

**RESEARCH ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL TOURISM IN THE
„ȚINUTUL SECUIESC” AND ITS IMPLICATIONS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF
THE RURAL SPACE**

**ADAMOV TABITA¹, IANCU TIBERIU*¹, PEȚ ELENA¹, PÎRVULESCU LUMINIȚA¹,
MATEOC-SÎRB NICOLEȚA¹, POPESCU GABRIELA¹**

*¹University of Life Sciences „King Mihai I” from Timisoara,
Faculty of Management and Rural Tourism, Romania*

*Corresponding author's e-mail: iancutiberiu10@gmail.com

Abstract: *"Székely Land" is - in the historical-ethnographic sense - the region in the south-eastern part of Transylvania, mostly inhabited by Székely Land, which includes the territories of the former Scythian chairs. Colloquially, the name "Székely Land" refers only to the territory formed by the counties: Covasna, Harghita and part of the county Mures. Having a rich natural and human tourism potential, the "Székely Land" is establishing itself as an important tourist area both regionally, nationally and internationally, as evidenced by the large number of foreign tourists who visit this land. In the last 20 years, rural tourism has registered a spectacular dynamic, even if, currently, the tourist potential is not utilized to the maximum extent.*

Key words: *rural space, rural tourism, "Székely Land", sustainable development*

INTRODUCTION

Rural tourism has a larger coverage area, including agritourism. But, unlike rural tourism, agritourism must comply with a series of criteria related to consumers, such as: staying in a peasant household, consuming agricultural products obtained in that household, participating, as far as possible, in various household activities. [1,8]

From the definitions of rural tourism and agritourism, which will be presented next, it will be possible to identify the main differences between these two concepts.

Rural tourism represents the form of tourism focused on destinations in the rural area, having a functional structure of accommodation and other heterogeneous services.

The development of Romanian villages has always been strongly marked by non-agrarian activities, because they have a complementary function in the rural economy. The village community could not survive without certain services provided by some of its members, who perform elementary work in the agricultural sector and thus contribute to obtaining a more decent standard of living. [5,7,10]

Among other valorizing activities of the village's potential, the idea of combining traditional activities with those related to hospitality and recreation was born. The idea of rural tourism starts from the fact that the agricultural household is, in general, in a natural, unpolluted environment, carrying cultural veins specific to the area of existence, that the agricultural farm has complete natural resources that can ensure the stay of any tourist, and not in the last line that the gates are opened for the valorization of rural spaces and agricultural products owned by pure rural farmers. [9,13]

Even though for now rural tourism has a small share of the tourist market, its growth trends are obvious and therefore can generate positive effects on rural socio-economic life. Rural tourism can bring about changes in the use of the labor force by encouraging and financing new types of activities that can give more vitality to deficient and perfectible economic states. [6,14]

The main implications of promoting tourism in rural areas are:

- **Stabilizing the population by fixing the workforce** it is an extremely important consequence for many rural areas generally faced with the phenomenon of depopulation that occurred especially because of the absence of a definite material perspective of the inhabitants.

The cash flow from tourism benefits can help preserve jobs in services such as trade, tourist accommodation, local transport, healthcare. They can bring additional income to farmers, forestry workers, fishermen. Even if the preservation of jobs is a less attractive objective than the creation of new jobs, it can contribute to the viability of rural communities and especially those of the marginal type, which do not benefit from the effects of urban polarization. [2,11]

- **Creation of new job** sit is possible under the conditions in which the local implementation of rural tourism is carried out successfully. The creation of jobs is associated especially with hotel and restaurant practices but, in the subsidiary, their success creates prospects for the amplification of activities related to the trade in food products and handicrafts, transport, capitalization of its heritage Studies carried out in Great Britain highlight a variation in the number of jobs created depending on the type of activity.

- **Diversification of the use of labor forces.** The vast majority of rural areas show little diversity in the way labor is used, almost entirely in the agricultural sector. The diversification of activities in a favorable economic context can also lead to the stabilization of the rural population.

- **Pluriactivity** is another beneficial consequence of rural tourism. It designates the situation in which, at the individual or family level, ensuring existence is achieved by providing additional activities (at least one), in addition to the basic activity. Thus, a farmer can have the availability to rent rooms, to help the local administration by providing tourist services (guide, animator, ski instructor). Pluriactivity allows the realization of additional incomes, both in the context of the decline of a type of activity, and in that of the constraints generated by the seasonal rhythmicity of agricultural activities.

- **Promotion and development of services** is an essential aspect even more since many rural communities are still frequently burdened by the absence of appropriate service facilities. The additional demand for products caused by the numerical increase of the clientele (including the tourist one) can allow the expansion of the commercial network, the support of habitat improvement works (modernization of roads, sewers, electrification, road and tourist signage), the development of public transport, services postal and communication. It is as important to attract and maintain the clientele as to increase it; this fact does not happen by itself, a concerted policy of all the variables acting on the clientele being necessary. [3,12]

- The economic support of farmers is a major issue in economic and political environments. Numerous studies carried out in countries with a tradition in rural tourism have highlighted that the average income of farmers can be increased by offering different forms of accommodation, by promoting visits to agricultural farms that possess various attraction functions (horse riding, winemaking, vegetable growing, beekeeping, etc.), by selling household-specific products, by increasing the share of the use of female power in non-agricultural activities. In addition to the economic advantages that can encourage farmers to engage in tourism activities, the social advantages cannot be ignored. [1,4,9]

In general, the "The Székely Land" is considered to consist of the present counties of Covasna, Harghita and Mureş. "The Székely Land" is particularly known for its mountain landscape and spa resorts with mineral water springs, and benefits from a rich cultural heritage. [17,19]

The existing resources of the region determine the visibility of the area. These resources are identified both in the natural and in the anthropized one. [16,18] "The Székely Land" has a valuable tourist potential, thanks to its picturesque landscape, rich mineral waters, skunks, but also through the existence of historical and cultural monuments of art and architecture. The diversity of natural forms becomes a tourist attraction, with visitors to the area coming to admire the landscape that has undergone minimal changes caused by human activity. [18,19]

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research was carried out based on statistical data provided by the National Institute of Statistics and other institutions that have useful information in this regard. The information sources used are official sources and are represented by: Statistical Yearbook, Central Region Development Strategy 2021-2027, Center Regional Development Plan 2021-2027, The Tourism Development Strategy of Harghita County, the Rural Development Strategy of Harghita County for the period 2020-2030. The analysis of statistical data was carried out with the help of economic indicators specific to tourism activity, and a series of conclusions were formulated based on the results obtained. The indicators were calculated on the base of statistical data.

RESEARCH RESULTS

"The Székely Land" it stands out for its mountainous relief and balneoclimatic resorts as well as for its rich cultural potential. The valuable elements of cultural and iconographic heritage recognized both nationally and internationally are supplemented by numerous ethno-folkloric resources that can be observed both in museums and in rural areas on various religious holidays. All these aspects have made, as during the last decades, Covasna, Harghita and Mures counties become rural tourist destinations, appreciated both here in the country and abroad.

Table 1. presents the evolution of tourist reception units, with accommodation function, existing at the level of the Central Region.

Table 1.
Tourist reception units with accommodation function, Central Region, 2005-2023

	2005	2010	2015	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Total								
Center Region	993	1188	2107	2249	2333	2973	3054	3169
Alba	27	67	159	196	227	305	333	357
Brasov	403	474	886	930	902	1207	1229	1253
Covasna	47	76	108	93	115	145	149	162
Harghita	301	281	357	420	408	458	494	545
Mures	104	123	282	337	363	430	428	434
Sibiu	111	167	315	273	318	428	421	418
The Székely Land	452	480	747	850	886	1033	1071	1141
Agritourism pensions								
Center Region	418	487	813	892	967	989	1019	988
Alba	11	36	81	113	126	131	132	139
Brasov	155	177	347	383	379	387	380	372
Covasna	9	28	47	36	56	45	45	50
Harghita	193	156	178	215	229	229	265	231
Mures	9	17	42	49	51	51	56	62
Sibiu	41	73	118	96	126	146	141	134
The Székely Land	211	201	267	300	336	325	366	343

Source: <http://statistici.insse.ro:8077/tempo-online/#/pages/tables/insse-table>, [15]

Recognized as a region with rich tourist potential, the Central Region will count many accommodation units, in 2023, 24.96% of the total existing accommodation units at national level will be registered here. At the level of the three component counties of "The Székely Land", Covasna, Harghita and Mures, in 2023, 45.47% of existing accommodation units in the Center Region were registered. [15,19]

During the analyzed period, there is a considerable increase in accommodation units, the average growth rate being 230.21% in the Center Region and 152.43% in "The Székely Land".

As for accommodation units of the type of agro-tourism guesthouses, the Center Region concentrates 28.24% of the total of this type of accommodation units, existing at the national level, in the year 2023.

Recognized as an area with an agro-tourism vocation, "The Székely Land" owned in the year 2023, a number of 343 agro-tourism guesthouses, i.e. 34.72% of those existing at the Regional level. Here the county of Harghita stands out, which occupies the 2nd place in the Central region, according to the number of agro-tourism guesthouses owned, concentrating 23.38% of the agro-tourism guesthouses, at the regional level and 67.35% at the level of the studied area, figure 1.

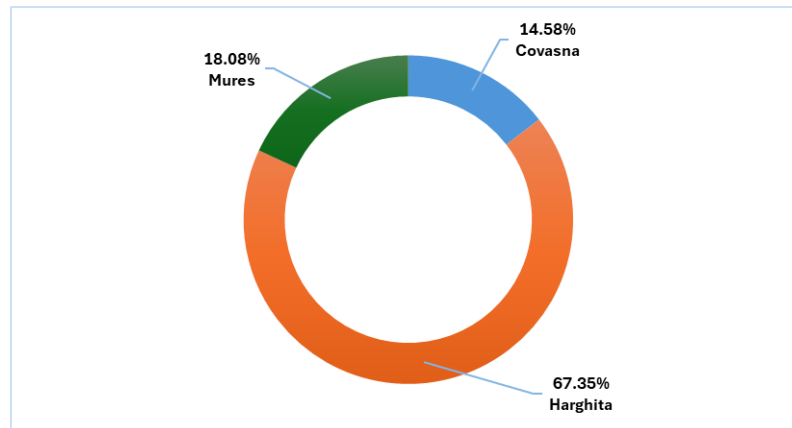


Figure 1. Distribution of agro-tourism guesthouses by the component counties of "The Székely Land" [15]

In the period 2005-2023, figure 3.2., the number of agro-tourism guesthouses registered a positive evolution, the growth rate, at the level of "The Szekely Land" being 62.56%, a value lower than the regional average – 136.36%.

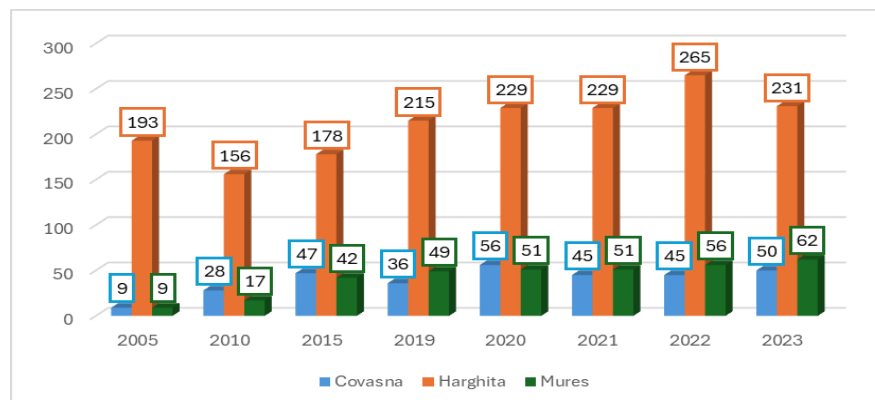


Figure 2. The evolution of the number of agritourism guesthouses, "The Szekely Land", 2005-2023 [15]

The distribution of agritourism guesthouses at the locality level is different. In each county there are a few localities that have 1, 2 or 3 agro-tourist guesthouses, table 2 shows those that have registered at least 4 agro-tourist guesthouses. In Covasna County, in the year 2023, the 5 presented localities hold 42.00% of the total number of existing agro-tourism guesthouses.

Harghita County, recognized as a county with high agrotourism potential, has a few 11 localities with more than 3 agrotourism guesthouses, in 2023, they concentrate 72.29% of the total agrotourism guesthouses.

Table 2.
The evolution of the number of agritourism guesthouses, by locality, "The Szekely Land", 2005-2023

	2005	2010	2015	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Bixad	:	2	3	3	2	2	3	4
Ozun	:	1	4	3	4	3	3	4
Turia	2	1	2	3	4	4	4	4
Valea Crisului	1	3	3	1	1	3	4	4
Zabala	:	1	2	1	2	4	3	5
Total Covasna	9	28	47	36	56	45	45	50
Gheorgheni	:	:	8	7	7	6	9	6
Ciceu	7	3	5	4	5	5	5	6
Corund	17	9	9	11	12	14	15	18
Joseni	:	3	3	4	4	4	4	5
Lazarea	3	1	4	6	6	6	6	5
Lunca de Sus	2	3	4	4	4	4	4	4
Lupeni	7	8	7	8	8	8	9	12
Pauleni-Ciuc	:	:	:	2	2	2	2	4
Praid	33	36	53	60	64	62	60	59
Voslabeni	3	7	14	15	15	14	32	13
Zetea	27	30	24	30	36	37	36	35
Total Harghita	193	156	178	215	229	229	265	231
Corunca	1	1	6	5	5	5	4	6
Eremitu	:	1	2	1	2	3	5	5
Gornesti	:	2	2	4	4	4	5	5
Saschiz	:	:	1	4	5	4	4	4
Total Mures	9	17	42	49	51	51	56	62

Source: <http://statistici.insse.ro:8077/tempo-online/#/pages/tables/insse-table>, [15]

In Mures County, in 4 localities there are more than 3 agro-tourist guesthouses, these 4 localities totaling 32.25% of the total of agro-tourist guesthouses.

Table 3.
Accommodation capacity, from agritourism guesthouses, Central Region, 2005-2023

	2005	2010	2015	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Existing capacity (number of seats)								
Center Region	4270	6814	14449	15466	16526	17191	16964	17349
Alba	168	630	1634	2140	2383	2459	2505	2596
Brasov	1785	2676	6234	6763	6695	6920	6688	6716
Covasna	106	374	648	574	762	761	734	825
Harghita	1603	1762	2819	3254	3439	3525	3511	3758
Mures	149	329	995	965	972	968	1009	1140
Sibiu	459	1043	2119	1770	2275	2558	2517	2314
"The Szekely Land"	1858	2465	4462	4793	5173	5254	5254	5723
Capacity in operation (number of seats-days)								
Center Region	1052896	1573856	3840642	4604180	3188588	4025486	4312450	4615402
Alba	22795	148354	415654	605567	422227	588956	687299	795139
Brasov	717274	932944	1990288	2116202	1574004	1825076	1945629	1980865
Covasna	30053	72384	167091	192176	137237	181857	223143	254702
Harghita	135156	123105	589671	849831	434239	624931	620592	758958
Mures	44414	107842	271116	272776	147124	163469	156909	183427
Sibiu	103204	189227	406822	567628	473757	641197	678878	642311
"The Szekely Land"	209623	303331	1027878	1314783	718600	970257	1000644	1197087

Source: <http://statistici.insse.ro:8077/tempo-online/#/pages/tables/insse-table>, [15]

The tourist accommodation capacity (existing and in operation) represents an important indicator of the tourist offer. In table 3., the evolution of tourist accommodation capacity is presented, for the period 2005-2023, at the level of the Central Region.

Regarding the analysis of the existing tourist accommodation capacity, in the agro-tourism guesthouses, in the Central Region, it can be observed that, in 2023, "The Szekely Land" concentrates almost a third - 32.98% of the total number of accommodation places, at the regional level. Most of these are registered in Harghita County - 65.66% of the total number of existing accommodation places in "The Szekely Land".

In the analyzed period, in "The Szekely Land", the existing accommodation capacity, specific to agro-tourism guesthouses, indicates an upward trend, figure 3., registering an average growth rate of 208.02%, the value being lower than the regional average – 306.30%.

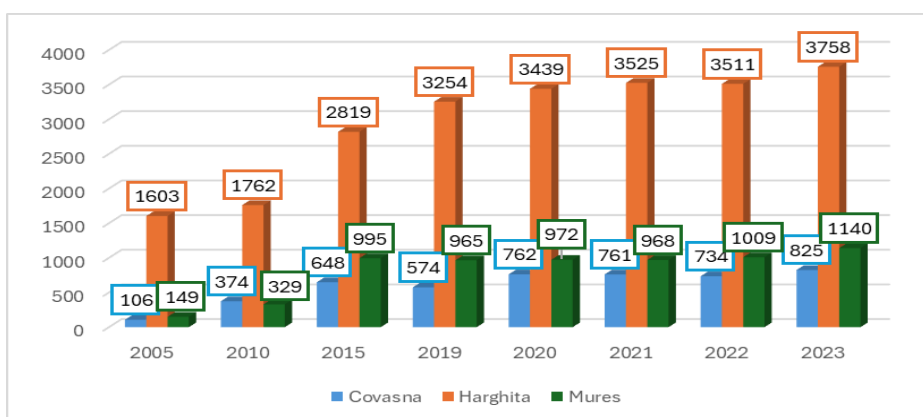


Figure 3. The evolution of the existing accommodation capacity in agro-tourism guesthouses, from "The Szekely Land", 2005-2023, [15]

The accommodation capacity in operation, in the case of agritourism guesthouses, from "The Szekely Land", represented in 2023, 25.94% of the existing one at the level of the Central Region. Harghita County owns 63.40% of the operational accommodation capacity of the analyzed area.

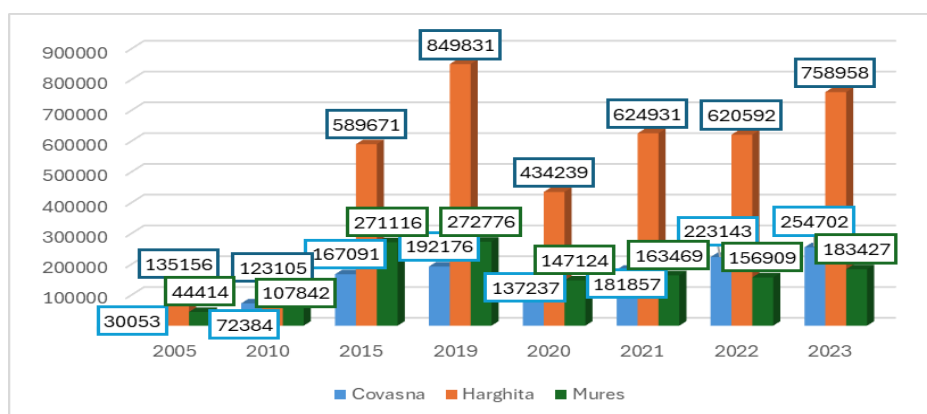


Figure 4. The evolution of the accommodation capacity in operation, from agritourism guesthouses, from "The Szekely Land", 2005-2023, [15]

In the period 2005-2023, the value of the accommodation capacity in operation, from the agro-tourism guesthouses, from "The Szekely Land", increased constantly, until 2020, when due to the Covid 19 pandemic and the security conditions imposed by it, it decreased, in the following years resuming its upward trend, figure 4., during the period

2005-2019, the average rate of increase was 527.21%. In 2020, the capacity reduction in operation was achieved with a percentage of 45.34%. In 2023, the value of the accommodation capacity in operation increased by 66.59%, compared to 2020.

The net utilization index of the tourist accommodation capacity in operation expresses its effective use, being determined as the ratio between the total number of overnight stays and the accommodation capacity in operation.

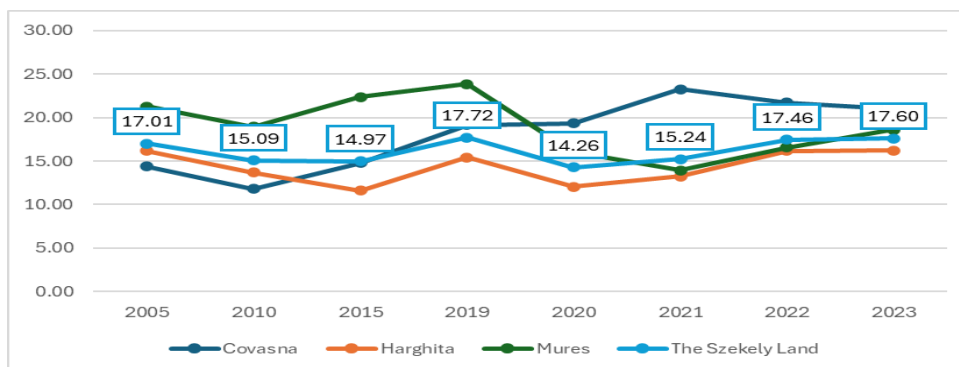


Figure 5. The evolution of the net utilization index of the accommodation capacity in operation, in agro-tourism guesthouses, from "The Szekely Land", 2005-2023, [15]

Figure 5. presents the index of net use of the accommodation capacity in operation, in the agro-tourism guesthouses in "The Szekely Land", in the period 2005-2023.

At the zonal level, the highest value of the net utilization index of the accommodation capacity in operation was recorded in 2019 - 17.72%. In 2020, due to the restrictions imposed by the covid 19 pandemic, the value of the indicator drops to 14.26%, the lowest value, and starting from 2021, after the restrictions are lifted, increases are recorded, reaching in 2023, a value approximately equal to that of 2019 – 17.60%.

In the period 2005-2019, only in Mures county are recorded values higher than the zonal average, in terms of the degree of utilization of the capacity in operation, and starting from 2020, in Covasna County are recorded values higher than the zonal average.

The analysis of the net utilization index of the accommodation capacity in operation, per month, in the year 2023, indicates a higher degree of the accommodation capacity, in the summer period June-August and in December, on the winter holidays. The maximum value of the net utilization index of the accommodation capacity in operation, at the level of the studied area, was recorded in August - 26.59%.

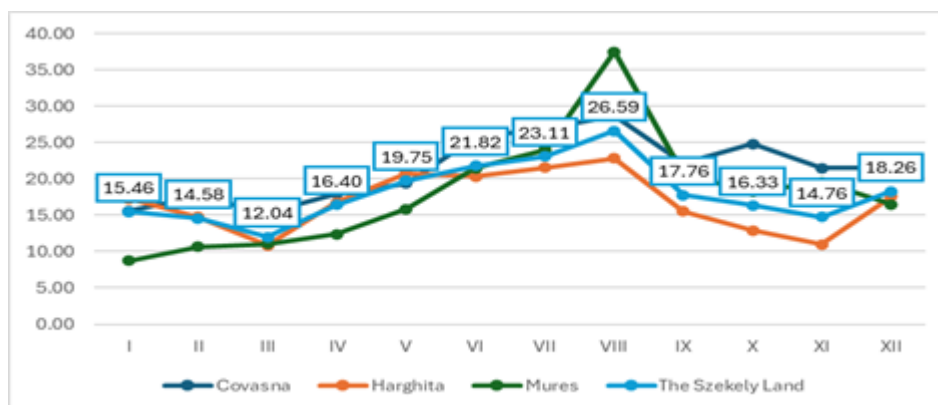


Figure 6. The evolution of the net utilization index of the accommodation capacity in operation, in agro-tourism guesthouses, from "The Szekely Land", 2023, [15]

In the counties of Mures - 37.47% and Covasna - 28.71%, the degree of utilization of the accommodation capacity in operation is higher than the regional average.

Table 4 presents the arrivals of tourists, recorded in the studied area, in the period 2005-2023. Tourists arriving at the agritourism guesthouses in "The Szekely Land" represent nearly a quarter of those registered at the level of the Central Region - 23.35%.

Table 4.
Tourist arrivals, by category, in agritourism guesthouses, Central Region, 2005-2023

	2005	2010	2015	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Total								
Covasna	1683	3626	8698	18561	14046	22985	21376	21196
Harghita	6205	5066	27052	53867	23863	35116	42744	51569
Mures	3972	13085	30361	43380	17062	15569	17150	22871
The Szekely Land	11860	21777	66111	115808	54971	73670	81270	95636
Romanian								
Covasna	814	2393	6580	15795	13729	21383	19329	19058
Harghita	3267	3031	18478	38967	22870	32149	37002	40230
Mures	3038	11221	26814	37649	16548	15072	16485	21644
The Szekely Land	7119	16645	51872	92411	53147	68604	72816	80932
Foreigners								
Covasna	869	1233	2118	2766	317	1602	2047	2138
Harghita	2938	2035	8574	14900	993	2967	5742	11339
Mures	934	1864	3547	5731	514	497	665	1227
The Szekely Land	4741	5132	14239	23397	1824	5066	8454	14704

Source: <http://statistici.insse.ro:8077/tempo-online/#/pages/tables/insse-table>, [15]

In the period 2005-2023, the arrivals of tourists in the agro-tourism guesthouses from "The Szekely Land" shows an increasing trend, except for 2020. This year, due to the limitations imposed by the Covid 19 pandemic, the number of tourists decreased by 52.53%, at the regional level. Decreases took place at the level of each county, the most pronounced reduction being recorded at the level of Mures county - 60.66%, followed by Harghita - 55.70% and Covasna - 24.32%. The values recorded at the level of Mures and Harghita counties exceed the zonal average - 52.53%.

The analysis of tourist arrivals, by category, indicates a higher share of Romanian tourists, in 2023, representing 84.62%, a difference of 15.38% being represented by foreign tourists. The share of foreign tourists arriving in agritourism guesthouses in "The Szekely Land" (15.38%) is higher than the regional average of 8.48%, indicating the preference of foreign tourists for these areas.

In the year 2023, the most foreign tourists were registered in Harghita county - 77.11% of the total number of foreign tourists arriving in the agro-tourism guesthouses in "The Szekely Land".

Analysis of the tourist circulation indicator - overnight stays by tourists, in agro-tourism guesthouses from "The Szekely Land", is presented in table 5.

In the period 2005-2023, in the agro-tourism guesthouses from "The Szekely Land", tourist overnight stays indicate a general trend of growth, except for 2020. In 2020, compared to 2019, the number of overnight stays decreased by 55.24%, the value being higher than the regional average - 42.94%. Starting from 2021, the number of overnight stays registers progressive increases annually, the average growth rate for the period 2020-2023 being 105.56%.

In 2020, the number of overnight stays decreased for both foreign and Romanian tourists. In the case of foreign tourists, the decrease was deeper 92.18% compared to that recorded in the case of Romanian tourists - 44.90%, a fact due to the restrictions imposed worldwide because of the Covid 19 pandemic.

Table 5.

**Overnight stays by tourists, by category, in agritourism guesthouses,
Central Region, 2005-2023**

	2005	2010	2015	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Total								
Covasna	4325	8539	24683	36794	26529	42270	48483	53506
Harghita	21885	16832	68575	131067	52289	82837	100225	123014
Mures	9457	20408	60626	65113	23669	22788	25991	34155
The Szekely Land	35667	45779	153884	232974	102487	147895	174699	210675
Romanian								
Covasna	1632	5190	18833	30684	25953	39196	44010	48322
Harghita	11559	9950	45698	91800	49263	75039	84957	90029
Mures	4789	13748	54751	55765	22993	22006	24767	31868
The Szekely Land	17980	28888	119282	178249	98209	136241	153734	170219
Foreigners								
Covasna	2693	3349	5850	6110	576	3074	4473	5184
Harghita	10326	6882	22877	39267	3026	7798	15268	32985
Mures	4668	6660	5875	9348	676	782	1224	2287
The Szekely Land	17687	16891	34602	54725	4278	11654	20965	40456

Source: <http://statistici.insse.ro:8077/tempo-online/#/pages/tables/insse-table>, [15]

In the year 2023, the structure by category of tourists, of overnight stays in agritourism guesthouses from "The Szekely Land", indicates a share of 80.80% of Romanian tourists and 19.20% of foreign tourists. The share of foreign tourists in the total overnight stays registered in agritourism guesthouses from "The Szekely Land" is higher than the average recorded in the Central Region - 9.31%, indicating the preference of foreign tourists for these lands.

The average length of stay indicates the capacity of the accommodation unit to retain the tourist for as long as possible. In figure 7. the evolution of the accommodation capacity, by category of tourists, in the agritourism guesthouses in "The Szekely Land", for the period 2005-2023.

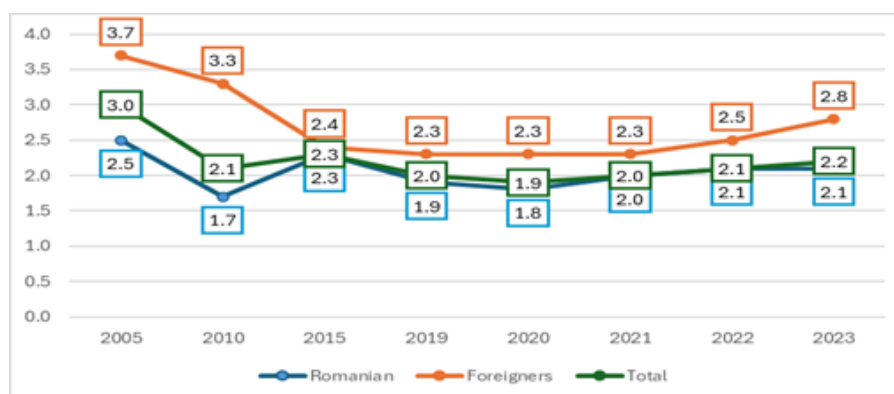


Figure 7. Average length of stay, in agro-tourism guesthouses, from "The Szekely Land", 2005-2023, [15]

From the data presented, a longer length of stay can be observed in the case of foreign tourists, the values being higher than the annual averages recorded as a whole. In the case of Romanian tourists, the values are approximately equal to those recorded at the regional level.

CONCLUSIONS

The socio-economic changes specific to rural and disadvantaged areas regarding the development and intensification of cultural and natural tourism activities constitute a true vector of the development of Romanian tourism.

"The Szekely Land" is a historical-ethnographic region located in the South-Eastern part of Transylvania that extends over the territory of 3 counties: Covasna, Harghita and Mures.

Covasna County indicates an increase in the importance of tourist activity in the county's economy, as evidenced by the increase in the number of accommodation units and their capacity, as well as the intensification of tourist traffic in this area, reflected in the increase in tourist arrivals and the occupancy rate of accommodation units. Regarding rural tourism and agritourism, the development of these forms of tourism experienced a significant rise in the localities: Turia, Braduț, Comandau, Ozun and Reci.

In Harghita reservoir, the predominance of rural settlements, the wonderful natural landscapes, the hospitality of the inhabitants associated with the cultural and ethnographic potential and the traditional gastronomy are determining factors of the intensification of rural and agro-tourism activity recorded in the last two decades.

Having a high tourist potential, embodied in a wide variety of natural and anthropic resources, Mures county is among the areas with high attractiveness both at the national and international level.

Endowed with a rich tourist potential, defined by the wide variety of elements of the natural environment, Mures County is among the areas of domestic and international attractiveness.

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