “Aquatic tourism” (2010), “Tourism and regeneration of physical sites” (2011), “Accessible tourism” (2013), “Tourism and local gastronomy” (2015). The chosen destinations are promoted as an European Brand and enables them to establish the EDEN Network. Due to the promotional and networking activities that have taken place once the award was granted, multiple benefits have been witnessed by local economy, stakeholders and visitors of the EDEN destinations. It is not necessarily a matter of greatly higher profits or tourist flows, but rather a matter of development and increased activity directly motivated by the award.

The Preparatory Action launched in 2009 called „Sustainable Tourism” is another programme that contributed to the development of rural forms of tourism, promoting routes, itineraries and trails throughout Europe, such as the Iron Curtain Cycling Trail which led to the creation of 15 cross-border cycling routes, the entire network completion date being approximated to be 2020 and will total over 70,000 km.

To sum up, tourism is for sure an important economic activity in the European Union, but there is still plenty of room for improvement in the field, especially in the case of the New Member States. These might have the necessary natural resources to develop and take advantage of rural tourism forms, but the lack of awareness, poor infrastructure, the rather absent cooperation among governments, local authorities, regional offices, accommodation and transport industries, tour operators and tourists greatly impede sustainable development in the sector.

Conclusions

All things considered, it can be stated that EU policies, programmes and initiatives follow two directions. On one hand, tourism is seen as an economic sector that requires regulations, so to be sustainable, profitable, qualitative and accessible by all social categories, and, on the other hand, tourism is perceived as a support-activity, as a mean to achieve other complementary objectives. For example, when it comes to the European Structural and Agricultural Policies, tourism and its economic effects are one of the main points of interest. Tourism can enable higher employment rate, increasing income, diminish spatial disparities, basically economic development. This also suits EU’s Cohesion Policy’s goals. Plus, some forms of tourism, such as ecotourism contributes to the preservation of nature and addresses sustainable tourism concerns EU has been so focused on. Lastly, tourism is not only a useful means for integration, stability and unity in Europe, but also a key instrument for the development of a European Identity, as also noticed by Diaconescu et al. (2007).

Sustainable, responsible rural tourism is hard to achieve without applying “green thinking”, ecotourism principles. Moreover, agro-tourism provides great support and naturally helps the tourism in rural areas. These three types of tourism are more connected and dependable than forms of mass-tourism, that can survive on their own. The need to conserve natural resources, to maintain a social equilibrium and to pass along cultural heritage, customs and traditions seems to have been well-understood by everyone worldwide, and has been addressed by the European Institutions on various occasions, but adopting an appropriate behaviour and applying the corresponding measures is still a sensitive issue, mainly in developing countries.

The number of tourists seeking relaxation in the middle of the nature, in rural, unspoilt areas is on the rise and a shift from mass-tourism to alternative, special interest forms of tourism has been observed, mainly in Western and Northern Europe. Niche tourism and buying “emotional” holidays in less known, unique destinations has become a lifestyle among highly educated, well-travelled tourists. Croatia and Czech Republic have high chances to compete with the key players, well-consecrated EU-28 rural touristic destinations. Bulgaria, Cyprus, Hungary, as well as Romania have interesting rural areas, unique traditions and attractive cultures, providing potential tourism providers great opportunities to generate profits. Nevertheless, a clear focus and strategic vision for the implementation of the necessary measures in the sector, a sufficient educational level for the population, appropriate infrastructure, ability to absorb necessary funding, as well as to accurately report rural tourism data remain important challenges in the rural, agricultural and ecotourism field in the New Member States.

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