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Incentives for Developing Resilient Agritourism Entrepreneurship in Rural Communities in Romania in a European Context

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Abstract: In a global setting where the requirements for development equally address the economic viability but also social and environmental sustainability, the healthy and efficient growth of rural communities poses substantial challenges. Our paper focuses on specific conditions and constraints that influence the progress of agritourism business initiatives as viable entrepreneurial solutions for self-sustainable rural communities in Romania. To assess the impact of economic, social and tourism-related factors on agritourism entrepreneurship for Romanian counties during 2010–2015 periods, we conducted several Ordinary Least Square regression models. The results emphasize that economic indicators like regional GDP and kilometers of national roads have a positive influence on the number of agritourism business units; also, a positive impact on agritourism entrepreneurship was identified for tourism-related factors like: number of employees and corresponding salaries in tourism, total tourists, share of tourism firms and their turnover in total firms and turnover of the region, as well as preference of tourists for agritourism. The conclusions highlight the direct link between resilient agritourism entrepreneurship and sustainable development of the region and open further research directions.

Keywords: resilient agritourism entrepreneurship; green entrepreneurship; rural communities; sustainable development; agritourism boarding houses; European context; resources efficiency

1. Introduction

The recent interest in agritourism entrepreneurship is mainly due to its contribution to support the sustainable development of the rural communities. Answering to the present socio-economic changes, technological transformation and need to preserve local environment, resilient agritourism entrepreneurship is an integral part of green business.

The aim of our paper is to investigate if economic, social and tourism-related factors contribute to the development of agritourism entrepreneurship. The selection of the factors to be analyzed (like GDP, total turnover, kilometers of national roads, unemployment, tourists, employees and salaries in tourism etc.) took into account the inner nature of agritourism entrepreneurship—a business initiative based on local conditions and a specific form of rural tourism. We focused our research on Romania, due to

its strong similarities with other recently adhered countries to the European Union and its particular features leading to a nascent entrepreneurial spirit: a post-communist country with a relatively young democracy, an emerging economy with a high growth rate mainly based on internal consumption [1] with a balanced ratio between urban and rural population and one of the newest EU Member States.

The contribution of the paper to the agritourism entrepreneurship field of study is at least a two-folded one, intended to fill-in the gaps identified in the specialized literature.

Firstly, we investigated the influence of a broad array of factors (economic, social and tourism-related) on the development of agritourism entrepreneurship, while a similar approach in terms of selected issues was not found in previous studies. When looking at factors that influence the propensity to develop entrepreneurship activities in agritourism, several researches focus more on a microeconomic perspective, by emphasizing characteristics of the farmer [2–13] and characteristics of the farm/surrounding land [2,7,13–19]. There are fewer studies that take into account the macroeconomic approach, for example, by linking the development of agritourism with GDP [20,21], economic development of the area [16,20] and tourism-related factors like tourism turnover [22] or tourism turnover in total region turnover [23,24] but without specifically referring all of them to the concept of agritourism entrepreneurship. Most studies identify the stimulating factors mainly by theoretical frameworks [16,19,25–27] or by conducting a questionnaire-based research [5,6,9,17,23,28–30] or interview-based research [4,31], while there are only a few studies that use regression models (e.g., [13,32]). After summing up the main factors that were identified and analyzed in previous studies (see the next section of this paper), we quantitatively analyzed a set of influencers that characterize the development level of a region, from an economic, social and tourism-industry point of view; these factors were considered to be essential at country and national level, in order to offer a macroeconomic view for better understanding the development patterns of agritourism entrepreneurship in different regions. Considering the background briefly depicted above, the in-depth identification of factors favoring resilient agritourism entrepreneurship could have a significant impact at national and regional level.

Secondly, to our knowledge, this is the first research examining the cumulative impact of economic, social and tourism factors on agritourism entrepreneurship at county level (applied to Romania, in this case), even more in the post-crisis period. The most important contribution of our study to extant literature is proposing a comprehensive approach based on a regression model designed to evaluate the influence of the main factors favoring the development of agritourism entrepreneurship. The results emphasize a positive connection between the regional development and the propensity of Romanian counties towards agritourism entrepreneurship.

The endeavor of analyzing the contribution of specific economic, social and tourism-related factors (e.g., regional GDP, firms' turnover, kilometers of national roads, unemployment, tourists, employees and salaries in tourism, share of tourism in regional turnover) to the growth of agritourism entrepreneurship in Romania is useful both for academics and practitioners in the field. On one hand, the present paper offers an empirical evidence for further comparative studies in agritourism entrepreneurship at European level, consolidating the role of the analysis not only for the examined country; this framework of investigation could be also used for similar EU countries in terms of economic, social and political evolution (e.g., ex-communist countries, with emerging entrepreneurial initiatives, where the rural population still has a high weight at national level). On the other hand, this study supports the development of agritourism entrepreneurship by emphasizing practical implications and further lines of action, with specific regional measures.

The motivation of the research is connected with the role of agritourism entrepreneurship and its economic, social and ecological influences on the development of the regions. The benefits induced by agritourism entrepreneurship represent the main reasons for its strategic support both at micro- and macro-economic levels. In order to analyze the incentives that stimulate agritourism entrepreneurship, a specific focus on highlighting its contribution to sustainable development of the rural communities is necessary.

One of the most significant problems the European Union has been facing during the past decades has been the unequal development of urban and rural areas, especially after the accession of the newest member countries. The EU policies focusing on improving the economic and social development of villages are particularly concerned about the migration of population from rural to urban areas [21]. As a consequence, different strategies for stimulating the development of the rural environment were defined within EU since 1980s [33], mainly for consolidating the self-sustainable economies through resilient entrepreneurial business solutions. From this perspective, agritourism has recently gained more attention, partly because of the demographic trends in Europe and worldwide and partly because of the development-related changes in agriculture and land use.

Agriculture and farming are still an important sector of human activity but their contribution to national GDP has constantly decreased [34]. Besides, the population involved in these activities is experiencing an ageing trend, since urban establishments and crowded cities represent a much more attractive environment for youth, which prefer to shift from rural to urban areas. Available data from [35] provides a good comparison among rural shares in several EU member states. While the European Union's average is situated at approximately 73% of the population living in urban areas, in countries such as Slovenia, Slovakia, Romania and Croatia the proportion between rural and urban is more balanced; on the opposite pole, Belgium, Malta, Denmark, France, Luxembourg, Sweden, Finland and the Netherlands register less than 20% of rural inhabitants [35]. Based on this fluctuation in population's location and employment preferences, agritourism becomes a more viable and sustainable alternative to traditional farming, as several studies point out [2,11,12,36,37]. One explanation resides in the inner purposes of agritourism development, since different available resources (natural, human and financial inputs) are used by local entrepreneurs for achieving flexibility, change adaptability and sustainable business solutions in rural communities. Moreover, rural entrepreneurship becomes an alternative to urban businesses, since many European cities are becoming suffocated with population, traffic and office buildings. In this sense, there is a new tendency of relocating from urban agglomerations to rural areas, accentuated by the fact that the development of cities is more rapid than the local authorities' ability to take actions accordingly.

As previously mentioned, the research objective of the present paper is to investigate the contribution of economic, social and tourism-related factors to the development of resilient agritourism entrepreneurship in rural communities in Romania. In order to deal with this objective, the next sections of the paper are structured as follows: Section 2 presents the main findings in the specialized literature regarding the role and development of agritourism entrepreneurship, in general and in rural parts of Romania, in particular (Section 2.1), opening the way to the factors that support this type of countryside activities (Section 2.2); Section 3 is dedicated to the methodological framework of the current analysis and it highlights the data and methods used to test the two research hypothesis; Section 4 outlines the results of the study and their multivariate interpretation, while Section 5 summarizes the main conclusions and further research directions.

2. Literature Review on Agritourism Entrepreneurship in Rural Communities

In this part of the paper, the investigation on agritourism entrepreneurship is both related to its context, development and potential benefits (Section 2.1), as well as to the factors contributing to its consolidation at national or regional level (Section 2.2). Agritourism entrepreneurship is stimulated by the economic and social progress of the rural regions and it is seen as a viable contributor to the sustainable development of the areas, generating benefits for the entrepreneurs but also for the entire communities. While the reasons and benefits of agritourism entrepreneurship are presented in detail in the specialized literature, identifying the incentives that could stimulate agritourism entrepreneurship is a topic to be debated by academics and practitioners in the field, especially for the newest EU member countries.

Section 2.1 sets out the general background and importance of agritourism entrepreneurship; Section 2.2 examines the relationship between economic, social and tourism-related factors and the development of agritourism entrepreneurship.

2.1. Context of Agritourism Entrepreneurship

The aim of generating local and regional development on a sustainable basis—both in urban and rural areas—is recently associated with the emergence of new business initiatives build upon ecological and social engagements, also referred as “green entrepreneurship” and associated with green economics and green management. Starting from the “entrepreneurship” concept of founding an enterprise by seizing an opportunity on the market, applying innovation and assuming risks [38] (p. 60), the “green” focus emphasizes the environmental consciousness in addition to the economic and financial objectives. In a particular way, as stated in [39] (p. 3), the green business may deal with topics such as waste management, biodiversity conservation and ecotourism, due to their focus on protection of natural environment but with a profit orientation.

Although initially associated with the idea of operating the economic venture in a way not damaging and even improving the environment, the concept of “green entrepreneurship” has gained consistency in ecological, social and ethical terms, in direct correspondence with “sustainable entrepreneurship” [25,40,41]. From this perspective, the environmental awareness of “green business” (e.g., protection of the environment, preservation of ecosystems, recycle and reuse of materials, use of renewable energy sources) could be considered as well a social contribution to the overall well-being of the communities [25,41]. Social engagement, creation of jobs with low environmental impact and no negative effects on people’s health, as well as promotion of local values could complement the social role of green entrepreneurship.

Moreover, in [41], the ecological responsibility of a firm towards the local community is assumed to be stronger in smaller or more traditional societies, where the accountability of the entrepreneur could be easier perceived. As the role and size of rural areas remain decisive at global and European level, while the issue of regional development is of critical importance in non-urban areas that usually have less financial resources and lower access to innovation and technology [26] (p. 2), the application of green entrepreneurship in these societies could result in a national competitive advantage [27], supported both at micro- and macro-level.

As appointed by the International Labour Organisation [42], there are a series of key-areas—based on entrepreneurial initiatives—that could drive green and sustainable development in rural areas: supporting the transition to clean and renewable energy, increasing agricultural efficiency by improving production and consumption processes, consolidating sustainable tourism, creating local jobs and encouraging responsible use of local resources, implementing supportive and flexible actions for helping people in the rural areas etc. The decrease of the agriculture’s role [28] and farming operations [31] and the need for new jobs in the rural communities led to the rise of new activities and rural enterprises: agritourism, business customized services, organic food production and processing [43], local distribution and consumption of locally produced food [44] (p. 81), specialized industrial production and use of renewable energy sources [45] and different types of micro-enterprises [46] (p. 11). A broad revision of the forms that green entrepreneurship could take in rural areas—including in Romania—focuses on: preservation of ecosystems and agricultural terrains, creation and/or consolidation of local food systems, organic farming, use of renewable energy, agritourism etc.

According to various specialized studies—like [27] (pp. 120–121), [28] (p. 1911) and [47] (p. 754)—the agritourism is an essential part of rural tourism, with a positive impact on preserving the environment [48]. While rural tourism is strictly dedicated to tourism products, services and activities that are related to the local areas and inhabitants, the agritourism also adds the farming component to the tourism services and facilities, the tourists being involved in the basic activities of the rural accommodation unit (e.g., growing vegetables, food processing, animal care) [27]. Spending time

in guest houses situated in rural areas includes several leisure activities in connection to local food, traditions, cultural heritage and natural environment; agritourism activities are deeply related to the agricultural environment as a whole [21].

In what concerns the agritourism typology Phillip et al. (2010) [47] (pp. 756–757) provide a thorough analysis of the existing theoretical and practical evidence in the field and propose a five-folded classification: 1. agritourism in a non-working farm (the housing place was previously a farm dedicated to rural activities but presently is not connected with the farming component); 2. Agritourism in a working farm but with passive tourists' contact (the working farm only provides the background for tourism); 3. Agritourism in a working farm, with indirect tourists' contact (the locally produced agricultural products or services are integrated in the consumption process of the tourists); 4. Agritourism in a working farm, with direct contact but indirect participation of tourists (the tourists are showed different aspects of rural life); 5. Agritourism in a working farm, with direct contact and real participation of tourists (the tourists are actively involved in different rural activities developed within the farm). For the purpose of the present research, the agritourism meaning corresponds to all five types identified by [47].

More specifically, agritourism can take various forms of activities, with multiple combinations among them [49]: on-farm bed and breakfast, pension, agritourism boarding house (ABH), cottage or campsite; on-farm restaurant, bistro, bakery; pick your own (PYO) operations for harvesting fresh fruits and vegetables; on-farm products stand for retailing already harvested fresh fruits, vegetables and value-added farm products; instructive farm tours and interactive demonstrations; on-farm activities for children and adults; animal exhibits; hands-on farm duties; vineyards and wineries; on-farm festivals and events; watching and photography of farming life [49]. Although the rural areas in Romania present favorable natural conditions and resources for agritourism development in all mentioned forms, Cristina et al. (2015) [50] consider that this type of rural tourism still has an uncovered potential at national level and there are opportunities for future growth. The technological development—boosted by increasing access to Internet of rural Romanian areas—plays the decisive part when customizing different forms of resilient agritourism entrepreneurial initiatives, from promotional activities to payment facilities for tourists coming from many parts of the world.

The accommodation unit specific to agritourism is usually called 'agritourism boarding house,' it is of a rather reduced size (no more than eight rooms dedicated to tourists) [27] (p. 120) and it should provide the guests with the possibility to adequately accommodate, eat and practice different locally specific activities (e.g., processing the wood for obtaining different art objects). In this research, we use the 'agritourism boarding houses' to cover all the meanings of 'farm locations' identified by [47] but with a special focus on those accommodation facilities where tourists are directly and actively involved in different agricultural, rural housing and crafting activities, without damaging the natural environment.

The green or sustainable tourism in rural areas—and, more specifically, agritourism—has a strategic role in the economic development of the regions, leading both to direct effects (e.g., creation of new jobs) and indirect outcomes (e.g., support of related industries like agriculture and food processing, transport and utilities, commerce) [42] (p. 5). The growing attractiveness of agritourism in recent times and the business opportunities associated to it (e.g., creating jobs and generating income while protecting the environment) consolidated the agritourism entrepreneurship as one main component of green entrepreneurship in rural areas and one method of supporting local sustainable development [28,48]. Agritourism entrepreneurship also adds the entrepreneurial characteristics to the agritourism related activities: seizing the opportunity on the market (e.g., more tourists are lately attracted by the possibility of spending their holidays on farming environments), adapting to change through a flexible approach (e.g., the shift from agriculture to agritourism oriented services), applying the innovation (e.g., the use of the newest technologies in developing or promoting their businesses) and assuming the risks of a new business venture in the rural area.

According to Bosworth and McElwee [51], farming has become increasingly market focused and times of economic recession determine farmers to become more resilient to developing new skills and to transform themselves from ‘plain managers’ into ‘entrepreneurs.’ Therefore, taking into consideration various factors which determine the success of agritourism businesses (among which location and access to infrastructure play a significant role), diversification of services provided to agritourism consumers and clear segmentation between different markets are relevant for building resilient businesses, not prone to be affected by economic cycles.

The agritourism entrepreneurship refers to business initiatives based on agritourism boarding houses, aimed to increase the economic activities in the rural areas as an alternative to agriculture and to answer to a change in the consumers’ behavior [27], that are more and more attracted by this type of spending their holidays. Some specific characteristics of agritourism entrepreneurship relate to: partially overlapping space for homing and commercial activities [31], harnessing the ethnical peculiarities of the rural area, conducting the activities of the agritourism boarding houses without affecting the natural environment, offering access to communication technologies etc. Different studies—like [11,52] for US, [53] for China, [28] for Spain, [54] for South-Eastern Europe—found multiple effects and benefits of agritourism and/or agritourism entrepreneurship: increase of revenues of the agritourism boarding houses and farms, higher quality of life, creation of new employment opportunities and jobs, socio-cultural support, conservation of the natural environment, preservation of cultural heritage, respect for minority cultures and rural lifestyle etc. Also the educational and promotional role of agritourism entrepreneurship was emphasized [11], due to its potential of educating tourists about agriculture [28].

When dealing with its ecological contribution, the agritourism entrepreneurship was also found as a strategy to counteract climate change in more exposed parts of the world [55] and to increase the income from agricultural activities. According to [55], the risks associated to agricultural production and exhaustion of natural resources could be diminished by appealing to sustainable solutions like agritourism entrepreneurship. In a study dedicated to Italian farms [48], their agritourism entrepreneurial activities were considered a stimulus for developing more environmentally friendly methods in agriculture, with a corresponding positive impact regarding the preservation of landscape, natural resources and biodiversity, as well as the increase of organic production and consumption of quality food. The authors of the Italian study emphasize even more the ecological contribution of practicing tourism related activities in an agricultural context, by stating that the organizational model of agritourism supports the “environmental sustainability paradigm” [48]. Finally, agritourism meets increasing public demand for outdoor and nature-based activities, while providing farmers with the economic means to preserve natural landscapes and agricultural land.

In comparison with agritourism (sector of economic activity), agritourism entrepreneurship (tourism related business initiatives developed by entrepreneurs in the rural areas) brings in the entrepreneurial character and the role of the farm’s operator. As a consequence, the economic factors are complemented by social and cultural (if the case) characteristics when analyzing agritourism entrepreneurship. The entrepreneurial character is reinforced by the perceived opportunity on the market (growing number of tourists and national/regional financial support), the proactive and risk-taking initiative (developing a new business, with the resultant challenges associated to it) and the support of innovation and technology (although deeply anchored in the rural environment and local traditions, the agritourism boarding houses usually promote and reserve their services and activities by using the Internet and social media channels). One important feature of agritourism entrepreneurship, presented in [11] (p. 216), refers to the possibility of the agritourism entrepreneur to achieve his/her entrepreneurial purposes (e.g., the personal desire to promote the region and the rural lifestyle through the use of his/her farm) even in the absence of the profits. At the same time, when dealing with agritourism entrepreneurship, the role of the entrepreneur stands out due to his/her committed, innovative and risk-taking character [56] nurturing the business independence

and personal objectives [11] but also the governmental institutions play an essential role in providing relevant financial, legislative and infrastructure support for the entrepreneurial environment [56].

The agritourism entrepreneurship, in general and in Romania, in particular, has the potential to contribute to the sustainable development of the regions [28,48,52,54,57]: the economic component is consolidated through the functioning of agritourism boarding houses and the profits they generate as an alternative to agriculture; the social dimension resides on offering an increasing number of jobs for the rural population and assuring the needed societal stability [27,58], both in terms of employment opportunities and promotion of local values; the ecological pillar is integrated in the inner operations of the agritourism business facilities that are protecting the environment. Summing up, agritourism entrepreneurship is mainly put into practice through the existence and functioning of agritourism boarding houses; it is based on economic opportunity, innovation, risk taking, local landscape, social and environmental values. Agritourism entrepreneurship is an essential component of green entrepreneurship.

2.2. Influence of Economic, Social and Tourism Development Indicators on Agritourism and Resilient Agritourism Entrepreneurship

In this section of the paper we aim to present results of previous researches that identify factors which contribute to the development of rural areas and analyze their impact on the evolution of agritourism, as one of the most important vectors of sustainable growth of regions. This subject was investigated in the scientific literature and we synthesized the main contributions regarding the factors influencing sustainable rural development and agritourism. Simultaneously, a bidirectional link could be emphasized: the local development supports the growth of agritourism (and agritourism entrepreneurship), which contributes to the progress of the rural regions. In this way, the need for consolidating agritourism entrepreneurial ventures at national level is investigated in direct correspondence with the objectives of sustainable development.

Also known as farm-based recreation, agritourism is being used by farmers as a sustainable creator of income [2]. Generating new sources of income—additional to revenues from traditional farming activities—is one of the main reasons for entering into agritourism business [11]. This pursuit of more stable financial income is highly determined by the risks associated to agricultural activity, some of which are out of the control of the farmers, such as: poor harvest, bad weather conditions or economic distress [2,11]. Therefore, agritourism is a suitable alternative for farm operators seeking to supplement their income [59].

However, there are several other reasons which lead to developing agritourism enterprises. Farming is not always easy when the environment is not a friendly one for crops (off-road and bumpy terrain, poor and unpredictable weather conditions etc.), therefore many agritourism activities provide new usage for land which is unsuitable for crop and livestock production [2] (p. 190), thus compensating for fluctuations in agricultural income, generating additional revenues and expanding market share [11] (p. 217).

Agritourism has also a high potential of generating employment, especially for the family members of the entrepreneur. Several studies show that maintaining an agricultural business within the farmers' family is also one of the main drivers of diversification towards agritourism [23,60] and might serve as a plan for farm succession [61,62]. Additionally, agritourism may become a solution to reducing the tendency of young population's migration towards urban areas, thus diminishing the risk of depopulation of certain rural spaces, while also representing a source of entrepreneurial and employment opportunity for women [12,36,37]. Other factors in favor of agritourism initiatives include improving farmers' quality of life, developing a hobby or enjoying rural lifestyle [11,60,63]. This entrepreneurial niche that agritourism is providing has also been connected to wildlife and nature conservation, reduction of obesity and survival of small farms in the global economy [2].

According to [36] (p. 16), agritourism is a win-win for all players involved. Tourists benefit from all activities previously listed, while paying an attractive price for this kind of services, get pollution-free

environment, better diets and eco-products and some quiet retreat to get rid of the day-to-day stress characteristic for life in big cities. On the other hand, as previously shown, farmers and agritourism operators earn supplementary income with rather small investments, employ all their natural resources in an efficient way and benefit of demand for fresh local foods, while stimulating the rural community's economy [2,64].

In the context of sustainable development of rural areas, the conservation of the natural environment attracts a special attention, because it can be positively impacted by the agritourism, as the regional revenues help raise the community welfare and therefore encourage preservation activities. Certain attention has been drawn to the fact that poor economic development and low level of living standards have a negative influence on environmental preservation activities [65]. The above considerations are also available for the rural communities in Romania; a research by [66] emphasizes the need to preserve natural resources, cultural heritage and community traditions in order to develop a sustainable agritourism.

As previously stated, the local development—in economic and social terms—has a positive influence on agritourism entrepreneurship. In what concerns the economic development, it mainly refers to improving the quality of life and indicators like income, investments, infrastructure etc. could be connected with agritourism entrepreneurship. The social development generally entails the enhancement of the interaction between people, with indicators related to reduced unemployment (at the crossroads of the economic and social arenas), gender equality, better formal and informal education etc. that could be found supporting agritourism entrepreneurship.

Several studies have identified various factors that influence the development of agritourism, through theoretical frameworks and/or empirical research, conducted on different regions all over the globe. The most important contributions are synthesized in Table 1. We must take into account the complex nature of the relationships between the agritourism related activities and the identified factors, as some of these influences can be analyzed also from a bidirectional point of view.

Table 1. Literature review—Factors that influence agritourism and agritourism entrepreneurship.

Factors Identified in Previous Studies	Influence on the Development of		Relevant Studies
	Agritourism	Agritourism/ Rural/Green Entrepreneurship	
EU financing through different instruments	X	X	Chiritescu (2011) [67]; Galluzzo (2015) [21]; Nikolaou et al. (2011) [39]; Sima (2016) [27]; Soare et al. (2011) [10]; Strano et al. (2011) [46]; Theodoropoulou (2004) [12]
EU strategies and policies		X	Figueiredo and Raschi (2013) [33]
Government support through policies/programs and funding	X	X	Colton and Bissix (2005) [68]; Holland (2015) [69]; Kaur (2014) [26]; Mastronardi et al. (2015) [48]; Jones et al. (2009) [7]; Sima (2016) [27]; Strano et al. (2011) [46]; Tourism Law (2017) [70]; Ungureanu et al. (2009) [19]; Weaver and Fennell (1997) [71]
GDP/Regional GDP	X		Andrei et al. (2014) [20]; Galluzzo (2015) [21]
Economic development of the area	X		Andrei et al. (2014) [20]; Călina et al. (2010) [16]
Regional investments	X	X	Ungureanu et al. (2009) [19]
Geographic location/ distance to cities	X	X	Bagi and Reeder (2012) [2]; Bernardo et al. (2004) [14]; Brown and Reeder (2007) [15]; Che (2007) [72]; Comen and Foster [4]; Hilchey (1993) [73]; India Tourism Catalog (2017) [74]; Jones et al. (2009) [7]; Strano et al. (2011) [46]; Veeck et al. (2006) [75]; Yeboah et al. (2017) [13]

Table 1. Cont.

Factors Identified in Previous Studies	Influence on the Development of		Relevant Studies
	Agritourism	Agritourism/ Rural/Green Entrepreneurship	
Level of current infrastructure	X	X	Bagi and Reeder (2012) [2]; Călina et al. (2010) [16]; Che (2007) [72]; Jensen et al. (2014) [5]; Matei (2015) [76]; Nikolaou et al. (2011) [39]; Shih et al. (2008) [17]; Sima (2016) [27]; Strano et al. (2011) [46]; Ungureanu et al. (2009) [19]
Social-demographic development of the area	X		Călina et al. (2010) [16]; Che (2007) [72]; Mace (2005) [6]
Unemployment rate/the existence of cheap labour force	X		Călina et al. (2010) [16]; Jones et al. (2009) [7]; Ungureanu et al. (2009) [19]
Existence of programs that promote the creation of green jobs and/or offer training for entrepreneurs		X	Colton and Bissix (2005) [68]; International Labour Office (2015) [42]; Jensen et al. (2014) [5]; Strano et al. (2011) [46]; Ungureanu et al. (2009) [19]; Weaver and Fennell (1997) [71]
Characteristics of the farmer (e.g., age, education, social skills, creativity, direct/online communication skills)		X	Bagi and Reeder (2012) [2]; Barbieri and Mshenga (2008) [3]; Comen and Foster [4]; Hilchey (1993) [73]; India Tourism eCatalog (2017) [74]; Jensen et al. (2014) [5]; Mace (2005) [6]; Mureşan et al. (2016) [37]; Jones et al. (2009) [7]; Platania (2014) [8]; Schulze et al. (2007) [9]; Soare et al. (2011) [10]; Tew and Barbieri (2012) [11]; Theodoropoulou (2004) [12]; Ungureanu et al. (2009) [19]; Yeboah et al. (2017) [13]
Tax regimes that promote resource conservation/green businesses		X	Isaak (2002) [41]; Nickerson et al. (2001) [77]
Number of tourists	X		Călina et al. (2010) [16]
Number of firms that are present in the tourism sector	X		Călina et al. (2010) [16]
Number of employees working in the tourism sector	X		Jensen et al. (2014) [5]; Madsen and Zhang (2010) [32]; Zoto et al. (2013) [30]
Tourism turnover	X		Marin et al. (2009) [22]
Tourism turnover in the total region turnover	X		Carter (1998) [23]; Rilla et al. (2000) [24]
Rural residents'/farmers' attitudes towards the impact of tourism	X		Bagi and Reeder (2012) [2]; Hernández-Mogollón et al. (2011) [28]; India Tourism eCatalog (2017) [74]; Mureşan et al. (2016) [37]; Neumeier and Pollermann (2014) [78]; Schulze et al. (2007) [9]; Shih et al. (2008) [17]
Local measures to promote efficient networking between local actors	X	X	Colton and Bissix (2005) [68]; Figueiredo and Raschi (2013) [33]; Malkanthi et al. (2013) [36]; Nikolaou et al. (2011) [39]; Schulze et al. (2007) [9]; Strano et al. (2011) [46]
Promotional efforts targeted to farmers for strengthening awareness of available opportunities		X	Colton and Bissix (2005) [68]; George and Rilla (2008) [79]; George and Rilla (2008) [80]; Strano et al. (2011) [46]; Tew and Barbieri (2012) [11]
Characteristics of the area (natural beauty), farm's land (size) and landscape	X	X	Bagi and Reeder (2012) [2]; Bernardo et al. (2004) [14]; Brown and Reeder (2007) [15]; Călina et al. (2010) [16]; Hilchey (1993) [73]; India Tourism eCatalog (2017) [74]; Jones et al. (2009) [7]; Shih et al. (2008) [17]; Sotomayor et al. (2014) [18]; Ungureanu et al. (2009) [19]; Yeboah et al. (2017) [13]

Table 1. Cont.

Factors Identified in Previous Studies	Influence on the Development of		Relevant Studies
	Agritourism	Agritourism/ Rural/Green Entrepreneurship	
Ability to provide certified quality food and/or eco-products	X		Galluzzo (2015) [21]; Jolly and Reynolds (2005) [81]; Strano et al. (2011) [46]; Mastronardi et al. (2015) [48]; Ungureanu et al. (2009) [19]
Existence of environmentally protected areas and/or cultural heritage, historical monuments, patrimonial values etc.		X	Călina et al. (2010) [16]; Nikolaou et al. (2011) [39]; Sima (2016) [27]; Soare et al. (2011) [10]; Sonnino (2004) [82]; Ungureanu et al. (2009) [19]
Existence of other recreational activities for tourists related to rural life (handicrafts, animal breeding, crafts, festivals etc.) and/or outdoor sports	X	X	Brown and Reeder (2007) [15]; Călina et al. (2010) [16]; Galluzzo (2015) [21]; Holland (2015) [69]; Jensen et al. (2014) [5]; Neumeier and Pollermann (2014) [78]; Shih et al. (2008) [17]; Skiba et al. (2015) [83]; Snak et al. (2001) [84]; Strano et al. (2011) [46]; Ungureanu et al. (2009) [19]; Yeboah et al. (2017) [13]

This table summarizes the factors identified in a series of relevant studies in the literature and considered to have an impact on the development of agritourism and/or agritourism/rural/green entrepreneurship.

As shown in Table 1, success of agritourism businesses depends on several factors. The adequate economic setting (e.g., high revenues and investments, low unemployment, higher wages, public financing and support) and the attractions or opportunities of the natural landscape positively influence the potential of entrepreneurship in the region and they result in a higher number of entrepreneurial initiatives.

Other factor refers to the location of the agritourism business, farms near central cities with access to express ways and quality infrastructure being more likely to succeed [5]. Additionally, Matei (2015) [76] considers that provision of agritourism services requires a good infrastructure in order to reach the agritourism destination and investments in the comfort of the tourists (such as sanitation, running water etc.). The importance of infrastructure in the success of agritourism operations is pointed out in [16], where the analysis of sustainable development potential of Gorj county in Romania proves that the access to several European and national roads consists of a great added value to the agritourism business prospects. From this perspective, one of the main challenges some rural areas face in the case of Romania is the poor quality of the infrastructure, since county roads are not modernized and a great part of the rural population does not have direct access to main national or European roads or to the railway [19].

Environments with pleasant weather and amenities contribute substantially to development and expansion of agritourism operations [12] and also the Internet access is a competitive advantage for agritourism entrepreneurial ventures, because it expands the sources of information of the farmers regarding input and output prices, weather conditions, financial and meteorological forecasts, market development in terms of competition etc. [2] (p. 193).

A recent study [20] considers that the gap in economic development of rural areas in different countries or regions of the European Union also influences the evolution of the agritourism and their research focuses on the impact of GDP in different regions of Romania on the number of tourists and the corresponding evolution of rural tourism. The authors [20] econometrically tested the explanatory influence of GDP on the number of overnight stays in rural tourism and the results of their study indicate that there is a positive correlation between the overnight stays and GDP in the eight administrative Romanian regions (North West, Central, North-East, South-East, South-Muntenia, Bucharest-Ilfov, South-West and West, for the 2004–2012).

Although all these economic, infrastructure, geographic and motivational factors are equally important, the number and features of available human resources are seen as key success factors for the good performance of the farming units in agritourism entrepreneurship [85]. One of the

most influential determinants of successful agritourism is the operator of the farm—the agritourism entrepreneur, with his/her personal characteristics and entrepreneurial skills [9], where age and education are the most frequently analyzed aspects by previous studies in the literature. The age of the operator has been viewed both as an advantage and a disadvantage. Older farmers may have more experience and practical knowledge but may lack the courage for business expansion or for using new marketing techniques and they may be reticent to using modern techniques of computer-assisted development programs and ideas. On the other hand, for younger entrepreneurs in agritourism, the lack of experience may be compensated by better health and optimistic attitude, openness to new opportunities, as well as broader perspective of the future [2] (p. 193), which are essential characteristics for the entrepreneurial ventures.

A study conducted by [11] for empirically investigating the perceived benefits of agritourism in Missouri showed that approximately 46% of the examined agritourism operators are younger than 55 years old and the average age of Missouri farmers is 57.1 years. About one-third of the investigated farmers were retired from another occupation and they were nearly evenly divided between first-generation and multi-generation farmers [11], result supporting the previous statement that agritourism allows to keep business in the family and transfer the farming knowledge from one generation to another.

Another study analyzing the relationship between agritourism and human and social environment in the regions of Trikala and Ikaria in Greece (this country being an important exponent of tourism and agricultural businesses in Europe) points out that agritourism operators of these regions are mostly men (66%) aged between 30 and 44 years old (36%) [12] (p. 130). As previously stated regarding the urban-rural repartition, in Romania's case, more than half of the population still resides in rural areas and the study of [37] confirms that the data is also true for the North-West region of the country, as a specific case; however, in correspondence with this finding, there is a lack of attractive employment opportunities in the rural areas for younger generation, resulting in high unemployment or migration rates in these regions.

On the other hand, education plays an important role in determining the profile of agritourism operators. While most operators in the Romanian study of [37] have graduated from high-school, only one third of them have formal education in either agriculture (17.1%) or business (17.6%) in Missouri [11] (p. 218) and only 21% graduated from high-school in Greek regions [12], according to the previous researches. In a survey-based study also developed at US level [6], 55% of the agritourism entrepreneurs have a college degree, confirming the role of education in fostering entrepreneurial skills and dealing with both agriculture and tourism related issues.

In case of Romania, even though the rule does not apply for all villages, the level of education in rural areas tends to be lower than in the cities and the rate of school dropout at an early age—before graduating from high-school—is higher [86,87], which poses consistent challenges to agritourism entrepreneurship. An intermediate conclusion over the impact of education has been drawn by [2], stating that operators which could mostly benefit from participation in agritourism are low-income, undereducated and older farmers [2] (p. 189), corresponding to the profile of Romanian population dedicated to agriculture-related activities [10] (p. 68). However, the authors emphasize that there is a good possibility even for undereducated operators to surmount educational deficiencies and succeed in agritourism entrepreneurship, provided they seek appropriate advice from experts in the field [2] (p. 198). On the contrary, agritourism reduces rural unemployment, decreases the mass departure of young people from rural to urban areas by providing good jobs and enhances the level of education of rural residents [88]. The socio-demographic characteristics of agritourism operators show a great level of disparities in terms of income: from a monthly low income of 225–445 EUR in Romania, to 1000–1300 EUR in Greece [12,37]. The majority of the operations are small to medium enterprises employing 10–20 persons, mostly part-time. Moreover, an interesting issue stressed by [12] (p. 136) is that many of the agritourism businesses developed due to EU funding, which is a motivating incentive for start-ups or expansion decisions in many agricultural regions.

The empirical studies and the existent relationship between farming entrepreneurship and regional growth show that economic, social and external reasons (like obtaining an additional income or better use of resources, compensating for fluctuations in agricultural income, interacting with tourists or taking advantage of the incentives and regulations in the field, as identified in [77,89]) are driving the development of agritourism entrepreneurship; in a similar way, the local economic and social factors are stimulating the development of agritourism entrepreneurship. Considering the above-mentioned evidence, as well as the scientific purpose of the present paper, we proposed the first research hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1 (H1). *The economic and social development of a region positively influences the evolution of agritourism and agritourism entrepreneurship in the area.*

Moreover, there are also tourism-related factors that influence the development of agritourism entrepreneurial initiatives. For example, Mshenga et al. (2010) [90] emphasize the positive contribution of tourism to the growth of small farming entrepreneurial ventures, where tourist spending and activities equally support the expansion of agritourism businesses but also the economic development of the region and poverty alleviation. As formerly stated, the technological development also supports resilient entrepreneurial initiatives in agritourism, since technology and flexibility are planned to enhance capital investment in rural communities.

The tourism attractiveness of a rural area is driven by a variety of factors, with economic, social [6], cultural, ethnical, psychological and environmental motives considered together. When tourists are attracted in a particular region, also agritourism entrepreneurship may grow if proper conditions are found in terms of local facilities (from agritourism boarding houses to good infrastructure), landscape (pure natural beauties or cultural-historical sites) and promotion of a specific lifestyle (farm-based activities with passive or active involvement of the tourists). Regional studies [91] confirmed that diversification of tourism products and markets leads to development of rural tourism (agritourism) but tourism—in all its forms—needs long-term strategic funding in order to actively contribute to the rural development of the areas [91].

Statistics reveal that tourism generates approximately 10% of the global gross domestic product (GDP), it sustains 227 million jobs worldwide (9.5% of all jobs) and has a higher growing rate than the wider economy [92]. Referring to tourism activities in the countryside, the study of [30] cites a World Trade Organization (WTO) statistics estimating that rural tourism in Europe has a far higher growth rate (6%) compared to tourism in general, which is increasing annually with only 2%.

The agritourism activities in Romania are encouraged by the national government according to the provisions of the Tourism Law (chapter VI) through a number of specific measures, including promoting rural areas with high potential, offering necessary information about rural tourism opportunities, encouraging development of natural traditional products and issuing authorizations for new established guest houses [70]. The entrepreneurship in agritourism was encouraged through several European structural funds and the EU rural development policy (based on EC Regulation No. 1698/2005). For 2007–2013, business endeavors in agritourism could be co-financed through the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) as well as the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), put into practice in Romania by the Regional Operational Program 2007–2013. During the same period, the National Program for Rural Development (PNDR) 2007–2013 and the National Strategy Plan for Rural Development were implemented [67] and Romania had an absorption rate of roughly 91% for PNDR.

Currently, new business in agritourism in Romania are encouraged by the National Program for Rural Development (provisions 6.2 and 6.4), which is part of PNDR 2014–2020 (with a total EU budget of 100 billion EUR). The beneficiaries may be small or micro-businesses from rural areas or farmers/families who want to diversify their agricultural activity by establishing a guest house; they can obtain co-funding from EU structural funds of up to 90% of the estimated investment, without

exceeding 200,000 EUR/project. By February 2017, Romania had succeeded to access over 50 million EUR through PNDR 2014–2020, with approximately 1.2 million allocated for provisions 6.2 and 6.4, directly related to the development of agritourism [93].

At international level, the correlation between tourism and GDP was tested in different studies. For example, a complex analysis [94] reveals significant correlations between GDP, employment and regional tourism demand, while a positive link is considered to exist between the development of tourism in agricultural areas and the number of employees in this sector of activity [30,32]. The number of employees in the tourism sector and the applied marketing techniques directly influence the development of agritourism [5].

Another economic-financial indicator with impact on agritourism progress is the level of local investments, mentioned in [95]. Local investments in tourism, likely through governmental and European support, have a significant impact on developing agritourism [96,97], as the economic motivation is the main driver for rural entrepreneurs. In addition, Barbu (2013) [29] finds that more than one quarter of the respondents to a survey in Romania believe that specific investments have a significant leverage on the development of agritourism. On the other hand, the opposite is also true, because agritourism generates multiplier effects on direct investment [30]. According to [98], investments in tourism infrastructure are considered a key factor of growth for rural tourism.

Agritourism can only develop with the participation of local small and medium enterprises [95], so the number of companies in the food service industry has an essential influence in the growth of the tourism sector of a specific rural area. A large number of companies conducting business in the tourism sector can boost agritourism in a region, as their combined effort of promoting the existent accommodation facilities and the related leisure activities can attract new tourists. A study by [30] suggests that other local companies, in addition to rural guest houses, are also interested in agritourism activities, as they can also profit from the presence of tourists and their supplementary money spending, apart from accommodation. We may assume that these companies can have a positive impact in attracting more tourists, by promoting additional services and products and contributing to the local development. This affirmation is supported by empirical results, which demonstrate that local recreation and cultural activities are determinant factors that contribute to the development of agritourism, by attracting more customers [78].

The same reasoning is true when considering the local investments in tourism and the number of local tourism agencies as factors supporting the success of agritourism initiatives [97], due to the essential role of these tourism-dedicated organizations in promoting the farms and guest houses to tourists. The presence of more enterprises in tourism sector in the same region has also a positive influence on the development of agritourism, as tourists can benefit from having more attractions in the area [5]. Connections with local tourism agencies can help improve the national and even international visibility of agritourism locations from a specific region, because most agritourism businesses are managed by small entrepreneurs, which do not have extensive expertise in marketing or promotion in virtual environment.

According to a study conducted in Romania during 1994–2007, there is a direct link between the increase in the number of agritourism facilities and the development of tourism in general [22]. The share of tourism-related revenue in the regional turnover is an important indicator of the further progress of entrepreneurship in agritourism sector [23,24].

The demand for agritourism also depends on various reasons that have an influence in the choice of tourists for spending one or more days of vacation; the motivations of tourists for choosing to visit a rural area vary from buying homemade or eco-products from local farmers [81] to experiencing agricultural practices and traditional arts and crafts [84], practicing different outdoor sports like horse-riding, swimming, canoeing, ski or cycling [83] or enjoying the natural beauty of rural landscape, while relaxing with family or friends [18].

Moreover, one important factor for the attractiveness of agritourists is represented by the “farm identities” [99] (p. 43) that deeply depends on the ability of the farmers (agritourism

entrepreneurs) to provide the local experiences their guests are searching for. By diversifying the farm activities into agritourism undertakings, the farm entrepreneurs change their role [99] from agriculture-involved to service-providers attentive to the needs of the tourists. The new approach generates a boost in the existence of the farm over the next period of time.

The encountered theoretical and practical evidence, as well as the scientific purpose of the present paper led us to the formulation of the second research hypothesis in correspondence with the first one:

Hypothesis 2 (H2). *The tourism development of a region positively influences the evolution of agritourism and agritourism entrepreneurship in the area.*

The two research hypotheses previously stated were tested on the rural communities in Romania during 2010–2015 period, by taking into account the positive contribution that agritourism entrepreneurship has on the economic, social and environmental development of the rural areas. As such, resilient entrepreneurship in the countryside may be considered a prerequisite of sustainable development, where various available resources are used in an efficient and creative way for increasing the productivity of the region.

3. Database and Research Methodology

The aim of the present study is to examine the incentives for developing agritourism entrepreneurship in rural communities in Romania. As stated in the introductive part, Romania is a relevant case for agritourism entrepreneurship and special attention is needed due to the country's economic history but also to its place in the European Union. Like in other ex-communist countries that had a centralized economy for almost 50 years, the private initiative and the entrepreneurial ventures were not supported in Romania until the early 1990s. During the socialist regime, the state ownership of all goods [100] and the massive industrialization [101] were not in favor of entrepreneurship in rural areas. After the instauration of the democracy in Romania, the economic restructuring and the change in societal perceptions have reaffirmed the role of rural activities in the development of the country [102]. As a consequence, including agritourism entrepreneurship is recently considered a viable option for the sustainable growth of the regions and, after the accession of Romania to the European Union, the financing through structural funds also facilitated this type of business initiatives. Moreover, it is important to take into account that in spite of the decrease of rural population in several European countries, in Romania's case, almost half of the population still lives in the countryside.

In order to accomplish the research objective, we analyzed several indicators expressing the agritourism entrepreneurship and also a set of factors describing the macroeconomic and social environment in Romania, in general and tourism, in particular, by conducting several linear regression models. The selection of the sample and the included variables are presented in the following sub-sections, by focusing on the characteristics of the post-crisis period.

3.1. Sample

The database of the study contains information provided by the Romanian National Institute of Statistics (INS) [103] for the 2010–2015 period. All tables and figures in the paper were processed by the authors based on INS's datasets for the specific research purpose of the paper. The sample was selected for the 2010–2015 period so that it contains the most recent and complete statistical information for quantifying the development of agritourism, both at national and regional level. Even if data for 2016 was also available for few indicators, we considered that the main analysis should cover only the 2010–2015 period, in order to examine more variables that may influence the agritourism environment.

Consequently, for this study, we focused on the NUTS 3 level proposed by Eurostat, which in Romania's case are the 41 administrative counties, as showed in Figure 1. The NUTS classification (Nomenclature of territorial units for statistics) is a hierarchical system for dividing up the economic territory of the European Union; the classification was proposed for collecting, developing and

harmonizing the EU regional statistics and socio-economic analyses of the regions (NUTS 1—major socio-economic regions, NUTS 2—basic regions for the application of regional policies, NUTS 3—small regions for specific diagnoses), as well as framing the EU regional policies [100]. The county analysis can provide interesting information about the geographical development of agritourism entrepreneurship and it may also disclose specific factors for explaining the growth of agritourism business ventures in Romania.

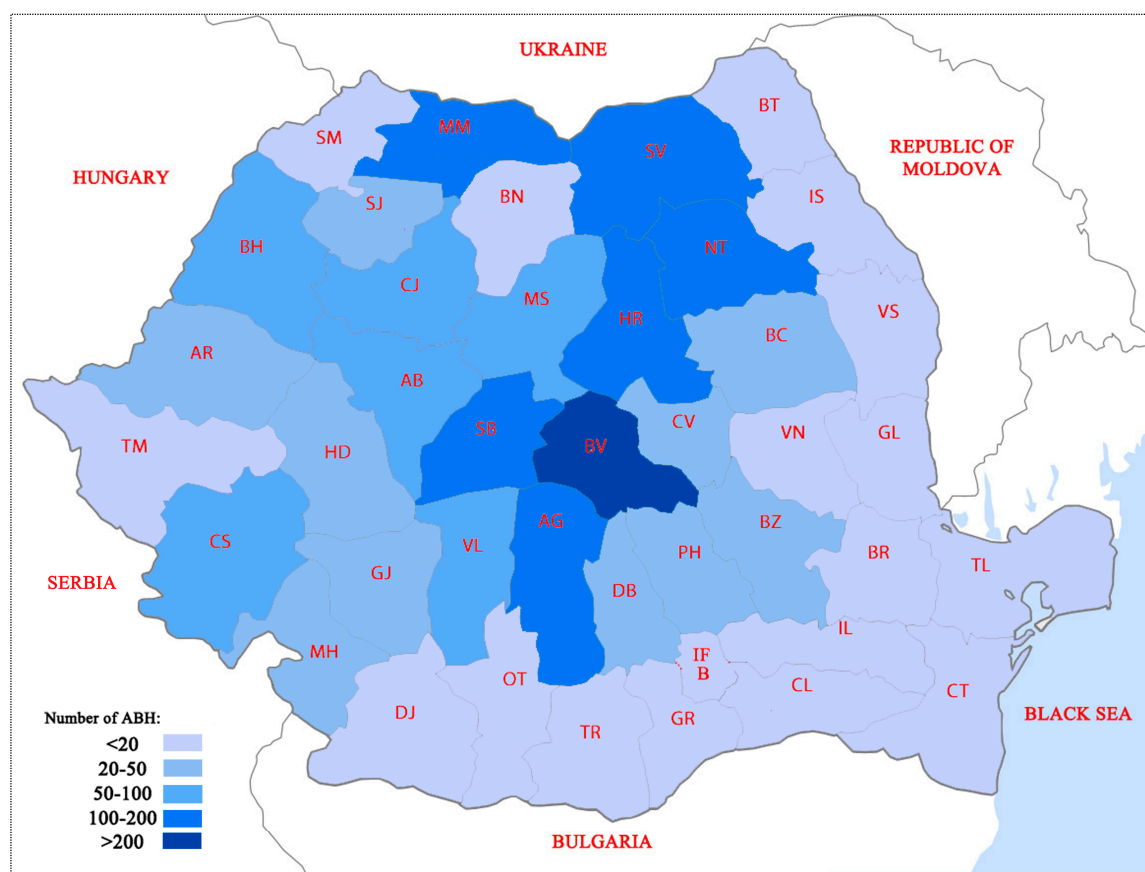


Figure 1. The NUTS 3 regions (counties) in Romania and the regional number of agritourism boarding houses (ABH) in 2016. The figure presents the number of agritourism boarding houses (ABH) in the 41 Romanian counties (NUTS 3 regions). The counties are almost of the same size but significantly different in economic terms.

The agritourism in Romania has deeply developed in the past 20 years, mainly in the mountain areas but not restricted to these regions. According to the INS data, in 2016 in Romania there were more than 2000 agritourism boarding houses, which promote different forms of green business but they are unevenly distributed at regional level. As Table 2 highlights, there are some counties with a high number of agritourism business initiatives, like Brașov, Harghita, Suceava, Sibiu and counties where this type of business is very scarce, like Braila, Calarasi, Galati, Giurgiu etc. One of the main reasons for this unequal distribution is the geographical landscape and local attractions; for example, if Brașov and Alba are counties placed in the mountain areas, Suceava and Neamt have monasteries and historic sites, while Sibiu is a medieval citadel. However, there are also other counties that have mountains and historical sites but where agritourism is not so developed. In the literature, there are studies indicating that the most dominant reasons for joining agritourism are the economic ones [96], farmers willing to develop an agribusiness in order to gain more, while a region with strong economy would have more chances to increase the agritourism success rate [96]. Due to this fact, as we already mentioned in the initial part of the paper, our first hypothesis refers to the positive influence that

economic and social development of a region has on agritourism and agritourism entrepreneurship in that area.

As presented in Figure 1, there is a higher density of the agritourism boarding houses in the center of the country, where the mountains are geographically predominant but also in the North-East regions. Even if the Western part of Romania is closer to Central Europe and it could represent an attraction point for tourists, it looks like not many agritourism businesses were developed there. On the other hand, bearing in mind the fact that agritourists have specific personal features [47], it is essential to develop the agribusinesses in a region where investments in infrastructure and tourism are constantly supported. Considering tourism as a facilitator for agritourism, our second research hypothesis previously stated deals with the positive impact of local tourism development and attractiveness on the evolution of agritourism and agritourism entrepreneurship in the area.

Table 2. Number of agritourism boarding houses in Romania in 2016.

County	Agritourism Boarding Houses	County	Agritourism Boarding Houses	County	Agritourism Boarding Houses
Alba	84	Covasna	39	Neamt	139
Arad	24	Dambovita	29	Olt	1
Arges	136	Dolj	8	Prahova	36
Bacau	37	Galati	1	Satu Mare	4
Bihor	78	Giurgiu	1	Salaj	26
Bistrita-Nasaud	6	Gorj	30	Sibiu	110
Botosani	2	Harghita	188	Suceava	151
Brasov	352	Hunedoara	29	Teleorman	3
Braila	1	Ialomita	2	Timis	18
Buzau	47	Iasi	14	Tulcea	15
Caras-Severin	79	Ilfov	1	Vaslui	9
Calarasi	3	Maramures	104	Valcea	59
Cluj	66	Mehedinti	22	Vrancea	18
Constanta	7	Mures	50	TOTAL	2029

This table presents the number of agritourism boarding houses for every county (NUTS 3 regions) in Romania, in 2016.

3.2. Descriptive Statistics of the Variables Included in the Analysis

For developing the analysis, initially we looked at four indicators that refer to the development of agritourism in rural communities in Romania—investigated by counties—and these are: total number of agritourism boarding houses (TABH), total beds in agritourism boarding houses (TB), total tourists in agritourism boarding houses (TT) and, respectively, total nights spent in agritourism boarding houses (TN). The evolutions and trends of TABH, TT and TN for the 2001–2015 periods are presented in Figure 2.

Taking into account the high difference in size when comparing the four indicators and for a better picture of the data trends and evolutions, we graphically represented only three of them (TABH, TT and TN), additionally considering that the capacity (in beds) of the agritourism boarding houses (TB) is directly and closely related to TABH. Due to the same reason regarding the relative size of the indicators, we used two different measuring scales in the above graph: in the left part, there are values between 0 and 1,600,000, for the TT and TN variables, while in the right part, there are values between 0 and 2500, for emphasizing the TABH variable.

The analysis of Figure 2 reveals upward trends, with relatively similar gradients for all three indicators, reflecting their interdependence and comparable evolution for the examined period, especially for the first years (2001–2006). However, although the fluctuation margins are low, two specific considerations could be emphasized when analyzing the entire 2001–2015 period.

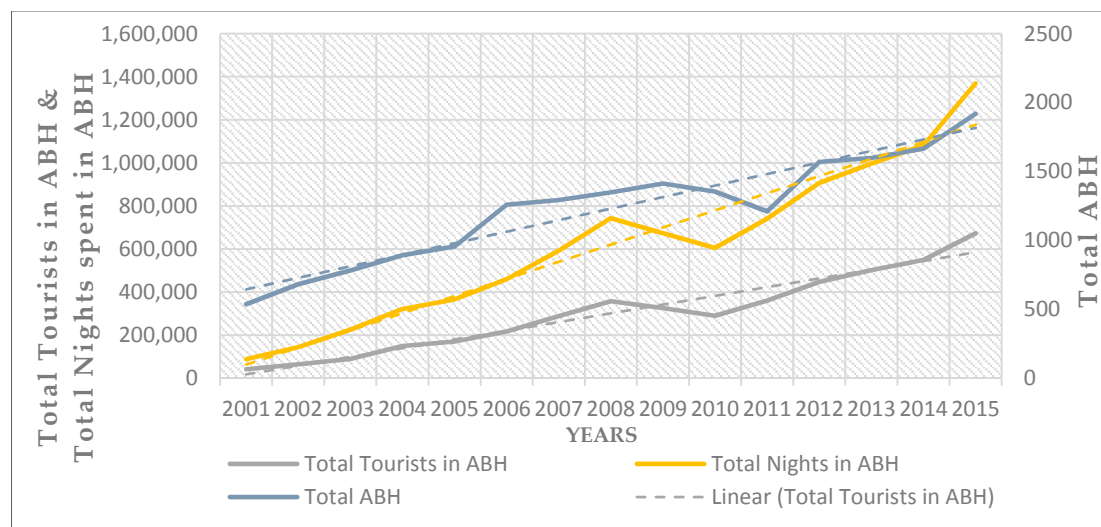


Figure 2. Evolutions and trends of agritourism indicators. The figure presents the evolution in Romania of the following indicators: Total number of agritourism boarding houses (TABH), Total number of tourists in agritourism boarding houses (TT) and Total number of nights spent in agritourism boarding houses (TN), for the 2001–2015 periods.

The first comment refers to a slightly faster evolution of TABH and TN compared to TT and this difference was even more stressed for the 2011–2015 period. One explanation for this situation resides in the existence of different direct and indirect incentives of economic and/or social nature aimed at developing the agritourism entrepreneurship in Romania, highly significant in the third part of the interval, besides those strictly determined by the demand of tourism services and represented by the number of tourists. The direct incentives could be the availability of financial, material and human resources, as well as the existence of specific and steady financing opportunities for investments in tourism and green entrepreneurship (e.g., the EU funds for the 2011–2015 period), areas with high but not totally exploited tourism potential and personnel with corresponding education, training and qualifications for founding and managing the agritourism boarding houses. The indirect incentives that contributed to a higher development of agritourism entrepreneurship could refer to the level of economic and social development of the regions/counties, promotion of local tourism at all levels, higher education and awareness of the population especially regarding the concepts of entrepreneurship and sustainability and their corresponding advantages, stronger confidence of investors after the economic crisis (mainly for the 2010–2015 period) and the measures to promote and enhance the development of sustainable tourism [104] and green entrepreneurship at European and national level. At the same time, the similar progression of TT and TN—but with a slightly higher gradient for TN—means that the evolution of number of nights spent in agritourism boarding houses is highly but not entirely due to the fluctuations in the number of tourists. The evolution of TN during the analyzed time interval was also influenced by the actions conducted for improving tourists' loyalty, which led to a progressive increase of their stay period. The loyalty programs for agritourists were based on the nature and quality of the agritourism services, as well as the improvement of living standards and wellbeing of the population; the same factors related to the welfare of the inhabitants may also represent an explanation for the higher growth in the number of agritourism boarding houses during 2001–2015.

The investigated indicators almost simultaneously increased and decreased during the time period, with a short but significant one year gap for the TABH variable compared with the other two (TT and TN). This evolution was profoundly influenced by two key-events that occurred during the analyzed period: the Romania's EU accession in 2007 and the global economic crisis. Thereby, although upward trends for the three indicators were identified for the whole-time interval, the higher

growth of them in the post-accession period—excepting the moment when the crisis affected the Romanian business environment—proves a positive influence of the integrationist event on the agritourism development, both regarding the demand and the entrepreneurial initiatives. Moreover, another specific issue could be identified by analyzing the 2008–2011 time intervals: the consumers of agritourism services were the first that reacted to the effects of the economic crisis and later the entrepreneurs in the agritourism field. As a consequence, the demand for agritourism services represented by TT and TN began to decline in 2008, when the first effects of the crisis were felt, while the entrepreneurial initiatives in agritourism—represented by the number of agritourism boarding houses (TABH)—continued their upward trend until 2009. At the same time, while the agritourism entrepreneurs kept their skepticism regarding the initiation of new investment projects until 2011, the number of tourists and overnight stays has resumed its upward trend one year earlier.

In order to determine the factors that influence the development of agritourism in Romania, we performed Ordinary Least Square regression models to test the economic, social and tourism factors that can influence the number of agribusinesses in Romania. We considered that entrepreneurship in agritourism can be measured in Romania by the total number of agritourism boarding houses (TABH) and this indicator was kept as our dependent variable. A high number of agritourism boarding houses in a specific area indicate that tourism entrepreneurs prefer to invest in this type of business ventures in the region; so, in order to test the hypotheses from the second section of the paper, we considered TABH as the dependent variable in our regression models.

We chose the explanatory variables according to the above hypotheses and we tested them to observe whether they can explain the development of agribusinesses in Romania. The independent variables that were used are presented in Table 3; some of them have been also used in previous studies (e.g., GDP, unemployment, size of national roads or quality of the infrastructure, investments in the area, employees working in tourism, tourists, tourism turnover), while others are original and considered relevant for the Romanian agritourism businesses.

Table 3. Explanatory variables used in the model.

Economic and Social Development of the Regions—Variables	
REGGDP	Country GDP. Equivalent regional GDP. Gross domestic product (GDP) is the sum of final uses of goods and services of resident institutional units (final consumption, gross fixed capital formation) plus exports minus imports of goods and services. The values are in million RON. We included the logarithm values in the regression.
UNEMP	Unemployment rate. This indicator represents the unemployment rate for a specific region. Unemployment rate is the ratio between the number of unemployed people (registered at the agencies for employment) and civil active population.
DROPOUT	School dropout rate in a specific region per 100 inhabitants. It is a proxy for the level of education. It represents the average difference between the number of students enrolled at the beginning of school and found out at the end of the same school year, expressed as a ratio of the number of students enrolled at the beginning of the school year.
KM	Total number of kilometers of national roads in a specific region. We included the logarithm values in the regression.
INVEST/TURN	Total investments per total turnover of the region. This represents the total value of investments in tangible goods, whose service life is longer than 1 year, of all firms in the region divided by the total region turnover (excluding VAT), which means the net income from sales of goods, execution of works and provision of services of all the firms existent in the region.

Table 3. Cont.

Tourism Development of the Regions—Variables	
TEMPL	Number of employees working in the tourism sector at every 1000 inhabitants in the region.
TTURN/TNT	Tourism turnover per night spent in tourism accommodation units. It represents the net income from sales of goods, carry out of works and delivery of services in tourism (VAT excluded) per night.
TNA/TNT	Total nights spent in agritourism boarding houses divided by total nights spent in total tourism accommodation units. It represents the share of nights spent in agritourism over total tourism.
TINVEST/TTURN	Tourism investments per tourism turnover of the region. This represents the value of regional investments in tangible goods in tourism, whose service life is longer than 1 year, divided by the region turnover in tourism (excluding VAT), which means the net income from sales of goods, carry out of works and delivery of services in tourism in the region.
TSAL/AVSAL	Tourism salary divided by the average salary in the region. This represents the average net salary for a person working in the tourism sector divided by the average net salary for a person working in the region.
TOURISTS	Total number of tourists reported to have visited a particular region (county). We considered the logarithm values in the regression.
%TFIRMS	Share of firms acting in the tourism sector in total number of companies in the region. It is a proxy for the tourism development.
%TTURN	Share of tourism turnover in total region turnover. It is a proxy for the tourism development.

The descriptive statistics for the independent variables used in the models are presented in Table 4 and they show the trends in local and tourism development at county level. For example, the regional GDP (REGGDP) varies from 3875 million RON in Covasna in 2010 to 36,275 million RON in Constanta in 2015, while many counties are below the average level of 11,441 million RON. Unemployment in Romania (UNEMP) has an average value of 6.40% but there is a high volatility between counties. Moreover, there is also a high difference between counties like Vaslui or Botosani and Brasov or Alba, when considering the tourism sector (e.g., number of tourists, employees in tourism). More specifically, when it comes about tourism development variables, the number of employees working in the tourism sector at every 1000 inhabitants in the region (TEMPL) significantly varies from a county to another, with high values in the mountain regions (Brasov, Alba etc.) or in monastery and historical areas (e.g., Botosani, Neamt, Maramures). Furthermore, total nights spent in agritourism boarding houses divided by the total nights spent in tourism accommodation units (TNA/TNT) shows that there is a higher preference for agritourism in the mountain regions than in other parts of the country. The analysis was aimed to identify the influence of these factors on the development of agritourism entrepreneurship in Romania, represented by the number of agritourism boarding houses.

We have also tested for identifying the multi-collinearity of the variables. The corresponding correlation matrix is presented in Table 5. We did not consider in the same regression the variables correlated at a higher level than 0.4, because otherwise bias coefficients of the independent variables can be obtained in the regression models of the research. According to [105] (pp. 264–265), we performed the regression in order to obtain a high level of significance.

Table 4. Summary statistics of independent variables.

Economic and Social Development of the Regions—Variables					
Indicator	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation	Max	Min
REGGDP (Million RON)	11,441	9462	6828	36,275	3875
UNEMP (%)	6.40%	6.10%	2.27%	11.80%	1.20%
DROPOUT (per 100 inhabitants)	1.83	1.70	0.74	4.20	0.10
KM (Kilometers)	2052	2088	636	3536	788
INVEST/TURN (%)	10.19%	8.88%	7.21%	84.24%	4.29%
Tourism Development of the Regions—Variables					
Indicator	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation	Max	Min
TEMPL (per 1000 inhabitants)	5.65	4.88	3.13	16.66	1.67
TOURISTS (Number)	158,797	90,001	185,647	1,021,475	10,600
TSAL/AVSAL (%)	58.45%	58.11%	7.05%	83.56%	39.39%
TTURN/TNT (RON)	783.96	640.57	554.31	3580.94	131.95
TNA/TNT (%)	6.84%	4.85%	6.34%	28.31%	0.08%
TINVEST/TTURN (%)	18.86%	16.33%	9.30%	55.56%	2.51%
%TFIRMS (%)	5.53%	5.35%	1.33%	8.83%	2.72%
%TTURN (%)	1.19%	1.13%	0.47%	3.40%	0.43%

This table summarizes the features of analyzed variables in order to explain the development of agritourism in Romania.

Table 5. The correlation matrix.

INDICATOR	REGGDP	UNEMP	DROPOUT	KM	INVEST/ TURN	TEMPL	TOURISTS	TSAL/ AVSAL	TTURN/ TNT	TNA/ TNT	TINVEST/ TTURN	%TFIRMS	%TTURN
REGGDP	1.00												
UNEMP	−0.50	1.00											
DROPOUT	−0.02	−0.06	1.00										
KM	0.44	−0.09	−0.35	1.00									
INVEST/TURN	0.02	0.02	0.02	−0.01	1.00								
TEMPL	0.71	−0.60	0.12	0.18	0.06	1.00							
TOURISTS	0.73	−0.44	0.23	0.22	0.05	0.82	1.00						
TSAL/AVSAL	−0.16	−0.06	0.19	−0.14	−0.15	0.09	0.04	1.00					
TTURN/TNT	−0.03	0.18	−0.15	−0.08	−0.02	−0.18	−0.33	−0.09	1.00				
TNA/TNT	−0.12	0.14	−0.14	0.27	−0.07	−0.09	−0.04	−0.01	−0.09	1.00			
TINVEST/TTURN	0.08	−0.16	0.05	−0.03	0.08	0.23	0.17	0.02	−0.16	0.00	1.00		
%TFIRMS	0.02	−0.18	0.04	0.21	0.11	0.38	0.37	−0.05	−0.47	0.13	0.21	1.00	
%TTURN	0.04	−0.03	0.07	0.11	−0.01	0.37	0.34	0.21	−0.14	0.10	0.12	0.53	1.00

4. Results and Discussion

We tested whether the development of agritourism boarding houses in Romania is influenced by other factors besides the geographic characteristics of the landscape or the historical and religious sites. The study was conducted for the 41 counties in Romania (NUTS 3 regions) and we used values of the indicators recorded between 2010 and 2015. The achieved results are presented in Table 6. Due to provision of information on a relatively small number of cross-sectional units, for every county we used pooled data analysis, so the database has both pooled time series and cross-section data.

Table 6. The estimated results of the model.

Variable	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
L_REGGDP	32.82 *** (6.71)				
UNEMP		−482.04 *** (−3.99)			−291.04 ** (−2.11)
DROPOUT	11.17 *** (3.14)	9.13 ** (2.32)	6.51 * (2.32)	6.32 * (1.75)	7.26 * (1.68)
L_KM		9.80 (1.09)	1.79 (0.21)	15.03 (1.42)	30.13 *** (3.09)
INVEST/TURN	−44.05 (−1.22)	−23.05 (−0.63)	−40.52 (−1.17)	−51.52 (−1.50)	−50.62 (−1.18)
TEMPL			6.66 *** (7.49)		
TTURN/TNT		−0.01 ** (−2.32)	−0.01 ** (−2.46)		−0.01 *** (−2.66)
TNA/TNT	415.74 *** (10.18)	400.86 *** (9.08)	425.32 *** (10.32)	398.65 *** (9.96)	
TINVEST/TTURN	21.17 (0.75)	19.32 (0.66)	−4.46 (−0.16)	−1.09 (−0.04)	27.15 (0.81)
TSAL/AVSAL	131.72 *** (3.52)	52.32 (1.32)	52.61 (1.42)	64.19 * (1.68)	63.61 (1.47)
L_TOURISTS				25.32 *** (8.57)	
%TFIRMS	945.85 *** (4.81)			292.23 (1.42)	
%TTURN		2311.96 *** (3.93)	864.12 * (1.68)		2580.12 * (3.79)
INTERCEPT	−441.11 *** (−8.13)	−99.83 (−1.27)	−81.41 (−1.21)	−222.07 *** (−3.27)	−246.58 *** (−2.77)
R-squared	45.20%	41.46%	49.53%	50.72%	21.12%
Number of observations	246	246	246	246	246

This table estimates the factors that influence the geographic expansion of agritourism boarding houses in Romania. The database consists of macroeconomic and tourism sector data provided by the National Institute of Statistics in Romania. Logarithmic values for the variables previously mentioned were used in the analysis. We did not consider in the same regression the variables correlated at a higher level than 0.4. We performed Ordinary Least Square regression models to test economic, social and tourism factors that can influence the number of agritourism businesses in Romania. T-statistics are in parentheses. The symbols *, **, *** represent significance levels of 10%, 5% and 1%.

The results show that the two research hypotheses are confirmed, meaning that both regional economic-social development factors and tourism-related factors influence the development of agritourism boarding houses in Romania. R-squared has a relatively high value for the regression

models presented above, meaning that the selected variables significantly impact on the agribusiness industry in Romania.

After conducting the analysis, we identified positive influence on agritourism entrepreneurship evolution for the economic factors represented by regional GDP (REGGDP) and kilometers of national roads (KM), which confirms our first research hypothesis (H1) presented in the second section of the paper and also the findings of [2,11,12,33,60]. A possible explanation would be that the higher economic development of a region is also reflected in local tourism; government and EU funds were raised mainly in these regions and the growth of agritourism boarding houses is partially justified by the allocation of the regional funds to tourism development. However, at a more detailed glance, it is an obvious virtuous circle created around touristic regions: national investments and European funding improve touristic attractiveness and development of a region, while lack thereof determines an amplification of the disparities among regions. Poorer regions' local administrations are often faced with the impossibility to sustain co-financing EU funds' absorption process, thus private entrepreneurial skills and initiative may seem as sole solutions for local development and agritourism boarding houses are one example of exploitable market niches. Nevertheless, this loop involving local administration's investment—absorption of EU funds—local and regional development—increased opportunities for tourism and agritourism—improved quality of life implies a whole new analysis, which is one future direction of research on this topic but not the main focus of the current study.

Another issue with impact on tourists' choices is represented by the number of attractions that complement the accommodation facilities and where more firms are operating, there are usually also more ways to entertain customers. The adequate roads (existence of paved and national roads) are also important for the tourists to easily reach those regions, as confirmed by the studies conducted by [2,5,16,17,19,39,46].

Other positive impacts on agritourism development can be noticed in tourism-based indicators. The number of employees in the tourism sector per 1000 inhabitants (TEMPL), the salaries of the employees in tourism related to the average salary in the region (TSAL/AVSAL), the total number of tourists in the region (TOURISTS), the share of tourism firms in total number of firms in the region (%TFIRMS) and the share of tourism firms' turnover in total turnover of the companies in the region (%TTURN) explain all the same thing: where tourism is developed, the agritourism is also developed. There could be several explanations supporting this finding. Firstly, most entrepreneurs have developed agritourism businesses in regions visited by a high number of tourists and where the number of companies in the tourism industry is higher than the average. If tourists are attracted in a specific region, many of them will also consider the agritourism boarding houses as a good and/or healthy alternative to spend their holidays. Secondly, in the areas where the tourism is developed, the local authorities invested in tourist sites and facilities and the central government had rural and regional policies to support the tourism industry at local level. All these results confirm our second hypothesis (H2) presented in the second section of the paper.

An interesting result is the positive influence that the preference of tourists for agritourism (TNA/TNT) has on the number of agritourism boarding houses. As we previously mentioned, there is a high propensity for this kind of tourism in the mountain regions, where the fresh food, clean air and quiet environment turned to be valued by tourists that want to escape from their city life. This need of tourists has recently grown and their preferences for specific regions positively influence the development of agritourism boarding houses in these places.

Another result to be taken into account is related to the tourism turnover per night spent in the tourism accommodation units (TTURN/TNT). The conducted analysis revealed a negative influence of this variable on the agritourism boarding houses, which means that the higher the turnover per spent night (TTURN/TNT), the fewer agritourism boarding houses (TABH) are present in the region. A possible explanation is that high values of turnover per night are obtained in places with large tourism accommodation sites, like resorts and other modern facilities, while agribusinesses are placed outside of well-known resorts, usually in the middle of the nature.

According to our research, the unemployment has a negative influence on the agritourism boarding houses spreading but this is not a totally concluding result, since we consider that there are also other factors influencing the unemployment ratio. Although the rate in school dropout was found to be positively related with the number of agritourism business ventures, leading to the idea that no high-school diploma is needed in order to work in agritourism boarding houses, the personal and cultural characteristics should be also analyzed. A possible interpretation could reside in the fact that employability in tourism is not necessarily associated with having a high-school diploma for activating in the sector but there are other more relevant factors contributing to this decision (e.g., a family business to be developed in the future).

The conducted analysis did not find a direct link between the development of agritourism and factors like regional or tourism investments, measured as a percentage in the total or tourism turnover (INVEST/TURN and TINVEST/TTURN). An explanation could be that high investments were done in the tourism industry in Romania before 2010, mainly in the communist period, when many resorts and accommodation sites were developed, especially in the seaside and mountain regions. In the period investigated in this study (2010–2015), most of the (agri)tourism investments are done by locals and they are of a limited financial value. This is why INVEST/TURN and TINVEST/TTURN could not explain the development of agribusinesses in Romania.

Romania's patterns in terms of economic and social factors that influence agritourism business are to some extent similar to the ones of other countries, as confirmed by previous studies exposed in the literature review section; however, there are some characteristics that differentiate this country at European level. Firstly, as previously stated, post-communist Romania is still defined by a large proportion of the population living in rural areas, some of which belong to the poorest regions' category in the European Union. Actually, as Eurostat data points out [106], the poorest regions in the EU are characterized by economic activity concentrated within agriculture, forestry and fishing activities and are found in Eastern and Southern regions of the EU—five regions from Greece, three regions from each of Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania, two regions from Portugal and one from France. Secondly, there is a significant urban agglomeration in fast developing regions, which has determined a massive migration from rural to urban areas in the past all over the European Union but which is now generating the opposite effect, namely the return of urban population towards the calmer rural life but with a set of knowledge-based entrepreneurial skills acquired while living and working in urban environment. We must also take into consideration some other factors that may determine shifts from urban to rural businesses, such as air pollution, stress caused by traffic jams and crowded cities, need for more organic food products etc. This aspect can also be correlated with the aging tendency of the population observed throughout Europe; the median age in Romania is 41.3 years, not significantly different than the EU28 median age of 42.6 years [107] but the importance of investing in the quality of life is becoming more acknowledged even in Eastern European countries, where life expectancy is considerably lower than in Western countries.

In the end, we consider that the regional economic, social and tourism development influences the foundation of the agritourism businesses; entrepreneurs are willing to invest in locations where there is a high concentration of tourists and where their chances of success are high.

5. Conclusions and Further Research

Considering the significant role of rural communities at global, European and national level, the socio-economic changes and challenges, the increasing focus on environmental protection and the quest for achieving sustainable development, the agritourism entrepreneurship could be considered one viable option for present and future progress of non-urban areas. The main benefits that business ventures in agritourism may induce include but are not limited to: increased revenues and employment opportunities in the region, protection of the natural environment by appealing to traditional and non-invasive practices, promotion of the local culture and heritage, consolidation of the entrepreneurial skills and personal objectives of the involved population, alternative solution

to the decreasing agricultural endeavors etc. However, in order to benefit from all these economic, social and environmental advantages, the agritourism entrepreneurship needs specific conditions and incentives for its growth. Some of the most frequently stated facilitators of the agritourism businesses refer to socio-economic and tourism factors at macroeconomic level but also personal characteristics at individual level.

The present paper investigated the influence that economic (regional GDP, kilometers of national roads, total investments in total turnover of the region), social (unemployment, school dropout) and tourism related factors (tourists, employees in tourism, tourism turnover per night spent in tourism accommodation units, share of nights spent in agritourism related to total nights in tourism, tourism investments in tourism turnover of the region, tourism salary in the average salary of the region, share of tourism firms in total companies of the region, share of tourism turnover in total turnover of the region) have on the progress of agritourism entrepreneurship for all 41 counties in Romania, during the 2010–2015 time interval, which was assumed to represent a period of economic recovery after the crisis. For the majority of the indicators, a positive influence was identified concerning the evolution of the agritourism boarding houses, with only few exceptions: the unemployment rate of the region and tourism turnover per night spent in tourism accommodation units had a negative influence, while no impact resulted for the regional and tourism investments related to total turnover and, respectively, tourism turnover of the region. The positive influence is directly related to the sustainable regional development indicators and more in-depth analysis would be needed for factors that revealed negative or no correlation with agritourism entrepreneurship.

At this point, we may assume that a higher unemployment rate is a sign of socio-economic weakness of the region, also resulting in lower propensity towards establishing or working in agritourism boarding houses. The cultural mindset and the personal characteristics of the human resources working in agritourism are factors that should be investigated further on and the analysis could be developed at two main levels: the extensive examination refers to enlarging the study by taking into account a higher number of years, while the intensive one is about including more factors from the socio-cultural arena. The importance of the present study resides in the nature of the analysis conducted in order to test the influence of different incentives on the agritourism environment in Romania, assuming the practical implications that can be taken into account by national or local authorities interested to stimulate regional development or by investors who are looking to make the best choice for going into a new business venture in the rural areas of Romania.

The current analysis is especially relevant for other European countries with NUTS 3 regional characteristics similar to Romanian counties, where rural communities still play an important role and the local economic development is mainly based on agriculture and tourism, as in the case of the newer Member States of the European Union. Similar less developed regions in terms of low values of regional GDP, high unemployment rates, less developed road infrastructure or significant school dropout rate due to financial constraints and lower quality of life can also be found in countries such as Bulgaria, Greece or Hungary.

However, our analysis could be a starting point in evaluating the economic efficiency of agritourism businesses even for more developed European regions, as new means of exploring the services market, since the economic and financial crisis has forced many small and medium enterprises to shut down. If we take into account the fact that recent Eurostat analyses show a reversing phenomenon regarding the migration from urban to rural environment, then such an analysis at national and regional level could be proven useful for other countries as well.

Moreover, the economic and political environment, though apparently stable, is quite unpredictable at European and international level and the effects of the economic and financial crisis can still be felt within the national economies, either developed or less developed. Therefore, the entrepreneurs seek to establish resilient business opportunities, in order to prevent massive shocks in the eventuality of future unanticipated critical situations. Agritourism entrepreneurs as well are trying to respond to such challenges and scientific endeavors which point out the main determinants of

improvement become extremely useful instruments. From a quantitative perspective, further analysis on the subject could take into account the contribution of regional development EU funding in reducing local disparities and subsequently in increasing agritourism potential. An even clearer connection between regional and national development through European and national allocation of funds could be drawn; more specifically, further analyses could emphasize the influence of substantial financial allocations on the development of infrastructure, on restoring patrimonial sites and buildings, on improving the local quality of life with a further impact on developing tourism businesses, in general and agritourism businesses, in particular.

As previously presented from available literature, there are other subjective factors which may help develop agritourism boarding houses, like: the climate of a region, the picturesque landscape and the presence of cultural and historical patrimony. Consequently, from a qualitative perspective, further analysis for developing resilient agritourism could include an emphasis on agritourists' inclinations towards certain types of locations, their expectations regarding the agritourism experience, their preference for wilder environments or more historical sites based on their culture, age, educational and professional background, average annual income etc. All these could be taken into consideration for further developing a qualitative approach to the subject of resilient agritourism entrepreneurship.

Nonetheless, the quantitative approach, which, as previously stated, may include even more factors or incentives than the ones currently addressed in this paper, has an incontestable scientific value. Tourism consumers become more diverse, their tastes are increasingly refined but, in spite of cultural or environmental differences, the niche provided by agritourism entrepreneurship can be more easily exploited and resilient by assessing regional economic and social factors.

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