

Past, present and future for traditional products from southeastern Romania

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Abstract

Compared to other European countries, Romania has few traditional products certified at European level. The number of certified traditional products was until 2014, over 4.400 products nationally certified. Currently, more than 4.000 products have been removed from the list, and registering a product as traditional has become a more rigorous process than ever before. The southeastern Romania includes Brăila, Buzău, Constanța, Galați, Tulcea, Vrancea. Unfortunately, although it has great potential due to the Vrancea area, the Danube Delta, the Black Sea coast and the cities on the Danube side, did not have and does not have a representative number of products nationally or European certified compared to Transilvania, Maramureș or Bucovina. Consumers are willing to perceive and evaluate the quality of a product based on its place of origin and share opinions and attitudes towards the related goods or services. The image of a country or area can determine the perceived quality of a category of products, stimulating sales. The study was generated by the BSB project “Local development and cross border cooperation in the area of agricultural products and traditional food” – LOC FOOD which will have a decisive role in product promotion, participation in discussions between partners and local representatives, exchanges of experience, and all project activities will lead to an increase in the visibility of each producer of the SE of Romania and of the Black Sea area. In the age of digitalization, the Geographic Information System – The roots of taste - created by the project will ensure access to new markets, which leads to product promotion, encourages online commerce, and avoids the effects of a crisis.

Keywords: traditional products, the South-East development region of Romania

1. Introduction

The South-East development region is located in the southeastern part of Romania. It spans from the coast of the Black Sea to the Eastern Carpathian Mountains, crossing the lower course of the Danube River and includes the Danube Delta. It covers an area of about 35 000 square kilometres - the second largest Romanian development region by area - and has a population of around 2.5 million people. The region comprises six counties of which three, Constanța, Galați and Brăila, are classified by the EU as “intermediate” regions (20-50% of the population living in rural areas) and the other three, Tulcea, Vrancea and Buzău, are classified as rural regions (more than 50% of the population living in rural areas) [1].

Traditional foods have played a major role in traditions of different cultures and regions for thousands of years. They include foods that have been consumed locally and regionally for an extended time period. Preparation methods of traditional foods are part of the folklore of a country or a region. Unfortunately, throughout Europe, some traditional foods are at risk of disappearing due to altered lifestyles. Therefore, it is important to study and document traditional foods to sustain important elements of European cultures [2].

Food traditions in Romania are at the intersection of several cultures. The Hungarian and Serbian are found in the western, central and south-west. The Bulgarian one in the south.

The SE area comprises influences, Bulgarian, Greek, Turkish due to the Black Sea and the Danube that cross this area. Although there are several influences in this area, although the agricultural area is with great potential, the number of traditional products recognized at the respective European national level is not large compared to Transylvania or the northern - Maramureș, Bucovina [3].

In Romania there are a significant number of traditional foods and beverages, and despite all the efforts made by the producers, their selling is hampered by the challenging logistics and too many rules and regulations that must be complied annually [4].

The number of traditional products certified was analysed by Chiciudean et al., (2014). Results indicated a strong discrepancy between Northern and Southern regions from Romania regarding the interest for certification [5].

This review is carried out to achieve an overview of the potential and traditional products in the southeastern part of Romania and also constitutes a starting point for achieving the objectives of the LOC-FOOD project (eMs 1101) **“Local development and cross border cooperation in the area of agricultural products and traditional food”**.

2. Past

Traditional food products have been playing an important role in European culture, heritage and identity. The growth of this segment in the European food market has been providing a higher variety of food choices for consumers [6].

Until 2014, Romania had over 4.400 traditional products nationally certified. In the official documents of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MADR), the most numerous products were those of milk, followed by those of meat, jams and other sweet specialties.

Currently, more than 4.000 products have been removed from the list, and registering a product as traditional has become a more rigorous process than ever before.

Several producers notified MADR that not all those who received the certificate for the production of traditional products comply with the legislation in force. Several producers not all those who received the certificate for the production of traditional products comply with the legislation in force.

Many have complained that there are farmers who produce huge quantities, impossible to achieve under the conditions imposed by law, and that the ingredients used are not always exclusively natural

Once the number of complaints increased, the authorities adopted new regulations for the sector.

3. Present

Named traditional products are part of a national inventory made by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MADR), through its territorial infrastructure. Each product is assessed based on the declared specifications and is granted with an attestation. To qualify for protection, such as protected designation of origin (PDO), protected geographical indication (PGI) and traditional speciality guaranteed (TSG), the food product should be registered at community level, as a result of the application made by a group. Today, the problem of ‘group’ which means any association, irrespective of its legal form or composition, working with the same agricultural product or foodstuff, is the most sensitive aspect. Possibly due to recent historical reasons, small farmers and producers may be reluctant to engage in associative entities. Notwithstanding, the strong dynamics in this domain are an indicator that opportunities and advantages for local communities to keep their traditions in a sustainable way are being used [7].

Today when global products are launched to the markets in large quantities it is very important to protect traditional and regional gastronomy and foods. The most significant contribution of traditional and regional foods lies in promoting the domestic economy, reducing unemployment. It is therefore important to raise consumer knowledge about mark of traditional and regional foods, which are a guarantee of quality and traditional recipes. Manufacturers of traditional and regional products have to maintain traditional production using raw materials and be competitive. That is why it was necessary to unite under European Union rules for the registration and protection of foodstuff with designation of PGI, PDO, and TSG is the guarantee of the product of origin for consumers [8].

Analyzing the official distribution of products on the surface of Romania an imbalance is found (Figure 1). There is a concentration of them in the area of Transylvania and the west of the country, with uncovered areas in the mountainous areas, where the population density is low due to the relief.

The northern area and that of the Eastern Carpathians have a relatively high density of certified products, as well as the area of the Southern Carpathians, with a higher concentration in tourist areas (Braşov, Prahova Valley, Sibiu).

The east-southeast area has a very small number of certified products, due on the one hand to the

presence of agricultural areas and on the other hand to the absence of tourism. Although the Danube Delta and Constanţa are touristic areas, they benefit from these seasonal activities and have local products based on fish, shells and seafood preferred by tourists in season.

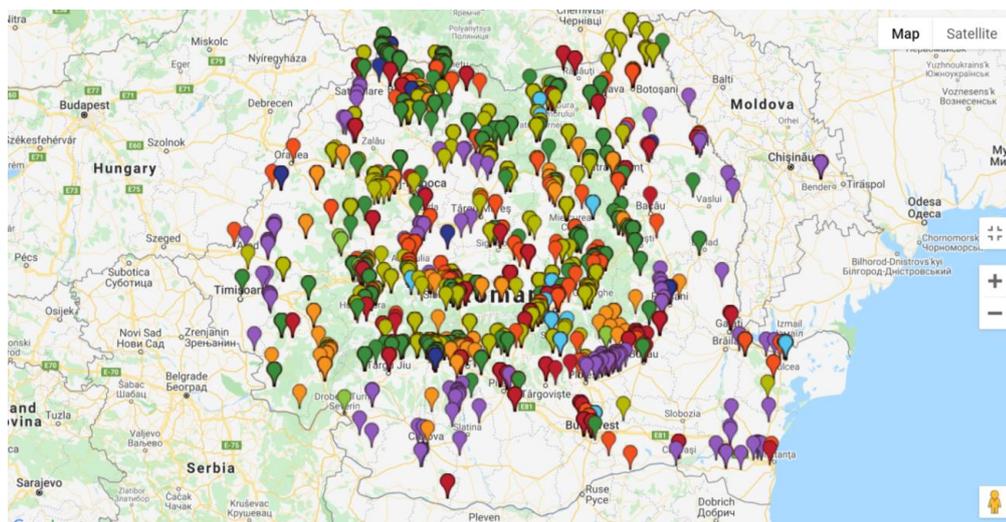


Figure 1. Distribution of certified products in Romania (Source: <https://cpac.afir.info/>)

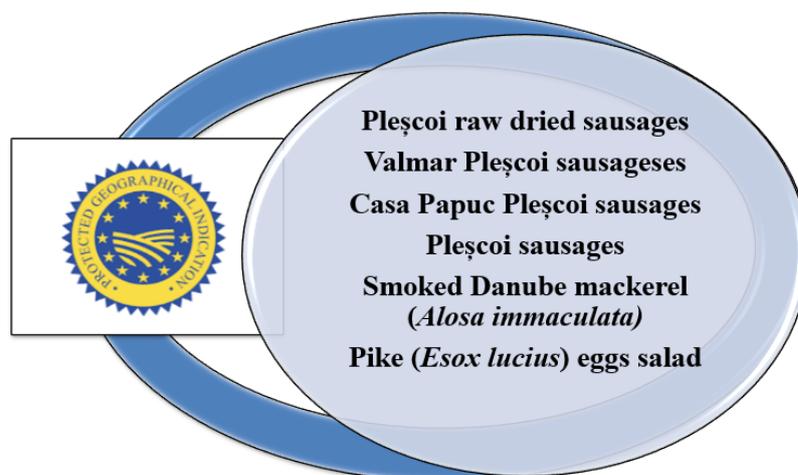


Figure 2. Distribution of traditional products with European labels in SE of Romania

In order to become competitive and to assure high quality products on the market, certification of traditional products could be one of the solutions. This market niche should be occupied in general by the small producers. In actual condition of the market, it is almost impossible for a big company to produce an old family recipe in a traditional way because the technological process is long and pretty much manual. However, due to the very permissive law, big industries were able to certify a lot of so

called „traditional“ products even though they were not even close to the authentic methods of production and to the product itself. In this way, they succeeded to gain customers confidence and benefit from the new markets accessed [10].

4. Future

In order to maintain or expand their market share and profitability, traditional food sector should be also forced for innovations. Innovations include the

improvement of product, process and distribution of traditional foods in the ways of non-traditional foods, except keeping natural identity of traditional food products such as usual, familiar, authentic, typical and inherited. The degree of food familiarity affects the consumer responses, willingness to buy and finally potential of success. Understanding of consumers' preferences of traditional food has also important to commercialize the product throughout the country, even in global market. A new dimension to the traditional product might be adding a new concept associated with improving the perceptual properties of the product such as reinforcement of traditional character, reduction of fat contents, removing unpleasant flavour, packaging and presenting them in more natural way at the various sizes and selling them in vending machines [11].

Petrescu-Mag et al., (2020) found that the preference for the online purchase of traditional foods during COVID-19 pandemic was well predicted by traditional foods taste, the perceived effect on health of traditional foods consumption, the health protection effect of online ordering, traditional foods price perception, and easiness of the online purchase. From a practical perspective, marketers should be aware that Romanian consumers are keen to purchase traditional foods at the click of a button. Each of us, no matter which part of the barricade we are, consumers, producers, or retailers, must be aware that the COVID-19 hurried the digital revolution also in the food sector, and the Internet is the instrument through which the food industry, where traditional food has its place, has started one of its most visible makeovers. Probably, the development of food online platforms that connect local producers with the consumers together with the advertising of traditional foods as contributors to environment protection, sustainable production, or social local solidarity could positively impact on the growth rate of the online purchase of traditional foods [12].

The *Geographic Information System* record shows us that geographical conditions contribute to product quality. Related to the origin, we can refer to the product as a product from a certain area, as a traditional product, regional product, authentic product, etc. The connection with the origin is made in a combination of local environmental resources, climatic conditions, soil, species and animal breeds.

4. Conclusions

Romanian consumers start to be aware about the importance of good quality foodstuff, including traditional products.

The potential of the eligible area in terms of traditional products is a real opportunity to increase exports of agri-food products to the EU and regional markets, with beneficial effects on both the revenues of producers of such products and the economy, respectively the increase of the national income and the image of the country.

Compliance with Ethics Requirements. Authors declare that they respect the journal's ethics requirements. Authors declare that they have no conflict of interest and all procedures involving human or animal subjects (if exist) respect the specific regulation and standards.

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