

Article

The Transition from Natural/Traditional Goods to Organic Products in an Emerging Market

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Abstract: The consumption of natural, green, organic products represents an increasingly important subject for contemporary society, organizations, consumers and researchers. Demographic and cultural factors, traditions and consumption habits, along with the individual desire to adopt a healthy lifestyle in accordance with principles of sustainability and environmental protection are relevant vectors in the search, choice and consumption of green products. Producers and retailers have identified the interest of modern consumers, introducing a varied range of green grocery and non-food products to match expectations and needs. Using the case study method, this paper highlights the transition of the organic market in an emerging European country: Romania. During the era of state economy, organic and natural products were interchangeable, but after liberalization of the market, the rise of the organic sector began with the establishment of inspection and certification bodies, establishment of procedures, and the appearance of specialized agricultural farms, processors and sellers. Consumers understood soon enough the advantages and benefits of organic products and a healthy lifestyle, and the market for organic products has been developing steadily. We show the current state of development and discuss its evolution, outlining the different market statistics, and making recommendations regarding future development possibilities.

Keywords: Romanian consumers; organic; green products; traditional products; natural products; consumption behavior; organic consumption

1. Introduction

The consumption of natural, green and traditional products is defined by Romania's evolution throughout time. Two distinctive reference periods can be identified: the period up until 1989, when the Romanian market was dominated by the state, and the period of the free liberalized market which began in 1990 after the fall of communism. Romanian consumers have been deeply marked by the transition from communism to democracy. Released from a regime which imposed a certain type of planned consumption, the domestic population was powerless in the face of the variety of products available on the market following the opening of borders. The inflow of products from other countries overcame the previous shortages and rationalization they were accustomed to, offering far more diversified possibilities of satisfying their needs and desires [1,2]. Natural, traditional products and groceries were replaced by foreign goods, mostly coming from other European or international markets [3]. Due to the power of branding, attractive packaging and new tastes, such foreign brands have managed to compete with traditional brands, eliminating them from the market.

This article shows the evolution of organic product consumption in Romania, from the time when the market was closed and such products were considered natural, to the free market economy, when organic products were only those certified by a proper inspection and certification body. We focus our attention on the emerging European market, with Romania having experienced some of the most

pronounced economic growth in the European Union during the last few years [1]. With the help of a case study, we paint a picture of the organic market in Romania during communist times, when there was no organic control or certification, and the situation after 1990, when the market was liberalized. The literature highlighting such comparisons within the organic market in two different time periods is sparse, probably due to the paucity of data availability, its trustworthiness and correctness.

The structure of the paper is as follows: in Section 2, we present a literature review on the consumption of organic products in general and the situation in Romania, followed by a short methodology of the case study in Section 3. In Section 4, we outline the organic products market in communist Romania, and in Section 5, the situation after liberalization of the market. The final section presents the conclusions, limitations and future research perspectives of the study.

2. Perspective of the Literature

The interest paid to organic products has considerably increased over the last few years due to individuals' access to information, as well as to the fact that they are produced in ever increasing quantities, and at lower costs [4,5]. Producers and consumers alike have become aware of the benefits of organic products to their own personal health [5–9]. Furthermore, increasing importance is also given to the fact that the principles of sustainability and environmental protection are clearly followed in the production and consumption of organic products [9–12]. By respecting nature and not harming the environment in any way, the ecosystem can be better protected, allowing future generations to have access to resources and products similar to those used by current generations [13–15]. Naturally, the desire for active organization in the sphere of environmental protection and sustainability contributes to the enhanced production and consumption of organic, green products, at the expense of conventional goods [16–19].

Based on various principles of consumption, and especially on the desire to improve their long-term health [8], consumers everywhere are increasingly showing preference for green, organic products, at the expense of conventional merchandise [20,21]. The consumption of organic products is largely determined by different influencing factors: price, origin, method of preparation, ingredients, packaging, etc. [12,20,22]. Healthy food contributes to the adoption of a healthy lifestyle, which represents one of the most important factors in the purchasing decisions of organic products consumers [5,7,9–11,23]. Prevention or alleviation of health problems is an important reason why consumers prefer the consumption of green, organic products [5,24]. Advocating for a cleaner environment, consumers everywhere are also starting to choose environmentally friendly products according to the measures in which they are environmentally friendly [7,11,13,25,26].

The desire to adopt a healthy lifestyle and the intention to protect the environment are probably the most important pillars determining consumers' choice of organic products [5,7,9,10,14]. Quality perceived via taste [4,6,16], degree of freshness [16], safe ingredients [10] and the absence of pesticides [5,11,14] represents other determinant vectors in the preference and purchase of green products. Recent studies also indicate the fact that young consumers, either Millennials or Zers, prefer such green products [27,28].

The consumption of organic products has become more and more widespread in Europe and across the world. In Romania, it has transformed in recent years from a niche segment into one of consistency, which shows no lack of international store chains activity [29,30]. European retail chains such as Carrefour, Cora, Auchan, Kaufland and Lidl, among others, nowadays sell several tens of hundreds of different organic food products under the brands of domestic and foreign producers, as well as under their own brands. This evolution precisely highlights the attractiveness of organic food products in Romania, and allows retailers to obtain consistent turnover [8,31].

Changing lifestyles, societal trends towards organic products, environmental protection, healthy eating, local food and fair trade [29,30] are strong enough reasons for more and more people to gradually switch from consuming conventional products to organic products, certified according to precise quality standards. Even if from the perspective of developing trade in organic products

Romania is behind more highly developed states [32], Romanian consumers are increasingly tending to align their consumption with their western confrères.

The literature frequently analyzes the specific consumption behavior regarding organic products, studies highlighting the determinants, influencers and supporters of organic produce consumption. Aspects noted include the following: concern for the care of mankind, amelioration or improvement of health [33–36]; environmental protection [33,35]; development and consolidation of a favourable attitude to the consumption of organic products [30,33–35,37]; increased knowledge concerning the advantages, benefits and risks of certain types of food [33,35,38]; delineating the factors that describe the quality of organic products [34] as compared to conventional ones; and personal [34,35] and social vectors [35,38] which favor or enhance the consumption of organic food products, etc.

Petrescu et al. [34] note that a positive attitude towards organic products is not only influenced by quality but also by social and personal factors, while they only slightly support purchase intention. On the other hand, purchase intention can be determined by the degree to which the obtained food products or goods are environmentally friendly, respecting the principles of sustainability and green marketing [29,39,40]. Due to strict standards of production, processing and distribution, and limited use of chemicals, organic foods are commercialized at a higher price than similar conventional products [8,37]. Attitudes, concern for health and the environment, as well as previous knowledge and experience of organic products directly influence consumption [30,33,35]. From this perspective, Romanians have similar interests and tastes to their European and American counterparts regarding the consumption of organic products, but totally opposite to their Asian peers, for whom environmental protection is not in the least bit relevant [41].

Health is the main reason for the consumption of organic foods, for the special attention paid to food and its influence on personal health and prevention of possible diseases [8]. Concern for one's health is also generated by demographic factors, such as consumers' gender or age, and requires educating individuals from an early age on healthy eating and factors which can generate it [23,34]. Caring for one's own health is an increasingly important reason as to why organic products are preferred by Romanians, many of whom are consuming significant quantities of organic fruits and vegetables [33,42].

By adopting a vegetarian, or even a vegan diet based on organic products, consumers contribute to protecting the lives of animals and their habitats [35]. Adopting the consumption of organic products is also determined by an individual's degree of information. Compared to their western peers, Romanians receive a precarious lack of information concerning the benefits of organic food consumption, with little knowledge of the positive and negative features, nor the profile of the target group to which they are addressed [38]. Lack of information is also demonstrated by the tenderers (producers, processors, distributors) of organic products, as they have little awareness on the exact profile of consumers, their expectations, interests or motivations. The lack of information is also due to the relatively low promotion of organic products via mass media. This denotes a lack of active involvement from the state authorities, the profile associations, which should support more intensely the organic movement, and also the consumerist organizations, which should militate for a healthier lifestyle, in accordance with the environment and principles of green marketing [29].

Consumers' knowledge on organic products depends on their cognitive structures; the more information a person possesses on such products, the lower his or her level of skepticism [33]. Romanians' lack of information is due to the precariousness of the organic culture [43], and to the non-existence of a mentality concerning the consumption of such food products. However, many Romanians resort to the consumption of organic products for social reasons, thus identifying themselves with reference groups which represent authentic consumption patterns [33]. Social norms dictate the behavior of individuals who mimic the behavior of the groups they belong to, with social factors having a positive effect on the attitude towards organic products. It was found that personal factors, such as age, personality, self-awareness, lifestyle, occupation and income, among others, have a direct and positive influence on the consumption of organic products [35].

3. Research Methodology

In order to highlight the transition from the natural product market to the organic product market in Romania, the authors employed a qualitative approach, based on secondary data available in public and governmental statistics. Hence, we relied on a case study, which is divided into two sections: the first part presents the natural product market during the communist period, when the economy was not liberalized, while the second part approaches the organic market and consumption patterns after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Such a case study allows an in-depth insight into a given phenomenon that is not studied well in the literature [44–46]. The case study method was an appropriate approach, as it can focus on holistic situations in real-life settings, which tend to have set boundaries of interest, such as an organization, a particular industry or a particular type of operation ([44], p.99). We, therefore, focused our case study on an emerging market, namely Romania, describing an industry, namely the organic market after liberalization, as well as the natural products market before that liberalization.

4. The Romanian Natural Products Market in the State Economy

The Ceaușescu age, which Romania experienced until 1989, profoundly marked the country's economy, its consequences still being visible in some economic sectors and within citizens' mentalities nowadays [1]. On attaining the leadership of Romania in 1974, Nicolae Ceaușescu aimed at transforming the country into a strongly industrialized fortress, a goal to which he dedicated his entire actions. The results did not cease to appear, with recorded levels fluctuating, depending on the country's political situation. Net investment in industry increased from 18% during 1951–1955 to 36% during 1976–1980, subsequently decreasing to 27% during 1981–1985 [47]. This spectacular evolution, recorded over several years, demonstrates the fact that the party's strategy had been realized, although the decrease during the last period represented a sign of some societal, economic and planning shortcomings, corroborated with the dictator's desire to pay all the external loans taken in advance from international creditors [48].

The labor force in the secondary sector increased from 12% to 37%, placing Romania at second place in the Europe of that period, with a high percentage of employed. Towards the end of the communist period, the percentage of the population employed in agriculture decreased from 71%, cumulating, in the 1950s, to 28% [47]. After obtaining substantial funds from abroad for the industrialization and urbanization of Romania in the 1970s [48], the entire payment of the country's external debt was decided after 1980, using available internal resources until exhaustion. Thus, much of the food and non-food products for Romanian consumers were exported, which caused a serious shortage of goods in the domestic market, with food sales decreasing in the 1980s by over 50% (meat and meat products by 49%; dairy products by 60%, etc.) The population was increasingly deprived of necessities, such as heat or electricity during wintertime, and were pressured to work longer hours [47].

The analysis of the natural products market during the period preceding the transition to a market economy is based on the official statistical information extracted from the Statistical Yearbooks of that period [49,50]. According to these, the natural products present on the shelves of food stores and kiosks came either from the country's production or from imports, adding to the domestic shortcomings. Although the country's surface has always been generous, allowing the development of an advantageous agricultural production, the deficiencies were covered by imports from the former Soviet block, namely from countries with which there were bilateral exchange agreements [51]. Of course, many domestic products were destined for export, Romania playing, at least regionally, an important role in the food market. As shown in Table 1, the imports and exports of the considered period (1950–1989) experienced an upward evolution. If in 1950, the value of food imports was 4.8 million lei (the equivalent of 0.80 million USD), by 1985, it would reach 2966.5 million lei (678.84 million USD). Similarly, the value of exports had increased from 180.7 million lei (30.12 million USD) in 1950 to 13,629.7 million lei (3118.93 million USD) in 1985 [52]. The significant difference between the value of exports and the value of imports is worth appreciating. The generous value of exports reached by the Socialist Republic of Romania in 1985 indicates a significant production of foodstuffs.

Table 1. The evolution of the value of exports and imports of foodstuffs.

Year	Export of Foodstuff (mil. USD)	% (1950 = 100%)	Import of Foodstuff (mil. USD)	% (1950 = 100%)
1950	30.12	100	0.80	100.0
1955	43.74	145.2	19.37	2420.8
1960	84.70	281.2	16.47	2058.3
1965	153.15	508.5	25.90	3237.5
1970	224.19	744.4	59.60	7450
1975	467.17	1284.4	119.80	12,404.1
1980	971.91	2404.2	378.41	39,181.2
1985	3118.93	7542.7	678.84	61,802.0

Source: processed after [49,50].

Agriculture has always been a strong point in Romania, irrespective of the period (inter-war, post-war, market economy since 1990), the political regime laying great store on plant and animal production and of its valorization on the domestic market. Table 2 shows the plant production between 1925 and 1985. It can be observed that cereals, orchards and vineyard production gradually increased between 1925 and 1938, while forested areas gradually decreased as a result of the development of the furniture industry. Food and industrial plant crops recorded significant variations between 1925 and 1938 [53–55], as a result of the social, economic and political turbulence of the time. Agricultural production suffered considerably during World War II, but later this sector would recover and develop continuously, production being supported by the state through public funding [49,50,56]. The accelerated mechanization of agriculture allowed the increase of production per surface unit, as well as crop diversification. For example, the area cultivated with cereals increased from 1830.3 million hectares in 1967 to 4765 million hectares in 1985, which corresponds to an increase of approximately 68%. As compared to the period preceding the global conflagration and its actual development, namely the removal of its effects (1937–1950), the registered losses were strongly compensated by the increase of the entire sector in the 1960s [50].

Table 2. The evolution of the number of hectares according to culture 1925–1984 (million hectares).

Year	Total Arable Land	Cereals	Meadows and Pastures	Orchards of Trees and Vineyard	Forestry
1925	12,269.3	10,471.6	4218.9	545.2	7241.7
1929	13,012.4	11,222.5	4054.4	613.6	7134.2
1938	13,873.8	11,387.3	5046.6	649.6	6584.2
1950	9377.9	205.9	2234.6	411.5	6446.3
1960	9820.7	1526.1	4200.6	525.3	6403.3
1967	9799.8	2830.3	4312.4	726.4	6238.8
1980	9838.5	4207	4467.2	549.3	6937.0
1985	9934.8	4765	4329.2	344	6338.2

Source: computed after [53–55].

Agricultural products were used either for animal husbandry or were processed as staple foods during the state economy period. As a result of increased investment in the development of the post-war food industry (1950: 143 million lei, 1967: 1832 million lei), Romanians benefited from meat directly from slaughterhouses, dairy and cheese products, butter and vegetable oils, starch, sugar, canned foods, etc., the most commonly sold products being meat and cans [50]. Before 1990, food

products were distributed via shops and kiosks, grouped on commodity categories: meat and fish, bread, vegetables and fruits (Table 3). As can be seen, their number increased until 1980, when, following the regime policy of the accelerated return of the external debt [53], the number of these units decreased [50].

Table 3. Number of food stores and kiosks 1950–1989.

Year	Total, of which	Meat and Fish	Bread	Vegetables and Fruits
1955	9646	1082	2598	1037
1960	12,523	1508	2569	1880
1965	14,477	1421	3065	2519
1975	22,377	1423	3295	6489
1980	23,472	1490	3365	6795
1984	22,380	1490	3082	5787

Source: processed after [50].

The consumption of food and non-food goods represented an important index of the development level in the state economy. Although agricultural, industrial and commodity production for the population was steadily increasing before 1989, a large proportion of it went to export, citizens having only limited access to food and non-food goods [57]. In the Romania of the 1980s, although citizens had considerable financial resources, they could neither buy much from the domestic market, nor did they have access to the external one [58,59]. After the transition to the market economy, this precariousness generated a change in consumer behavior, with people tending to purchase a multitude of products without necessarily needing them [57]. Although communist Europe wanted to look like an ideal place, a dream for the ordinary citizen, the socialist states in effect deprived their citizens of the possibility to consume, culminating in 1989–1991 with the popular change of all such regimes [56].

Although the number of food shops and kiosks was quite large (Table 3), food availability was extremely poor, mostly only cans being readily available. Consumers frequently spent a lot of time in endless queues, waiting to purchase natural products such as fruits, vegetables or meat [58,59]. Basically, the most advantaged citizen of those times was the peasant, who, even though he did not have spectacular wealth, by producing his own food, he did not suffer from the hunger and shortages generated by the system. Hence, the peasant led a relatively better life than that of the town dweller. The food items for subsistence consumption were made according to traditional methods and techniques, peasants having no access to chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Individuals who could obtain products from peasants were consuming natural, green products.

5. The Organic Products Market in the Liberalized Market Economy

In the mid-1990s and early-2000s, Romania witnessed both the accession of major international retailers (Delhaize in 2004, Metro in 1996) [2] and the birth of organic farming [60,61]. In 1997, the first organic farming association [2,60] was founded with the help of a Swiss social-charitable foundation (COM Schweiz). Since its foundation, Bioterra Romania has aimed at the education of producers via initial and continuous training in the spirit of organic farming principles. They are represented mainly by small farmers, for whom this style of agriculture can mean state subsidies and a higher price for the sold products. In this regard, the Bioterra Association has worked intensively with specialists from Switzerland, Germany, Austria and Hungary, who have annually participated in different events, workshops and information sessions [8,60].

The Bioterra Association initially contributed to raising awareness among the national authorities regarding the regulation and support via subsidies of the producers, farmers, processors and distributors of organic agricultural products in Romania. In 2000, as a result of consequent and consistent efforts, the legislative framework necessary to regulate a production system was created, based on the European

organic farming model. The Emergency Ordinance no. 34/2000 concerning organic agri-food products states that organic production refers to “obtaining agri-food products without using synthetic chemicals, in accordance with the established organic production rules” [62]. Later, with Romania’s accession to the European Union in 2007, both the national legislation and the regulations of the European Union became valid in Romania [32].

In 2004, the Bioterra Association received funding from the Swiss government for establishing and developing the first control and certification body for organic agricultural products: Ecoinspect Romania [60]. Currently, Ecoinspect Romania is the main body that controls and certifies the producers, processors and distributors of organic agricultural products in Romania, having over 1000 customers. The company’s large number of clients is also due to the collaboration protocol concluded with Biokontroll Hungary and Biocerta Switzerland, which have granted Ecoinspect exclusive rights of control and certification on behalf of these bodies for clients in Romania. Ecoinspect controls and certifies according to the European organic farming standard SR EN 15012: 2000 [63].

Organic food products are derived from the organic farming circuit [8]. The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of Romania defines organic farming as a system of producing food which is “cleaner and more suitable for the human metabolism, in full correlation with the conservation and development of the environment” [64]. Organic production is based on two essential values, which are increasingly known to organizations, namely a healthy lifestyle and environmental protection. These values have become increasingly popular in the Romanian market, which is gradually adopting the principles and customs already practiced by the markets in developed countries.

Concern for one’s personal health and avoiding the adverse effects on the environment from the use of pesticides and genetically modified organisms in agricultural production processes has led to an increased interest in organic products by producers and consumers alike [6]. More and more consumers have become aware of the benefits of consuming organic, green products, which they prefer, to the detriment of conventional ones. This fact has also been noticed by investors, who have focused their attention on producing, processing and marketing organic products. Their adoption and consumption in Romania are increasingly evident [65].

Organic products are characterized by a lack of pesticides, fertilizers, genetically modified organisms and other chemicals from the entire value chain, from producer to processor, to the final distributor and the consumer [20,66]. Their production follows very exacting standards and processes which do not pollute, and which protect the environment [29,60,67]. Organic products are obtained within an organic farming system, without additives, complementary substances or synthetic chemicals [68]. Farms and/or companies involved in producing, processing and/or selling organic products must first undergo a complex process of inspection and certification, carried out by a competent body in organic matters, strictly respecting the national and community legislation, and delimiting organic processes from conventional or conversion ones [63]. Once the control and certification processes have been completed, the organization receives an appropriate code for its products from the certification body, which also contains the “ae” sign. Through this, the relevant ministry guarantees to consumers that products with the “ae” logo strictly respect the safety standards of the organic production process [68].

Although organic products are topical nowadays, and receiving increased recognition, traditional products also remain a topic of interest for consumers and producers everywhere. The production and sale of traditional products represents an important economic input for many regions, making essential contributions to the prevention of depopulation, especially in rural areas. The importance of studying traditional products is particularly significant, as many such products in Europe are on the verge of extinction, due to several factors including the alteration of lifestyles [69]. According to Guerrero et al. [70], traditional products represent an important element of European culture, being associated with specific regions, and towards which consumers have a positive attitude.

Traditional Romanian produce has certain specific features which distinguish it from similar products from other countries. Both the raw materials and their actual production must be realized

on Romanian territory, according to a traditional recipe based on old procedures, and from which food additives are missing [64,68,71]. At a symbolic level, the traditional product encompasses a set of values and concepts specific to the culture and history of a country and which are different from those of other states.

In parallel with the interest paid to organic and traditional products, there is also an increased orientation towards natural products, which consumers may unintentionally associate with green produce, and which they prefer for various reasons. Consumers often tend to opt for natural products, to the detriment of organic items, due to lack of information, as well as negligence in carefully reading and understanding the meaning of labels on the purchased goods. The Consumers Union [72] notes that many consumers perceive natural products as being superior because of the name, which suggests lack of additives, chemicals and pesticides. Thus, an overlap is identified between the concepts of “organic” and “natural” [8].

Due to the assiduous efforts made by Bioterra Romania, as well as to the existence of an appropriate legislative framework, the number of producers of certified organic farming products began to increase in Romania, their evolution being shown in Table 4. However, as a result of a partial reduction in the subsidy for organic farming, the number of producers has declined since 2012, reaching a minimum in 2017.

Table 4. Evolution of the number of producers in organic agriculture in Romania.

Year	Producers	Year	Producers	Year	Producers
2004	1200	2012	15,280	2016	10,083
2007	2238	2013	14,553	2017	7908
2009	3078	2014	14,151	2018	8518

Source: [73].

The distribution of organic products is an important aspect of the market in Romania. Consumers have access to organic products via different channels: local markets specializing in organic products, shops located in rural or urban areas, central arteries, manufacturers’ offices, and chains of physical and/or online stores [74]. In 2008, 80% of organic products were sold via supermarkets and hypermarkets, while only 5% were sold via specialized stores, and 15% via other channels [75].

Regarding the consumption of organic products, Romania has a tendency to align itself to European customs in the field, although from a statistical perspective, this phenomenon is still developing. By analyzing the consumption of organic products per capita, Romania was ranked 22nd in Europe in 2014, with a value of 3.7 euros, unlike Switzerland, which ranked first with an average consumption of 221.5 euros per capita. However, consumption in Romania was higher than in states such as Turkey or Bosnia and Herzegovina, where it was about 0.1 euros per capita [75]. The disparity of consumption per capita in Romania compared with Switzerland, Germany, France, Austria, etc., derives both from net lower purchasing power, from Romanians’ lack of education concerning the health benefits of organic products, and from the desire to economize by buying cheaper products. Moreover, the tradition of cultivating, processing and trading organic products is much older in these other European states than it is in Romania.

The upward evolution of organic products consumption is obvious considering that, in 2006, Romania registered a market of approximately 2.5 million euros, meaning 0.1 euros per capita [75]. Countries such as Germany, the United Kingdom, Italy and France present a cumulative consumption of 80% of the organic production in the European Union, being top of the rankings concerning the annual growth rate of organic products consumption [35].

Romanian consumers spent about 74 million euros purchasing organic products in 2014. Even if the registered amount is significantly higher than that specific to the countries ranking lowest, there is a significant difference in consumption between Romania and the developed countries. The average cost of purchasing monthly organic products is around the equivalent of about 10 euros/month/person.

Only a small number of consumers are willing to pay 10%-15% more for such products [35]. However, consumers purchasing organic products from the big chain stores are willing to pay up to 100% more for them [8], the most popular being organic plant products [35,76]. Compared with their Western European confrères, Romanians consider that food products produced in their own household or cultivated on their own land are natural, giving them a similar importance to the organic products that they find in stores, even if they are not checked by an acknowledged body. Basically, a significant part of the rural population does not resort to buying organic products from stores, preferring to produce their own food [75].

The organic products market in Romania is mainly export-oriented. Due to the low awareness of the quality of organic products among Romanian consumers, producers are more oriented towards external markets, where they find customers willing to pay high prices for the obtained organic products [75]. The traditional products market in Romania is regulated similarly to that of the organic market. Considering the definition of traditional products and the legislation in force, Romania was listed in 2011 with 3850 traditional food products. This value is higher than that registered in 2010 of about 2800 traditional products [69]. The upward trend of traditional Romanian products is supported by the value registered in 2013: approximately 4400 products. The new regulations of 2013 (Order no. 724 of 29 July 2013, concerning the certification of traditional products) represented an obstacle in the evolution of traditional products at the end of 2014, with only 300 products being certified as traditional [77]. Subsequently, the upward trend in the supply of traditional products resumed, reaching 510 units in 2015 [64], and 592 in 2020 [68].

6. Discussion and Conclusions

Romania has significant potential regarding the consumption of organic products. The lack of information concerning the benefits of their consumption and the high prices compared with traditional products represent a factor which discourages their purchase. This situation is in contradiction to other, more developed countries, where organic products are preferred to traditional ones, due to their taste and health benefits, and to the fact that they protect the environment. Traditional products, on the other hand, enjoy such popularity among Romanian consumers. The segment of consumers purchasing traditional products is higher than that purchasing organic products. This is a consequence of the lack of information specific to the indigenous population, which leads to confusion of organic products with traditional ones and vice versa [78,79]. Another reason for the popularity of traditional products is the tendency of Romanian consumers to seek alternatives to similar products abroad [68]. In the 21st Century, when travelling and exchanges no longer represent boundaries to products and consumers, there is an interest in products specific to a certain culture, different from those found on the store shelves. There are still many traditional Romanian products which characterize the culture and the country, and to which the population still pays attention.

During the state economy era, consumers could hardly even find basic groceries in food stores and had little information concerning the benefits of organic products or how to ensure a healthy diet. Most relied on their own household produce, as they still had acquaintances and/or relatives living in rural areas. Today, this situation has changed, as Romanian consumers have increased access to information and different organic products of domestic and international origin. However, a proper education regarding the benefits and advantages of organic products is still a necessity. The transition from communism to democracy has represented a real challenge for the Romanian market. Renowned Romanian brands have survived the transition, while others have waned; most of the renowned Romanian brands were born in the post-communist period. Traditional Romanian products are still preferred by Romanian consumers who are attached to the memory of the past and, at the same time, eager to maintain an authentic lifestyle. Thus, certified organic products may be questioned by the Romanian population who, due to lack of information and financial resources, are more likely to resort to natural and traditional products, or to self-sufficiency.

The lack of proper education on organic products and a healthy lifestyle, a fixed attitude regarding the correct identification and consumption of organic products, as well as the limited purchasing power of many Romanian consumers, still represent reasons why the organic products market remains niche. Romanians often resort to products made from traditional recipes, emanating from the households of certain entrepreneurs and farmers, but which are not properly certified according to the principles of organic farming, and which are sold as natural products.

From a theoretical perspective, there seem to be quite prominent differences between the indigenous Romanian population and those of other European states when it comes to the preference and consumption of organic products. Concern for personal health and care for the environment through the consumption of quality produce are premises which persuade consumers to buy organic products. However, the high level of prices represents a barrier in this regard. Also, Romanian consumers have not yet developed a proper mentality in favor of this type of consumption; that is, they do not always understand and correctly assess the advantages of such foodstuffs for their own health. Many consumers still prefer traditional and natural products which, despite their lack of certification, are more accessible and trustworthy, as they can be bought from local farmers. Self-sufficiency is still present in rural areas, which makes the market for organic products almost exclusively an urban phenomenon.

Understanding these aspects is of high significance for retailers and managers of organic businesses, as they must know how to approach and properly target consumers interested in organic products. The farming industry, together with organic farming associations, processors and retailers has the task of raising the profile of organic foodstuffs in consumers' minds, explaining the benefits of a healthy lifestyle based on organic products, and showing the advantages of such products over conventional produce. Such a task is not easy to fulfil, as consumers often display polyvalent consumption behavior: sometimes they are price sensitive, while at other times, they prefer to buy from neighboring stores, as convenience is far more important to them [8]. However, retailers and other stakeholders in the field need to know how to assess consumers, understand their desires and expectations, and fulfil their needs.

Given the differences and similarities between product categories, some question marks are of importance for producers, processors, distributors, retailers, marketers and even for government institutions. On the one hand, it is necessary that the three markets (production, processing, distribution) are clearly defined and delimited, so that the stakeholders of each are well known. At the same time, it is important that the factors influencing consumer behavior and attitudes are properly investigated and understood, and subsequently transformed into strategies for addressing the target segments of consumers. Finally, it is necessary that the evolution of the market's products is known, in order to develop proper marketing strategies.

This paper has several limitations, as it only analyzes the Romanian natural product market and organic product market from the perspective of statistical data available in governmental and official statistics. Private data on the sector were not available, so future studies could also take into consideration the natural versus organic market sector in the region, and not only in one country.

Future papers could aim to not only highlight consumer awareness regarding organic products but also assess the expectations and preferences of consumer generations toward these products. It would also be worth studying the competition intensity of the sector, by highlighting the penetration degree of foreign organic products compared to domestic ones. Another relevant analysis could take into consideration a comparison of traditional brands that existed during communist times and that are still present in the Romanian market. Last but not least, highlighting consumption behavior regarding organic products during times of pandemic crisis could also be a topic for future studies.

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