

# PERCEPTION OF MODERN AGRITOURISM. WIELKOPOLSKIE PROVINCE (POLAND) AND THE NORTHEAST REGION (ROMANIA) CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Agritourism in countries like Poland or Romania has effectively developed rural space, turning what in the socialist period was regarded as weaknesses, such as small, family farms, or the extensive character of the agricultural production, into strengths. Nowadays, this particular form of tourism is a significant trend in creating brand tourism products in both countries. However, progress depends on many factors, starting from natural, economic and legal conditions, and ending with the perception of agritourism by tourists. The authors of the article attempted to examine how agritourism is approached scientifically in both countries (theory verification in the light of literature analysis), what the supply is in selected regions and how agritourism is perceived by potential clients.

Preliminary studies show numerous differences in agritourism development in both countries. While preparing the article, the authors made use of both, primary (collected during a survey) and secondary materials (analysis of literature, strategic documents, statistical data). The survey questionnaire was prepared with the help of agritourism service providers.

## Introduction

Not only in Poland, but also in many other European cities, rural tourism has been playing an increasing role. However, despite many similarities, especially between adjacent regions, every country is different, at least as regards some features, e.g. the natural environment, religion, traditions, customs and rituals, cuisine, language, or the socio-economic situation – all these differences are reflected in the specificity of rural tourism. In this paper, two European countries – Romania and Poland will be compared. Therefore, the authors know the conditions and the present state of tourism in the rural areas of their countries best; they are also able to draw the most accurate conclusions regarding its future.

## Romania and Poland – similarities and differences

The authors decided to compare tourism developing in the rural areas of two countries – Romania and Poland, because of the similarities and certain differences between them. Firstly, they are both former socialist countries, which belonged to the so called Eastern Block from the 1940s to the early 1990s, which undoubtedly had an influence on peoples' mentality, as well as on the economy, including agriculture. For many years, in both countries, a typical form of property were large, state-owned farms. In the 1990s, most of them were closed down.

At present, very small farms still exist – Romania is the leader as regards fragmentation of farms among all EU, with Poland coming second; the average farm area for Poland in 2010 was 9.6 ha and for the Wielkopolska region – 10.5 ha (<http://stat.gov.pl>), while for Romania – 3.4 ha and in the Northeast Region – 2.5 ha (<http://ec.europa.eu>); in both countries, the values are growing. This is obviously not profit-enhancing, though on the other hand, this particular feature is an advantage as regards the attractiveness of an agritourism farm. In farming and animal breeding, extensive methods are still predominant. The small area of individual farms automatically means that they are very numerous, compared to other European Union states (with Romania in the lead, with 33.5% of all such properties, and Poland coming second, with 13.2%) (<http://ec.europa.eu>).

The question of the religious denomination looks practically identical – ca. 85–90% of the citizens are followers of the predominant, Christian religion: the Eastern Orthodox Church in Romania and Catholicism in Poland. Other similarities concern the size of the countries (they are both medium-sized European states), EU membership, the abundance of intact nature, as well as thriving folklore and traditions, especially in rural areas.

As regards obvious differences, they include the land relief – Poland is a predominantly lowland country (91% of the total area), in contrast to Romania, where mountains cover over 30% of the whole area. We should also mention ethnicity at this point – in Romania, there is a large group of Hungarians, Gypsies and Germans living among autochthonic Romanians (89%). Poland is also inhabited by various ethnic groups, but they make up only 3% of all citizens.

Detailed analysis included two areas: Wielkopolskie Province (the top level administrative unit in Poland) and the Northeast Region (a functional unit, established for the purposes of EU statistics) – both represent the NUTS-2 level. The choice was based on the possibility to compare regions, first of all as regards their size and number of population<sup>1</sup> (Table 1).

<sup>1</sup> Romania is divided into 41 districts, which are the top level administrative units. Therefore, it would be difficult to compare Polish provinces to the districts, due to their considerably bigger size and population.

**Table 1.** Selected features of the regions under study (2014)

Feature Unit	Northeast Region	Wielkopolskie
Area (km <sup>2</sup> )	36,880	29,826
Number of population	3,302,217	3,477,755
Population density (persons/km <sup>2</sup> )	90	116.6
Countryside population (%)	56.6	44.9
Farm land (%)	57.61	59.7
Forests (%)	30	25.7
Number of accommodation facilities/beds	709/26,055	711/42,600
Required (collected) number of questionnaires	384 (449)	384 (512)

Source: authors' elaboration based on statistical yearbooks.

### Tourism in rural areas in Poland and Romania

As it has already been mentioned, recreation in the Polish countryside has a long tradition. However, the changing needs of contemporary tourists, as well as the growing competition on the tourism services market, forced specialists to specify the existing forms of recreation in the country. The terms most frequently appearing in European nomenclature are *rural tourism* and *agritourism*. Generally, agritourism is a form of rural tourism, i.e. all forms of travelling to and around non-urbanized areas; the term *agritourism* is much narrower, as it refers only to recreation on a functioning farm. Despite the fact that these two terms have a lot in common with each other, we should stress that they are not synonyms, and they are described in a number of definitions, whose authors usually put emphasis on slightly different aspects. As regards rural tourism, A.P. Wiatrak stresses the economic aspect, saying that "it encompasses whole tourist economy in rural areas". M. Dębniwska and M. Tkaczuk (1997), V. Glăvan (2003, 2006) and P. Nistoreanu, M.R. Dorobanțu and C.E. Țuclea (2011) stress the importance of the rational use of resources in rural tourism. J. Sikora (1999) and V. Glăvan (2003) focus on rural attractions contrasting them with the urban ones. P. Nistoreanu (1999) points out that one of the main benefits of rural tourism is the reconciliation between man and nature. Generally, researchers dealing with these problems may be divided into two groups: some of them focus on the type of terrain where tourist activity takes place, and others – on the attractions connected with "rurality".

As for the concept of agritourism, the following aspects are stressed: tourist's recreational participation in farm work (Nowakowski, 2001; Glăvan, Nicula, 2014), the transitional character of the environment where it is practiced (between highly valuable ecosystems, e.g. protected areas, and those which are intensively exploited in agriculture) (Drzewiecki, 1995); a positive effect on the farmer's budget (an additional source of income) (Długokęcka, 2001); tourists' rational use of the environment resources (Dębniwska, Tkaczuk 1997; Glăvan, 2003, 2006; Nistoreanu, Gheres, 2010). We should also mention an alternative and slightly better developed conception by P. Wolak (1995), who identified agritourism facilities – functioning farms, where tourism services are just an additional element, as well as farm tourism – including those farms whose owners make a living mainly from tourism.

## The condition and character of agritourism infrastructure in Wielkopolska and the Northeast Region

It is very troublesome for a researcher to make a detailed inventory of the agritourism infrastructure in both Poland and Romania. This is due to different approaches to cataloguing this type of facilities by the lowest rank administrative units, changing statistical records and, finally, to the differences in interpreting the concept of an agritourism farm by data collecting institutions. There is the additional problem of verifying facilities at regular intervals and the lack of a uniform inventory form. A consequence of the abovementioned factors are huge discrepancies in the acquired data and spreading inaccurate information, mostly via the Internet. Another problem are the differences in the terminology used to refer to rural accommodation facilities in Poland and Romania.

According to the Central Statistical Office data (based on KT-1 form, <http://form.stat.gov.pl>, according to the tourist facilities catalogue), in 2015, there were 69 agritourism farms in Wielkopolskie Province, offering over 10 beds each (55 were available all year round). On the other hand, according to Wojewódzki Ośrodek Doradztwa Rolniczego (the Provincial Farming Counselling Centre), in 2015, there were 771 farms offering 9,741 beds ([www.wodr.poznan.pl](http://www.wodr.poznan.pl)). When analysing statistical data, one may notice a clustering of farms in just a few administrative units, which results from their natural resources enabling tourists to embark on a variety of activities (Uglis, 2012).

According to the National Institute of Statistics in Romania, in 2015 there were 321 agritourism boarding houses in the Northeast Region, offering 6,026 beds (<http://statistici.insse.ro>). Romanian statistics do not use the term "agritourism farm" and do not differentiate between an "agritourism farm" and a "farm".

Wielkopolska agritourism is becoming progressively specialized, which can be seen in the growing number of educational farms (11 in 2016), as well as in the categories of the competition for the best rural tourism facility, which has already been organized 11 times by the Marshall's Office. The categories are the following: an agritourism farm within a functioning agricultural farm, an accommodation facility in a rural area, and a specialist facility in a rural area, taking advantage of the traditions and assets of the countryside.

As regards Romanian facilities, the study did not show even the early stages of offer specialization.

## Research on the perception of agritourism in the studied regions

The empirical study procedure included 512 respondents from Poland and 449 from Romania. The researchers used a survey questionnaire consisting of eight key questions, both closed and open, enabling the respondents to speak freely. The study was conducted in March and April this year, by means of the questionnaire in the paper form and online, with the participation of partners from both countries.

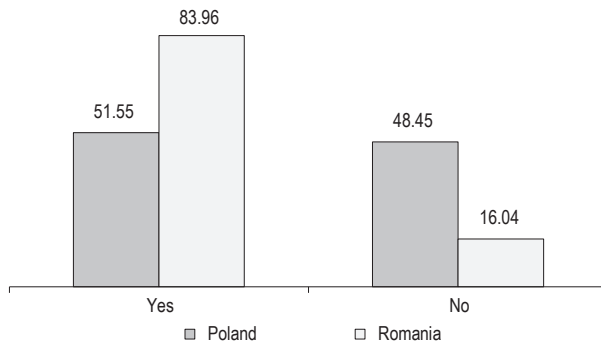
Both samples easily meet the condition of minimum sample size, with the assumed level of confidence  $\alpha = 0.9$  and the maximum error 3%.

The mean age of the respondents ranged from ca. 37 in Poland to slightly below 46 in Romania. Women were much more willing to participate in the survey than men, making up 70% of the respondents in Poland and 61% in Romania. As regards the education level, in both countries, most respondents had completed higher education – about 70% in both countries. Most Polish respondents (51%) declared good financial status, while the Romanians usually described it as average (54.1%). It is not surprising that the majority of the people taking part in the survey came from cities – 76% in Poland and 88% in Romania.

The respondents typically associated the term *agritourism* with the countryside, as well as various natural environment assets, such as *peace, quiet, nature, water, forest, animals*, followed by characteristic farm-related elements.

Most people expressing their opinions about agritourism had taken advantage of this form of recreation before – 83.96% of the Polish and 51.55% of the Romanian respondents. Additionally a high percentage of respondents are going to practice agritourism in the coming year (2017) – this intention was declared by 34.30% of Poles and 68.38% of Romanians.

The expectations of all contemporary tourists are changing, following market trends. We can see this, e.g., in the opinions frequently expressed in social media. What is interesting, despite the fact that they are generally older, the Romanian respondents are definitely more active in this matter than the Polish ones (Figure 1). This distribution of responses is not surprising, considering the fact that it is the Internet that is the main source of information about a potential tourist destination for 73% of all respondents. The next source indicated by them was family and friends (nearly 22%).

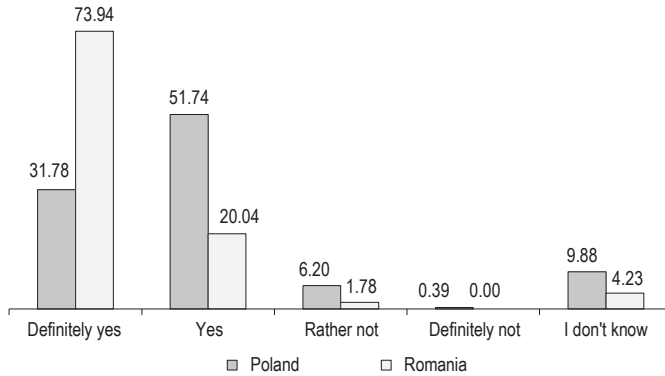


**Figure 1.** Using the agritourism offer by respondents (%)

Source: authors' elaboration.

Respondents from both countries under study had a positive opinion concerning the attractiveness of their home regions for the development of agritourism (Figure 2). The abovementioned distribution of responses proves the respondents' growing awareness of the local tourist potential.

The key question in the questionnaire concerned the features (up to 5) determining the choice of the agritourism. Despite many differences in the development of agritourism in both countries, the features were rated in a very similar way (Table 2). The first two most important features were the same, though in the opposite order. As the third most significant feature, the respondents from the Northeast Region, chose the cosy character of the facility, and those from Wielkopolska pointed to the importance of home-made, good quality meals.



**Figure 2.** Attractiveness of the home country in the aspect of agritourism development in the opinion of respondents (%)

Source: authors' elaboration.

It is worth mentioning that the price turns out much less significant when choosing this type of tourism offer – at least that is what the respondents claimed. This becomes an argument in a discussion whether agritourism must be a cheap form of recreation (many associate it with a low quality of the provided services).

**Table 2.** Respondents' ranking of features determining the choice of an agritourism offer

Feature	Poland		Romania	
	place	% indications	place	% indications
Low price	6	33.91	5	52.12
Short distance from home	14	3.88	10	18.04
<b>Location in an attractive environment</b>	2	59.30	1	80.18
Cosy character of the facility	4	45.93	3	56.12
Comfortable accommodation	5	38.95	5	52.12
Good, reliable information about the facility	9	22.48	7	22.05
<b>Hosts' hospitality, friendliness</b>	1	65.12	2	66.15
A possibility to participate in farm work	12	7.75	9	20.04
A possibility to see farm animals in real life	7	29.07	9	20.04
Home-made, good quality meals	3	55.23	6	28.06
Suggestions for organizing free time	8	23.64	4	54.12
Facility to recreation with children	10	16.67	8	20.49
A possibility to organize a party	13	4.84	13	6.01
Access by public transport	11	8.53	11	8.02
Other	15	3.49	12	7.35

Source: authors' elaboration.

## Conclusions

The rating of the most important features determining the choice of the agritourism offer, established in the course of the study, points to some guidelines for agritourism development:

- it is advisable to use farms located in an attractive environment, mainly natural, as well as skilfully create and promote attractions through service providers (agritourism must not be treated as a remedy for a difficult economic situation in a given village);
- it is important to build an agritourism brand on the basis of the intuitional, spontaneous hospitality of the hosts open to “live”, authentic contact with tourists;
- a great asset is home-made cooking, based on high-quality products from local suppliers;
- the cosy character of the facility should be maintained (considering the changing needs of tourists who want to get away from large-sized, crowded infrastructure, this feature will be gaining in importance); the growing income gained from agritourism must not be identified with an excessive increase in the number of beds (e.g. in former farm buildings), but with appropriate adjustments of infrastructure to the available space within the farm, as well as with an increase in the range of offered services.

Despite similar evolution of agriculture in both countries in the last several decades, we can observe clear differences as regards agritourism infrastructure. These discrepancies can be noticed not only in the nomenclature, but also in the organizational structure (weak development of regional and local associations in Romania) and the progress of specialization (in Poland, the growing competition in a way forced specialization of facilities, while in Romania this trend has not appeared on the market as yet). In Romania, agritourism is an economic activity on which both theorists and practitioners have mainly focused since 1990. Therefore, there are many theoretical, practical and legal aspects concerning Romanian agritourism still in need to be clarified.

The lack of the “official” tradition of the Romanian concept of agritourism is the reason why Romanians do not usually make a clear-cut distinction between rural tourism and agritourism.

The study described above shows the differences in the tourism developing in the rural areas of two European Union states on the one hand, and on the other – it is an encouragement to undertake further comparative research of this type, encompassing other members of the European Union.

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