

AGROTOURISM AS A PILLAR OF ECONOMIC RESILIENCE AND SUSTAINABLE RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA: AN INTEGRATED APPROACH

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Abstract

The authors of this research work analyze the dynamics and perspectives of rural tourism and agritourism in the Republic of Moldova in the context of global socioeconomic transformations and new consumer preferences in the post-pandemic period. The main objective of the study is to evaluate the potential of this sector as a driver of sustainable economic growth for rural communities. The methodology used includes a SWOT analysis of the agritourism sector, analysis of economic and financial performance indicators, and interpretation of statistical data provided by the National Bureau of Statistics for the period 2022–2024. The research results indicate significant resilience in incoming tourism, which grew by approximately 17% in 2024, largely driven by the wine and gastronomy sector and the “Wine Route” program. However, the analysis identifies serious structural barriers, such as underdeveloped road infrastructure, the concentration of accommodation facilities in urban areas, and the low level of digitalization among small businesses in rural areas. The conclusions of the research emphasize the need for a comprehensive strategy to turn these weaknesses into opportunities by utilizing European pre-accession funds and strengthening international partnerships. Agritourism is presented not only as an alternative to mass tourism, but also as a vital tool for revitalizing cultural heritage and improving the quality of life in the villages of the Republic of Moldova.

Keywords: agritourism, rural development, Republic of Moldova, economic efficiency, sustainability, winemaking heritage, incoming tourism

1. Introduction

Agritourism is an essential component of rural tourism and is considered a key driver of economic and social development in rural areas. In the context of the global sustainability paradigm and shifts in the consumption behavior of tourists increasingly oriented toward authentic, non-invasive experiences and closeness to nature, this sector is experiencing significant growth worldwide. For the Republic of Moldova, the development of agrotourism in the country represents a strategic opportunity to make effective use of local resources and

regenerate rural areas. Moldova offers a distinctive tourism product based on the concept of “slow tourism”: a symbiosis of authentic traditions, enogastronomic heritage, and preserved cultural landscapes. According to official data from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), agritourism’s direct contribution to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is approximately 1%. However, its impact on the economy is much more profound. Analyses focused on inter-sectoral flows [13] demonstrate indirect effects on related sectors, particularly on services and trade, such that the total contribution to the national economy is estimated at 3–4%.

Wine tourism remains, undoubtedly, the cornerstone of resilience and the main driver of the country’s international appeal. The “Moldova Wine Route,” certified by the Council of Europe, forms the foundation upon which the national tourism brand has been built. World-class attractions, such as the underground cellars at Mileștii Mici (recognized by Guinness World Records for the exceptional size of their wine collection) and the Cricova heritage complex, transcend their role as production facilities, functioning as true centers of industrial and cultural tourism. According to reports from ANTRIM (the National Association for Inbound and Domestic Tourism), these locations generate annual visitor numbers exceeding 200,000, strengthening the country’s position on the global map of elite wine tourism [1].

In addition to the wine industry, the past decade has seen growth in the rural and culinary tourism sector, as evidenced by a roughly triple increase in the number of tourist and agritourism guesthouses and a roughly 4.5-fold increase in the number of tourists [1]. The “Orheiul Vechi” Cultural-Natural Reserve and the micro-regions of the Lower Prut Floodplain serve as models of best practices in transforming traditional hospitality into a competitive tourism product. However, sectoral progress is hampered by major structural deficiencies: the poor condition of road infrastructure in areas adjacent to tourist attractions and insufficient visibility on global booking platforms (OTAs—Online Travel Agencies).

The “Tourism 2030” strategic document indicates a new direction for tourism development, which provides the changes from a model focused on transit tourism to another which focuses on longer stays by tourists in the country. The new approach emphasizes sustainability, digitalization, and the authentic promotion of cultural and natural heritage, aiming to create complex and attractive tourist experiences. For this transition to succeed, an integrated vision of existing resources is necessary—namely, from monasteries and historic fortifications to artisanal workshops and local traditions—which must be connected in a coherent manner. This can be achieved by developing well-structured tourism packages that combine amenities specific to the local area, which will influence the length of stay and enhance the appeal of the destinations. Furthermore, digitalization plays an important role in this process; by facilitating access to information, online platforms, mobile apps, and digital promotion tools, it enables the integration of tourism offerings into an ecosystem that is accessible and attractive to tourists.

At the same time, tourism has been identified as an important factor in sustainable development; analyses conducted by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP Moldova), including through the Sustainable and Climate-Resilient Communities through Women’s Empowerment Program, have demonstrated that income diversification through agrotourism reduces dependence on subsistence agriculture and contributes to increased economic security [32; 34]. Also, projects aimed at developing the local economy (the MiDL

model) [33] emphasize the importance of investing in rural tourism, which creates jobs for young people and women, directly impacting efforts to combat migration and depopulation in rural areas.

In the same context, the 2020 Human Development Report highlights the role of tourism as a solution for harnessing natural capital and strengthening community resilience [36]. All these initiatives demonstrate that tourism can become a key pillar of sustainable economic development, offering viable alternatives to traditional agricultural activities, thereby contributing to the revitalization of rural areas in the Republic of Moldova.

Moreover, the success of the “Tourism 2030” program depends directly on effective cooperation between government agencies, the private sector, and local communities, as well as on the ability to transform cultural heritage into a holistic, authentic, and sustainable tourism experience [30].

2. Level of investigation of the issue at present, goal of research

In recent scientific literature, the issue of promoting and developing agritourism is a central topic, becoming the subject of interdisciplinary analysis at both the national and international levels. Academic and policy-making interests converge on the recognition of tourism as a driver of economic resilience and territorial cohesion.

Strategically, the National Regional Development Strategy for 2022–2028 establishes ensuring sustainable economic growth at the regional level as a priority objective. To implement this vision, the state is focusing on amplifying regional tourism potential, with one of the fundamental measures being the consolidation and modernization of tourism infrastructure in development regions. Actions related to the implementation of these policies are primarily oriented toward:

- ✓ *Sectoral strategic planning and leveraging the regions’ endogenous capital;*
- ✓ *Rehabilitation and logistical development of heritage sites and related infrastructure;*
- ✓ *Expanding tourism activities to rural areas as a means of economic diversification and cultural preservation.*

The academic dimension of the domain is supported by a wide range of research studies, articles, and technical reports. Particular attention is given to wine tourism and its multidimensional impact on the agri-food sector, viewed as a driver of economic development. Analyses of the correlation between wine heritage and destination attractiveness can be found in the works of researchers such as Ceașu F. (2011) [8], Dorobatu M. (2011) [11], Popescu G. (2011) [29], Iașișin T. and Colesnicova T. (2017) [18], and Colesnicova T., Iașișin T., and Ciobanu M. (2018) [19]. These authors address the economic and structural aspects of the agricultural sector, providing the necessary background for understanding the sustainability of the wine sector. Furthermore, the theoretical perspectives on tourism management and regional development are complemented by the contributions of the authors Turcu, D. Weisz, J. (2008) [40], Petrușenko, O. (2013) [28], Middleton, V. (2012) [23], who analyze the sector’s dynamics in a European context. The research is empirically based on institutional reports issued by the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Industry, market analyses by the National Office of Vine and Wine (ONVV), as well as numerous prestigious foreign publications that monitor global wine market trends.

3. Research methods and materials

The methodological foundation of this study is based on a multidisciplinary approach, combining quantitative and qualitative analysis to obtain a holistic view of the tourism and agri-food sectors in the Republic of Moldova.

The research's information base consists of a wide range of documentary and statistical sources, including official statistical data provided by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) of the Republic of Moldova, which enabled the monitoring of trends in macroeconomic indicators and tourist flows. Summary documents elaborated by relevant organizations, such as the National Office of Vine and Wine (ONVV), the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Industry (MAIA), and professional associations in the field (ANTRIM) [3]. Scientific corpus: Reference works, treatises, and specialized articles authored by local and foreign researchers, which provide the conceptual and theoretical framework necessary for interpreting the data. Expert analysis: Opinions and analytical articles published by established experts in the wine, fruit-growing, and tourism sectors, offering an applied perspective on market challenges. The research methodology involved the use of the following methods: comparative method: used to highlight the dynamics of sectoral indicators over different time periods (chronological analysis 2021–2024); analysis and synthesis method: applied to process complex reports and draw relevant conclusions regarding the impact of economic factors (e.g., fuel prices) on production costs; tables and graphs method: used to visualize statistical data and facilitate the interpretation of numerical variations recorded in the wine and tourism sectors; strategic diagnosis technique (SWOT analysis): implemented to identify the correlation between internal strengths and external threats, with the aim of formulating strategic recommendations. The central objective of the methodological approach was to examine the evolution of agritourism, highlighting their interdependence in the context of the Republic of Moldova's sustainable regional development goals.

4. Results and discussion

The relevance of agritourism in the international and European context

The importance of developing the rural tourism sector can be explained by a number of economic, social, and cultural factors, including growing demand for alternative forms of tourism, such as ecotourism, and, of course, the need to diversify sources of income in rural areas. In this context, agritourism is becoming a viable solution for capitalizing the local resources and stimulating sustainable economic development. At the same time, rural businesses are characterized by specific conditions, such as underdeveloped infrastructure, limited accessibility, and the seasonal nature of activities - aspects that require adapting development strategies to the particularities of this environment. The development of agritourism requires the coherent integration of several essential components, including the diversification of accommodation options, the promotion of local agri-food products, and the development of tourism and service infrastructure. These elements contribute to the creation of an authentic and competitive tourism product capable of meeting the increasingly diverse demands of tourists.

International experience highlights numerous successful models for the development of rural tourism. In France, for example, agritourism is seen as a solution to the challenges facing

agriculture and is organized around the “Gîtes de France” network, where long-term stays are the norm [15]. In Austria, rural tourism is structured around the concept of the “recreational tourist village,” representing an advanced organizational model. Germany stands out for its well-established tradition in rural tourism, with a positive impact on local commerce and industry, while in Belgium it is organized through the association of several families within tourist farms [39; 24]. In Denmark, “active vacations” are promoted, based on accommodation on farms or at campsites [11], while Finland capitalizes on its natural features through activities such as horseback riding or winter sports [11]; rural tourism is concentrated in traditional areas, particularly on the western coast, and in Portugal, it is characterized by tourists’ involvement in recreational and cultural activities. Similarly, in Bulgaria, rural tourism targets high-income tourist segments by promoting villages with unique character. At the European level, the development of rural tourism is institutionally supported by the Council of Europe through initiatives such as the “Rural World” campaign, as well as by the European Commission, which promotes rural areas as a common good and encourages the integration of rural tourism into overall sustainable development policies [12; 14].

Expanding agritourism businesses is not only an economic opportunity but also a strategic necessity for revitalizing rural areas, helping to strike a balance between economic development, heritage preservation, and environmental protection.

Methodology for elaboration and implementation

The development of rural agritourism in the Republic of Moldova is following three main strategic directions:

1. The business model based on the diversification of agricultural activities (multi-activity), focused on generating non-agricultural income by integrating hospitality services into rural households, allowing for the utilization of surplus home-grown produce.
2. The authentic experience model, which focuses on cultural and gastronomic experiences where the main tourism product is the authentic rural lifestyle;
3. The ecosystem-based model (clustering), the success of which depends on the functional interdependence among local actors (artisans, guides, winemakers), thereby generating an integrated value proposition at the regional level.

The adoption of these models stems from the convergence of macroeconomic and social factors, notably the growing global demand for ecotourism, the imperative to develop local economies, and the need to diversify income sources in rural areas [42]. Compared to urban areas, entrepreneurial activity in rural areas takes place under unique conditions characterized by limited access to basic infrastructure, significant seasonal variations in activity, and an inevitable dependence on available natural resources.

In this context, extending businesses in agritourism requires the creation of favorable conditions based on the harmonization of several essential elements [4]:

- *Diversification of accommodation options: Integrating guesthouses, agritourism farms, and traditional homestays into the tourism circuit;*
- *Leveraging local resources: Utilizing local agri-food products and authentic crafts;*
- *Cultural synergy: Integrating intangible heritage (folklore, customs) into the tourism offering;*

- *Environmental responsibility: Respecting the carrying capacity of the natural environment;*
- *Social impact: Job creation and the development of public and private service infrastructure.*

Elaborating a business plan for agritourism goes beyond simple operational planning; it is a rigorous exercise in assessing the feasibility of the investment [6].

The planning process must include:

- *Selection of the location (area, village, accessibility): Assessment of the geographic area and level of accessibility, as well as compliance with land-use plans;*
- *Assessment of tourism potential: Identification and mapping of attractions in the region that can generate visitor traffic;*
- *Strategic market positioning: Analysis of the existing agritourism offerings in the region (competitive analysis) and definition of the competitive advantage;*
- *Strategic framework: Determination of medium- and long-term strategic objectives and the organizational structure.*

According to experts in this field [29], the success of the program depends directly on a strategic orientation toward satisfaction of the tourists' needs, the introduction of innovative elements into this sector, and the achievement of high economic efficiency through optimal management of local resources.

Access to funding sources, such as European funds for rural development, also plays an important role, particularly through programs such as the National Rural Development Program, which supports investments in agritourism, farm modernization, and the diversification of economic activities [42]. The development of agritourism must be compliant with rural development policies and the requirements of European integration, which promote the principles of sustainable development, environmental protection, and social inclusion. These measures contribute to the harmonious and sustainable development of rural areas. The use of online booking platforms, digital marketing, and social media can help to attract specific groups of foreign tourists and optimize the process of selling travel products [17]. The agritourism business requires an integrated approach that combines rigorous economic analysis with strategic planning and continuous adaptation to market dynamics. Long-term success is ensured by the entrepreneur's ability to constantly innovate while maintaining the authentic and sustainable nature of the experience offered.

Economic and financial analysis is an essential tool for the strategic management of agritourism operations, providing the necessary decision-making support both for launching investment projects and for processes of modernization or diversification of services [5, 6]. A critical step in this process is the rigorous justification of expenses. Regardless of the nature of the investment - whether it involves the development of lodging facilities, landscaping, or recreational infrastructure - profitability must be assessed by comparing capital costs with estimated revenues. In this context, it is crucial to calculate a budget of revenues and expenditures that will help identify sources of revenue (agriculture, tourism, education) and current expenses related to resource use (raw materials, utilities, maintenance) [17].

The economic efficiency of an agritourism activity can be evaluated using a series of indicators:

- *Technical indicators*: analyze the structure and volume of agricultural production, yields per unit of area, and average annual productivity [27];
- *Economic and financial indicators*: quantify labor costs, total production costs, sales prices, and, implicitly, the profit margin, with a particular focus on liquidity management to offset seasonality.

A central element in financial planning is the analysis to determine the break-even point. This determines the minimum volume of activity or the level of revenue required to fully cover total costs, providing the entrepreneur with a clear perspective on the line between loss and profitability [38].

The social dimension and business sustainability

In addition to financial performance, agritourism generates a range of positive externalities that define the sector's social effectiveness. These include the creation of new jobs, the mitigation of rural population migration, the preservation of intangible cultural heritage, and the improvement of the quality of life at the local level [3].

The sustainability of the activity is closely linked to the adoption of eco-friendly practices and the utilization of local resources. The integration of organic farming models and responsible tourism not only protects the environment but also contributes to building an authentic image capable of attracting segments of tourists with a high level of environmental awareness [11].

Financial success also depends on the effectiveness of marketing strategies. In today's landscape, leveraging digital platforms, collaborating with specialized tour operators, and participating in industry trade shows are essential for increasing visibility and tourist flow [8]. Economic analysis in agritourism is a multidimensional process that integrates financial, social, and ecological factors. A rigorous approach to these elements ensures not only short-term profitability but also the sustainable development of rural communities, transforming agritourism into a modern and sustainable approach to harnessing national potential.

Thus, following a multidimensional analysis of the agritourism sector (focusing on economic, structural, and public policy aspects), we can note that agritourism represents a modern approach to leveraging rural resources, integrating agricultural activities, tourism services, and traditional cultural elements. From the perspective of global trends in rural tourism development, the expansion of businesses in this sector worldwide is driven by significant shifts in tourist preferences, which are increasingly oriented toward authentic, natural, and sustainable experiences [9; 10].

To transpose these theoretical concepts into the reality of the relevant market in the Republic of Moldova, we have elaborated the following strategic diagnostic matrix (Table 1), which synthesizes the interdependence between influencing factors and the sector's growth potential.

Table 1. SWOT analysis of the agritourism sector in the Republic of Moldova

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<i>Unique wine heritage:</i> world-class underground cellars (Cricova, Mileștii Mici) and European-certified routes, the presence of regions with Protected	<i>Precarious infrastructure</i> Deteriorated access roads to rural areas and inadequate tourist signage, as well as deficiencies in sewer and waste management systems.

Geographical Indication (PGI) status, and a well-known rural gastronomic culture.	
<i>Cultural authenticity</i> Authentic culinary, artisanal, and folkloric traditions. The absence of excessive commercialization (typical of mass tourism) provides a competitive advantage by offering immersive tourist experiences that are highly valued by Western tourists.	<i>Limited accommodation capacity</i> The concentration of accommodation facilities in Chişinău and the lack of standardization in rural areas.
<i>Competitive prices</i> The cost structure in rural areas makes it possible to offer attractive tourism packages for the regional market. An attractive value for money for tourists from the European Union and the region.	<i>Low level of digitalisation of services:</i> Limited presence on international platforms (Booking/Airbnb) and a lack of card payments in rural areas.
<i>Diverse natural resources and cultural landscape:</i> The presence of micro-regions with high tourism potential, such as the Orheiul Vechi Reserve, the Lower Prut Floodplain (a UNESCO site), and the forested areas of Codru.	<i>Strong seasonality:</i> dependence on weather conditions and the lack of year-round tourism products „all-season”, which affects cash flow. <i>"All-season" (or multi-season) tourism products are an integrated set of services and experiences designed to maintain a destination's appeal throughout the year, regardless of weather conditions or seasonal cycles. They are structured to generate a steady flow of visitors and stable revenue, mitigating periods of economic inactivity.</i>
<i>Recognised hospitality</i> The importance of the human factor and the culture of welcoming guests in “slow tourism”. <i>Slow Tourism is a sustainable travel model that emphasizes the deep connection between the tourist and the destination.</i>	<i>Lack of skilled labor</i> Migration of young people from rural areas and a lack of managers specializing in tourism.
<i>Favorable strategic framework:</i> Alignment of national policies with European standards (CAP) and the availability of financial support programs through AIPA for the diversification of rural activities.	
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<i>Post-pandemic trends</i> The growing global demand for safe, isolated, eco-friendly, uncrowded, and sustainable destinations.	<i>Regional instability</i> A tense geopolitical context that may deter foreign tourists (perception of risk).

<i>Extension of the concept:</i> creating integrated tourist routes (e.g., the Wine Route) that connect small producers with accommodation units.	<i>The accelerating depopulation of villages:</i> The risk of losing intellectual heritage (traditions, crafts) due to demographic decline.
<i>Partnerships with EU</i> Accessing funds for the development of infrastructure and rural entrepreneurship.	<i>Regional competition</i> Destinations such as Georgia, Romania, and Bulgaria, which are investing significantly in similar promotional efforts.
<i>Digitization of services</i> The implementation of booking platforms (Booking Systems) dedicated to rural tourism and virtual tours would enable small rural entrepreneurs to access the market. These tools will allow small rural entrepreneurs to be integrated into the national and international tourism circuit. These services would enable the transformation of cultural and wine-related capital into directly traceable and sustainable financial flows.	<i>Degradation of cultural heritage</i> The risk of losing authenticity due to chaotic modernisation or a lack of monument conservation.
<i>Development of niches</i> Adventure tourism (cycling, hiking), religious tourism, and craft camps.	<i>Climate Change</i> Impact on the Agricultural Landscape and Wine Production, Key Factors in the Region's Attractiveness.

Source: elaborated by the authors

As the SWOT matrix reveals, the Republic of Moldova has a solid competitive advantage thanks to its wine-growing heritage and rural authenticity, but the ability to capitalize on these is severely limited by structural barriers (infrastructure and digitalization). The development strategy should focus on the “Strategy for Converting Weaknesses into Opportunities” (WO Strategy [41]), which involves overcoming internal barriers through the strategic exploitation of opportunities offered by the external environment. Financial support from European funds and key development partners, including USAID and UNDP, enables Moldova to modernize transport routes and digitize rural small businesses. This would help reduce the threat posed by regional rival countries, transforming Moldova from a “hidden” tourist destination into an “accessible and prominent” one.

Beyond financial performance, agrotourism generates positive externalities that underpin the sector's multidimensional effectiveness. In this regard, two strategic dimensions stand out:

- ✓ The socio-economic dimension: this includes job creation, mitigating rural migration, preserving intangible cultural heritage, and improving the quality of life in rural communities.
- ✓ The sustainability dimension: achieved through the adoption of eco-friendly practices and responsible tourism, which attract segments of tourists with a strong environmental consciousness [5; 7; 12], who are willing to pay a higher price for green authenticity.

According to Moldovan Law No. 352-XVI/2006 [22], tourism is a priority sector, involving approximately 20 related industries and over 140 types of services (food, transportation, handicrafts, etc.). Tourism harnesses resources that, traditionally, would not find efficient use in intensive agriculture, transforming less developed areas into income-generating destinations. Through agritourism, a vital balance is achieved between urban and rural areas, offering the urban population the opportunity to rediscover their cultural roots and relax, while simultaneously contributing to the growth of national wealth through the system of taxes and fees paid into local and central budgets. International studies indicate that in countries with developed tourism, 2–5% of the working-age population is employed in this sector [20], a threshold toward which the Republic of Moldova is striving through its village revitalization policies.

Infrastructure Challenges and the Potential of Agritourism in the Republic of Moldova

Although the Republic of Moldova has a remarkable cultural and wine-growing heritage, underdeveloped infrastructure remains the main obstacle to increasing regional competitiveness. The Republic of Moldova ranks low, which directly affects accessibility to the pearls of rural tourism. Thus, in WEF reports, Moldova has consistently received low scores in the land transport infrastructure pillar. In global assessments of infrastructure quality, Moldova has consistently placed between 120th and 130th out of 140 evaluated nations regarding road conditions [4; 37].

While the main roads have been partially rehabilitated, access roads to isolated villages or medieval monasteries remain inadequate, increasing logistical costs.

Other major barriers identified in the “Tourism 2030” Development Strategy [15] are:

- *Polarization of accommodation units: the excessive concentration in Chişinău prevents communities in the northern and southern regions from benefiting from revenue generated by overnight stays.*
- *Airport dependency: the high cost of tickets at Chişinău International Airport limits the city-break segment.*
- *Digital deficit: the limited online presence of small producers and the lack of card payment systems or multilingual signage discourage Western tourists [16].*

As noted in The Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report [17], without massive investment in the transport and services infrastructure pillar, the Republic of Moldova risks remaining a niche destination, despite its authentic cultural potential.

Agritourism: A New Paradigm for Rural Development. Agritourism is an economic activity complementary to agriculture, serving as a means of fully leveraging the rural environment (agricultural, human, and technical-economic potential). Unlike the mass tourism, it is characterized by the following:

- *Authenticity: The initiative is organized and managed by farmers (local villagers).*
- *Sustainability: It does not require massive investments in heavy infrastructure and avoids large crowds.*
- *Social impact: It allows urban residents to rediscover their roots and cultural values (OECD, 2007).*

In the Republic of Moldova, agritourism has a competitive advantage due to the "Wine Route" [31] and regions with Protected Geographical Indications (Codru, Valul lui Traian,

Ștefan Vodă). The “Moldovan Wine Route” has become the first tourist destination in the Republic of Moldova to be registered in “ITER VITIS – Les Chemins de la vigne,” a cultural route certified by the Council of Europe. The European affiliation was promoted by the National Association for Inbound and Domestic Tourism (ANTRIM), with support from the Moldova Competitiveness Project funded by USAID, the Government of Sweden, and UK aid, and was formalized through the affiliation certificate dated February 28, 2020.

Examples such as Orheiul Vechi, where agritourism accommodations offer wine-tasting, culinary, and adventure experiences, demonstrate the viability of this model (Figure 1).



Agritourism combines agricultural activities with tourist services on the farm property.

- The guesthouse or farm provides tourists with natural products and farm tours.
- Agritourism includes activities that generate income for the family, as well as agricultural activities.
- Accommodation options are limited in number and have a rustic character.

It is a form of tourism that is spread out over a wide area.

- The tourism offerings are authentic, drawing on the unique characteristics of the region.
- It offers the local population the opportunity to relax



Figure 1. Characteristics of agritourism

Source: elaborated by the authors

The opportunities for the development of agritourism stem from the fact that tourists from industrialized and highly urbanized countries such as Germany, the Netherlands, or France—where rural living conditions have remained largely unchanged— “...will experience the sensation of entering, for a time, another temporal dimension, usually calmer, more relaxed, and idyllic” [8]. The rural population is the bearer of incomparable riches: ancient traditions and customs passed down from generation to generation. Thus, folk customs related to the life cycle feature a highly varied repertoire and a special charm. These customs are most frequently practiced during the winter holidays, at Christmas and New Year’s. From this cycle, we can mention customs related to weddings and funerals. Ancient Romanian customs should be utilized by agritourism service providers to attract tourists to the areas where these services are offered. Thus, research has demonstrated that a guesthouse can bring benefits to entrepreneurs, the local community, and the national economy alike.

Recent data confirms that the rural sector has been the main driver of post-crisis resilience, with a more than 50% increase in accommodation capacity in recent years. This positive trend continued in 2024, consolidating the country’s position as an emerging destination in the

region. According to data from the National Bureau of Statistics, the evolution by tourism category is as follows (Table 2):

Table 2. Trends in the number of tourists, thousands of people

Categories of tourism	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Receptor (foreigners)	19.2	19.8	6.9	24.0	29.0	43.6	67.6
Emitter (External)	264.1	310.6	74.7	217.7	324.6	362.4	396.9
Internal (Local)	40.1	46.2	42.9	79.2	123.6	97.7	91.3
TOTAL	323.4	376.6	124.5	320.9	477.2	503.7	555.9

Source: adapted by the authors based on NBS data [2]

Based on the analysis, we observe that:

- Receptoir tourism (foreign visitors): This was the segment with the most spectacular growth. While 43,600 visitors were recorded in 2023 (+50.3% compared to 2022), preliminary data for 2024 indicate a volume of approximately 51,200 visitors, a sustained increase of about 17% compared to the previous year. This success is due to the intensive promotion of wine tourism and international cultural events.
- Emitter Tourism (Moldovans abroad): Remains the market leader, with a share of over 70%. In 2023, it totaled 362,400 people, and in 2024 the figure rose to over 395,000, against the backdrop of the full restoration of air routes and increased demand for overseas vacations.
- Internal tourism: After a sharp decline in 2023 (97,700 people, -21.0%), 2024 brought stabilization, with figures returning to the 102,000 mark—a sign that Moldovans are beginning to rediscover local destinations (rural guesthouses and wineries) even outside of crisis periods.

In the total structure for 2024, emitting tourism dominates the market with a 72.1% share, followed by domestic tourism at 18.6% and receptor tourism at 9.3%. Notable is the steady increase in the share of foreign tourists (receptive) tourism, which rose from 8.7% in 2023 to nearly 10% in 2024. An analysis of data through 2024 reveals that the Republic of Moldova is succeeding in attracting ever-increasing numbers of foreign tourists, gradually offsetting declines in domestic tourism and demonstrating that investments in the country brand are beginning to generate tangible statistical results [1].

According to data from the National Bureau of Statistics for the last year (2024), the number of foreign tourists has seen a significant return, exceeding the threshold of 40,000–50,000 visitors officially registered through agencies (the actual figure, including unorganized/individual tourism, is much higher). Table 2. The number of foreign citizens who visited the Republic of Moldova through travel agencies increased by 55.1% compared to 2023, totaling 67,600 visitors. It is important to note that, in the structure of tourism in the Republic of Moldova, over 90% of visitors are foreign nationals (day visitors) who arrive for rest, recreation, and leisure, confirming that Moldova is increasingly perceived as a destination for relaxation and sensory experiences (gastronomy and wine). Thus, 254,000 foreign tourists, approximately 53.6%, were reported by accommodation establishments in 2024. According to data provided by the National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, in 2024 the structure of inbound tourism was dominated by visitors from Romania (67.2%), Italy (13.5%), Ukraine (3.3%), Germany (2.1%), and Turkey (2.0%) (Table 3).

Table 3. Receiving tourism organized by travel agencies and tour operators, by country of origin in 2024, %

Country of origin	Number	The share, %	Visitor Profile
Romania	45468	67%	Weekend, wine, and cultural tourism.
Italy	9139	13.5%	Diaspora, business, and culinary tourism.
Ukraine	2236	3.3%	Transit, business, and leisure tourism.
Germany	1432	2%	Niche tourism, cultural tours, and organized groups.
Turkey	1355	2%	Business, official visits, and wine tourism.
TOTAL by country	67631	100%	

Source: adapted by the authors, based on data from the NBS and the National Agency for Real Estate Information and Market Research (ANTRIM)

This geographic distribution highlights the sector's dependence on local markets, as well as a growing interest from Western European tourists (Germany, France), drawn to the wine tourism niche.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, the Republic of Moldova is at a crossroads, where its potential for authentic tourism is limited by the constraints of an archaic physical and digital infrastructure. A combined analysis of data provided by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) and trends identified by ANTRIM (the National Association for Inbound and Domestic Tourism) shows that, although the wine sector remains the flagship of national tourism, long-term sustainability depends on diversifying the tourism offering and modernizing the physical infrastructure.

For the Republic of Moldova to become a competitive destination in the Southeast European region, the following strategic recommendations derived from the objectives of the "Tourism 2030" Program (Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Moldova) are required:

1. **Rehabilitation of Access Infrastructure:** Prioritizing regional roads connecting national highways to major tourist hubs (Orheiul Vechi, Soroca, Lunca Prutului). According to World Bank impact studies, improved rural connectivity is directly proportional to increased income for small local entrepreneurs.
2. **Digitalization and Visibility:** In light of the UNWTO's recommendations on digital transformation, it is imperative to establish a national subsidy program for the digitalization of rural guesthouses. This involves not only adopting online booking systems and electronic payment solutions, but also integrating with global platforms (Booking, Airbnb, TripAdvisor). Subsidizing the digitization of rural guesthouses through the implementation of online booking systems and electronic payments. Integrating Moldovan destinations into global platforms (Booking, Airbnb, TripAdvisor). This transformation is essential for attracting tourists from younger generations and those from high-tech societies, as recommended by the UNWTO (World Tourism Organization).

3. Promoting Long-Stay Tourism: Developing integrated “experience”-based tourism packages (ceramics workshops, culinary experiences, cycling routes between wineries) to increase the average length of stay from 1.5 days to at least 3 days, thereby optimizing tourism spending per visitor.
4. Public-Private Partnerships (PPP): Utilizing the successful models promoted by UNDP Moldova to create regional tourism clusters that include local producers, guides, and accommodation providers, ensuring a closed economic loop in rural communities.

Implementing these measures will enable the Republic of Moldova to capitalize on its competitive advantages—genuine hospitality, its culinary heritage, and safety—transforming tourism from an economic promise into a tangible contributor to the national GDP. As the World Economic Forum emphasizes, in the new paradigm of global travel, small, safe, and uncrowded destinations have the greatest potential for growth if supported by a coherent strategic vision.

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Rezumat

Autorii acestei cercetări analizează dinamica și perspectivele de dezvoltare ale turismului rural și agroturismului în Republica Moldova, în contextul transformărilor socio-economice globale și al noilor preferințe ale consumatorilor post-pandemie. Obiectivul principal al cercetării constă în evaluarea potențialului acestui sector ca motor de creștere economică durabilă pentru comunitățile rurale. Metodologia utilizată integrează o analiză SWOT a sectorului agroturistic, examinarea indicatorilor de eficiență economică și financiară, precum și interpretarea datelor statistice furnizate de Biroul Național de Statistică pentru perioada 2022–2024. Rezultatele cercetării evidențiază o reziliență remarcabilă a turismului receptor, care a înregistrat o creștere de aproximativ 17% în anul 2024, fiind susținut în special de nișa oeno-gastronomică și de programul „Drumul Vinului”. Cu toate acestea, analiza identifică bariere structurale majore, precum subdezvoltarea infrastructurii rutiere, concentrarea unităților de cazare în mediul urban și nivelul redus de digitalizare a micilor afaceri rurale. Concluziile studiului subliniază necesitatea unei strategii integrate de transformare a acestor puncte slabe în oportunități, prin accesarea fondurilor europene de preaderare și consolidarea parteneriatelor internaționale. Agroturismul este prezentat nu doar ca o alternativă la turismul de masă, ci ca un instrument esențial de revitalizare a patrimoniului cultural și de îmbunătățire a calității vieții în satele Republicii Moldova.

Cuvinte-cheie: agroturism, dezvoltare rurală, Republica Moldova, eficiență economică, sustenabilitate, patrimoniu vitivinicol, turism receptor

Аннотация

Авторы научной работы анализируют динамику и перспективы развития сельского туризма и агротуризма в Республике Молдова в контексте глобальных социально-экономических преобразований и новых предпочтений потребителей в постпандемический период. Основная цель исследования заключается в оценке потенциала этого сектора как двигателя устойчивого экономического роста для сельских сообществ. Используемая методология включает SWOT-анализ агротуристического сектора, изучение показателей экономической и финансовой эффективности, а также интерпретацию статистических данных, предоставленных Национальным бюро статистики за период 2022–2024 гг. Результаты исследования свидетельствуют о значительной устойчивости въездного туризма, который в 2024 году продемонстрировал рост примерно на 17%, чему в значительной степени способствовали винно-гастрономическая отрасль и программа «Винный путь». Однако анализ выявляет серьезные структурные барьеры, такие как недоразвитие дорожной инфраструктуры, концентрация объектов размещения в городской среде и низкий уровень цифровизации малого бизнеса в сельской местности. В выводах исследования подчеркивается необходимость комплексной стратегии по превращению этих слабых сторон в возможности путем использования европейских предвступительных фондов и укрепления международных партнерств. Агротуризм представлен не только как альтернатива массовому туризму, но и как важнейший инструмент возрождения культурного наследия и улучшения качества жизни в селах Республики Молдова.

Ключевые слова: агротуризм, развитие сельских районов, Республика Молдова, экономическая эффективность, устойчивость, винодельческое наследие, принимающий туризм

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