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PERIURBAN TOURISM: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF PERIURBAN AREAS

ABSTRACT

Peri-urban tourism in the North-East Region of Romania remains an insufficiently explored segment, despite its significant role in regional dynamics. The present analysis, based on official statistical data, highlights the clear polarization between counties with a strong tourism tradition (Neamț, Suceava, Iași) and those with modest development (Botoșani, Bacău, Vaslui). Agritourism guesthouses emerge as the dominant nucleus, yet also the most vulnerable segment, reflecting both the dynamism of rural entrepreneurship and its sensitivity to recent crises. The results, circumscribed to the peri-urban areas of county seat municipalities, can be cautiously extrapolated to the entire county level, providing a useful framework for formulating differentiated regional policies. The study emphasizes the importance of integrating peri-urban tourism into regional sustainable development strategies, with a focus on diversifying the offer, stimulating entrepreneurship, and creating cooperation networks.

Key words: agri-food industry, processed products, production, consumption, policies.

JEL Classification: O18, R11, Z32.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of sustainable development and responsible tourism, peri-urban tourism has become an essential constituent of regional development strategies, placed at the crossroads of urban and rural areas. This form of tourism capitalises on local natural, cultural, and historical resources, thereby reducing pressure on packed urban centres and encouraging environmental sustainability and social inclusion.

Peri-urban tourism supports economic and social development worldwide, facilitating recreational opportunities for city dwellers, and reducing the adverse effects of tourist flows in urban centres. In Romania, this trend is increasingly relevant in the North-East region, which has significant natural and cultural potential but also faces challenges such as depopulation and inadequate infrastructure. The present analysis aims to seize the particularities of this phenomenon through a comparative assessment of accommodation structures and overnight stays, highlighting the polarisation of counties between consolidated centres and

emerging areas. The results obtained provide not only a descriptive image but also a framework for reflection on the regional implications and public policy directions, aimed at transforming periurban tourism into a vector of sustainable development.

2. STATE OF KNOWLEDGE

Over the past few decades, the dynamics of urban and rural development have undergone significant transformations, primarily driven by population growth, infrastructure development, and global socioeconomic changes. In the North-Eastern Region of Romania, this dynamic is evident both in urban expansion and in the remarkable potential of peri-urban rural areas, particularly from a tourism perspective. County seats in this region, such as Iași, Suceava, and Neamț, play a central role in economic and social development. Nevertheless, the expansion of urbanisation also poses challenges related to congestion, environmental degradation, and identity loss in peri-urban rural areas.

Concurrently, the peri-urban areas of this region offer significant opportunities for tourism development, both by capitalising on the region's natural and cultural heritage and by promoting sustainable, diversified tourism. In the mountainous, sub-Carpathian and plain areas, this urban-rural interface area can be the key link for the development of an integrated tourism offer, which would contribute to balancing regional growth and boosting the economic appeal of local communities.

Recent studies highlight the importance of developing peri-urban tourism as a complementary strategy to alleviate the pressure on the urban centre and stimulate the economic vitality of rural areas (Ianoș and Jones, 2019; Smith, 2021).

Peri-urban areas offer opportunities to expand and diversify the tourism services, particularly amid growing interest in experiential and ecotourism (López Sánchez *et al*., 2021). In peri-urban areas of the United States, Australia, and Asia, this type of tourism has been integrated into regional strategies, thereby contributing to the development of local communities and alleviating pressure on traditional tourist destinations (Spyra *et al*., 2025). In Europe, peri-urban tourism is also part of the tourism offer (Rota, 2024). The European Union's regional development policy and cross-border cooperation projects have supported initiatives to capitalise on peri-urban potential for sustainable tourism (European Environment Agency, 2025). The study by Holleran (2020) highlights that, in Europe, peri-urban areas are increasingly connected to regional development strategies, given the growing interest in rural tourism, ecotourism, and urban recreation. In this regard, a significant example is the peri-urban area of the capital of the United Kingdom, London, where numerous ecotourism and cultural tourism projects have been developed in proximity, creating new opportunities for local communities and tourists (Freemark *et al*., 2020).

Within the global framework of sustainable development and the growing interest in responsible tourism, the concept of periurban tourism has become of paramount importance in regional development strategies (Eichelberger *et al*., 2020). It is a form of tourism that occurs in areas on the outskirts of cities, often between urban spaces and the countryside, combining the advantages of both environments and having significant potential for sustainable development. Across Europe, peri-urban tourism contributes to the valorisation of local natural, cultural and historical resources, while reducing pressure on overcrowded and busy urban centres (Muys *et al*., 2023). Worldwide, this form of tourism supports alternative development approaches, encouraging environmental sustainability and social inclusion (Mendes *et al*., 2023).

The relationship between peri-urban tourism and rural and urban development is both complex and bidirectional. In the first case, peri-urban tourism can provide a source of income and employment opportunities in rural areas adjacent to cities, thereby reducing social and economic disparities (Biegańska *et al*., 2018; Florian, 2015). Secondly, in urban development, peri-urban tourism serves as an alternative for recreation and relaxation for the inhabitants of these areas, as well as a strategy for managing tourist flows and mitigating adverse effects on big cities, such as congestion and pollution (Kratzer and Kister, 2021).

In the case of the North-East Region of Romania, this trend is increasingly relevant, given the region's natural potential, authentic culture and local traditions, as well as the need to diversify the tourism sector and boost the regional economy. Owing to its distinctive natural landscapes, historical monuments, and authentic local traditions, the North-Eastern Region of Romania has significant potential for the development of peri-urban tourism. However, the region faces multiple challenges, including depopulation, underdeveloped infrastructure, and difficulties in capitalising on its cultural and natural resources (Stanciu *et al*., 2019; Davidescu *et al*., 2018). In this respect, initiatives to promote periurban tourism can significantly impact the economic and social revitalisation of local communities, thereby contributing to the preservation of traditions and cultural values.

Building on these theoretical and empirical contributions, the present analysis examines the key features of periurban tourism in the North-East Region by comparing accommodation structures and overnight stays.

3. MATERIAL AND METHOD

To analyse the periurban tourism phenomenon in the North-East Region, the research has used secondary statistical data from the National Institute of Statistics, via the Tempo Online platform, representing official series collected directly from tourist accommodation units. The reference period was 2019–2024, which enabled the capture of both recent trends and the effects of the pandemic and the post-pandemic context on periurban tourism.

The methodology went through the following steps:

1. Descriptive analysis of the tourist reception structure, through the distribution of accommodation units by primary forms of manifestation (hotels, guesthouses, campsites, etc.) in the six counties of the region.
2. Examining the evolution of the number of overnight stays, by accommodation type, to highlight the dynamics of tourist demand and the preferences of periurban visitors.
3. Comparing indicators between counties to identify territorial differences and potential areas with a competitive advantage.
4. Qualitative interpretation of the results, by relating them to the research objectives and the formulated hypotheses, with an emphasis on the socio-economic impact and infrastructural challenges.

The identification of peri-urban communes in the North-East Region was achieved by applying a set of administrative and functional criteria. First, communes located in the immediate vicinity of the county seat municipalities were selected, excluding localities within officially designated metropolitan areas. Thus, for each county seat municipality, the relevant peri-urban communes were identified (Table 1).

Table 1

Delimitation of peri-urban communes analysed in the North-East Region (2019–2024)

Municipality	**Peri-urban municipalities**
Bacău	Săucești, Filipești, Hemeiuș, Gioseni, Luizi-Călugăra
Botoșani	Bălușeni, Curtești, M. Eminescu, Răchiți, Roma, Stăuceni
Iași	Aroneanu, Bârnova, Holboca, Rediu, Tomești, Ciurea, Miroslava, Valea Lupului, Lețcani
Vaslui	Muntenii de Sus, Muntenii de Jos, Lipovăț, Pușcași, Bălteni, Ștefan cel Mare, Zăpodeni
Suceava	Adâncata, Salcea, Ipotești, Moara, Șcheia, Pătrăuți, Mitocul Dragomirnei
Piatra Neamț	Doamna, Văleni, Ciriței, Gârcina, Dobreni, Girov, Dumbrava Roșie, Piatra Șoimului, Alexandru cel Bun

Source: Delimitation made by the authors, based on NIS data (Tempo Online) and administrative and functional criteria.

The identified communes also meet other functional or socio-economic criteria regarding the dimensions of a peri-urban area, such as: work/education relations (a large number of residents commute daily or weekly for work or studies), a high degree of real estate development through the presence of residential developments, the presence of tertiary and quaternary functions (commerce, logistics, industry) relocated from the city, a high degree of development of local infrastructure through the extension of utility and transport networks from the city to the commune, etc. A worthy reminder, not all of these localities provide tourist activities, and the forms of these services are heterogeneous.

For the descriptive analysis of the periurban tourism phenomenon and its qualitative features, the distribution of the tourist reception structure across all forms of manifestation was first examined, followed by an analysis of the number of overnight stays in the selected area across accommodation types in the

6 counties. The evolution of these indicators was analysed during 2019–2024, using data series from Tempo Online, to provide the most comprehensive possible picture of the periurban tourism phenomenon in the region.

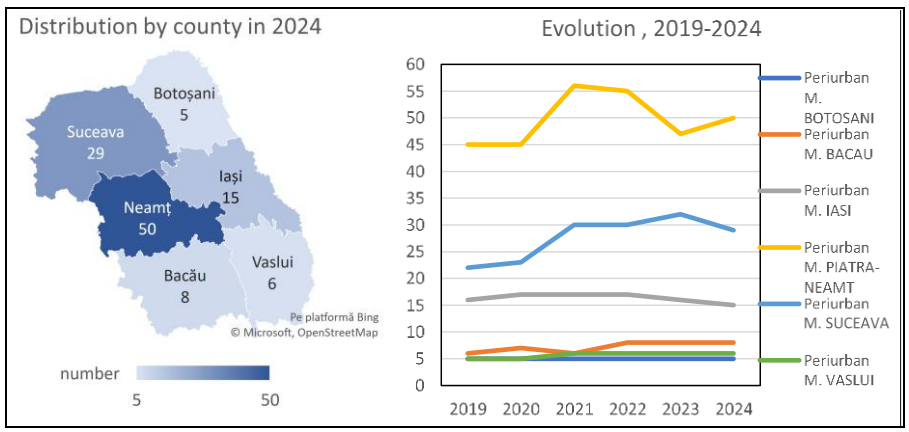
4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Based on the criteria for delimiting peri-urban communes and secondary statistical data provided by the INS via the Tempo Online platform, the descriptive analysis of the tourism phenomenon has highlighted several characteristics of accommodation structures and overnight-stay dynamics during 2019–2024.

4.1. PERI-URBAN ACCOMMODATION STRUCTURES: DISTRIBUTION AND PARTICULARITIES

If we analyse the distribution by county in 2024, we can observe that the largest share of accommodation structures in peri-urban areas is concentrated in two counties with a tradition in tourism, namely Neamț (44%) and Suceava (26%). In addition, Iași County accounts for 13% of the accommodation capacity (see Figure 1). Moreover, in these counties, the highest capacities for hotel, motel and hostel accommodation are recorded in the peri-urban areas. As for the other three counties (Botoșani, Bacău and Vaslui), tourism activity in the peri-urban area accounts for only 16% of the region's accommodation units, each reflecting a distinct accommodation structure.

Analysing the types of tourist accommodation structures in the region's peri-urban area, we note that the largest share is held by agro-tourism guesthouses and tourist villas. Rental apartments have also been registered in the area since 2021.



Source: Authors' calculations based on data from the National Institute of Statistics.
Figure 1. Distribution by counties of accommodation structures in the peri-urban area of the North-East Region.

Substantial accommodation capacity is also present in the peri-urban area: 9 hotels, 3 motels and 2 hostels, representing over 12% of the total number of accommodation units. These are concentrated in the counties of Suceava, Iași and Neamț. Among accommodation structures, agro-tourism guesthouses account for the largest share, with 77 units (68% of the total). Most of them are concentrated in the peri-urban areas of Suceava, Neamț and Iași.

In 2024, peri-urban tourism in the region exhibited peculiarities in the three less-developed counties: areas with diverse accommodation structures and slightly polarised by certain typologies. This aspect explains their specific way of adapting to current economic and social challenges.

Thus, around the municipality of Botoșani, a very particular structure is recorded, concentrated around only two localities out of six: the first, Curtești (where there is a large camp for students and preschoolers), and the second, Mihai Eminescu (where we find 1 motel, 1 bungalow and 2 agritourism guesthouses). These localities are situated along the municipality of Botoșani's main road access arteries and serve specific categories of tourists.

In Bacău, the tourist accommodation structure in the peri-urban area is concentrated in only four localities (Filipești, Hemeiuș, Luizi-Călugăra and Săucești) and consists exclusively of tourist villas, tourist guesthouses and agritourism guesthouses.

Analysing the area surrounding Vaslui, we note that the accommodation structure is rather limited, concentrated in four localities: Lipovăț (where there is a student camp), Bălțeni, Muntenii de Jos and Ștefan cel Mare (where only agritourism guesthouses are available). We also note that two motels ceased operations in 2023.

Table 2

Dynamics of types of accommodation structures in the peri-urban area of the North-East Development Region (number)

Types of structures	**2019**	**2020**	**2021**	**2022**	**2023**	**2024**
Hotels	8	8	8	9	9	9
Hostels	2	2	2	2	2	2
Apartments and rooms to let	0	0	14	12	10	12
Motels	4	4	5	4	4	3
Tourist villas	2	4	4	4	5	4
Bungalows	1	1	1	1	1	1
Campings	0	0	1	1	1	1
Tourist stops	1	1	0	0	0	0
Tourist cottages and chalets	0	1	1	2	2	2
Camps for students and preschoolers	2	2	2	2	2	2
Agritouristic guesthouses	79	79	82	84	78	77

Source: National Institute of Statistics, Tempo database, regional statistical series.

Over time, the number of accommodation structures has evolved in a sinuous manner, increasing from 99 units in 2019 to 121 in 2021, only to decrease to 113 in 2024. This evolution is also referable to the Romanian vacation voucher

program for public-sector employees, which has significantly stimulated tourism activity. On the other hand, the decline in population incomes following the pandemic and the onset of the Russian-Ukrainian war, coupled with the energy crisis and increased operating expenses for accommodation facilities, led to a reduction in the number of accommodation units beginning in 2023. Agritourism guesthouses remain dominant throughout the analysed period, with 77 units (68% of the total), most of which are located in the peri-urban areas of Suceava, Piatra Neamț and Iași. This structure confirms the orientation of peri-urban tourism toward authentic and accessible experiences, as well as the elasticity of rural entrepreneurship in response to economic fluctuations.

Table 3

Evolution of peri-urban accommodation structures in the counties of the North-East Region (number)

Periurban areas of the regional municipalities	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Periurban area of Botoșani	5	5	5	5	5	5
Periurban area of Bacău	6	7	6	8	8	8
Periurban area of Iași	16	17	17	17	16	15
Periurban area of Piatra Neamț	45	45	56	55	47	50
Periurban area of Suceava	22	23	30	30	32	29
Periurban area of Vaslui	5	5	6	6	6	6

Source: National Institute of Statistics, Tempo database, regional statistical series.

The evolution of accommodation structures was not uniform across regions, recording major fluctuations in their number around the municipalities of Piatra-Neamț and Suceava.

4.2. DISTRIBUTION AND PARTICULARITIES OF OVERNIGHT STAYS IN PERI-URBAN TOURISM

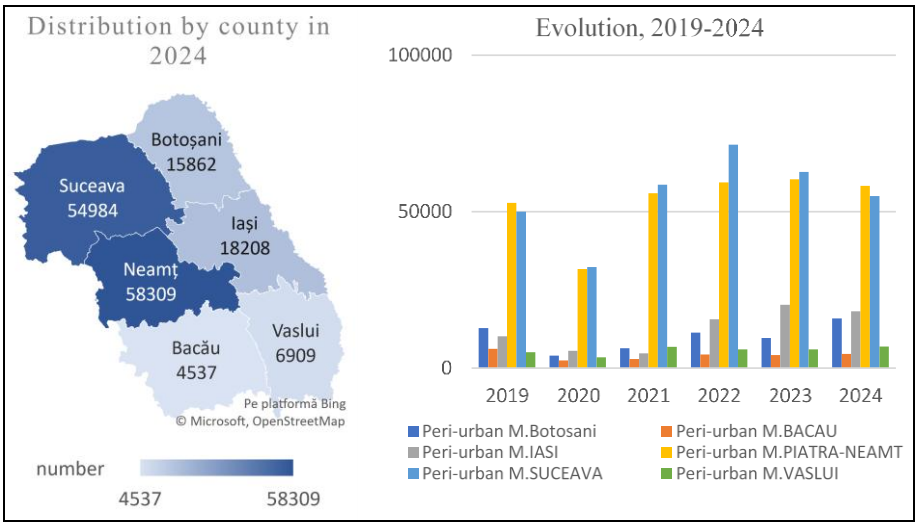
Analysing the number of overnight stays in 2024 by type of tourist accommodation in the peri-urban area of the analysed region, we note that most events are recorded in the counties of Neamț (58,309) and Suceava (54,984), accounting for over 71% of the total. The peri-urban areas of Iași and Botoșani follow, with much smaller numbers of overnight stays (representing only a third of the tourist activity in each of the previous areas). In Botoșani, there is a particularly unusual situation: nearly half of overnight stays occurred at the Curtești school and preschool camp in 2024.

If we analyse the data excluding this reporting element, we observe that, at the peri-urban level, the counties of Botoșani, Bacău, and Vaslui have a roughly similar number of events. We can thus emphasise that the same segregation of peri-urban tourism activity, as recorded by the county in accommodation structures, is also reflected in the number of overnight stays.

Based on the accommodation type, the number of overnight stays varies substantially. Thus, the majority of events in 2024 were recorded in agritourism guesthouses, accounting for 56% (89,599 of 158,809 overnight stays). Hotels are the next most important type of tourist accommodation in peri-urban areas in the region, accounting for 22% of total overnight stays (35,004).

Surprisingly, at the level of rental apartments, motels, and tourist villas, the percentages are almost equal, accounting for 5%. It is worth emphasising that tourist accommodation capacity in 2024 was reported as zero in various peri-urban localities that experienced no tourist events.

During the period 2019–2024, the number of overnight stays recorded a general upward trend, with small variations.



Source: Authors' calculations based on data from the National Institute of Statistics.

Figure 2. Stayings overnight in tourist accommodation establishments in peri-urban areas by county.

It should be noted that overnight stays in agritourism guesthouses in Suceava and Neamț counties declined in 2020.

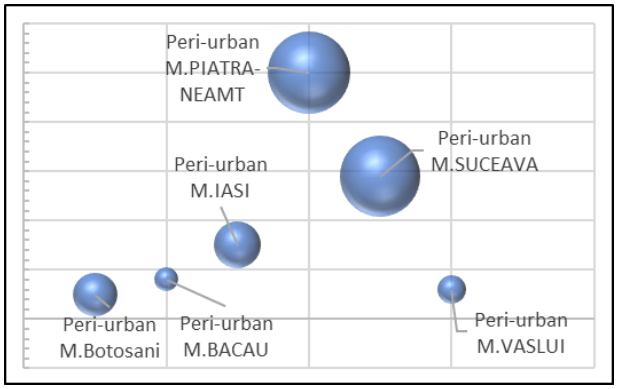
Additionally, oscillations are recorded at the level of Botoșani County, where the activity of the school camp in Curtești partially influences them. We recall that 2020–2021 saw a decline in tourist activity in Romanian tourism due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, during which freedom of movement was restricted for medical reasons in certain periods of the above-mentioned period.

Beyond the statistical evidence and comparative interpretations shown earlier, the analysis highlights a series of regional particularities that require a differentiated approach to tourism development policies.

4.3. REGIONAL PARTICULARITIES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR TOURISM DEVELOPMENT POLICIES

Correlating accommodation structures with the dynamics of overnight stays, a polarisation of counties along two major directions is highlighted:

1. Counties with recognised traditional tourist potential, where peri-urban tourism benefits from different types of accommodation, and tourists have multiple motivations: Neamț, Suceava and Iași (see Figure 3).
2. Counties with rather modest or emerging economic structures, where periurban tourism has limited and almost monotonous accommodation structures, tourism that seeks niche resilience solutions: Botoșani, Bacău and Vaslui.



Source: Authors' calculations based on data from the National Institute of Statistics.

Figure 3. Correlation between accommodation structures and overnight stays in peri-urban tourism.

Although the results presented mainly reflect the dynamics of peri-urban tourism around the county capital municipalities, the characteristics identified – the polarisation between counties with a tourist tradition and those with a more modest development, the predominance of agritourism guesthouses and the vulnerability to external factors – can be extrapolated, with a certain degree of caution, to the entire county. This extrapolation provides a useful framework for formulating differentiated regional policies, tailored to both consolidated and emerging areas. The results obtained highlight significant differences between counties with a tourist tradition and those with modest development, confirming the structural and functional polarisation of peri-urban tourism in the North-East Region. Thus, peri-urban tourism in the North-East Region is characterised by a pronounced heterogeneity, shaped by tourist traditions, local resources, and the economic performance of each county. This diversity has direct implications for how regional policies should be phrased and implemented.

In counties with a stronger tourism tradition, namely Neamț, Suceava, and Iași, the emphasis should be on consolidating and diversifying the offer by

integrating peri-urban accommodation structures into regional promotion networks and capitalising on natural and cultural heritage. These areas have the potential to attract diverse tourist flows, which is why public policies should support infrastructure development and the creation of integrated tourist packages.

In contrast, counties with a more modest tourism sector, namely Botoșani, Bacău and Vaslui, require interventions to stimulate local entrepreneurship and diversify accommodation types. Regional policies can help reduce vulnerabilities through funding programs, training and inter-municipal cooperation, aimed at creating resilience networks and capitalising on niche resources.

Thus, the identified particularities confirm the need for differentiated regional policies, tailored to the specifics of each county. Peri-urban tourism can serve as an instrument for economic and social balancing when integrated into regional sustainable development strategies, with an emphasis on infrastructure, education, and culture.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of peri-urban tourism in the North-East Region highlights a structural polarisation between counties with a tourist tradition and those with a more modest development, confirming typological diversity and varying degrees of adaptability to recent economic and social challenges. Agritourism guesthouses remain at the core of the offer but are also the most vulnerable segment, mirroring the dynamism of rural entrepreneurship and sensitivity to external crises.

The results show that peri-urban tourism has significant potential but is unevenly distributed. Consolidating this segment involves diversifying accommodation types, capitalising on local resources and integrating them into regional promotion networks. At the same time, public policies must be differentiated: support for consolidation in traditionally tourist counties and interventions to stimulate entrepreneurship in emerging counties.

Overall, peri-urban tourism can serve as a vector of sustainable and balanced development if it is integrated into regional infrastructure, education and culture strategies, thereby reducing disparities and increasing the attractiveness of the North-East Region.

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