


Article

Rural Tourism—Viable Alternatives for Preserving Local Specificity and Sustainable Socio-Economic Development: Case Study—“Valley of the Kings” (Gurghiului Valley, Mureș County, Romania)

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Abstract: Rural tourism, defined as a form of local initiative tourism, has at its forefront the involvement of the local community, who contribute significantly to the affirmation and promotion of this type of tourism. In order to be able to speak of the practice of this type of tourism in a given geographical area, it is first necessary to highlight the existence of a tourist heritage, both natural and anthropic, which identifies itself with the authentic character of the area, satisfying the need of the tourist to discover activities and tourist attractions with local specificity. The purpose of this research is to investigate the role of socio-economic and cultural aspects in the sustainable development of tourism in the Gurghiului Valley. The present study also aims to highlight the role of local entrepreneurs in the process of economic development in the area by means of new practices and sustainable approaches; this is based on efficient capitalization of the natural and anthropic tourism heritage of the area, defined by elements of authenticity. The methodology applied in this work is based on the study of specialized literature, along with case study on tourist activity in rural tourism. The research carried out is based on analysis of data from official sources of tourist data (the National Tourism Agency (hereafter NTA) and the National Institute of Statistics (hereafter NIS)), as well as research carried out in the field to see if there are discrepancies between what these two aforementioned official sources provide and the reality on the ground. Our research finally revealed the fact that Gurghiului Valley officially entered into the tourist landscape in 1990 through the lens of the Lăpușna student and preschool camp, and rural tourism has been organized in the study area since 2005. At the same time, research has shown that there is currently a need for much greater involvement and awareness both from local authorities and the resident population regarding the importance of rural tourism in the social and economic evolution of the local community.

Keywords: Romania; Transylvania; tourist potential; rural tourism; sustainable development; local specificity; case study

1. Introduction

Tourism represents one of the economic activities that has grown, in a positive sense, in recent decades, with growth rates surpassing every economic branch [1], contributing significantly to the degree of economic development of a state/region and participating as a source of income in both developed and developing countries [2]. From this point of view, it is an important pillar within the GDP for many countries across the globe (e.g., the Mediterranean countries), and an important component of foreign trade [3]. Within narrower limits, tourism also contributes in a visible way to the development of smaller areas, for example, by providing a diversity of socio-cultural activities with sustainable characteristics, thus raising the quality and standard of living [4,5].

Tourism has one of the biggest contributions in terms of achieving sustainable development; this is firstly due to the dynamism and growth of this sector with direct implications on the economic development of tourist regions and destinations, and secondly due to the fact that tourism is based on a direct link between consumers (tourists), industry, environment and local communities [6].

This direct relationship between tourism and sustainable development is also created given that in tourism, unlike in other industries, the consumer (the tourist) moves toward the producer and the product, and when it is properly planned and managed, it can be a viable means of obtaining income and, implicitly, support for rural and urban communities.

However, even though tourism is considered an activity dominated by urban space and urban populations [7], in the past 30 years, since the release of the 1987 *Brundtland Report*, [8] sustainable tourism has emerged as the dominant paradigm in tourism development, becoming a popular catchphrase and having one of the most noteworthy impacts in contemporary development discourse. The debate and discourse focusing on this important topic of tourism research continues today, as numerous research studies prove [9,10]. The *Brundtland Report* mainly aimed to obtain a multilateral support for enhancing awareness and cooperation and establishing a more balanced approach to development [11] in order to “meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” [12]. In this respect, tourism quickly joined these goals; since then, tourism has been present on the agendas of governmental authorities, in the various subfields and branches of activity with tourism profiles and in the work of researchers [13,14].

According to Javier and Elazigue [15] “*sustainable tourism development refers to the management of all resources that meet the needs of tourists and host regions while protecting opportunities for the future, in such a way that economic, social and aesthetic needs can be met while preserving cultural integrity, biological diversity and life supporting systems*”.

Moscardo [16] describes three principles of sustainable tourism, namely: a quality experience for tourists, improving the quality of life of the local community, the continuity of natural resources and the balance between the needs of the local population and those of the environment.

At the same time, “sustainable tourism through the development of its many forms of concrete manifestation, ensures the natural and economic integrity of the environment and rationally capitalizes on natural and cultural resources, but retains the necessary potential for future generations and is practically identified with a dynamic equilibrium of supply and demand, which outlines any modern tourist market” [17,18].

For a positive impact on the effect tourist activity within a geographical area, an effective territorial development is required. In other words, tourism (especially rural tourism) is closely related to territorial development, that has as main purpose [19,20] the creation of a favorable environment and standard of living through the integration of services and production networks [21].

This aforementioned link is best systematized within rural areas, where the territory possesses traditional and authentic elements acquired over time, used as dynamic/active elements in the process of sustainable and regional development.

Nowadays, the rural areas of Europe are in a continuous process of change both socially and economically, due primarily to the evolution of commercial activity, technology and communications, as well as the desire of the rural population to raise its standard of living [19].

Within these changes, rural tourism also appeared, approached as a sustainable measure within territorial development [22–24]. This economic activity was seen as a way of capitalizing on existing resources in rural areas through which rural tourism led to the creation of new jobs due to the emergence of local entrepreneurs who had the courage to approach the tourism sector [25,26].

Over time, it has been established that rural tourism is defined by three main elements: people, space and products; through their authentic and traditional character, they have

the ability to attract tourists who are eager to know traditional techniques, taste the local gastronomy, delight their eyes with slightly altered natural landscapes or transpose themselves into ancient culture through dances and traditional customs. All of these actually create the concept of territorial identity because each rural area is authentic and identifies itself with certain elements and features [5,27].

Although the changes experienced by the above-mentioned rural areas represent positive aspects within the rural settlements, we must not forget the fact that both at the European level and the Romanian level, rural settlements also face some negative aspects such as the aging of the population and the migration of young people to urban or economically developed areas of Europe (e.g., from Romania to Western Europe); these have led to the degradation of agricultural activity, thus increasing uncultivated land surfaces.

Because of these negative aspects, agricultural activity has suffered a decline in recent years, affecting, to large extent, some of the activities that could support rural tourism, and on the other hand, the high degree of population aging and the lack of a young population affect the sustainability of rural areas [19,28].

In the context of the epidemiological situation that has affected the whole planet, tourism has been one of the most affected activities. However, currently, there is an increasing desire in the population to travel, and the most sought-after destinations are those that have small accommodation spaces [29,30]. These accommodations are identified in areas secluded from the noise of cities, where the tourist can relax in peace and admire all that nature offers, and where one can exploit the resources in a traditional way.

The purpose of this manuscript is to investigate the socio-economic and cultural aspects of the sustainable development of tourism within the rural area of the Gurghiului Valley—the “*Valley of the Kings*”. The study aims to highlight a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the provision of tourism, as well as aspects regarding the sustainability of the area in terms of the possibility of practicing rural tourism [31]. At the same time, the present work aims to highlight the role that local entrepreneurs can play in the economic development of the area by developing new practices and sustainable approaches, having at hand the natural and anthropic touristic heritage of the investigated territory, defined by elements of authenticity.

The basic methodological approach of this work is based on the study of the specialized literature completed in a case study regarding tourist activity in rural tourism. The research is based on the analysis of data provided by two official sources of tourist data (NTA and NIS), as well as field research to see if there are any discrepancies between what these two previously mentioned official sources offer and the reality on the ground. To these are added the questionnaire method applied at the level of both local authorities and local residents. These practices are able to define local specificity and the individualization of the analyzed territory in comparison to those of the neighborhood.

As a result of the study, it was found that the analyzed territory has a complex and diversified provision of tourist activity that made its presence felt in the Gurghiului Valley officially in 1990. This may have the ability to transform rural tourism into a viable economic alternative, as long as the possibility of exploiting the tourist resources (usually, through the practice of some forms of tourism, integrated into competitive tourist products) exists. This tourist activity comes against the backdrop of adequate, active and sustainable exploitation, coupled with efficient promotion capable of channeling various segments of demand, actions resulting in the intensification of tourist flows and the maximization of the income obtained from tourism.

2. The Role of Rural Tourism in the Sustainable Socio-Economic Revitalization of Rural Areas

2.1. Theoretical and Conceptual Background

Worldwide, it is known that one of the income-generating economic activities within the economy of a state/geographical area is *tourism*. This positive influence is best felt in rural settlements where, once “established”, this economic activity leads to improvements [9],

primarily in terms of increasing rural incomes, followed by raising the standard of living by creating jobs, thus reducing poverty; secondly, tourism also leaves its mark on the social, economic and cultural aspects of a rural settlement [32].

Rural tourism, is generally seen as any form of tourism that takes place in the countryside [33,34] in which the visitor's experience is related to a wide range of products generally linked to nature-based activities, agriculture, rural lifestyle/culture, angling and sightseeing [35], and "includes any tourism activity organized and conducted by local population and which exploits the local tourism resources (natural, cultural-historical, human) as well as the tourism endowments and structures, including the pensions and agro-tourism farms" [36].

The main particularities include "development of the touristic product in a functional way, based on the features of the rural area and on the traditional character; closeness to nature; tranquility; sense of continuity and stability, of living a lasting history; the ability to better and closely know the rural place and its residents; the chance to integrate in the rural community during the touristic stay; closely knowing/familiarity with local businesses, etc." [37,38].

Moreover, rural tourism contributes to "creating jobs and increasing income therefore improving the living standards, reducing migration, supporting the protection of natural landscapes and environment, preserving cultural and architectural identities, crafts, traditional lifestyles, increasing and spreading the social contacts and the exchange of knowledge and experiences" [33,34].

However, it should be noted that although rural tourism brings considerable benefits to rural areas, it can, at the same time, create a gap between the rich and the poor local population [39], or disrupt the original rural ecosystem and subconsciously change local cultural values [40].

However, for developing countries, rural tourism can represent an effective solution to escape poverty, but also to realize the importance of perpetuating and capitalizing on the legacy that still exists today, especially on the cultural and spiritual levels [41].

Rural tourism is consistent with sustainable tourism because it has a traditional character, with a low negative impact on the natural environment, as well as on society. Thus, both the environment and society benefit from rural tourism over a long period [42]. This is possible because rural tourism is a small-scale form of tourism being controlled by local entrepreneurs eager to raise both their personal standard of living and that of the community [43].

Rural tourism must be profitable within the local communities that support and promote it so that the investments of local entrepreneurs are doubled by the revenues obtained from tourism activity [44,45]. Managed in a proper way, rural tourism, along with agriculture, could become an important engine for the economic development of Romanian rural areas.

The basic items that determine strong rural tourism are those related to the authenticity of the place that outlines and defines local specificity, expressed through the rural landscape, the local gastronomy represented by local products that can be consumed on the spot or purchased by tourists, as well as the cultural heritage identified mainly through traditions, crafts, folk clothing and song [46].

In addition, in the last two decades, the demand of the population in urban areas for rural life has increased greatly, which has led to the development of a new form of rural tourism practiced in agritourism guesthouses.

Within rural tourism, the notion of agritourism is used quite often, creating a confusion between the two terms. In reality, the two concepts are not synonymous, as agritourism is actually a particular form of rural tourism that relies mainly on accommodation services in the households of farmers who make use of their own products in terms of food and non-food, while rural tourism also uses other forms of accommodation and public catering [32,47].

Both within rural tourism and agritourism, the predominant accommodation units are agritouristic guesthouses where tourists have direct contact with the host, who can provide them with information about the organic food produced in their own household, can train them in various traditional activities, etc. [42]. Unlike rural tourism, agritourism does not involve the practice of all touristic activities carried out in the rural environment; there is a close connection with the life of the rural household, with the agritouristic guesthouse (agritourism) being the main tourist attraction. Addressing mainly individual tourists, families or small groups, the development of agritouristic activities does not require the existence of developed accommodation and food structures, as it can be successfully practiced using the existing dwellings within individual rural households, as well as the existing leisure and entertainment spaces within them. Both rural tourism and especially agritourism are based on the potential of rural areas, on people and on products that are specific to the place; they have to adapt to the requirements of the tourist market, by arranging households to bring them to the level of quality and diversity standards desired by tourists, to highlight the specific culinary traditions of the place. The tourist product or products created in rural areas are addressed either to organized and individual tourism (on their own), to local tourists, and also to foreign tourists. They must be diversified and customized to meet the needs and demands of tourists eager to discover the elements of the traditional rural community specific to each region or area [48].

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Thus, nowadays, increasingly, rural areas have become spaces with a high tourist appeal, and in order to meet the needs of tourists [49,50], they have also become production spaces, both for handicraft products and raw materials for local gastronomy; this has created new opportunities for the workforce and influenced rural demographic evolution and sustainable development (e.g., the evolution of agritourism in Tuscany in Italy [51], in the USA and in Asia) [52–54].

All the aspects presented above can support and determine the practice of sustainable rural tourism that aims to increase the sustainability of the destination with regard to the long-term improvement of living standards, by maintaining the balance between environmental protection, promoting economic benefits, establishing social justice and maintaining cultural integrity [55].

2.2. An Overview of the Evolution of Rural Tourism in Romania

In Romania, rural tourism has been practiced since ancient times, but in a spontaneous, sporadic, random and, above all, unorganized form. Its first form of materialization appeared from the 1920s to the 1930s in the 20th century, through the accommodation of citizens and of occasional tourists who arrived in rural settlements [56]. Only during 1967–1968 did the first attempts to practice organized tourism occur, for groups of tourists located on the Romanian Black Sea coast. It turned out to be a promising start, so in 1972, the Ministry of Tourism elaborated law 297/1972 [26], following which the Research Centre for International Tourism Promotion could identify and select representative rural localities, for the Romanian villages, which were to be enrolled in the tourist circuit. Thus, following consultations between the county tourism offices and the local administration bodies, it was established that about 118 rural localities could be introduced into domestic and international tourism. Starting on 16 July 1973, the Ministry of Tourism declared 14 rural localities, experimental villages of tourist interest called “tourist villages”: Lerești și Rucăr (Argeș), Poiana Sărată (Bacău), Fundata și Șirmea (Brașov), Bogdan Vodă (Maramureș), Tismana (Gorj), Sibiel (Sibiu), Vatra Moldoviței (Suceava), Racoș (Timiș), Sfântu Gheorghe, Murighiol și Crișan (Tulcea) and Vaideeni (Vâlcea) [26,56,57].

This “organization” of rural tourism did not last long because the following year, by decree 225/1974, it was forbidden to accommodate foreign tourists in private dwellings;

thus, the tourist villages became inoperative in the framework of international tourism. However, there was a small escape, in a positive sense, which benefited the villages enrolled in the cultural and folklore programs of the “Carpathian” National Tourism Office that were contracted on the external market (Lerești, Rucăr, Sibiel, Murighiol and Crișan) [26,56].

The short period of the “officialising” of rural tourism was not favorable for the organization of tourist activity or for the proper arrangement of tourist villages, because in many localities, the households that met the conditions for accommodation were not approved (Rucăr, Vatra Moldoviței and Vaideeni), and in others, the accommodation of domestic tourists was carried out in an unorganized way and without keeping a record (Crișan, Fundata and Rucăr). With very few exceptions, this situation lasted until 1989 [26,58].

Since 1990, rural tourism has been reborn due to the increasing interest present among tourists eager for recreation [42,59]. Thus, due to political, legislative and economic changes, the path to investment in rural tourism activities has been opened, giving birth to various associations and bodies that aim to affirm and develop tourism in rural areas, supporting local entrepreneurs [60–62].

The need for profit has intensified the activity of rural tourism, particularly in the agritourism category; in order to be practiced as close to nature as possible, it aims to preserve the elements of the category of natural and anthropic heritage, with conservation achieved through sustainable rural tourism. In the specialized literature on agritourism [63,64] and rural tourism, several reviews refer to the economic concept of demand and supply, as well as the advantages and risks associated with it, without emphasizing the future trends of agritourism and rural tourism through sustainable tourism development [65–67].

In this sense, in Romania, in order for rural tourism and agritourism to become sustainable, several bodies have had a significant influence, these being: the Romanian Federation for Mountain Development (in 1990, they wanted to support the inhabitants of the mountain area in several aspects, including the promotion, organization and development of agritourism); the Romanian Agency for Agrotourism (in 1995, they succeeded in “connecting” Romanian agritourism to the international tourism system); the National Association for Ecological and Cultural Rural Tourism in Romania—ANTREC (in 1994, they were a member of the European Federation of Rural Tourism (EUROGÎTES)) [66,68].

These bodies involved in the rural tourism activity, as well as the involvement of entrepreneurs, made it possible to create the “spine” of tourist villages [21]. These new structures of Romanian tourism are based on a picturesque, unpolluted natural heritage, with very high attractiveness regarding the very well-preserved natural and rural landscape, with many elements of uniqueness; however, they are also characterized by a slightly unaltered material and immaterial cultural heritage, which transposes the tourist to a space conducive to recreation, neuro-psycho recovery and cultural enrichment.

Thus, a significant number of villages in Romania meet the minimum conditions to develop activity specific to rural tourism: a natural environment untouched by pollution, with great attractiveness; a rich material cultural passion, built and immaterial, which favors accommodation and access to traditional gastronomy; and the active participation of the tourist in manifestations specific to the life of the Romanian village.

Currently, the main regions, counties and localities with intense tourist activity are situated in the mountainous areas of the Carpathians, the Sub-Carpathians, the Transylvanian Basin, the Mehedinți Plateau, the Suceava Plateau and the Danube Delta.

As for Mureș County, tourism contributes to the local economy through tourists attracted by the tourist areas of Sovata, Sighișoara, the Gurghiului Valley and the Mureș Superior Valley; the last two have managed to attract tourists through activities and elements specific to rural tourism.

Regarding the study area, it entered into the tourist landscape, officially, before 1990 (through the student and preschooler camp, near Lăpușna Castle), where rural tourism took shape in organized form, authorized by the NIS in 2005 when the first agritourism guesthouse in the area was approved in the locality of Gurghiu.

2.3. Rural Tourism and Sustainable Socio-Economic Development in Romania

The rural space in Romania concentrates about 48% percent of the total population and is still characterised by a significant share of subsistence-oriented agriculture, low levels of income and a bad provision of infrastructure and services. Under these circumstances, the rural development strategies in Romania decided that it was appropriate to focus on economic diversification. One of the possibilities was rural tourism, which represents an activity developed in the political and economical framework after 1989 [26].

Even though within the EU area, the positive contribution of tourism to rural development is unanimously recognized and accepted (being revealed by a rich body of specialized literature, focusing on research and case studies on different areas such as spatial extension and taxonomic level—from individual to local, regional and national), a statistical picture cannot be provided at EU level that reflects the particular importance and benefits that rural tourism and agritourism have in the potential development of agritouristic farms, in particular, and rural areas, in general [68].

However, the deceleration of tourism activities' impact on sustainable economic growth was—in the 1990s and 2000s—the subject of a relatively small number of approaches from the former communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe [69–71], but also in Romania [72–74].

However, the extent to which the role of rural tourism generated sustainable growth in rural areas in the former communist countries is not yet fully clarified, and expectations regarding the development of rural tourism have been raised since the beginning of the asserting process of tourism in these countries [75].

These expectations were “boosted” by tourism's significant economic impact in the less developed and peripheral regions of Western and Northern Europe. In this regard, a number of studies have suggested that tourism could be the key factor in ensuring a faster transition to a more diversified and sustainable rural economy, thus facilitating faster integration of these countries into the EU community [76,77].

These statements were also based on the fact that member countries of the European community supported the development of rural tourism through programs initiated and carried out in the 1990s [78].

However, despite these estimates, some further studies have supported the fact that, in reality, the contribution of tourism to rural development in the European community/EU has been relatively limited and differentiated from one country to another [79].

As for rural tourism practiced in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, it was largely dependent on domestic demand [75], demand already limited by the high share of the rural population and the family ties between rural and urban residents (coming from the rural population that migrated during the communist period to urban areas following the industrialization process) [72,80].

Moreover, a number of studies highlight that, apart from traditional tourist destinations, the economic importance and development potential of tourism in many rural areas have been overestimated in a number of countries such as Serbia [70] and Croatia [71], and quite limited to certain areas in the case of Poland [75,81], Bulgaria [82] and Slovakia [83].

This situation is caused by a number of factors considered to have a notable impact on the poor quality of tourist infrastructure, such as fragmented, unrealistic and underfunded promotion campaigns focused on achieving quick and short-term results, to which are added a demographic decline and lower quality of human capital, the under-representation of the private sector, differences in the performance of local agriculture, etc. [72,79,83–85].

Even though Romania has adopted a national strategy for sustainable development by 2030 [86], little attention has been paid to the positive role of tourism activities in rural areas, with tourism not included on the main agenda of national, regional and local authorities in recent years [72,80,87,88].

Although national and local authorities have created a number of development plans, few have indicated tourism as a possible solution to the development and/or socio-economic revitalization of rural areas [45], despite the previous encouraging results,

whereby a number of localities located in rural areas have actively supported the affirmation of rural tourism since the last decade of the 20th century (Țara Maramureșului, the area of Mărginimii Sibiului, Sâncraiu from Cluj county, Rimetea și Albac from Alba county, Vama și Ciocănești from the area of Bucovina-Suceava county, the area of Bran-Moeciu-Rucăr from Brașov-Argeș counties, etc.).

A more active role in this context has been given to NGOs (*Federația Română pentru Dezvoltare Montană—F.R.D.M.*, *Opération Villages Roumains—OVR*, *Asociația Națională de Turism Rural*, and *Ecologic și Cultural—ANTREC*), although their actions are mainly carried out at the local level, and most of their work does not directly focus on the sustainability of rural tourism [72].

Despite the fact that after joining the EU in 2007, Romania has benefited from a series of support schemes and significant capital infusions to sustain the development of rural tourism (*PHARE Turism Programme*, *PHARE—Lien Programme*, *PHARE Interreg*, *Proiectul Transhumancia (ECOS-OUVERTURE 9604 Ce Transhumancia)*, etc.), its level of progress is still far from its real potential. This is largely because of the fact that the eligible and financed projects are mostly individual projects (their object being, in most cases, the establishment of accommodation and meal structures), without targeting more important systemic problems (especially those related to the poor transport infrastructure to many areas and locations with potential for rural tourism development [34,89]; it is also due to difficulties in attracting investments [80] and the limited range of services, all against the background of a general low development index [90].

A comparative study aimed to identify the main differences in rural development, especially through tourism, between Romania and Austria [91]. The study confirms that tourism represents the main driving force for rural development in both countries and, with few exceptions, the only realistic opportunity for their economic development. Another common feature identified by this study reveals that new initiatives in the field of tourism come mainly from the locals, a fact that highlights the significant involvement of the local population in tourism activities. For this reason, the authors conclude that the development of tourism through the contribution and involvement of local communities is essential for regional development, underlining “that local cooperation, trust and networking are essential ingredients, approach that needs, however, vision and leadership, entrepreneurial skills, access to credit facilities and the mobilization of resources” [91].

A comparative analysis of the dynamics of rural tourism in three regions of Romania, Poland and Slovakia before and after their integration into the EU/community area has also been carried out, highlighting the fact that, in the case of the North-East region of Romania, integration with the EU did not have a significant impact on the development of rural tourism, even though there has been a positive trend in tourism since 2001. This occurred because of insufficient and inefficient capitalization of the opportunities offered by EU membership amid the multiple general problems facing the region. In this context, it is considered appropriate in Romania to implement strategies that have worked in the analyzed regions from Poland and Slovakia, which have targeted the “elaboration and implementation of development plans, knowledge transfer towards regions, service quality improvement, promotion of national products specific for the country, and creation of new tourism products” [72].

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Study Area: The Main Geographical Features—Favorable Premises for Outlining Attractive Tourist Offerings and the Development of Rural Tourism

The Gurghiului Valley—the “Valley of the Kings”—represents an area that has been famous since ancient times in terms of the variety and richness of deciduous and resinous forests, and especially for the hunting of fauna (there are data as early as 1734 regarding the hunting area of the Gurghiului Valley); it has become, over time, an authentic hunting brand in the national and international landscape [92–94] (Figure 1).

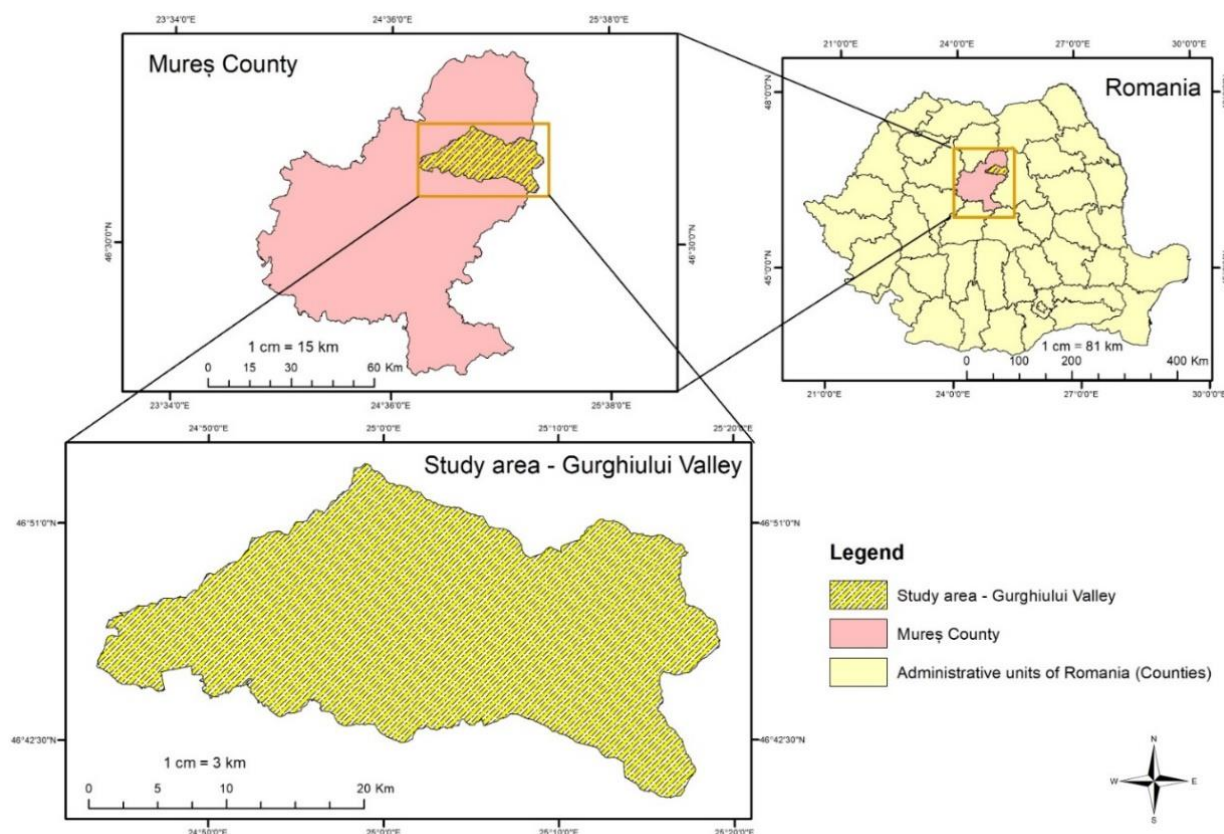


Figure 1. Geographical position of the study area within Romania, especially within Mureș County.

Between 1734 and 1918, hunting rights in this region were held only by representatives of the nobility of the Austrian–Hungarian Imperial House [95].

To understand the importance that this place held internationally, we mention some of the personalities who practiced hunting here before 1918: Franz Josef I (the Emperor of Austria), Prince Rudolf of Habsburg (the only son of the Austrian Emperor, Franz Jozsef I) and count Samuel Teleki.

Due to this important status in the field of hunting, in 1882, Bornemisza Castle was transformed for a period of 4 years into the Hunting Castle of Prince Rudolf of Habsburg. Later, the intense activity in terms of hunting led to, in 1925, the construction of the Royal Hunting Castle in Lăpușna locality; construction was initiated by the Royal House of Romania during the reign of King Ferdinand I and his wife, Queen Mary, and completed in 1930 during the reign of King Carol II.

Between 1918 and 1947, the hunting area of the Gurghiu Valley was the largest in Transylvania, and after the completion of the Royal Hunting Castle, the “*Valley of the Kings*” enjoyed the presence of kings, princes, dukes and barons, both from Romania and from abroad. Thus, important names in the hunting field of Gurghiu are: King Ferdinand I, King Carol II, King Michael, Prince Nicholas (outstanding personalities of Romania), King Alexander I and Queen Marioara of Yugoslavia, Prince Wilhem of Hohenzollern, King George of Greece, Prince Franz Josef von Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen [96] and many others.

We have mentioned all these aspects related to the hunting area of the Gurghiu Valley in order to clarify the significance of the name “*Valley of the Kings*”, a name that is still preserved today, representing an important hunting area that attracts both national and international personalities.

In addition to the aspect related to the importance of the region in terms of hunting, the “*Valley of the Kings*” also represents an ethnographic area characterized by diversity concerning traditional clothing, customs and crafts, aspects that have supported the practice of rural tourism.

Additionally, natural tourist attractions of special importance (Mocear Forest, Secular Oaks, Daffodils Glade—all of which are protected natural areas) along with anthropogenic ones of different categories (Gurghiu Fortress, Bornemisza Castle, Lăpușna Monastery, Cașva Monastery and the Lăpușna Royal Hunting Castle) contribute to diversifying and increasing the tourist attractiveness of the area and can support the development and practice of rural tourism (Figure 2).

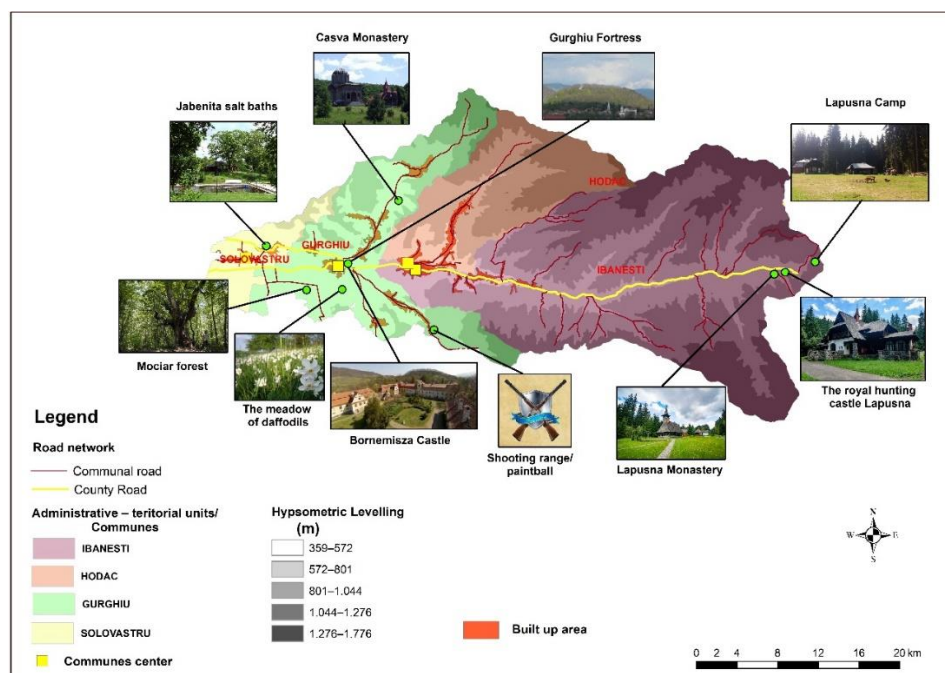


Figure 2. Spatial location of the main attractive resources in the Gurghiu Valley.

Regarding the natural setting, the Gurghiu Valley is located in a hilly area specific to the eastern part of the Transylvanian basin at an altitude of approximately 350–400 m, continuing in the space of the Gurghiu volcanic mountains, where altitudes between 800 and 1777 m can be encountered; these determine the existence of natural ecosystems that, combined with the agriculture practiced in the area and the specific cultural elements, form a perfect framework for the sustainable development of rural tourism.

One of the most important factors that can favor or restrict tourism activity is climate. Thus, climate can play two key “roles” in tourist activities: on the one hand, it determines the state of the atmosphere at a certain time (good weather or bad weather), and on the other, it is, itself, a resource that determines tourism attractiveness depending on the possibility of climatic or balneoclimatic treatments.

Due to the fact that the Gurghiu Valley is situated on altitudinal steps, the area has a moderate continental temperature with oceanic hues, defined by the circulation and character of air masses in the west and northwest, favorable to the practice of tourism during all four seasons of the year and characterized by average annual temperatures of 6.4 °C–8 °C. The summer months have an average of 14 °C–19.7 °C, and the winter months –2.4 °C–(–6 °C), which creates favorable conditions for practicing tourism throughout the year. Additionally, in terms of climate, we must remember that the average annual amount of precipitation (700–800 mm/year) is a favorable element which, together with the temperature, primarily favors the development of agricultural activity in optimal conditions in terms of both agricultural crops and vast areas for grazing; thus, it is another essential element in the development of rural tourism.

The shelter conditions provided by the mountain area, the rich resources of wood and grazing, as well as the agricultural space in the lower areas of the Gurghiu Valley have contributed to the constant growth in the number of inhabitants and the formation

of viable human settlements. Within this area, 29 rural localities are identified within four administrative-territorial units (ATUs), namely the communes of Solovăstru, Gurghiu, Ibănești, Hodac.

All these component localities of the Gurghiului Valley have developed, over time economic activities based on agriculture and traditional crafts (wood, wool, leather, glass and stone processing), with a special emphasis on shepherding and forestry. Most of the villages in the area have preserved unaltered spiritual and ethno-folkloric treasure based on traditions, traditional clothing and folk song, with continuity, to the present day. Crafts inherited from generation to generation are still practiced today in this research area. Since ancient times, the population of the area has been mainly one of shepherds and craftsmen in wool, leather, wood, glass and stone sculpting, activities that favor the development of rural tourism.

In addition to the agricultural activities and crafts mentioned above, an important role in the sustainability of this area is also held by local gastronomy, which is based on traditional products, some of them managing to support the emergence of small enterprises that have carried on the traditional techniques of preparation of local products. In this regard, we recall the production of dairy products (such as cheese, bellows cheese, cheese curd and cottage cheese); these have been basic products obtained by locals since ancient times and bring a large contribution to the existence of a local factory. This factory is based on the processing of cows' and sheep's milk, managing to obtain a unique product in the country that is certified by the European Union ("Chees of Ibănești"- "elemeaua de Ibănești").

In addition to the famous cheese of Ibănești and other dairy products of the local enterprise, the company has managed to become known and appreciated both nationally and internationally. Apart from this example of continuity of traditional occupations, the Gurghiului Valley still offers the possibility of growing fruits and vegetables in the traditional household or using a wood oven to obtain various traditional bakery products (bread on hearth, cakes, "pupci", etc.).

A significant contribution to the development of tourism in the analyzed area is due to events, a fact confirmed by other recent research analyzing event tourism as one of the fastest growing types of tourism [97]. Some of these events began to regain their previous importance from locals and local authorities, while others were born of the desire to promote the area from all possible aspects. In this regard we refer to events of, for example, an ethnographic and religious cultural nature. Among the most important events that manage to attract a significant number of tourists in the research area are The Gurghiului Valley Festival, The Gurghiu Girls' Fair and The Canine Exhibition. These manifestations delve into important tangible and intangible heritage values that could become examples of good practices of an authentic and specific geographical space, valued by both local communities and local authorities [98].

At the same time, events manage to have a national impact by attracting tourists from all over the country.

A possible association between relevant actors in the community can also have beneficial consequences for the development of tourism within the studied area. Guesthouse owners are considered development agents for the community, which is why local authorities should provide them with more support. Because guesthouse owners have enough resources to produce relevant changes in the field, especially in the improvement of tourist infrastructure, but also in promoting the tourist potential of the area, they should increase their influence, through closer collaboration.

Therefore, the anthropic tourist heritage has an intangible component in the space delimited by the Gurghiului Valley, and its potential has begun to be explored and exploited in an increased manner in recent years, by stimulating the initiatives capable of contributing to the strengthening and affirmation of local identity and local specificity in a multicultural Europe and in a globalized society.

In other words, the Gurghiului Valley—“*Valley of the Kings*”—is beginning to regain, to a certain extent, and with small steps, the status of an attractive tourist area in terms of rural tourism, through the development of agritourism concepts and promotion of local traditions both at national and international levels.

3.2. Research Methodology

This research was built from three hypotheses followed by corresponding objectives (Figure 3).

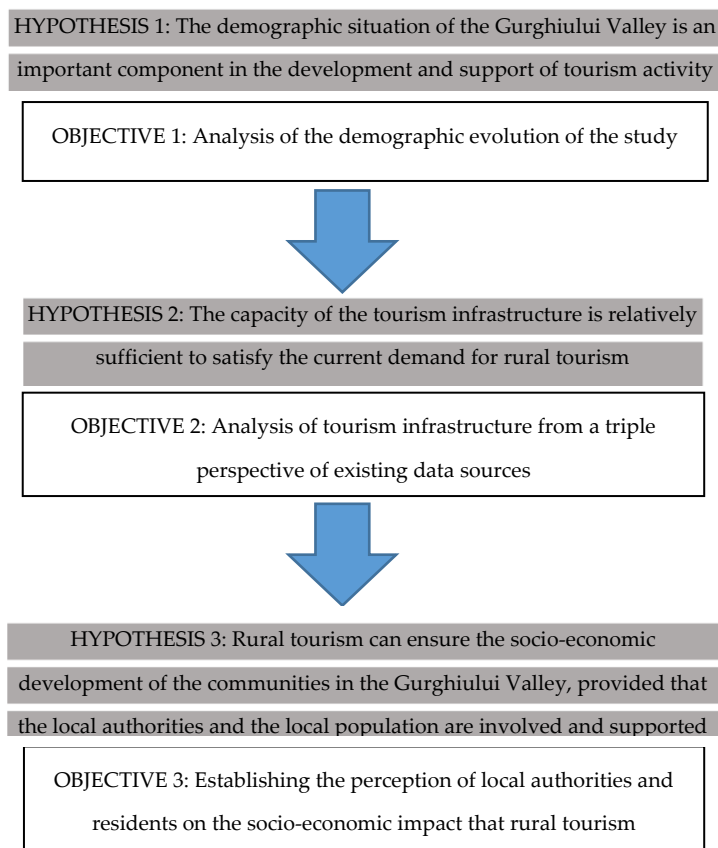


Figure 3. The main hypotheses and objectives.

All these hypotheses anticipate and serve the general objective of the research, namely, to demonstrate that rural tourism can be a viable economic alternative for the communities in the Gurghiului Valley, which can ensure efficient capitalization of its resources under the conditions of proper planning and efficient promotion.

Considering the fact that the purpose of this work is to discover whether the Gurghiului Valley—“*Valley of the Kings*”—manages to successfully develop constant tourist activity, namely sustainable rural tourism, we turned to research methods such as a case study, interviews and questionnaires. These have proven useful for a better understanding of what sustainable rural tourism means [61].

Regarding the case study, emphasis was placed on the qualitative aspect because it was possible to carry out on-site research, after which some conclusions were drawn regarding the capacity of the area in terms of sustainable support for rural tourism. Moreover, this method provided answers to some questions such as: “*what?*”, “*why?*” and “*how?*”. Another positive aspect of this method is that the researcher places more emphasis on the case studied and less on the way the method is conducted.

In this article, the context in which rural tourism developed within the Gurghiului Valley area was first analyzed, followed by resource exploration for sustainable development, taking into account the perception of local residents and local authorities regarding the impact of rural tourism on the community and their direct involvement in supporting this activity to become sustainable [99,100].

In this regard, a structured interview was used in the form of 15 questions addressed to the local authorities from the 4 ATUs of the study area. Here are some relevant questions from the interview: *Do you think that the development of tourism in the commune and its surroundings would help the local economy? How do you consider it appropriate to include your commune in the tourist network? Is there a tourism development strategy at the level of the commune or do you have a vision in this regard? If you were to recommend the commune as a holiday destination, what would be the top 3 tourist attractions you would promote?*

At the local residents level, the questionnaire method of 14 questions was applied through several internet channels in order to reduce the response time.

In order to achieve the proposed goals, in the first stage, we used the NIS database to carry out an overall quantitative analysis regarding the demography of the area, thus being able to draw conclusions on the need to develop sustainable rural tourism. Regarding quantitative data on tourist activity in the area, the information provided by the NTA was analyzed and interpreted, as it provides a more realistic database than the NIS; the latter does not contain data on the types of entrepreneurs owning tourist reception structures with accommodation or catering functions included in the tourist circuit, or the quality of the structure (stars, daisies, etc.).

The perception of the locals [101] was obtained with the help of questionnaires applied to a sample of 300 people from the existing localities in the Gurghiului Valley, completed with 54 valid answers.

The case study was developed using documentary research methods and using national statistics and databases regarding accommodation, catering and transport services, provided by the National Tourism Authority and the National Institute of Statistics.

The selection of these two data sources was determined by the fact that the NIS does not collect data from dwellings with fewer than 5 accommodation places; thus, the analysis of this data source alone would have been an objective one and as close as possible to the reality on the field, especially since small dwellings are typical of rural destinations in Romania and have become extremely attractive in the current context of COVID-19 [30].

Based on the first database, the information contained in the system at the level of 2021 was analyzed in order to have a clearer picture of reality concerning the types of reception structures with public accommodation and catering functions, in terms of the number per category of accommodation structures and the types of entrepreneurs who manage such structures (information that we do not find in the NIS database).

However, in order to obtain an overview of tourism activity within the research area, it was necessary to consult the data provided by the NIS, which has information on this subject starting from 1991 until 2021. All these aspects mentioned above were analyzed both at the level of Mureş County and at the level of the analyzed territory in order to observe the contribution of tourist activity in the area.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Aspects Related to the Economic and Social Development of the “Valley of the Kings”—The Gurghiului Valley

Even though at the national level, there was a visible decrease in the population (from 23,143,860 people in 1992 to 21,980,534 people in 2022, according to the NIS) [60], following the data analyzed at the level of Mureş County, only a slight decrease was observed in the number of inhabitants in the period between 1992 and 2021; the population at the level of the county decreased by about 6%, from 618,243 people in 1992 to 587,224 people in 2021. The same slow decrease also occurred at the level of the research area, registering

approximately 7% fewer inhabitants in the year 2021 (18,328 inhabitants) compared to the year 1992 (19,532 inhabitants) [60] (Figure 2).

At the level of the Gurghiului Valley, the most significant decreases during the analyzed period were recorded in the commune of Gurghiu (with 693 fewer people in 2021 compared to 1992) and Ibănești (with 629 fewer people). This decrease began to occur as a result of Romania's integration into the EU in 2007, which brought with it the liberalization of circulation in the international space; this was followed by the economic crisis of 2008, which caused the migration of the population to other European states, and thus, their definitive settlement in countries such as France, Italy and Spain.

However, in addition to the above-mentioned factors, a decrease in population was felt quite clearly in the last two years (between 2020 and 2021) because of the appearance of the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused a decrease in birth rates in the research area, as well (from 5882 newborns in 2020 to 5209 newborns in 2021).

On the other hand, it should be stated that there were localities in this regard that were affected neither by Romania's integration into the EU, nor by the crisis of 2008 or the appearance of the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, at the level of the component localities of the Solovăstru commune, there has been an increase in the number of inhabitants in the last 29 years of about 285 inhabitants; this is an area that has become a "dormitory commune" for the inhabitants of the nearby urban space (Reghin), especially after the appearance of the COVID-19 pandemic.

From the point of view of the structure of the population of the Gurghiului Valley by gender, the proportion of women and men is somewhat balanced (e.g., in 2021 there were 9045 women and 9283 men, respectively), with a slight difference between men and women (Figure 3). It should be stated that for the research area, it was and is very important that the share of the male population is not too low because the main activity over time, and also the main sources of income of many families is agriculture, forestry and sectors in which men's labor is needed.

In terms of population structure by age group, the analysis of the data provided by the NIS (Figure 4) showed a higher proportion of the population aged between 30 and 49 years, which leads us to the conclusion that in the future, there will be an aging population phenomenon that could be increased if the birth rate does not follow an upward trend. Thus, from this point of view, it cannot be said with certainty that the investigated area shows sustainability in the practice of tourism in the future, but currently, it represents a strong asset to start such activities (Figure 5).

Another aspect that was taken into account in the analysis of the research area in order to determine sustainability is related to the number of employees existing in the Gurghiului Valley (Figure 6). As can be seen in Figure 7, the average number of employees in the investigated area had fluctuating evolution during the period between 1991 and 2020, registering an upward trend. What is worth noting is that this evolution was not overshadowed by the appearance of the COVID-19 pandemic; on the contrary, the number of employees increased from 1883 in 2019 to 1914 in 2020. This situation reveals that as a result of the occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic, some localities of the analyzed area have "benefited" from the return of the native population, especially those in the categories of active and able-to-work populations.

For a more detailed analysis of the socio-economic situation of the concerned territory, together with the evolution of the employees, we also analyzed the evolution of the number of unemployed people between 2010 and 2020. Thus, as can be seen in Figure 8, the number of unemployed people in the Gurghiului Valley decreased over the course of the 11 years analyzed. Moreover, following the research conducted among entrepreneurs in the tourism field, it was found that a large proportion of people working in an accommodation or public catering establishment do not have an employment contract or only have a limited-term contract.

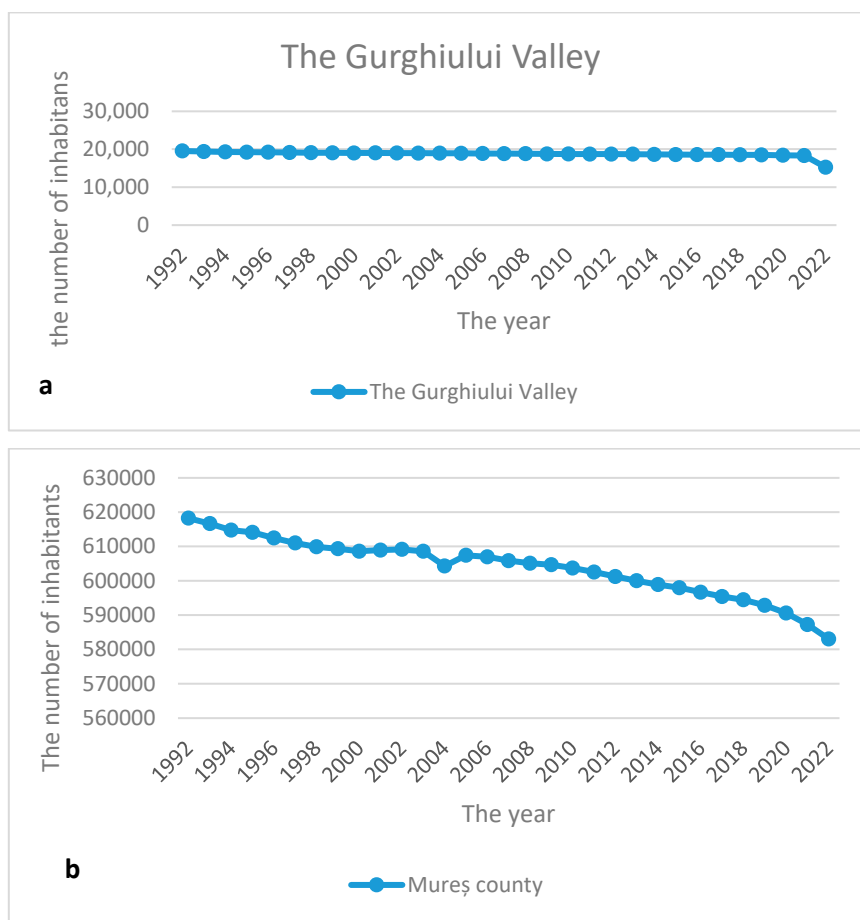


Figure 4. Numerical evolution of the population in Gurghiului Valley (a) and Mureș County (b) in the period between 1992 and 2020. Source: Authors’ processing based on NIS data [102].

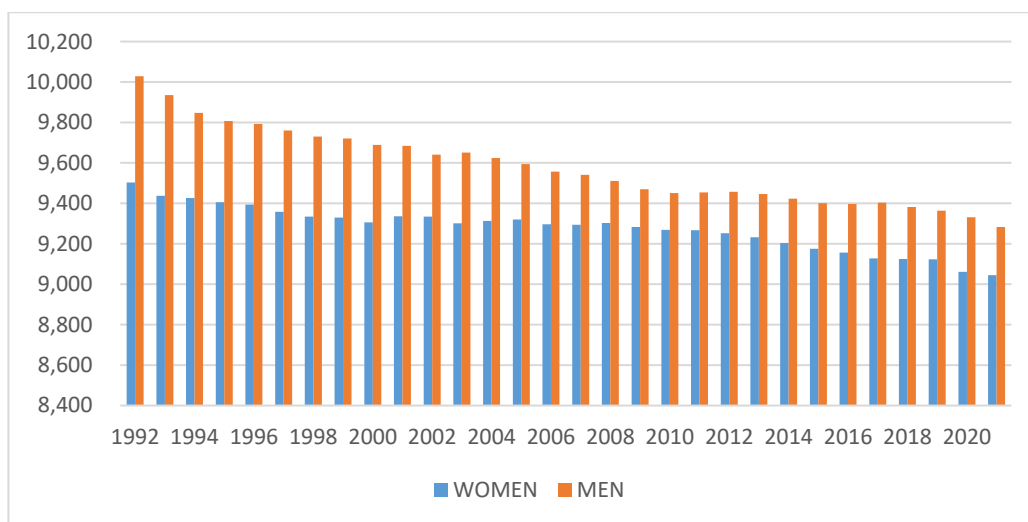


Figure 5. Numerical evolution of the population by gender in the Gurghiului Valley in the period between 1992 and 2020. Source: Authors’ processing based on NIS data [102].

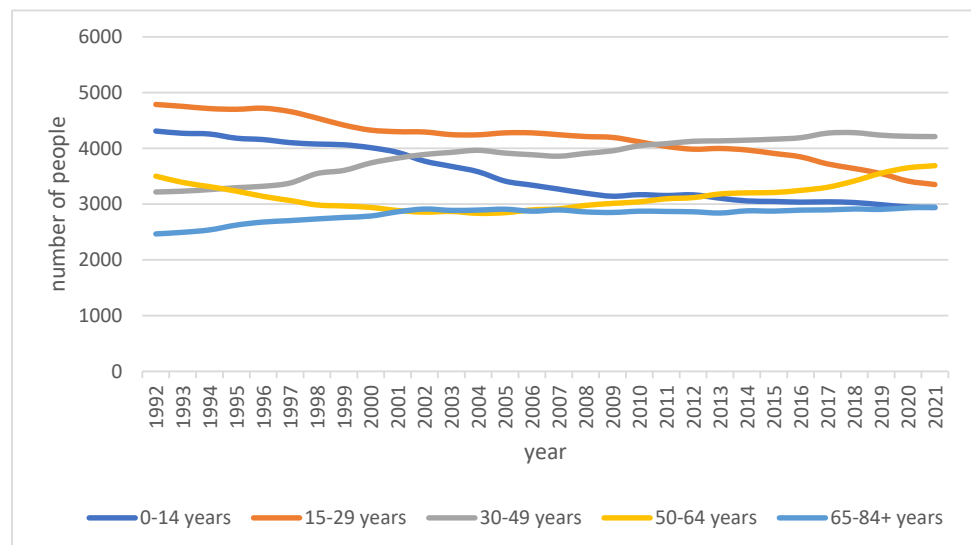


Figure 6. The evolution of the number of inhabitants by age group in the Gurghiului Valley in the period between 1992 and 2020. Source: Authors’ processing based on NIS data [102].

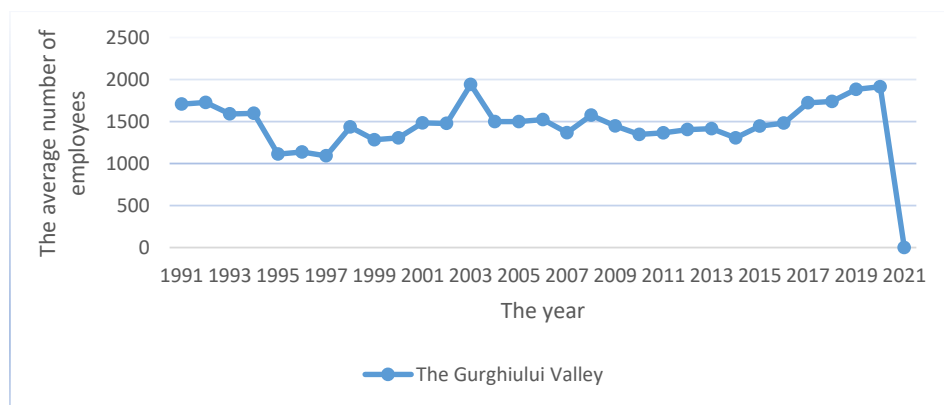


Figure 7. The evolution of the average number of employees in the Gurghiului Valley in the period between 1991 and 2019. Source: Authors’ processing based on NIS data [102].

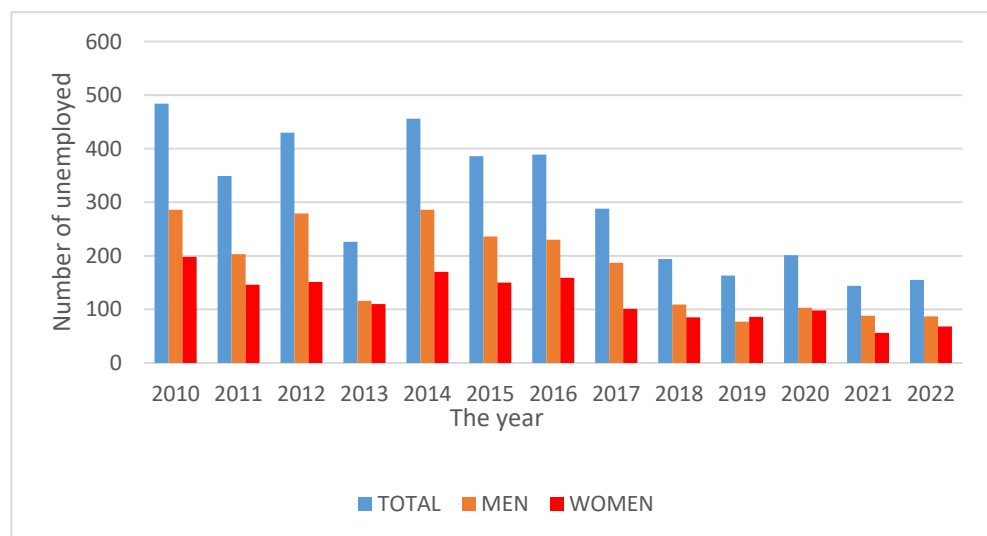


Figure 8. The evolution of the number of unemployed people in the Gurghiului Valley in the period between 2010 and 2020. Source: Authors’ processing based on NIS data [102].

As a result, we can affirm that this evolution is a favorable one, but after analyzing the data on the migration movement of the population in the Gurghiului Valley (Figure 9), it can be concluded that this also occurred due to the recent increase in emigrants compared to immigrants (e.g., 2020: 10 emigrants, 2 immigrants).

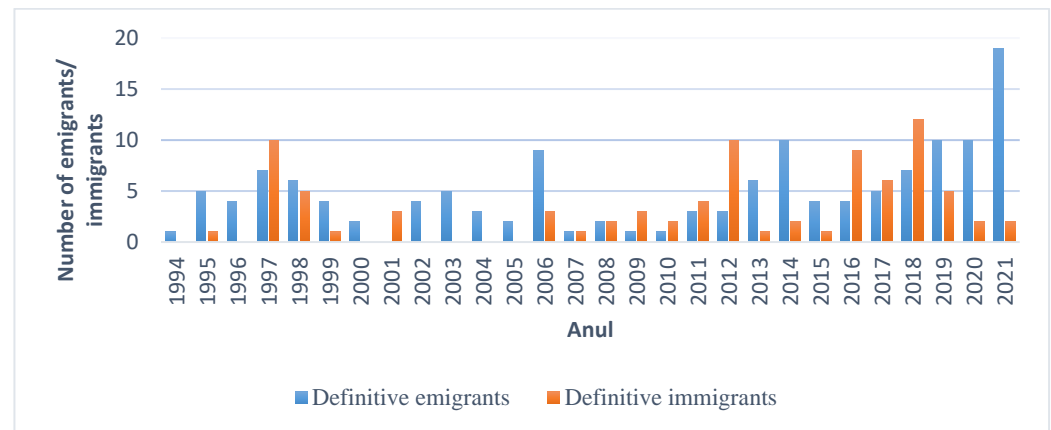


Figure 9. The evolution of the migratory movement of the population in the Gurghiului Valley during the period between 1994 and 2020. Source: Authors' processing based on NIS data [102].

Concluding the analysis of the data on the socio-economic evolution of the Gurghiului Valley, we can say that it represents an area that has managed quite well to preserve its population over the years compared to other regions of the country, while also managing to adapt to the challenges that have appeared over time both socially and economically. Additionally, people of three different ethnicities (Romanians, Hungarians and Roma minority) have managed to live together in the studied area.

4.2. Aspects Related to Tourist Activity in the "Valley of the Kings"—The Gurghiului Valley

In order to provide a more objective picture of the current rural tourism in the Gurghiului Valley, quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed, both in terms of its provision and tourist demand for it, but before proceeding to the presentation of this analysis, it should be noted that rural tourism has been practiced in this area unofficially since the period when this tourist activity was not officially practiced in Romania. We refer here to the period when important personalities, both at national and international levels (kings, princes, barons, etc.) established their presence in the Gurghiului Valley, in order to capitalize on the hunting resources and after which, as we mentioned at the beginning of the study, a castle for hunting purposes was built, which is still used for tourism purposes.

Thus, the appearance of rural tourism in the area is related to the above-mentioned period; subsequently, the tourist phenomenon started to easily take shape, establishing its official presence in the tourist landscape of Romania in 1994 due to the student and preschooler camp in Lăpușna, located just 1 km from the Hunting Castle.

As for rural tourism, the first official data on practicing this form of tourism date back to 2005 when the first agritourism guesthouse appeared in the statistics offered by NIS, located on the territory of the Gurghiu commune.

Upon analyzing the data provided by the NIS regarding the evolution of the number of reception structures with accommodation functions in the Gurghiului Valley, it can be observed that this evolution has changed over the analyzed period (between 1994 and 2021), both in terms of the number of units and their categories (Figure 10).

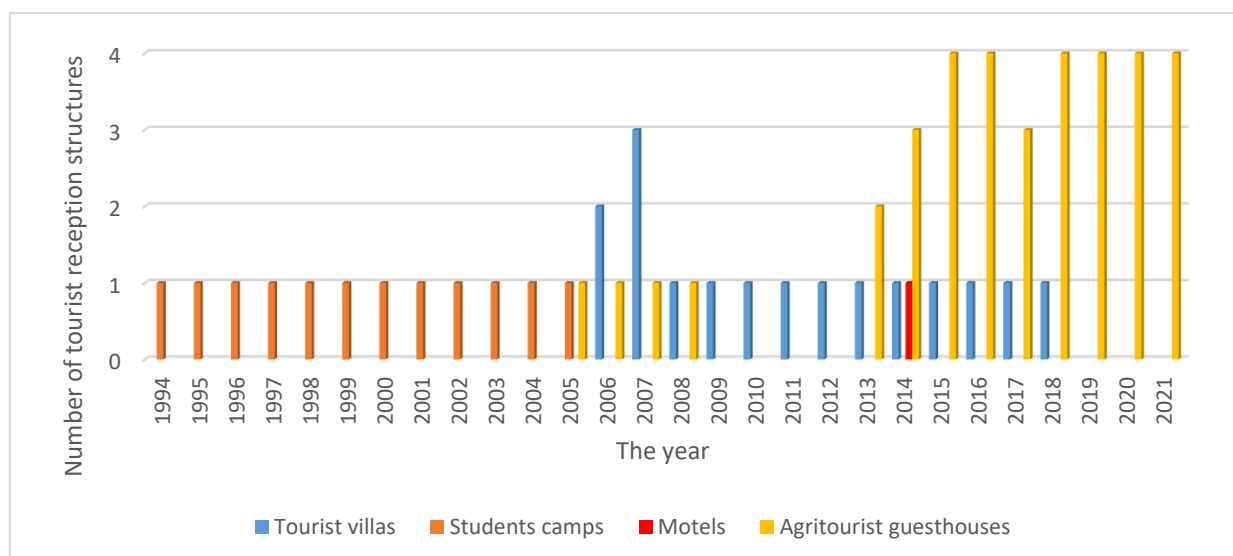


Figure 10. The evolution of the number of categories of reception structures with accommodation functions in the Gurghiului Valley in the period between 1994 and 2020. Source: Authors' processing based on NIS data [102].

The data analyzed show that at the level of 2021, only four reception structures with accommodation functions were operating in the Gurghiului Valley, all of which belong to the category of agritouristic guesthouses.

Because it is not useful to consult only one source, we analyzed, in addition to the data provided by the NIS, the data provided by NTA, which were subsequently compared with our own field research. Thus, according to the NTA, in 2021, the Gurghiului Valley had 10 tourist reception structures with accommodation functions such as tourist guesthouses (six structures), tourist villas (three structures) and rooms for rent (two structures). Taking into account only the two official sources, we can conclude that the local entrepreneurs are not yet fully registered with permanent activity, so the NIS does not have data about the activity of some tourist reception structures with accommodation functions [102].

If we go further with the data obtained from the field research, the conclusion is that the two official sources mentioned above do not correspond in any way to the reality on the ground. Thus, in this regard, we must mention that the reality is based on the following data: a total number of 20 tourist reception structures with accommodation functions within the four ATUs of the Gurghiului Valley, with the following accommodation units types: tourist guesthouses, agritouristic guesthouses, tourist villas, tourist chalets, student and preschooler camps and rooms for rent (Figure 11).

As a result of the field research on tourist reception structures with accommodation functions, it was found that there are structures with a reduced capacity but which are more sought after on the tourist market than those in the category of tourist or agritourism guesthouses. Thus, considering the fact that the NIS takes data only from reception structures with accommodation functions that have at least five beds within them, it is understandable that the number of structures offered by the NIS does not correspond to reality.

In order to obtain a more conclusive picture of tourist activity in the *Valley of the Kings*, other data series were also analyzed, such as those regarding the existing accommodation capacity, the accommodation capacity in operation (Figure 12), but also the number of overnight stays and arrivals in the period between 2001 and 2021.

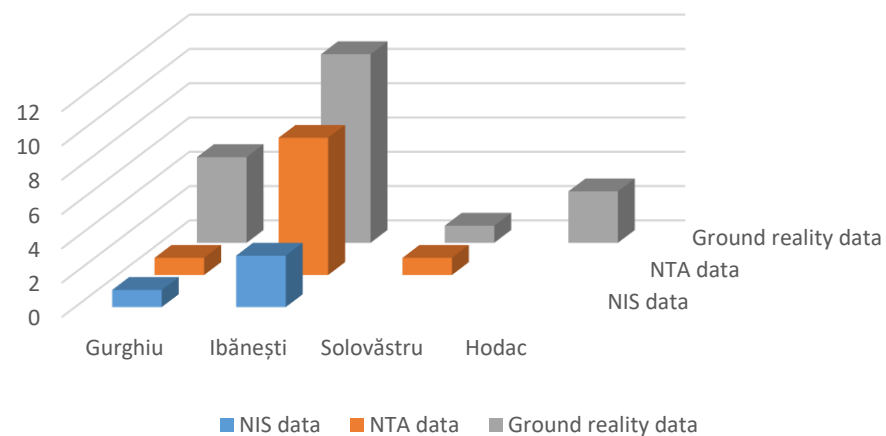


Figure 11. Number of tourist reception structures with accommodation functions at the level of localities according to NIS, NTA and land research. Source: Authors' processing based on NIS data [102] and NAT data [103].

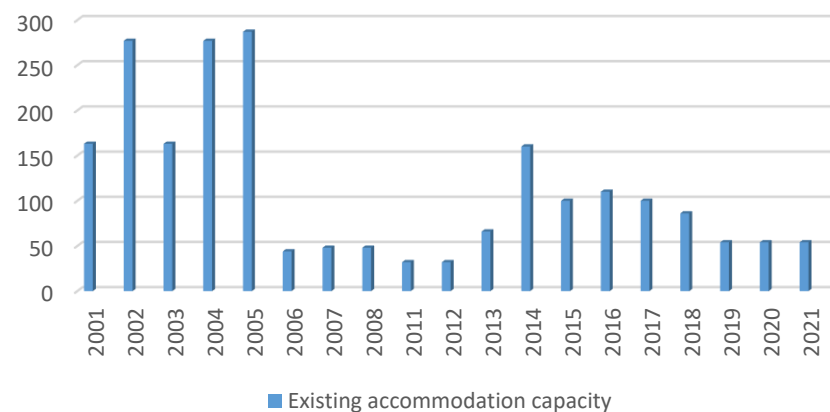


Figure 12. The evolution of the number of accommodation places in the Gurghiu Valley in the period between 2001 and 2021. Source: Authors' processing based on NIS data [102].

The analysis of these data was used to make a comparison between the existing tourist demand in the analyzed area and the accommodation capacity made available by the tourist reception structures with accommodation functions throughout the analyzed period (Figure 13).

The analysis of the data provided by the NIS (listed above), show that the study area offers sufficient accommodation capacity, both in terms of the number of existing places and those in operation, but it was noted, over the period analyzed, that in no year was the tourist demand close or equal to that of the "Valley of the Kings". Therefore, these aspects reveal the existence of problems at the level of the investigated area, such as that related to the insufficient promotion of tourist reception structures, but also of the area itself, and the existence of unofficial tourist activity among the tourist reception structures with small accommodation functions, which do not enter the statistics provided by the NIS or the NTA; the latter reveals the existence of a rural tourism "under the counter".

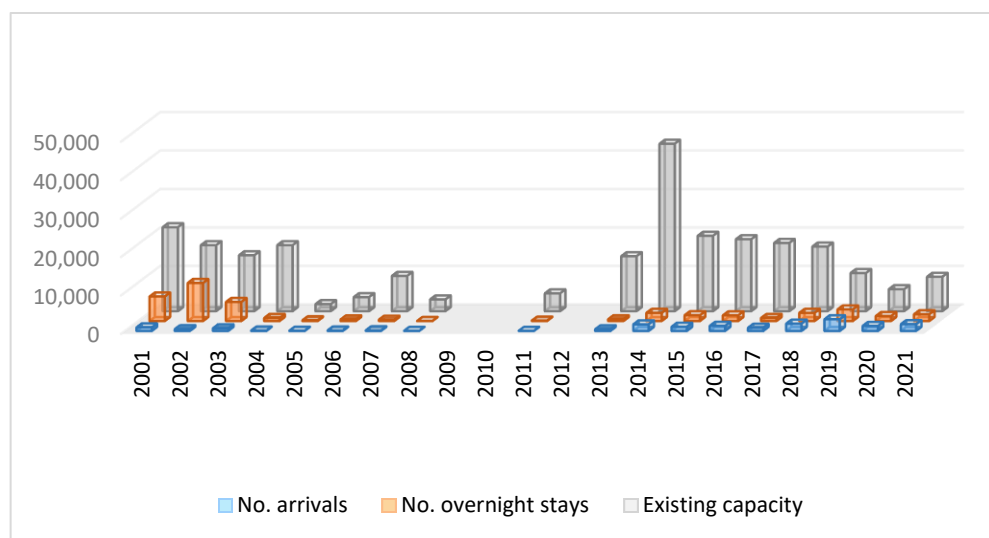


Figure 13. Comparative analysis of the accommodation capacity in operation, the number of overnight stays and the number of arrivals in the period between 2001 and 2021. Source: Authors' processing based on NIS data [102].

In order for the analysis of tourist activity to be complete, regardless of the type or form of tourism practiced, an analysis is also required of the existing public catering units at the level of the area subject to research, which allows us to obtain a more conclusive picture of the existing tourist offerings in terms of the material tourist base.

Given that the NIS does not have data on public catering establishments, the only official source that could be considered is the NTA. Thus, in consulting the data provided by the NTA, we were unpleasantly surprised to find that only one public catering establishment in the Gurghiului Valley is officially registered.

Inevitably, a consultation of the reality on the ground was needed to obtain a clear quantitative and qualitative picture of this aspect. Thus, following the field research, it was found that there are eight public catering establishments, six of which are classic restaurants belonging to tourist reception structures with accommodation functions and two of which are pizzerias. This reality shows us, again, as in the case of tourist reception structures with accommodation functions, that those in the category of public catering units also operate without being officially registered on the NTA list.

Following the research carried out on the structures of tourist reception and public catering, we indirectly found dysfunction in the development and practice of tourism organized in the Gurghiului Valley. In this case, in order to draw a more pertinent conclusion on this issue, we used the interview method applied at the level of the local authorities of the four ATUs, respectively, and the questionnaire applied among the locals in the study area.

Thus, the first part of the investigation included four structured interviews consisting of 14 questions each, addressed to the local representatives of the four communes on the Gurghiului Valley. These interviews took place during July 2022 and aimed to evaluate the opinions of decision-makers in the investigated territory on the development of tourism within the limits of the administered communes, the ways in which tourism potential is exploited, and its opportunities and implications in the socio-economic development of local communities.

The applied questionnaire included 15 questions targeting several aspects, such as:

- The existence or non-existence of a strategy for the development of rural tourism within each analyzed commune;
- The degree of openness of local authorities to tourism activity;
- The degree of knowledge of the local leaders regarding the existing tourism potential in the perimeter of their ATUs;

- The method of promotion existing until now regarding the promotion of the commune on a tourist level;
- The types and forms of tourism considered to be triggering or supporting elements of rural tourism.

Following the analysis and interpretation of the answers given by the four respondents, the following aspects were outlined:

- The existence of tourism development strategies at the town hall level (three of the four ATUs currently have such a strategy, each with a different direction: the restoration and conservation of anthropogenic tourist objectives—Ibănești commune; the diversification of tourist offerings and/or the design of an original, unique tourist product—Hodac commune; the development of tourist infrastructure such as accommodation, catering, transport and leisure—Gurghiu commune).
- Local leaders consider rural tourism to be an economic component that could contribute, to an extent of approximately 70%, to the economic development of the local community, especially in the entire area subject to research (the Gurghiului Valley).
- The low degree of openness of local authorities regarding the establishment of a tourism service within their municipalities.
- The lack of a clear vision from the local leaders on the categories of tourist resources, especially on those that could trigger and support the practice of rural tourism.
- The modest knowledge of local authorities about the types and forms of tourism that can be practiced and, implicitly, that can support the development of the tourism phenomenon.

Concluding the interpretation of the results of the questionnaire applied to the local authorities, we mention the fact that the major problem identified at the level of the area under analysis is poor awareness of tourism's potential, resulting from insufficient promotion, which currently puts tourist activity in the Gurghiului Valley on "stand by".

Consequently, regardless of the value of tourist potential, the lack of knowledge of one's own tourist offerings seems to be one of the identified problems that explain the poor development of rural tourism in the Gurghiului Valley today.

The second part of the investigation included the application of a questionnaire among inhabitants of the Gurghiului Valley over the age of 18, in order to identify their opinions regarding tourist activity carried out within their commune. This questionnaire consisted of 14 questions applied to a sample of 300 people, distributed by combining several internet channels to simplify the application and response time as much as possible. Out of the 300 applied questionnaires, only 54 contained valid answers.

Of the respondents, 77.8% are women and 22.2% are men between the ages of 18 and 56. The highest share is represented by respondents aged between 18 and 24 (22.2%), followed by those aged between 31 and 40 (18.8%). Equal percentages are recorded among respondents aged between 25 and 30 and those over 50, with both categories representing 18.8%, and the lowest value is represented by respondents aged between 41 and 50 (15.1%). Taking into account the fact that most respondents are up to 30 years old, tourism seems to have continuity in the Gurghiului Valley.

In terms of the level of training of respondents, the highest share is represented by those with bachelor's degrees (42.6%), followed by those in high school (33.3%), with master's degrees (22.2%) and at professional levels (2%). This shows us that the level of training is medium to high; hence, in the answers to question no. 4 related to the professions of the respondents, most of them practice a profession that requires secondary or higher education (Figure 14).

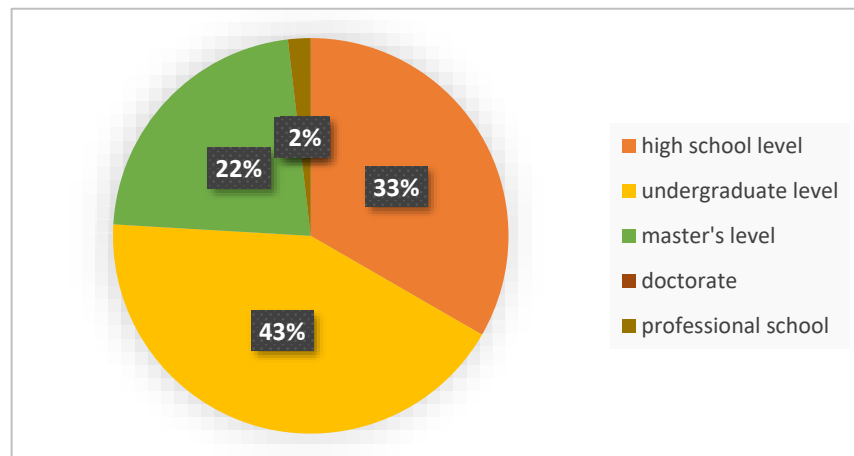


Figure 14. The percentage distribution (%) of level of education completed by respondents.

After the introductory questions on issues related to the respondents, questions followed that aimed to identify some aspects related to tourist activity in the Gurghiului Valley, which revealed the following aspects:

- The local respondents place rural tourism among the economic activities that can substantially contribute to the economic and social development of the local community.
- There exist some tourist reception structures with the functions of accommodation and public catering in the administrations of the surveyed locals; the most numerous are from the category of local gastronomic locations and rooms for rent, but, as can be seen on the graph below, they also occur in other categories of tourist reception structures (with accommodation or catering functions) (Figure 15).

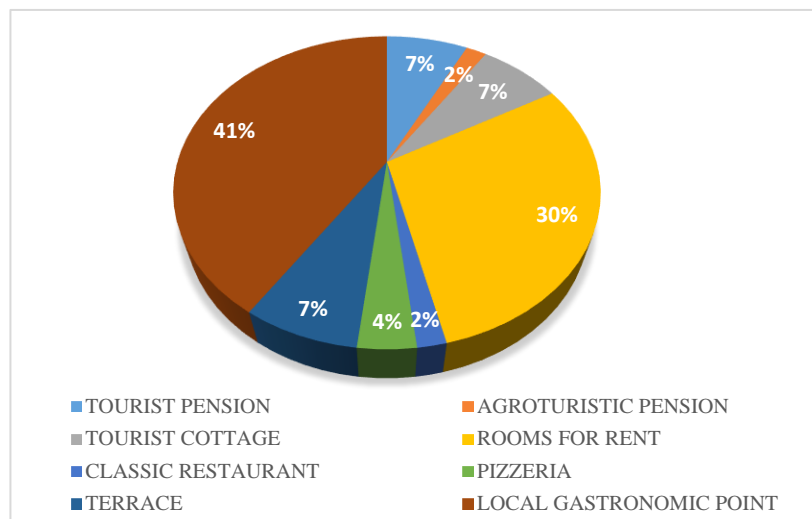


Figure 15. Tourist reception structures owned by local respondents.

- There is a positive image of the locals in terms of the degree of involvement and the methods of tourism promotion used by the local authorities; the most common method of promoting tourism, formulated by locals and supported by local authorities, include *support for local entrepreneurs and the organization of tourism activities*; however, as can be seen in Figure 16, local authorities have (to a lower extent, in the opinion of respondents) also used other methods of promotion, which shows their desire to promote the area from a tourism point of view.

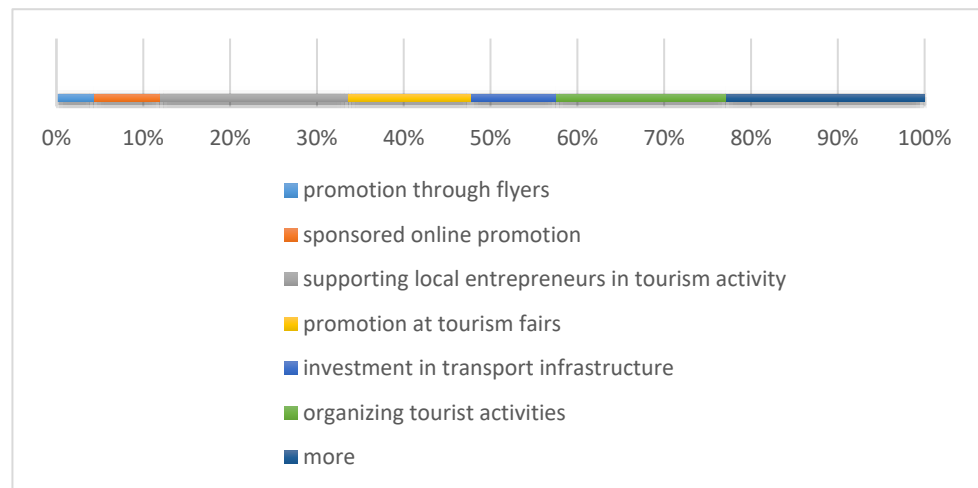


Figure 16. Local authorities' tourism promotion methods.

- There is insufficient involvement of local residents regarding the promotion and support of rural tourism in the area; most of the respondents have no involvement in this regard, which shows a lack of attention from the residents regarding the importance of tourism in the development of the community (Figure 17).

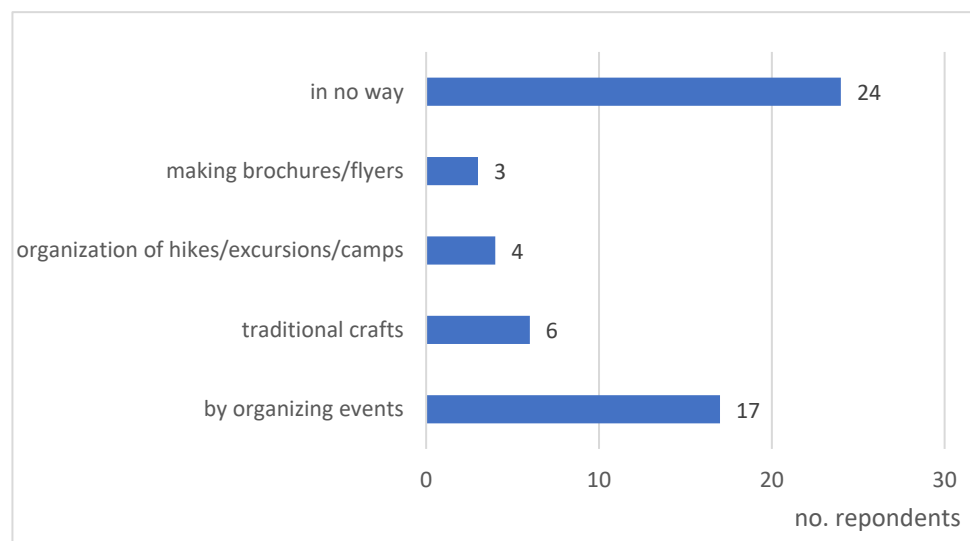


Figure 17. The way of involvement of the locals in the tourism promotion of the area.

- There is a lack of knowledge in respondents regarding the existing tourism resources and the tourism potential of the area, given that no respondent mentioned ethnographic resources and events (important tourism resources in the research area).
- Most respondents (over 80%) are convinced that rural tourism would help the development of the local community they belong to (Figure 18).

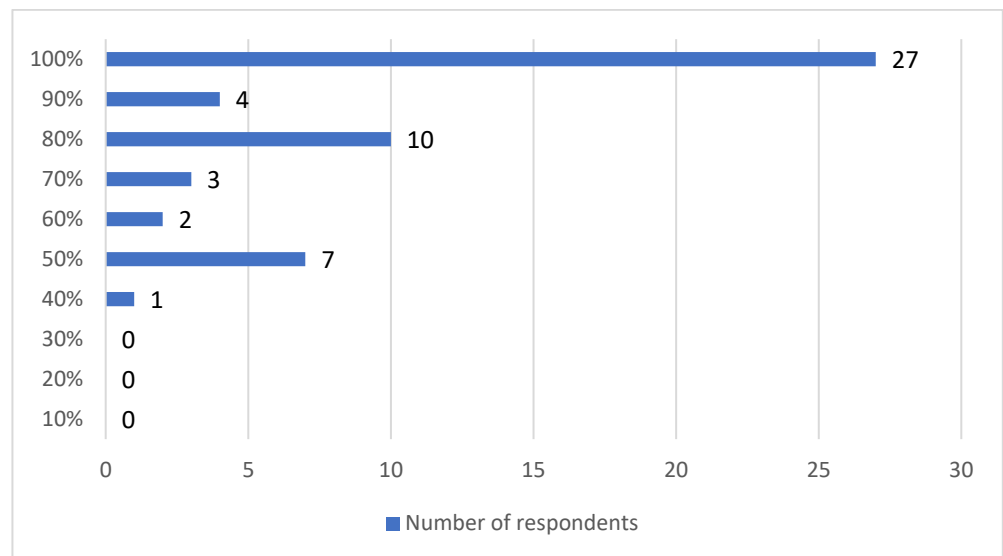


Figure 18. The vision of the locals regarding the impact that tourism can have on the economic development of the area.

- Agriculture is no longer the main source of income, with the economy returning to industry and other services; this shows that the resident population has exceeded the status of farmers and there is a desire to orient toward other areas, including tourism, even if it does not currently occupy a leading place (Figure 19).

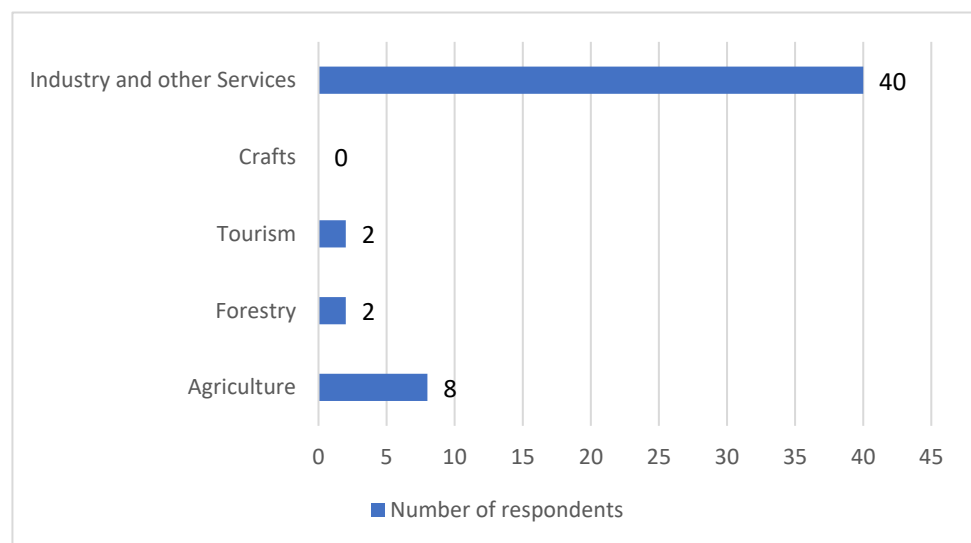


Figure 19. Respondents' main source of income.

- There exists a high degree of openness (48.1% of respondents) in terms of respondents' intention to start their own activity in the field of rural tourism (Figure 20).

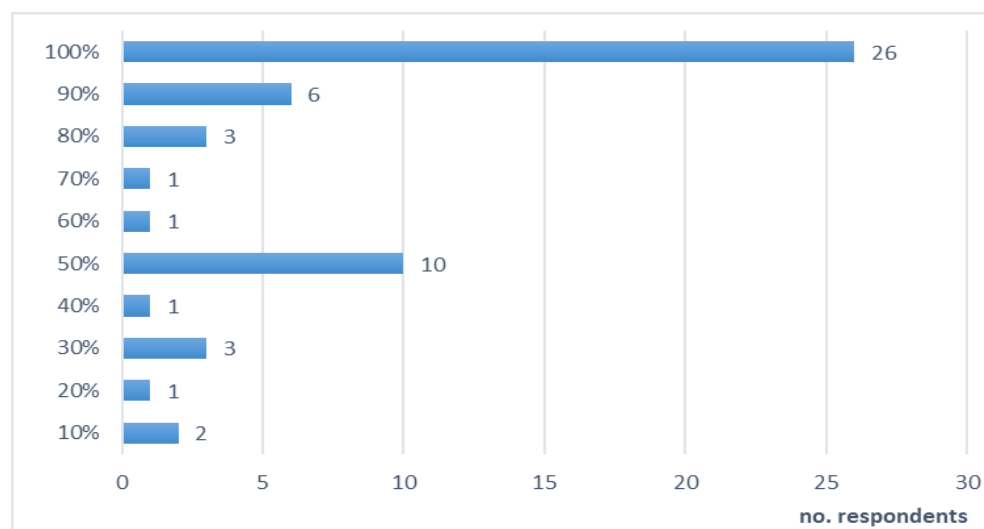


Figure 20. The intention of the locals to start their own activity in the field of rural tourism.

Following the case study, which pursued several aspects of the local community of the Gurghiului Valley, the following features were outlined: in addition to the existing tourist potential, the study area presents a relatively large and balanced population in terms of population distribution by gender, with respondents predominantly within the 30 to 49 year age group; this denotes the existence of an optimal workforce to satisfy tourist activity. Regarding unemployment, a decrease in its rate can be observed in the last 20 years, which shows that there is an incremental increase in the actively working population registered with a work permit, gradually surpassing registration of the population only in the primary sector (agriculture).

Although from a social point of view, the study area reveals a satisfactory level, we cannot say the same with regard to the technical and material tourist base. Following the research carried out, we found, first of all, the existence of a fairly small number of tourist reception structures with accommodation and public catering functions to support intense tourist activity.

Another problem identified in carrying out this case study is the existence of previously mentioned unauthorized structures, in other words, structures undeclared to the competent authorities for authorization and inclusion on the official list (NIS, NTA). As could be observed in the study, in the part related to interpretation of the data provided by the NIS and NTA compared to the reality on the ground, the Gurghiului Valley currently owns such tourist reception structures; as they are not officially registered, this places the studied area in an unfavorable place in the rural tourism landscape of Romania.

As for the results obtained by applying the questionnaire method, they show us even more clearly why rural tourism is not found to be a constant economic activity in the Gurghiului Valley, given that this area has a complex tourist heritage, a stable and work-capable population and many aspects that give it uniqueness.

Thus, one of the problems—major, we could say—identified following the application of the questionnaires among the local authorities and the local inhabitants is that of deficient promotion of the researched area. Both local officials and inhabitants agreed that much higher investment is needed to promote the image of the Gurghiului Valley.

Another problem identified is related to the fact that neither the local authorities nor the inhabitants are familiar with many of the attractive resources that have the capacity to start and support rural tourism.

Although so far, we have mainly listed the negative aspects identified by the application of the two research methods, we must also mention the positive aspects. Three of the four communes of the Gurghiului Valley have a tourism development strategy, with the

local authorities aware of the contribution that rural tourism can have on the social and economic development of the local community.

At the same time, the survey of local inhabitants revealed that the majority of them would like to undertake a tourist activity and are very convinced that rural tourism could become a sustainable source of income.

5. Conclusions

Our approach, whose main purpose was to identify and highlight the role of tourism, in general, and that of rural tourism, in particular, focused on the revitalization and socio-economic development of the studied area, and it represents the first stage of more extensive and complex research on the area.

In addition, our approach was to design and develop an integrated strategy for the development of rural tourism within the communities from Gurghiului Valley area, with the aim of raising awareness; motivating and empowering potential providers of tourism products and services, but also public authorities at the local and governmental levels; and to integrate, efficiently and functionally, the efforts of all the actors involved or interested in achieving this major objective.

As a result, this first stage was indispensable to ensure the logical and chronological succession of the other necessary phases and, finally, the elaboration of the mentioned strategy, whose aim was to identify natural and anthropogenic tourist resources with attractive values that can shape the primary touristic offer of the studied area, but also the economic and human resources that might actively support the development of rural tourism and, through it, the socio-economic progress of the entire area.

The main contribution of this research is to provide a framework to meet our main aim: to reveal the fact that the Gurghiului Valley—“*Valley of the Kings*”—represents an area with an interesting past in terms of tourism practice. In this sense, possessing significant tourist potential both in terms of natural and anthropic heritage, the Gurghiului Valley has the necessary basis for starting and practicing quality rural tourism.

Moreover, this research underlines the fact that the Gurghiului Valley—“*Valley of the Kings*”—represents a tourist area with an interesting past that has supported the practice of rural tourism in one form or another over time, a form of tourism that has developed with small steps but could “explode” in a positive sense if some of the above-mentioned aspects are taken into account.

Furthermore, greater involvement and awareness on the part of the local authorities and the local inhabitants would assist in creating a competitive tourist destination in the Gurghiului Valley on the Romanian tourist market, because we are talking about an area where the natural heritage is intertwined with the variety of anthropogenic heritage, resulting in a high degree of attractiveness. However, the promotion of the tourist potential of the area is closely related to the capacity of the local community to “sell their goods” in a dynamic and efficient way.

The achievement of the final objective requires the continuation of this first stage of the analysis with a series of in-depth studies, structured on several levels, allowing the capture of other relevant and useful aspects (see below); on the basis of these, it would be possible to correctly identify the directions of action, to clearly and objectively define the objectives and the targeted measures. In this respect, we intend to use and implement some pertinent state-of-the-art qualitative and quantitative methods that may improve our initial results and conclusion. Some of the methods we will target in our following research (listed below) have already been used in previous studies, from which interesting, useful and highly applicable results will adequately support the achievement of the final goal of the research, namely the fact that rural tourism can become a viable alternative capable of contributing to real and effective socio-economic development in the Gurghiului Valley.

- (1) Revealing the attractive value of the identified tourist resources that form the current touristic offerings, which can be obtained via an qualitative and quantitative quantification of the resources that compose the natural and anthropic tourism potential

of the studied area; therefore, it is necessary to identify all existing tourist resources that have the capacity to support the practice of rural tourism in the mentioned area and to assess their attractive value. This can be achieved using a complex index (Golembki's index), based on multivariate comparative analysis, assessing the natural and human-made features and the degree of development of each locality from studied area [104,105]. This would facilitate the value hierarchy of the inventory resources and establish the priorities of the process of tourism development in terms of objectives and tourist locations in the Gurghiului Valley, a process that will be able to complement the current touristic offerings. In this respect, we will focus on qualitative and quantitative investigation of the potentiality of the whole studied area by dividing it into several touristic areas, based on its physiographic setting and Land Use–Land Cover (LULC) features, using satellite image data [106,107]. Additionally, it is important to reveal how to use the spatial distribution of tourism resources and the influencing factors in order to promote the sustainable development of rural tourism and sustain rural revitalization of the local communities from Gurghiului Valley.

- (2) Understanding if the effects of choice attributes on rural tourism are important in order to find a way to offer services and products that can appeal to customers via exploration of tourists' preferences and examination of the individual determinants of these preferences [108].
- (3) Evaluating how site attributes affect the choice of a host area or location from the studied area in different tourism markets [109].
- (4) The use of discrete choice experiments for measuring and predicting individuals' preferences and choices of alternatives, and whether these preferences could provide quantitative measures of the relative importance of the attributes of tourism destinations, products, or services, in order to find out tourists' willingness to pay for various services [110,111].
- (5) Exploring tourists' preferences for various destinations, taking into account the effects of the modernization of the transport network (the increase in accessibility and safety and the decrease in the time needed to access different tourist attractions in the studied area) and if this can contribute to the planning, marketing, management and sustainable development of different types of tourism that can be practiced in the studied area [112].

Additionally, the lack of an investigation in the form of interviews targeting all the actors involved in tourism activity at the level of the study area requires that, in addition to the interviews and questionnaires applied at the level of local authorities and local residents, the analysis should also be extended to the other main actors in terms of tourism activity (namely the tourism service providers in the study area and, to the greatest extent possible, the tourists who arrive at the Gurghiului Valley).

As for the data-driven methods via which some of the above-mentioned aspects could be investigated, we can mention: machine learning methods, which could help identify the most useful search query data to significantly improve forecasting accuracy in tourism (proposed by [113]), and the human-guided machine learning classification method based on tourist selection behavior, which can effectively help tourists make decisions in choosing tourist destinations (proposed by [114]).

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