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PROSPECTS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL TOURISM IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

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Abstract

This article presents the prospects for the development of rural tourism in the Republic of Moldova. Its aim is to analyze and identify the forms of active tourism in the Republic of Moldova and its correlation with rural tourism, as well as to make a comparative analysis of rural tourism with other countries.

For the development of rural tourism, it is worth mentioning that it is a rather new and promising branch of tourism activity, the essence of which lies in the fact that almost all tourism services in rural areas are provided by the inhabitants of these villages, from accommodation and food services to recreation.

In the context of developing the prospects for rural tourism, it is necessary to analyze the statistical data and indicate in general terms the forms of tourist activity taking place on the territory of the Republic of Moldova.

One of the main advantages of rural tourism development in the Republic of Moldova relates to the development of the rural sector.

Key words: *rural tourism, tourist activity, economic competitiveness, promotion methods, tourist resources.*
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A number of significant problems related to the implementation of tourism activities, including rural activities in the Republic of Moldova, have also been identified. For instance, not all the concepts used in the legislative acts are in line with the UNWTO recommendations; Moldovan tourism agencies do not properly use the potential of Moldovan rural tourism forms; tourist routes in the field of excursion activities are not accompanied by the necessary information about them and they are not certified; tourism infrastructure is one of the most problematic issues requiring serious intervention - the problems noted relate mainly to the state of public roads, the presence of a single airport in the country, the exorbitant price of air tickets, the inadequate qualifications of staff in the service sectors, from taxi drivers and public transport to staff in accommodation establishments and guides, etc. [1, c. 27].

The conclusion drawn from the analysis of rural tourism in the Republic of Moldova reveals that it has a number of advantages, namely: tourist resources which will favorably influence the interest of tourists in the Republic of Moldova as a rural tourism destination; legislation which includes rural tourism; world-famous Moldovan wine and everything associated with it: wine cellars, cooking technology, which also favorably influences the development of rural tourism, as each rural household has its own small wine cellar. History, culture and traditions of the Moldovan people, if used properly, can also take rural tourism in Moldova to a whole new level.

However, one cannot fail to mention the shortcomings that can negatively affect the development of rural tourism. These refer to the lack of qualified personnel in most rural areas, the low level of infrastructure, and there is still no running water in some villages. Accommodation facilities are underdeveloped, all these shortcomings and threats should be minimized, and only the advantages should be highlighted. In order to minimize the disadvantages of rural tourism in the Republic of Moldova and to increase people's enthusiasm for rural tourism, it is necessary to focus on the positive aspects, i.e. proper marketing and promotion of rural tourism resources will definitely attract tourists,

both local and foreign, who are interested in national culture, customs and traditions; competent use of Moldovan hospitality as a resource and large-scale wine production can form a unique tourist route in rural areas; ease of border crossing, i.e. visa-free regime with EU, CIS, and the USA, is definitely an advantage for Moldova as a tourist destination; adjustment of tourism legislation to all WTO conditions and standards will also be a great advantage; review of tourism policy, including rural tourism, by actively encouraging start-up entrepreneurs; allocation of funds for improvement of existing accommodation facilities, natural, cultural and historical monuments; benefits, subsidies, various tenders should become an integral part of rural tourism legislation.

Rural tourism itself is a fairly new and promising area of tourism activity. Essentially, nearly all tourism services in rural areas are provided by the local people themselves, including accommodation, food and leisure activities. To some extent, this makes it easier to carry out tourist activities. As well as the fact that rural tourism is promising for the community, as the areas and the communities develop, rural tourism also has a positive effect on the development of the country's economy.

To indicate the prospects for rural tourism in the Republic of Moldova, it is worth mentioning generally the forms of tourism activities that are carried out on the territory of the Republic of Moldova. The country offers a large number of different tourism forms, but they are all developed to different degrees. They can be divided into three conditional groups:

Active (mastered) forms of tourism [7]:

a) *Rural tourism*. The Republic of Moldova has great potential for the development of this form of tourism, due to its natural resources, history, etc.

b) *Viticulture and wine tourism (oeno-tourism)*. In the Republic of Moldova there are expensive wine tours, accommodation in prestigious hotels, villas, long-term wine tasting, to become acquainted with Moldovan wine, tourists can also visit the countryside, where each elder will tell about his unique technology of production, storage, etc. Such kind of tour is not worse than the most expensive ones, because wine and grapes are the pride of the Republic of Moldova;

c) *Religious / spiritual tourism* involves visiting various churches, temples, cathedrals in the Republic of Moldova. This can involve attending services, prayers and getting to know the architecture and the religious, spiritual significance for the local inhabitants;

d) *Excursion tourism* in the Republic of Moldova, as practice shows, among the local population is more developed than, say, wine tourism. It involves the services of a guide along a designated route through attractions with various purposes, both entertaining and educational;

e) *Business tourism*, which includes travel for delegation purposes, official receptions, participation in exhibitions, participation in conferences.

Less active (less developed) forms of tourism are:

a) *Cultural tourism*, which involves tourist trips for learning about the country's culture, history and national customs (music, clothing, dances); museums and various exhibitions are also part of this type of tourism. Cultural tourism in Moldova is very promising thanks to its rich history and large number of historical sites.

b) *Gastronomic tourism* consists of a trip aimed at getting acquainted with the national cuisine and the culinary rules that have been observed since immemorial times.

c) *Sports tourism* is carried out with the aim of spending leisure time in an active way, learning or improving skills in various sports, through active participation in sports events, competitions, etc. In Moldova there is also a great potential for this type of tourism, as the country has a large number of diverse stadiums, venues that deserve attention, as well as many professionals, masters of sports who could actively participate in such events.

d) *Nostalgic tourism* consists essentially of individuals who have permanently relocated to

another country. These people return to visit their families, relatives or cemeteries as a tribute to memory.

The following types of tourism show great promise in the Republic of Moldova:

a) *Academic tourism*, which entails attracting people to study in the country. In recent years, there has been a trend that Moldovan citizens tend to go abroad to higher education institutions, however, the Republic of Moldova also provides high quality secondary and higher education as well as providing vocational training to foreign students;

b) *Medical and health tourism*, meaning the provision of medical treatments to foreign citizens on the territory of the Republic of Moldova or simply the strengthening of health measures. It is actively requested by diaspora representatives returning to Moldova for medical services. This tourism is promising given that medicines in Moldova are much cheaper than in EU countries;

c) *Adventure tourism* can also gain recognition in Moldova, as it consists of an active form of leisure activities: motorcycling, cycling, hiking, rafting, parachuting, horse riding. Moldova offers all of these, which can be very attractive to tourists.

It should be noted that each of the above-mentioned types of tourism, with the exception of those in the straightforward academic and business sense, can be combined with rural tourism. Each type of tourism, except for what can take place in the countryside, is welcomed in villages and towns by local residents. Nature and landscapes allow for active leisure time, a large number of talented and intelligent individuals live in villages, who can go on a full-fledged excursion or teach a particular sport or activity. This is a direct prospect for the development of rural tourism in Moldova.

Table 1 presents the data on tourism activity of travel agencies and tour operators in the Republic of Moldova in 2021.

Table 1. Tourism activity of travel agencies and tour operators in 2021

Type of tourism	**Number of arrivals**		
	Total	**of which:**	
		Tourists	**Excursionists**
Incoming (accommodation of foreign citizens in the Republic of Moldova), **total**	24006	3879	20127
Of which by purpose:			
Tourism, recovery and recreation	22457	2330	20127
On personal and work matters	1467	1467	-
For treatment	82	82	-
Internal (accommodation of citizens of the Republic of Moldova on Moldovan territory for tourism purposes)	79196	18392	60804

Source: elaborated by the authors based on [6]

According to the data of the National Bureau of Statistics, the Republic of Moldova stands out in the tourism market as follows [6]:

1. Competitive price - 32nd place;
2. Health and Hygiene - ranks 34th;
3. Level of security - ranks 69th.

However, some points where Moldova is significantly lagging behind:

1. In terms of the quality of public roads, it ranks 130th;
2. In terms of tourism infrastructure, it ranks 131st;
3. In terms of attractiveness of natural heritage - 132nd place;

4. In terms of country brand promotion - 134th place.

Based on the statistical data in the table, it can be concluded that the number of foreign tourists and visitors for 2021 amounted to 26 thousand people, which, compared to the comparison indicators of 2020 and 2019, shows an increase of 17.1 thousand people, an increase by 3.5 times. The number of tourists and visitors participating in domestic tourism in 2021 was 79.2 thousand visitors, an increase by 1.8 times compared to 2020, amid a decrease in the indicator in 2020 compared to 2019 by about 3.3 thousand people (-7.1%). Tourist trips of Moldovan residents within the country were mainly organized by travel agencies and tour operators in the municipality of Chisinau (53.5%), development regions Center (36.1%) and South (8.2%). Based on these data, it can be concluded that there is a positive tendency in the field of tourism, expressed as an increase in the number of foreign tourists and participants in domestic tourism in the Republic of Moldova, which makes the prospect of successful development of rural tourism in the Republic of Moldova evident, as each year Moldova becomes more and more interesting for foreign tourists as a rural tourist destination.

To develop more targeted marketing activities and promotion methods in order to attract foreign tourists, the statistics of visits of foreign tourists and visitors to the Republic of Moldova in 2021 will be taken into account, broken down by country, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Statistics of the highest number of visits of foreign tourists and excursionists to the Republic of Moldova by country in 2021

Country name	**Number of tourists and excursionists**
Total:	**24006**
Austria	781
Russian Federation	3711
Germany	270
Italy	2430
Poland	4147
United Kingdom	776
Romania	8421
Turkey	105
Ukraine	2735

Source: elaborated by the authors based on [6]

The development trend of rural tourism in Moldova is positive and progressive. Interest in rural tourism in the Republic of Moldova exists not only among foreign tourists, but also among Moldovan citizens who cannot travel abroad, who wish to spend their holidays in a familiar natural environment. The phenomenon of rural tourism in the Republic of Moldova itself is very promising, as Moldova possesses an enormous potential of resources for rural tourism. There is a large number of rural regions on the territory of the Republic of Moldova, which can be involved in rural tourism, given the interest of citizens from other countries, making it a very promising source of income both for the state and for the regions themselves. The emphasis on less developed types of tourism in rural areas, e.g. gastronomic tourism, sports, medical and health tourism, in combination with rural, wine and religious tourism, collectively create a unique and interesting tourism product.

Rural tourism in the Republic of Moldova is a very promising direction for the development of both the state as a whole and for the development of the rural regions themselves. Tourism generates new jobs, improves infrastructure, increases the income level of the local population, preserves and develops local natural and historical attractions.

Moldova is rich in tourism resources, including in rural areas. Besides the well-known Moldovan hospitality, a huge number of villages with beautiful landscapes, scenery and nature, Moldova has a

great number of attractions, more than 300 significant nature reserves, about 400 settlements from different historical periods, about 50 ancient fortresses, about 500 settlements from the early Middle Ages, 6 medieval stone fortresses, more than 1000 architectural monuments under protection, more than 50 Orthodox monasteries. Nowadays rural tourism activities are not adequately using rural tourism resources to their full potential. In order to bring rural tourism in Moldova to the appropriate level, a clear development programme is needed, which will make rural tourism more attractive to foreign citizens, will regulate tourism activities in rural areas, and will make the process of carrying out tourism activities fair and profitable for all participants in rural tourism activities.

Currently, almost any activity, in one way or another, directly intersects or collides with the provision of services of any kind, which in turn requires constant improvement to continue to adequately meet the needs of the consumer. The exact picture emerges in rural tourism, as it is an activity aimed at meeting the needs of a person, a tourist, through the provision of various services related to tourism, in this case rural tourism. It can be participation in agricultural activities, the purchase of locally handmade souvenirs, tours to rural attractions and places of local pride, all of these are services offered as part of rural tourism. And like all types of service, rural tourism services need constant stimulation, development and improvement.

The range of services is not much different from the general definition and classification of tourism services, broadly speaking rural tourism, including in the Republic of Moldova. In rural areas, tourist accommodation, catering, transport services, infrastructure services (shops, small souvenir shops), sightseeing tours, and entertainment activities are also offered. However, rural tourism, whose main message is acquaintance with nature, antiquity, history and people, is questioned by private car rental, business centers, conference halls, and modern beauty salons. Typically, throughout a tourist's stay in rural tourism, the theme of authenticity of people, original customs, traditions, even cooking takes place in a special way, which, of course, does not mean large business centers, large enterprises, etc.

In order to identify strategic directions for improving services in rural tourism, it is necessary to pinpoint the factors that affect the quality of tourism services, including rural tourism.

1.Timely selection and organization of a suitable tour according to customer demand;

2.Customer service quality when choosing a tour;

3.Rapidity of obtaining additional information at the customer's request;

4.Politeness and receptiveness of the staff both when choosing a tour, attention to preferences and at the place of arrival;

5.Compliance of the proposed tour with reality;

6.Availability of all discussed aspects of the service at the place of arrival in the tourist destination.

In order to improve the quality of services provided in rural tourism, especially in the Republic of Moldova, it is necessary to develop an effective system of service quality management in rural tourism. The management system will ensure a competent approach to the organization and provision of tourism services, ensure continuous improvement of these services and their performance, ensure monitoring of service providers' qualifications and competent allocation of resources (material, technical, human) in the provision of tourism services.

However, a number of problems are likely to be encountered in the process of creating and implementing a management system and improving the quality of services in rural tourism. These relate to ignorance of the local population about the fundamentals of tourism activities and the correct provision of services, insufficient funding due to possible doubts about the profitability of implementing such a system.

The following principles should be followed when establishing a quality management system for services provided in rural areas:

1.In order to ensure high quality services, it is necessary to provide employees with opportunities for continuous and advanced training and to develop a set of rules for the appropriate service of guests.

2.The range of accommodation services should always take into account the needs of potential customers and ensure the possibility of an individual approach.

3.It should be guided primarily by the fact that the main task of providing any service is to meet consumers' needs or exceed their expectations of the service.

4.Assessment of the quality of service provided should be based on consumer feedback and comments.

5.The primary objective of all accommodation in rural areas should be focused on meeting the needs of consumers as far as possible but without exceeding their capabilities.

6.According to consumer evaluations, reviews and comments, the task of accommodation facilities is to correct any shortcomings in the work carried out.

7.An incentive system needs to be developed in order to motivate employees to work better and harder.

The desired improvement in the quality of services provided for visiting tourists can be achieved in a short time by implementing a service quality management system in rural tourism and by following all the aforementioned principles. In fact, the most important and significant areas of service improvement are: the possibility of evaluating the services provided, the possibility of continuous training of staff to improve their skills and the existence of a service quality management system which, as a managerial link, will be able to steer the activities of rural enterprises involved in tourism activities in the right direction on the road to high quality services.

With regard to the strategic directions for improving services in rural tourism in the Republic of Moldova, beyond the implementation of the management system, an enterprise that is involved in tourism activities in rural areas must always take into account and respect three major and fundamental principles:

Firstly – mandatory compliance with the principles of modern service, which implies:

1.Maximum consistency of services and consumer demands.

2.Ensuring a close link between services and marketing.

3.Adaptability of services to changing market requirements and consumer demands.

Secondly – providing comfortable and fair working conditions for staff, which implies the following:

1.Comfortable and equipped workplaces for staff.

2.A clear set of rules that every employee must follow.

3.An evaluation system for the quality of each staff member's work.

4.An incentive system to motivate employees to genuinely want to make a positive contribution to the development of a rural service enterprise.

5.Providing opportunities for advanced training.

Thirdly – improving the organizational structure of the enterprise, i.e., ensuring the correct procedure for transferring the product, in this case the service, to the customer.

Fourth – full objective control over the quality of services, which is one of the most important principles for improving services in rural tourism with the following implications:

1.Involvement of tourists and customers in assessing the quality-of-service provision.

2.Compliance with the standards of tourism activities in rural areas.

3.Establishing criteria for assessing the quality of services provided.

4.Implementation of technical means for monitoring and controlling the quality of services.

5.Introducing to the staff the individuals who will be responsible for the various organizational aspects of the rural tourism enterprise, e.g., recruiter, marketing manager, accountants, security specialists.

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