

## RURAL AREAS AND WINE TOURISM: THE CASE OF ROMANIA

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*Article history: Received: January 9, 2023; Reviewed: February 13, 2023; Accepted: February 20, 2023;  
Available online: March 30, 2023; Available print: April 30, 2023.*

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**ABSTRACT.** The purpose of the present paper is to provide an integrated approach to the development of wine tourism in Romania's rural areas. The main research question is: *are the communes hosting vineyards and wine-producing facilities and/or cellars/wineries in a better position to attract tourists, compared to the other communes?* This question was induced, first, by the fact that Romania is among the top 15 wine producers worldwide, and some of its wine brands are (well)known at least at the regional level, hence this position might influence Romania as a wine tourism destination. Second, Romanian rural tourism is still in its early stages of development at the national level and therefore a differentiation feature represented by wine-related activities might enhance the attractiveness of a rural destination. Furthermore, wine tourism is a fastly developing trend at the international level and those destinations which have the resources to establish and/or improve wine tourism should take advantage of this trend.

The findings of the current paper indicate that wine tourism is poorly developed for the group of wine-producing Romanian rural localities. The extra tourist potential of these localities (represented by vineyards and wineries) is used in an unsatisfactory and inexpertly manner for

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attracting tourists. The findings are in line with the relatively low level of rural tourism development in Romania presented by other academic works.

**Keywords:** vineyards, wine tourism, rural area, Romania

**JEL Classification:** Z32, L83, C10, R00.

**Recommended citation:** Pop, C., Coros, M.M., *Rural areas and wine tourism: The case of Romania*, Studia UBB Negotia, vol. 68, issue 1 (March) 2023, pp. 5-29, doi: 10.24193/subbnegotia.2023.1.01

## Introduction

As a tourism destination, Romania is spoiled by the too many opportunities and alternatives of tourism forms it can offer (Pop et al., 2007). Therefore, Romanian authorities spread thin among far too many proposed initiatives for tourism development; as expected, without a clear focus, the results can be appreciated at best to be modest so far since only from 2017 to 2019 has the total number of tourists over-passed 12 million arrivals, reaching, after three decades, the levels registered between 1987 and 1989. One can safely say that Romania's tourism potential is still to unfold.

Romania's potential for alternative tourism forms, mainly in rural areas, was highlighted by Turnock (2006), and the growth potential of rural tourism was emphasized by the Romanian Ministry of Tourism since 1995 (Pop & Georgescu, 2019).

According to the National Institute of Statistics (NIS), rural areas in Romania concentrate 45.90% of the population (by the end of 2019) hosted in 12,491 villages organized in 2,861 communes<sup>3</sup> (the smallest administrative-territorial unit or ATU, found only in rural areas). The same

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<sup>3</sup> In 2019 one small town requested the status of commune and it was re-included in this category of ATU during 2019. This transformation was not considered for the present paper.

data source, NIS, shows that rural areas concentrated between 39.26% (in 2005) and 45.72% (in 2019) of the total number of lodgings. This relatively high concentration is provided by several large spa and littoral resorts<sup>4</sup> registered as communes (e.g., Baile Felix and Baile 1 Mai in Sanmartin, Bihor County; Voineasa, Valcea County; Costinesti, Constanta County) and several communes with a large number of lodgings (e.g., Bran and Moieciu, Brasov County, near Bran castle). However, data regarding tourist arrivals in rural areas tell a different story, indicating a rural tourism that still is in its early stages of development since the rural areas attracted less than 20% of the total tourist arrivals (between 12.30% in 2005, and 18.22% in 2019).

Wine tourism, viewed as part of rural tourism, was taken into consideration by the Ministry of Tourism when it launched the program **Romania - Land of Wine** in 2002/2003, with the sub-program *Wine Road/Route* aiming at reviving the Romanian countryside by promoting rural tourism (Nedelcu, 2014; Dinu et al., 2015; Ungureanu, 2015). This initiative was based on Romania's tradition as a wine-producing country and at least several (well)known wine brands (e.g., Murfatlar, Cotnari, Odobesti, Jidvei, Recas). In 2019, Romania ranked 10<sup>th</sup> worldwide and 4<sup>th</sup> within the European Union (EU) from the viewpoint of the cultivated surface (ha) of vineyards. Also, in 2019, Romania ranked 13<sup>th</sup> worldwide and 6<sup>th</sup> in the EU in terms of wine production (information based on the International Organization for Vine and Wine (OIV) statistics).

Furthermore, based on official documents (Order 1205/2018 of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development), a number of 37 vineyards and 41 independent wine-growing centers (henceforth all called vineyards) were identified, of which 20 vineyards (one is in fact an independent wine-growing center) have the status of protected destination origin (PDO). These vineyards are spread across 35 counties (of the total of 41 Romanian counties).

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<sup>4</sup> The status of tourist resort for a locality is provided by the Ministry of Tourism (or the ministry that includes the portfolio of tourism) based on a series of criteria rather adapted for urban areas than rural areas. Nonetheless, the status of resort is desired by the local authorities since it has a certain potential to increase the visibility of the respective locality and to enhance the access to some extra financial resources.

Based on these resources, Romania was included by the Council of Europe in two routes dedicated to wine: the *Iter Vitis Route* (since 2009) and the *Roman Emperors and Danube Wine Route* (since 2015).

Therefore, there is a potential for wine tourism in the Romanian rural areas, as most of the vineyards are located within the countryside. An attempt was made to exploit this potential via the above-mentioned program.

Hence, the central research question for the present paper is: *Are the communes hosting vineyards and wine-producing facilities and/or cellars/wineries in a better position to attract tourists, compared to the other communes?*

In order to answer this central question, the present paper is structured as follows: a section dedicated to the literature review, followed by the section dedicated to data and research methodology, continued by findings, discussions, and conclusions.

## **Literature Review**

The attention attracted by the development and evolution of the wine tourism phenomenon over the almost three past decades is emphasized by the papers of Sanchez et al. (2017), Gomez et al. (2018), and Amarando et al. (2019). From a niche form of tourism, often included under the umbrella of cultural tourism and/or gastronomic tourism (Andrade-Suarez & Caamano-Franco, 2020; Garcia Revilla & Martinez Moure, 2021), wine tourism has managed to gain a stand-alone position as “special interest tourism” (Andrade-Suarez & Caamano-Franco, 2020; Cunha et al., 2021), which offers complex and holistic experiences within wine-producing regions (Correia & Brito, 2016; Garcia Revilla & Martinez Moure, 2021).

The interest towards nontraditional, less crowded tourism destinations started to grow worldwide (Cracolici & Nijkamp, 2009) and wine-producing regions, mostly located in rural areas, became increasingly attractive given their special characteristics which include vineyard landscapes, grape-growing and wine-producing heritage and traditions, and other cultural and gastronomic customs (Bonarou et al., 2019; Andrade-Suarez & Caamano-Franco, 2020; Cunha et al., 2021).

The appeal of wine-producing regions was enhanced by the inclusion of several wine-growing landscapes in the World Heritage Site (WHS) list (e.g., Portovenere, Cinque Terre and the Islands, Italy, in 1997, or more recently Burgundy and Champagne, France, in 2015, according to WHS (\*\*\*, 1997-2022)). This recognition provides the respective regions with the recognition of their special status as heritage sites at a cross between natural landscapes and man-made environments (Bonarou et al., 2019; Pastor, 2021; Yravedra & Perez-Somarriba Yravedra, 2021).

Since most grape cultivation and wine-growing activities take place mainly in rural areas and, given the increasing importance of vineyard landscapes for wine tourists (Pastor, 2021; Yravedra & Perez-Somarriba Yravedra, 2021; Trisic et al., 2020), the relation between wine tourism and rural tourism is obvious within wine-producing regions (Oncel & Yolal, 2019; Corigliano, 2016), rural wine tourism being also considered a sub-sector of rural tourism (Andrade-Suarez & Caamano-Franco, 2020; Cunha et al., 2021).

Similar to rural tourism, wine tourism is perceived as a potential tool for those wine-producing rural areas searching for sustainable development or revitalization (Correia & Brito, 2016). This status of wine tourism derives from its potential to integrate agriculture (a primary sector) with the wine industry (a secondary sector), and with tourism (a tertiary sector), while providing or enhancing the competitive advantage of the wine-producing regions by highlighting their unique features and cultural traditions (Salvado, 2016; Andrade-Suarez & Caamano-Franco, 2020). Furthermore, while analyzing the Italian case, Calabri and Vieri (2016), identify food and wine tourism as a genuine resource for a novel model of local development.

Wine tourism, mainly in European countries, has often been associated with wine routes (Montella, 2017; Oncel & Yolal, 2019; Trisic et al., 2020). Although most (well-known) wine routes or roads can be already considered tourist objectives, there seems to emerge a process of transforming wine routes in tourist destinations (Trisic et al., 2020). This nascent process is based on the capacity of wine routes to offer holistic experiences within a wine-producing region by connecting wine-related natural and man-made landscapes, events, and local cultural heritage (Trisic et al., 2020; Garcia Revilla & Martinez Moure, 2021). All of the

above-mentioned attributes of a wine route have the ability to provide a wine-producing region with distinctive (sometimes even unique) features and (potentially) a wine-based brand (Cunha et al., 2021), which might entice and attract tourists. Furthermore, wine tourism, often via wine routes, has the power to create networks among various related economic entities via collaboration, cooperation, and co-competition (Damayanti et al., 2017) and, if properly managed, can advance the sustainable economic and social development of the respective (wine-producing) region through environmental conservation, employment opportunities, and improved living conditions (McGregor & Robinson, 2019; Andrade-Suarez & Caamano-Franco, 2020; Cunha et al., 2021).

While all of the above mentions regarding wine tourism and wine routes in rural areas can, overall, be applied also to Romania, the Romanian academic literature which tries to investigate wine tourism shows a slightly different picture. The studies, mostly descriptive (Soare et al., 2010; Nedelcu, 2014; Dinu et al., 2015), give some opinions regarding the potential of wine tourism in Romania based mainly on the characteristics of the wine-growing regions and on the existing traditions. Olaru (2012) and Ungureanu (2015) speak about a low level of wine tourism development and few functional wine routes but without providing valid sources of data and further details. Some studies focus on specific Romanian wine regions: Coros & Popa (2018) and Ungureanu (2015) on Alba County, Nedelcu (2014), and Nedelcu et al. (2018) on Prahova County – Dealu Mare region, and Nedelcu et al. (2015) on Vrancea County. This focus indicates that at least within the respective wine-growing regions wine tourism exists, while the extent of this type of tourism and the real functionality of the associated wine roads remains unclear. In this line, Tanase et al. (2020) point out that Romanian wineries do not offer opportunities to spend free time in the surroundings or based on local resources. One should note that none of the above-mentioned studies are dedicated exclusively to wine tourism in rural areas.

The development of rural wine tourism in Romania is hindered by the poor decisions regarding rural area progress taken during the communist period and during the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Nonetheless, the Romanian Ministry of Tourism identified rural tourism as a major growth segment as early as 1995 (Hall, 2000). Though, only a relatively modest rural tourism development happened “rather despite of

government actions” (Hall, 2004), since numerous programs and initiatives were discarded due to political fluctuations and a chronic absence of financial resources.

While more recent studies support the idea that Romanian rural tourism potential remains high (Avram, 2020; Coros, 2020), the multiple and complex problems of the Romanian rural areas cannot be overlooked (Calina et al., 2017; Davidescu et al., 2018). Nicula and Popsa (2018) associated traditions and gastronomy with the development of local tourism by emphasizing the need of extending tourist routes to producers and to the region of origin of the resources or culinary products. A combination between rural tourism and wine tourism was taken into consideration within the program *Romania – Land of Wine* (2002/2003), and the sub-program *Wine Road/Route* aiming at reviving the Romanian countryside by promoting rural tourism (Nedelcu, 2014; Dinu et al., 2015; Ungureanu, 2015). However, neither the program *Romania – Land of Wine*, nor the sub-program *Wine Route* are mentioned in the Master Plan for Tourism Development, which was issued by the end of 2006. Despite declarations, rural tourism and wine tourism in rural areas seem to remain marginal and ignored, and do not find a way to become priorities for the Romanian national and regional authorities (Iatu et al., 2018). While the coordinating role of national and/or regional authorities is important, the paramount position in developing rural tourism lies on the shoulder of local authorities. Nevertheless, Romanian local authorities lack the support of destination management organizations (DMOs), as shown recently by Chasovschi (2019), while the concept of community-based tourism is also barely understood and rarely applied (Havadi Nagy & Espinosa Segui, 2020).

Notwithstanding the above-mentioned problems, the present paper adds to the scarce Romanian academic literature concerning wine tourism in rural areas the following contribution: it identifies all the communes where vineyards and wineries exist, further, it relates these data with other tourist attractions (historic monuments and protected natural areas), and it puts the previously mentioned data in relation with the tourist activity reported for the respective communes. This investigation is carried out to see if the wine-growing communes attract an increased number of tourists due to their (potentially) enhanced attractiveness provided by the wine industry.

## Data and Methodology

The present study is based on secondary data collected for the time span from 2005 to 2019. The covered period stops in 2019 for the following reasons: the 2020-2021 period is influenced by the pandemic lock-down and it was chosen to avoid the respective years; furthermore, some data at commune level are posted by NIS and by other authorities with important delays which can mount up to two years.

Data were extracted from multiple sources: the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development for vineyards and Revino.ro website for wineries; the Ministry of Culture for the historic monuments; the World Heritage website for the Romanian WHS; the National Agency for Protected Natural Areas for natural protected areas; the National Company for Road Infrastructure Administration for road accessibility at the level of communes; from a private data source using the Ministry of Finance data for the active firms in rural areas in order to assess the economic development level of communes, and from the NIS – via Tempo Online website – for tourist accommodation and tourist flows. Most of the data were collected for the end of 2019, while the data for active firms, lodgings, and tourist flows were collected for 2005, 2010, 2015, and 2019 and an average was computed for each commune. It must be mentioned that NIS neither provides data by types of tourists (e.g., wine tourists) nor provides information regarding the foreign tourists by localities.

Furthermore, rankings were created for vineyards and road accessibility in order to introduce the respective information as data series. For vineyards, the ranking was based on the number of communes they cover and on the presence of PDO. Since the authors were unable to establish clearly how many wine routes exist and which communes are part of these routes, this information was not included in the present study. For road accessibility, points were allocated based on the importance of the roads on or near which the communes are located, as explained by Pop & Georgescu (2020). Railway connections were not taken into account due to the sharp decrease in this form of transportation in rural areas. However, a dummy variable was created to highlight the road distance from each county residence (the main municipality, hosting the county's administrative institutions), thus, rural localities within a 20 km radius were granted the value 1.



For the assessment of the tourism potential, monuments and protected areas were considered. To these two factors, a variable called “extra-points” was added, including extra features of a commune: the presence of a WHS, the status of resort, and the presence of mineral/thermal water resources.

The tourism intensity variable was used as the ratio between overnight stays and the number of residents.

For empirical investigations, descriptive statistics, and partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) were used, since PLS-SEM allows complex investigations of cause-and-effect relations among the selected variables. The formative-reflective high-order components approach was used, comprising 12 dimensions containing 16 indicators.

In order to validate the findings, the official websites of all wine-growing communes were visited and information regarding tourism accommodation and tourist attractions, including wine-related attractions (wine-growing landscape, vineyards, wineries) were collected, where available.

## Findings and Discussions

As briefly mentioned in the Introduction, despite Romania’s high-ranking position as a wine-growing and a wine-producing country within Europe, Romania is little known as a wine-based tourist destination. After the overturn of the communist regime in 1989, the authorities in the field of tourism needed more than a decade to include wine among the resources that can generate an increase in the number of (international) tourists visiting Romania. The program ***Romania – Land of Wine***, with the sub-program *Wine Route/Road*, was launched in 2002/2003 under the auspices of the Ministry of Tourism. Nonetheless, this program was abandoned or forgotten along the way since the Romanian Master Plan for Tourism Development 2007-2026 does not make any mention of either ***Romania – Land of Wine*** program or the *Wine Route* sub-program. Within the Master Plan of 2006 there is only a brief mention of wine tourism and the potential wine-based tourism activities, a counting of wine-growing regions, a mention of 9 renowned vineyards (though the mention seems rather random and not based on notoriety), and a counting of several museums dedicated to wine.

The abandonment of the program dedicated to wine should be considered in the context of the respective period. Between 2000 and the mid of 2003 the Romania Ministry of Tourism had an intense activity, launching numerous programs in an attempt to overturn the modest results of the 1990s and, therefore, spreading thin the resources and the capacity to follow up on each program. A change in government, by mid-2003, ended up with the decision to discontinue the Ministry of Tourism as a stand-alone institution (September 2003) and to integrate the tourism portfolio into the larger Ministry of Transportation, Constructions and Tourism, as detailed by Pop et al. (2007). Consequently, and due also to political reasons, an important number of tourism programs launched during 2000-2003 were discarded and/or conveniently ignored.

Since 2007 a number of initiatives at county level considered either continuing the sub-program Wine Route (as is the case of Prahova County) or launching their own projects (the identified cases of Alba, Buzau, Vrancea, Arad, and Satu Mare counties). Nonetheless, it is almost impossible to find reliable data in order to demonstrate either the fact that these wine routes at county level are functional or to assess their power to attract tourists.

A new National Tourism Development Strategy 2019-2030 was issued by the end of 2018. This strategy barely mentions wine tourism in two cases: a) a (railway) route within the Lechinta vineyard connecting several localities in Bistrita-Nasaud County and Mures County, and b) the mention that Romania is included in two cultural wine-based itineraries certified by the European Council (EC), namely *Iter Vitis* and respectively *Roman Emperors and Danube Wine Route*. In neither case, details regarding the localities on these routes are provided. Furthermore, a brief investigation regarding the railway route within the Lechinta vineyard revealed (according to several media sources, the only available) that the railroad is not yet functional and that wine-based activities are occasionally organized in only one locality.

Due to the absence of reliable data regarding wine routes in Romania, the investigation proceeded with the identification of the communes registered at the national level as being related to the 78 officially registered vineyards (of which 41 are, in fact, independent wine-growing centers).

There were identified 760 wine-growing communes with vineyards and wineries and/or wine cellars. These communes represent 26.56% of the 2,861 communes. However, the number of wineries and/or wine cellars identified is relatively low, only 128, located in just 76 wine-growing communes.

Based on the available data, the communes were split into 3 categories: a) communes offering accommodation and registering tourist arrivals; b) communes offering accommodation but without tourist arrivals, and c) communes with no accommodation and no tourist arrivals. The structure of these communes compared to the structure at the national level is presented in Table 1. As one can observe, the percentage of the wine-growing communes not offering tourist accommodation is higher than the overall percentage at the national level, already suggesting that their differentiating potential is, at best, ignored by the local authorities and their inhabitants.

**Table 1.** The Comparative Structure for Wine-growing Communes to the Total Communes

Category	Communes		Structure	
	National	Wine-growing	National	Wine-growing
With lodgings and tourist arrivals	889	176	31.07%	23.16%
With lodgings and <b>no</b> tourist arrivals	103	25	3.60%	3.29%
No lodgings and no tourist arrivals	1,869	559	65.33%	73.55%
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,861</b>	<b>760</b>	<b>100.00%</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

Note: Of the 3<sup>rd</sup> category of communes, 5 communes are not accessible via national or county roads.

*Source:* authors' calculations based on NIS data and Order 1205/2018 information

The overall tourism potential of all Romanian communes and wine-growing communes is presented in Table 2 based on descriptive statistics. As Table 2 shows, the wine-growing communes have a slightly

higher number of historic monuments, a lower number of natural protected areas, and a lower level of extra features captured by “extra points” (WHSs, status of resort, mineral and/or thermal water resources). The economic activity is also somewhat lower within the wine-growing communes; while the average number of active firms is close to the national average in rural areas, and the data for quartiles 1 and 3 are also close, the maximum number of active firms shows an important difference, hinting to a less intense commercial activity, despite the presence of wineries. This situation might be connected with the lower accessibility of wine-growing communes via roads.

**Table 2.** Tourism Potential of Total Communes and Wine-growing Communes

Total 2,861 communes							
	Monu- ments (number)	Protected areas (number)	Extra points	Active firms (numbers)	Access by roads	Wineries	Vineyards (points)
Mean	3.437	1.456	0.086	49	1.039	-	-
Median	2	1	0.000	28	1.000	-	-
Minimum	0	0	0.000	1	0.000	-	-
Maximum	46	21	3.000	1,817	7.000	-	-
q1	1	0	0.000	16	0.250	-	-
q3	5	2	0.000	52	1.000	-	-
Wine-growing 760 communes							
Mean	3.634	1.297	0.049	42	1.003	0.168	3.664
Median	3	1	0.000	26	1.000	0	4.000
Minimum	0	0	0.000	2	0.000	0	1.000
Maximum	28	10	2.000	607	7.000	8	6.000
q1	1	0	0.000	15	0.250	0	3.000
q3	5	2	0.000	49	1.000	0	5.000

Note: Since wine-growing communes represent only about 27% of all communes, descriptive statistics for wineries and vineyards were considered to be of no significance.

*Source:* authors' calculations

For the purpose of this study, the communes with lodgings and tourist arrivals were further investigated. Table 3 presents the tourism potential only for the communes that provide accommodation and have

registered tourist flows. The data in Table 3 depict a similar situation as presented in Table 2. The wine-growing communes with lodgings and tourist arrivals have a higher number of historic monuments, a situation that might be related to buildings and installations related to wine-based activities. The number of natural protected areas is lower since the man-made vineyard landscapes are not (yet) taken into consideration to become protected areas by Romanian authorities. The extra features are less prominent for wine-growing communes in Table 3, though the vineyards and wineries could be viewed as complementary extra features.

**Table 3.** Tourism Potential of the Communes with Lodgings and Tourist Arrivals

National level 889 communes							
	Monu- ments (number)	Protected areas (number)	Extra points	Active firms (numbers)	Access by roads	Wineries	Vineyards (points)
Mean	4.431	2.168	0.207	83	1.300	-	-
Median	3	2	0.000	48	1.000	-	-
Minimum	0	0	0.000	4	0.000	-	-
Maximum	34	21	3.000	1,817	7.000	-	-
q1	1	1	0.000	28	0.500	-	-
q3	6	3	0.000	87	2.000	-	-
Wine-growing 176 communes							
Mean	5.324	1.767	0.125	74	1.330	0.278	3.682
Median	4	1	0.000	48	1.000	0	4.000
Minimum	0	0	0.000	7	0.250	0	1.000
Maximum	22	9	2.000	607	6.000	7	6.000
q1	2	0	0.000	25	0.500	0	3.000
q3	7	2	0.000	99	2.000	0	5.000

Note: Since wine-growing communes represent only about 31% of the communes with lodgings and arrivals, the descriptive statistics for wineries and vineyards were considered of no significance.

*Source:* authors' calculations

The economic activity is slightly lower for wine-growing communes than at the national level, with a lower average and a far lower maximum figure, despite the presence of wineries. Thus, the accessibility via roads

is slightly higher than at the national level but it seems that it has no impact on the economic activity of the commune. Compared to Table 2, for the wine-growing communes which offer lodgings and register tourist arrivals, the average number of wineries is higher, though the maximum number is not registered in this category of communes. The attractiveness of vineyards is almost similar to that in Table 2. This situation suggests that the vineyards and the related vine landscapes do not differentiate wine-growing communes.

Table 4 presents the comparative data regarding the accommodation offered, tourist flows, and tourism intensity for the communes with lodgings and tourist arrivals.

**Table 4.** Comparative Situation on Lodgings and Tourism Intensity for the Communes with Lodgings and Tourist Arrivals

National level 889 communes							
	Lodgings (number)	Arrivals (number)	Overnight stay (number)	Occupancy rate (%)	Length of stay (days)	Tourism intensity	Arrivals per residents
Mean	3.178	1,521	4,010	16.9	2.374	1.178	0.471
Median	1	321	665	13.7	1.926	0.195	0.095
Minim	1	1	1	0.1	1.000	0.000	0.000
Maxim	173	148,049	831,407	100	28.167	98.793	24.185
q1	1	93	193	8.0	1.446	0.059	0.028
q3	2	1,100	2,120	21.9	2.569	0.622	0.315
Wine-growing 176 communes							
Mean	2.097	877	1,865	18.1	2.317	0.438	0.214
Median	1	273	611	14.6	1.699	0.120	0.065
Minim	1	4	6	0.5	1.000	0.001	0.001
Maxim	39	15,543	67,200	92.6	28.167	9.820	4.054
q1	1	73	173	7.9	1.281	0.043	0.019
q3	1	793	1,633	24.8	2.376	0.353	0.194

Source: authors' calculations

Table 4 points to the same negative answer as the data in Table 1 suggested. The number of lodgings in wine-growing communes is somewhat lower compared to the national level, with a maximum number of only 39 lodgings and quartile 3 indicating that for 75% of the commune

there is only one accommodation unit. Within the wine-growing communes, tourist arrivals are about 42% lower than at the national level, while overnight stays are about 53% lower than at the national level. This low tourist flow is further confirmed by the tourism intensity and arrivals per resident. Thus, the length of stay is about 0.06 days lower than at the national level (suggesting that vineyards and wineries do not provide important extra attractions) while the occupancy rate is slightly higher, probably as an effect of the accommodation scarcity.

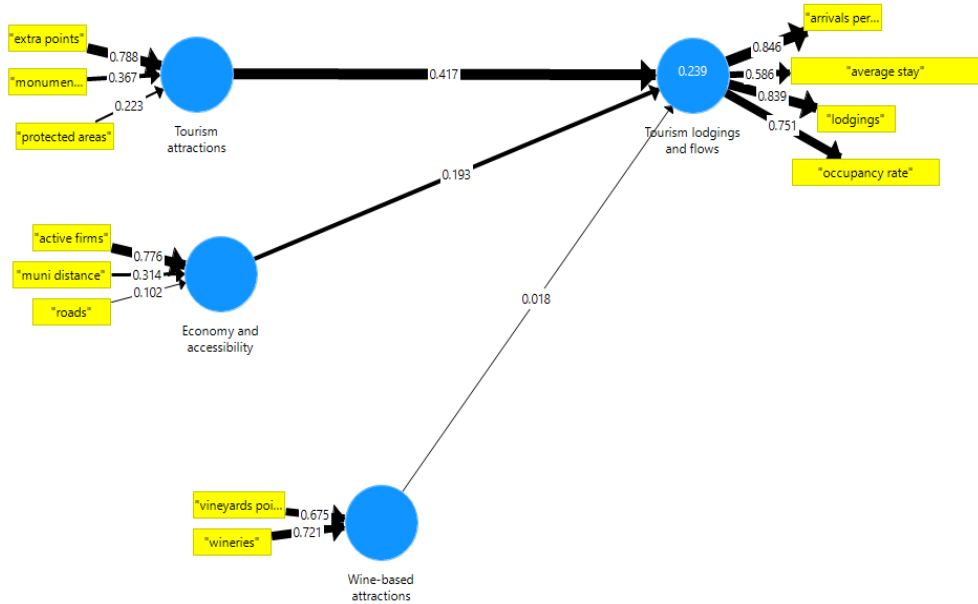
Further, the use of PLS-SEM was chosen due to the fact that this research method allows the estimation of more complex cause-effect relationship models (Cepeda-Carrion et al., 2019). Moreover, while PLS-SEM measures the latent (formative and reflective) constructs, it also simultaneously allows testing the associations among these constructs within a single framework of analysis (Hallak & Assker, 2017). These features advanced PLS-SEM in being considered one of the most prominent research methods across a variety of economic disciplines (Cepeda-Carrion et al., 2019), with relatively recent studies of do Valle & Assaker (2016), Ali et al. (2018), and Nunez-Maldonado et al. (2022) showing an increase in the use of PLS-SEM also in tourism and hospitality management academic papers.

The PLS-SEM used employs the formative-reflective high-order components (HOC) approach, with the latent variable “tourism lodgings and flows” being a reflective construct, while the other latent variables are formative.

The results are revealed in Figures 1 and 2, and in Table 5.

As Figure 1 shows, for all 760 communes, the influence of vineyards and wineries on tourism activity is non-existent, with a total effect of 0.018 (and a p-value of 0.755, see Table 5), while the other two latent variables (*Tourism attractions* and *Economy and accessibility*) have a stronger and significant influence (in both cases p-value is 0.000, see Table 5) on *Tourism lodgings and flows*. Looking at details, the tourist attractions represented by extra points (status of resort, a nominated WHS, mineral and/or thermal water resources) seem to play an important role in influencing the number of tourist lodgings and tourist flows, followed by the presence of historic monuments. A lower role is played by the economic activity within the respective communes, followed by their proximity to the respective county residences (the municipalities which are the main

administrative centers), while their level of accessibility via roads seems to have no influence at all. Though, one must highlight that the overall influence of the constructed variables on *Tourism lodgings and flows* can be considered moderate to weak.



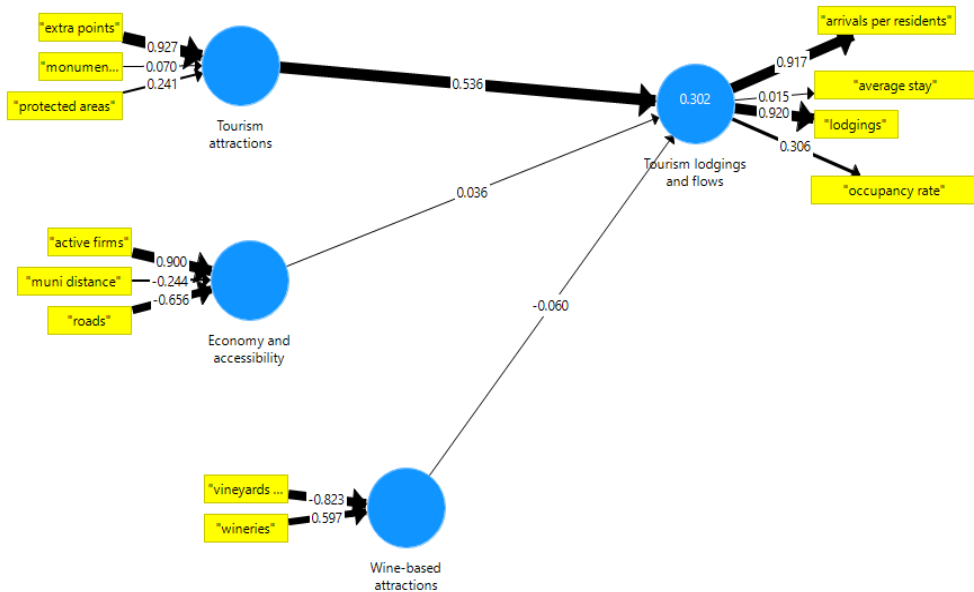
**Figure 1.** The Direct Influence of Vineyards and Wineries on Tourism Potential and Tourist Flows for all Wine-growing Communes

Source: authors' calculations

In the case of the 176 communes which registered lodgings (Figure 2) the situation is similar to the one presented in Figure 1: the influence of vineyards and wineries on tourism activity is non-existent. However, it is interesting to note that the total effect is negative (-0.060), though insignificant, with a p-value of 0.429 (see Table 5). Furthermore, in the case of these 176 communes, the latent variable *Economy and accessibility* has also an insignificant total effect of 0.036 and a p-value of 0.695 (see Table 5). The only variable that seems to have a significant moderate influence on *Tourism lodgings and flows* is represented by *Tourist attractions*. Considering some details: the extra-points dimension seems to be the most influential one, followed by the



existence of natural protected areas, a situation confirmed by the fact that 3 of these communes have the status of spa resorts (therefore including mineral and/or thermal water resources), while other 7 communes have a natural WHS which is usually surrounded by other natural protected areas). Furthermore, while the role played by active firms seems to be important, the proximity to a county residency and the road-based accessibility have no influence on the tourism variable.



**Figure 2.** The Direct Influence of Vineyards and Wineries on Tourism Potential and Tourist Flows for the 176 Wine-growing Communes with Lodgings and Tourist Arrivals

Source: authors' calculations

The findings from the above figures and Table 5 (below) concur with the data in Tables 1 to 4 (above). The lack of influence of wine-based activities (for all the 760 communes and for the cluster represented by the 176 communes with lodgings) suggests that tourists visit wine-growing communes for other reasons than their wine-related tourism potential. The contact with wine-based attractions seems to be triggered by chance encounters.

**Table 5.** PLS-SEM and Bootstrapping Results

<b>Total 760 wine-growing communes</b>							
<b>Variables</b>	<b>Cronbach's Alpha</b>	<b>rho_A</b>	<b>Composite reliability</b>	<b>Average variance extracted</b>	<b>Links between variables</b>	<b>T-statistic</b>	<b>p-value</b>
Tourism attractions (LV1)		1.000			LV1-LV4	4.495	0.000
Economy and accessibility (LV2)		1.000			LV2-LV4	4.132	0.000
Wine-based attractions (LV3)		1.000			LV3-LV4	0.311	0.755
Tourism lodgings & flows (LV4)	0.764	0.826	0.841	0.577			
<b>Wine-growing 176 communes with lodgings and arrivals</b>							
Tourism attractions (LV1)		1.000			LV1-LV4	5.438	0.000
Economy and accessibility (LV2)		1.000			LV2-LV4	0.393	0.695
Wine-based attractions (LV3)		1.000			LV3-LV4	0.791	0.429
Tourism lodgings & flows (LV4)	0.579	0.842	0.677	0.445			

*Source:* authors' calculations

The investigation of the official websites of all wine-growing communes for the ones (at least) mentioning tourist accommodations and attractions, and also the mentioning wine-related attractions, yielded results that support the lack of influence of the wine-based variable within the PLS-SEM model.

Of the total of 760 wine-growing communes, only 19 communes (2.5%) have a dedicated page for tourism, also presenting wine-based tourist attractions. Further, for 17 communes (of 760), their tourism potential, including wine-based attractions, is described in written form, usually within the general presentation of the respective localities. Additionally, 96 communes (of 760) mention in passing, most commonly in the economic section, the presence of vineyards, grape production activities, and, occasionally, the presence of a winery.

When the category of wine-growing communes with lodgings and tourist arrivals is considered, the situation is the following: only 5 communes out of 176 (2.8%) have a dedicated page for tourism, presenting also the wine-based tourist attractions; furthermore, 8 communes of 176 (5%) describe in written form their tourism potential, including wine-based attractions (usually within the general presentation of the respective localities); 30 communes of 176 (17%) mention in passing, usually in the economic section, the presence of vineyards, grape production activities, and, occasionally, the presence of a winery.

Moreover, none of the official websites mentions a wine road and/or route related to the respective commune. This situation makes one wonder whether there is a proper communication process between the authorities at the national, county, and commune levels when it comes to managing and implementing complex projects like wine routes which require collaboration among a wide variety of stakeholders. For the moment, at Romanian wine-growing commune level, the suggested answer is also a negative one.

All the undertaken investigations for answering the central research question of the present paper (*are the communes hosting vineyards and wine-producing facilities and/or cellars/wineries in a better position to attract tourists, compared with the other communes?*) point towards a negative answer. This negative answer is generated either by the lack of awareness exhibited at the local (commune) level by the authorities and local population regarding the potential of wine-based tourism or by the unwillingness of the locals to open their communities towards tourism. Further investigations are necessary for clarifying these situations.

## Conclusions

The results presented above clearly show that the Romanian wine-growing communes do not attract a higher number of tourists based on their differentiating feature represented by the wine industry. Furthermore, the study of their websites' content shows that the majority of these communes ignore (voluntary or not) their wine tourism potential.

At a two decades distance from the launching of the *Romania – Land of Wine* program and of the *Wine Route/Road* sub-program, wine tourism in rural areas can be considered in its very early stages of development since the program and sub-program did not manage to yield any important results, mainly due to the lack of appropriate communication between the various levels of public authorities. While some exceptions might exist (e.g., wine-growing rural regions of Prahova, Alba, and possibly Vrancea counties), for the majority of the rural wine-growing regions, the wine tourism potential is largely ignored due to the complex networks and constant efforts and implications it requires.

The findings of the present study are in line with the findings of Coros & Bode (2019) showing the modest economic results of the wineries/wine cellars of Transylvania and with Iancu et al. (2022), which shows the complex problems of Romanian rural areas and the low performance of non-agricultural entities, including tourism-related services. Furthermore, the findings are also in line with the previous findings of Pop & Georgescu (2019) regarding the limited capacity (or willingness) of rural destinations to exploit their tourism potential.

However, there is a certain level of wine tourism. Informal discussions with various wineries' representatives reveal that their locations are visited mainly by groups, often for business reasons; the visits are short, not including overnight stays. An estimation of these day-visitors is almost impossible to make since they are considered confidential information and wineries are not really willing to answer sensitive questions. Despite the fact that the number of day tourists visiting some of the wine-growing communes is high, the reported tourist arrivals suggest that these day visitors seem not to be willing to repeat their visit for a longer period of time. This suggested behavior is also in line with the results presented above.

Therefore, wine tourism in Romanian rural areas currently has a low profile, being underrated. Although, the development potential is high, if and when local communities will open their eyes and comprehend that in order to establish a wine tourism destination, there is needed a high level of understanding of local characteristics, combined with a sustained effort to build the needed complex links for cooperation, co-competition, and sustainability.

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