

UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMICS - VARNA
FACULTY OF MANAGEMENT
DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMICS AND ORGANIZATION OF
TOURISM

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**OPPORTUNITIES FOR AGRITOURISM DEVELOPMENT
THROUGH THE USE OF ORGANIC PRODUCTS IN
BULGARIA**

ABSTRACT

of a dissertation

for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree of „PhD“
in a professional direction 3.9. Tourism,
scientific specialty „Economics and Management“ (tourism)

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2024

The dissertation consists of 218 pages, including introduction (5 pages), three chapters (179 pages), conclusion (4 pages), list of references (14 pages) and appendices (12 pages). The main text contains 13 tables, 43 figures, 1 formula and 154 literary and informational sources.

The defense of the dissertation will take place on at in hall of the University of Economics - Varna at a meeting of the Scientific Jury, appointed by Order No. of the Rector of the University of Economics - Varna.

The materials of the defense are available to those interested on the website of the University of Economics - Varna, www.ue-varna.bg.

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SCIENTIFIC SUPERVISOR

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The dissertation was discussed and scheduled for defense at a meeting of the Department of Economics and Organization of Tourism at the University of Economics - Varna on The author is a PhD student at the Department of Economics and Organization of Tourism at the University of Economics - Varna and the research was carried out at the same university.

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I. General Characteristics of the Dissertation

Relevance of the research

One of the fastest-growing sectors both nationally and globally is agriculture. On one hand, agricultural producers face decreasing incomes and a need for innovations in rural areas, accompanied by fluctuations in product prices and internal market deficiencies. On the other hand, tourism serves as a primary driver for a plethora of economic activities and national economies. It focuses on providing additional income to the population, creating jobs, and achieving sustainable development. These factors necessitate the establishment of a long-lasting and stable connection between agriculture and the tourism industry.

The *relevance* of the discussed scientific issues is associated with the direct and indirect impact that agritourism has on rural lifestyles and the environment. Since the beginning of the century, agricultural producers have focused on tourism to diversify their activities and increase their incomes. Agritourism has become an effective way to achieve sustainable development in the tourism industry and rural areas globally. In 2023, the size of the global agritourism market amounted to \$56.97 billion, with expectations to increase by 6.5% in the next five years. According to the latest data from the German Research Institute of Organic Agriculture (FIBL) and the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM), certified organic farming is available in 191 countries, with the number of operators reaching 3.7 million. The primary goal of agritourism is to promote a local ecological community aimed at achieving a positive relationship between society and nature. However, there is no unified definition of this term. This necessitates the study and analysis of the essence, characteristics, and features of agritourism by applying biological practices both theoretically and practically to outline the favorable opportunities for its development.

Object and Subject of the Study

The *object* of the study in the dissertation is agritourism in Bulgaria as an alternative form of tourism conducted in rural areas to satisfy the specific needs and desires of visitors who wish to participate in agricultural activities.

The *subject* of this study is the features and opportunities for the development of agritourism, with an emphasis on the use of organic products in the process of tourist consumption.

Purpose and Tasks of the Study

The *scientific-research* goal set in the dissertation is to investigate the possibilities for the development of agritourism and organic products in Bulgaria, based on their theoretical aspects, in order to define directions for improving the agritourism business in the country.

The defined goal is realized through the decomposition and execution of the following *research tasks*:

- ✓ To investigate the main theoretical concepts related to the essence of agritourism and organic products, defining their role, typology, and characteristics in their functioning.
- ✓ To develop a conceptual model for the use of organic products in Bulgarian agritourism.
- ✓ To reveal the state and characteristics of agritourism through biological products in Bulgaria.
- ✓ To study the attitude of Bulgarians towards the consumption of organic products and the undertaking of agritourism activities, based on which to identify and assess key opportunities for the growth of agritourism in the country.
- ✓ To outline guidelines for the development of agritourism through the offering of organic products in Bulgaria.

Research Toolkit

In *methodological terms*, various research approaches have been used in the dissertation. A systematic analysis was applied for the theoretical and research foundation of the study. This approach enables the drawing of main conclusions and directions for the development of this alternative form of tourism in the Republic of Bulgaria based on existing (traditional and contemporary) theoretical and practical views on agritourism. The methods used in the work include induction, deduction,

analysis, synthesis, comparative and situational analysis, descriptive, statistical, and mathematical methods, desk research, and focus groups. An online survey was conducted, and the results were processed using SPSS software.

Information Provision

The *sources of information* include academic publications by experts in the fields of agritourism and organic production, statistical data and reports from national institutes, non-governmental organizations, local and foreign agritourism sites, and websites related to the offering and development of agritourism and organic products.

Research Thesis and Hypotheses

The *main thesis* of the dissertation is that there are numerous favorable opportunities for the development of agritourism activities in Bulgaria through the use of organic products. This is confirmed by the formulated hypotheses related to the study of Bulgarians' attitudes towards agritourism and organic products in the country:

Hypothesis 1: There is a clear trend towards positive growth in tourism development indicators, including agritourism.

Hypothesis 2: There is a clear trend towards the positive development of Bulgarian organic farming and an increase in the production of organic products.

Hypothesis 3: Potential demand supports the development of agritourism through a demonstrated willingness to purchase organic products and engage in agritourism.

Limitations and Problems in the Study

During the preparation of this dissertation, the following limitations were formulated:

✓ The specifics of the survey: The sample type is non-random and targeted based on demographic characteristics—age and income. Respondents need to be over 18 years old and have a per capita family income of over 780 BGN. According to research by the Ministry of Agriculture and Food and the Ministry of Tourism, these are the

individuals who most often make decisions about purchasing healthy products and undertaking tourist activities.

✓ The characteristics of the respondents: Tourists who visit agritourism sites in Bulgaria and actively participate in agricultural activities are not yet fully studied, and no comprehensive profile has been created for them.

Research challenges - problems were identified related to the lack of specialized literature on agritourism, insufficient research, and a lack of summarized local and foreign official statistical data in this area. Additionally, there was a refusal from some respondents to participate in the survey.

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III. Summary of the Dissertation

Chapter One

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF AGRITOURISM AND ORGANIC PRODUCTS

Paragraph 1.1 reviews Bulgarian and international literature sources on the essential characteristics and classification of agritourism. Firstly, it introduces the

concept of "agricultural tourism." Chronologically, agritourism emerged during the post-war recovery of Western Europe with the primary aim of retaining the population in rural areas by supporting farmers in the tourism sector. France was one of the first countries to develop this alternative form of tourism, being declared a "leader in the supply and demand of rural tourism." Agritourism also rapidly developed in the USA, China, India, and Brazil. Secondly, a historical overview of the term is provided, highlighting its features. Additionally, definitions of rural and farm tourism are examined, summarizing the similarities and differences among these three concepts. In both science and practice, a single, universally accepted definition of "agritourism" does not exist. The definitions formulated over the years vary significantly depending on the terminology used and the relationship between the offered tourist and agricultural activities. For the purposes and research tasks of this dissertation, the following definition is formulated: agritourism is a form of rural tourism that includes tourist and agricultural activities offered by agricultural producers to generate additional income and voluntarily performed by visitors (tourists) for relaxation, entertainment, enjoyment, and education. Thirdly, the typology of agritourism is derived, presented in chronological order and according to its main criteria. The dissertation summarizes the classification based on territory, type of transport, accommodation, duration of stay, and form of organization.

Paragraph 1.2 highlights the importance of agritourism by examining its role as an alternative type of tourism, examples of best practices, and market characteristics. Agritourism creates both economic and non-economic benefits for farmers and the local population, on the basis of which the advantages and disadvantages in this sector are presented. Examples of best practices worldwide include Liberty Hill Farm, Big Island Bees, Taos Goji Eco Lodge and Farm, Los Arenalejos Layesera, Dana Pani Organic Farmstay, Acton Scot, Dalabelos Estate, and others. The market characteristics of agritourism include data on the rural population, traditional farming, employment, unemployment, and the tourism sector, including agritourism in the USA, Europe, and China.

Paragraph 1.3 examines the features of organic products and their role in agritourism. Multiple definitions related to organic products are presented. To properly

understand this term, additional concepts such as "organic," "natural," and "ecological" products are explored. The chronological development and state of organic production globally are outlined. Based on this analysis, it is concluded that organic farming, combined with the tourism sector, and specifically agritourism, leads to the creation of new jobs, the reduction of rural depopulation, the improvement of living standards for the local population, and an increase in sales of organic products in tourism and commercial establishments. This is a primary reason for the state and farmers to focus their attention and efforts on creating a link between the two sectors.

Paragraph 1.4 presents an author's attempt to construct a conceptual model for the development of agritourism through organic products, shown in Figure 1. It involves concepts related to the relevant subject area, namely the agricultural and tourism sectors. It includes systematically linked elements. The analysis of factors and determinants in the development of agritourism through organic products points to the opportunities for creating an agritourism market in Bulgaria and achieving progress nationally and globally. The main goal of the model is to meet the needs, desires, and expectations of end consumers and achieve sustainable development in the advanced world by organizations (farms). The input of the system is a major part of the conceptual model of the study, encompassing elements of agritourism—material, financial, labor, informational, and technological resources and consumers. Internal (material, organizational culture, human resources, and technological) and external factors (economic, social, technological, political, and natural) influence this foundation, undergoing changes in subsequent stages. The development process of agritourism through organic products goes through four stages: analysis of the agricultural and tourism sectors, survey of the opinions of end consumers and organizations regarding the agritourism product through organic products, training and application of agritourism practices, and planning and development of marketing activities to popularize this type of tourism. The final stage of the conceptual model for the development of agritourism through organic products includes the obtained data or output results. They encompass the benefits for end clients and firms.

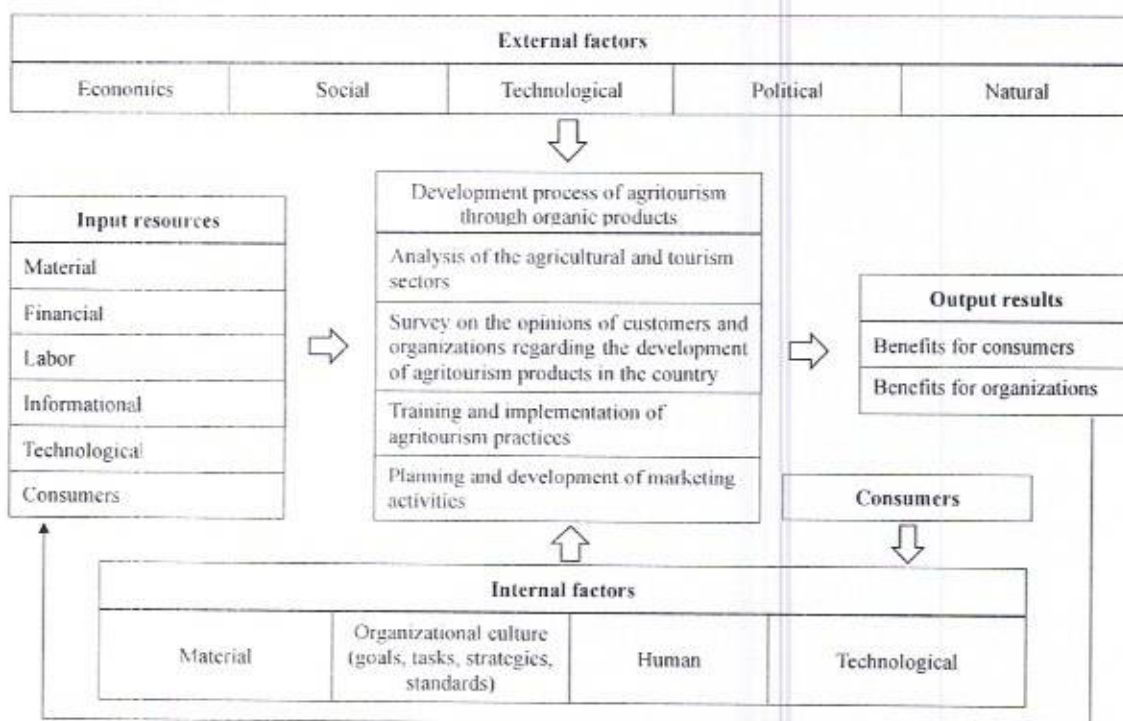


Fig. 1. Conceptual model for the development of agritourism through organic products.

Source: Prepared by the author.

Chapter Two

ANALYSIS AND CHARACTERIZATION OF AGRITOURISM THROUGH ORGANIC PRODUCTS IN THE REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA

Paragraph 2.1 examines the methodology and research tools for studying the possibilities for developing agritourism through the use of organic products in Bulgaria. The four stages in the process of developing the dissertation are presented: desk research, a survey of opinions and assessments of agritourism through organic products among the population of the country, the use of specialized software for analysis and summarization of the results from the respondents, and defining conclusions and recommendations for utilizing the results. The current development is based on a process-oriented model, presented in Figure 2.

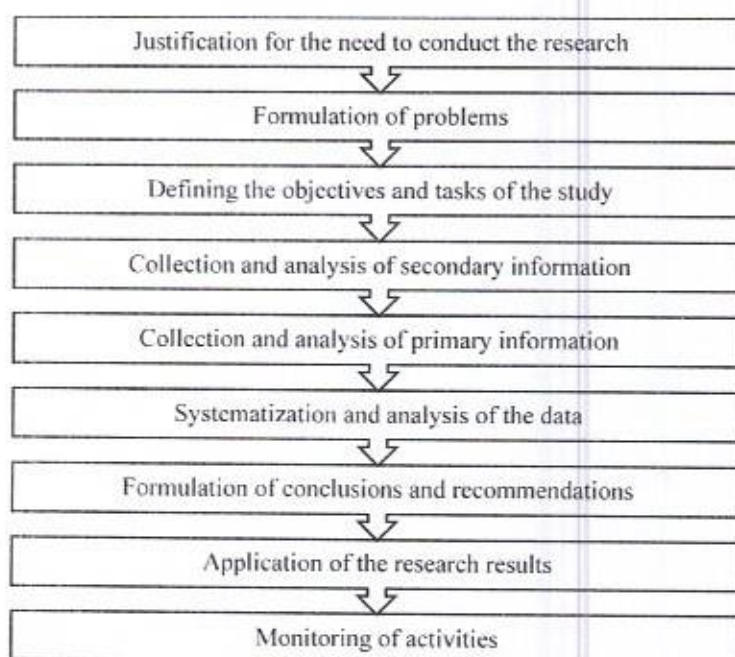


Fig. 2. Process-expanded model of agritourism research using organic products

Source: Prepared by the author.

Paragraph 2.2 examines the significance of agritourism in Bulgaria. Information regarding the country's population, territorial distribution, migrations, agricultural sector, and tourism sector (including agrarian tourism) is presented. It is necessary to clarify that the available information on this alternative form of tourism, as presented in literature and practice, is scarce and incomplete. Official statistics on agritourism in

the country are lacking, which complicates market analysis, policy planning, and its development. This indicates the need for the establishment of a data collection system regarding agritourism operators, tourists, demand, and agritourism products, conducting regular surveys, centralizing data, fostering collaboration between the government, businesses, scientific organizations, and the non-profit sector, and disseminating them to all interested parties.

Paragraph 2.3 presents an analysis of organic products in Bulgaria, including a market assessment and market framework of these alternative products. Organic farming in the country can be traced back to the 1990s and has been developing in recent years. The analysis explores the organic agricultural area in the country, the number of traders, leaders in organic production in the EU, types of organic products, livestock farming, sales, e-commerce, etc. The regulatory documents available on the Bulgarian and European markets can be summarized as follows:

- ✓ National Level: Regulatory documents were adopted before 2007 and after the country's accession to the EU, creating unified requirements for Bulgarian and European producers of organic products.

- ✓ EU and Bulgarian Legislation: There is legislation defining the conditions for the production and trade of organic products, allowing adherence to clear and specific rules and compliance with standards adopted by all countries.

- ✓ Labeling Rules: A mandatory condition for the production and offering of organic products is labeling, with numerous symbols indicating the product's origin and nature.

- ✓ Supervision: Supervision of Bulgarian organic operators is carried out by authorized supervisory bodies subject to inspection by the Ministry of Agriculture and Food. Producers, processors, and traders undergo continuous material and documentary control.

- ✓ Import and Export Compliance: All stakeholders strictly adhere to established conditions for the import and export of these products, limiting unfair competition and excluding uncertified products from the market.

- ✓ Environmental Conservation: Organic production aims at environmental conservation and supporting biological diversity, with strict EU policies regarding the

transition from conventional to organic production by excluding GMOs, enhancers, and artificial additives. This leads to more opportunities for producers through government support (financial support, tax relief, subsidies, etc.).

Paragraph 2.4 reveals the main characteristics and assessment of agritourism through organic products. A situational analysis of agrarian tourism has been conducted. The advantages, disadvantages, strengths, and weaknesses of this alternative form of tourism are formulated. Based on the SWOT analysis, strategic directions for the development of agritourism in Bulgaria are presented, summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Strategic directions for the development of agritourism in Bulgaria

TOWS analysis		Internal Environment	
		Strengths	Weaknesses
External Environment	Opportunities	Strategy S-O: Agritourism development plan, implemented through leveraging strengths and opportunities.	Strategy W-O: Improving the access to rural areas by addressing weaknesses and creating new opportunities.
	Threats	Strategy S-T: Creating entertaining agricultural tourism attractions in rural areas aimed at achieving tourist satisfaction by leveraging advantages and mitigating threats.	Strategy W-T: Training and preparation of tourism personnel through addressing weaknesses and threats.

Source: The table has been compiled by the author.

As a result of the analysis conducted up to this point, it can be summarized that agritourism is one of the most preferred alternative forms of tourism worldwide. In recent years, this concept has been gaining popularity in Bulgaria. However, agritourism is still in its early stages of development, with the potential for achieving high growth rates. It supports and develops various aspects of rural life. Promoting agritourism requires support both at the national level (Ministry of Agriculture and Food and Ministry of Tourism) and at the local level (the population in rural areas). Immediate measures are needed to popularize alternative forms of tourism, provide accommodations, attract and engage more farmers, maintain facilities, hospitality, and

community relations. Combining agriculture with the tourism business is a suitable and modern strategy for achieving sustainable growth.

Next, an empirical study was conducted regarding Bulgarians' attitudes toward consuming organic products in agritourism. The questions posed to respondents were related to their social and demographic characteristics (gender, age, occupation, family and financial status), consumer habits (nature of agritourism, consumption - place and time of purchase, visitation and satisfaction with it, awareness, reasons for undertaking such an alternative form of tourism, activities and services in agritourism facilities, development opportunities and agritourism practices, production, origin, and consumption of organic products, awareness, place of purchase, reasons for purchasing, etc.). In response to the final question, "Would you visit an agritourism site where organic products are sold," 94.2% of respondents expressed their willingness to do so, while only 5.4% would not undertake such tourism, and 0.4% indicated another reason (the main motive being the price). Agrarian tourism has become one of the most important sectors of tourism activity in rural areas. Visiting agritourism sites in Bulgaria depends on multiple factors. It is the result of various reasons influencing the decision-making process for tourism travel to rural areas. Based on the conducted empirical study of Bulgarians' attitudes toward consuming organic products in agritourism, the following conclusions and generalizations can be formulated:

- ✓ Visitors staying at agritourism farms are mainly mature, well-educated, and financially affluent individuals.

- ✓ Overall, respondents are familiar with the terms "agritourism" and "organic products." However, there are inaccuracies in their definitions provided by the respondents.

- ✓ The main reasons tourists choose this alternative form of tourism are the opportunity for relaxation in nature among a limited number of people under favorable conditions typical of rural areas, offered at affordable prices.

- ✓ Agritourism activities provided and chosen by agritourists include accommodation, meals, sale of organic products, and education in agriculture and animal husbandry.

✓ The three preferred types of accommodation in agritourism facilities are guesthouses, farms, and bio-hotels. Respondents mostly choose Bulgarian organic products, associating them with positive health effects, high quality, easy accessibility, rich variety, and certification opportunities.

✓ According to the majority of respondents, the development of agritourism in the country is necessary. A prerequisite for this is sustainable practices in rural areas and the application of organic requirements in crop production and animal husbandry.

In summary, this study provides fundamental knowledge about the agritourism sector through the use of organic products in Bulgaria, its prospects, demand from end tourists, and its importance for future research. The study was conducted online and targeted Bulgarian citizens, demonstrating its usefulness for future research. Future studies have the opportunity to analyze the challenges of the sector and identify pragmatic ways to address them. Additionally, qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews with more stakeholders are necessary to provide a better understanding of the motives for agritourism from the demand and supply perspectives. The development of agritourism in Bulgaria through the use of organic products is essential for the country's progress in both economic and social aspects. Poverty reduction and the upliftment of rural areas have been primary goals of the state in recent years. The foundation of this is directed toward the desires of farmers, the ability to create necessary infrastructure, and tourists' interest in such a form of tourism. In conclusion, based on the analysis conducted, it can be stated that potential demand supports the development of agritourism through the expressed willingness to purchase organic products and engage in agritourism. The possibilities for progress and sustainability of this type of tourism depend on both demand and supply. Studies in this area are primarily focused on developed countries, while research in developing countries is limited. This is the main reason why periodic literature reviews and practical guidelines for the proper development of agritourism are necessary. This can be achieved by defining trends and prospects, establishing criteria for sustainable development, building a marketing strategy, summarizing problems and challenges, and synthesizing proposals and recommendations for improving agritourism through the use of organic products.

Chapter Three.

GUIDELINES FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF AGRITOURISM IN THE REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA THROUGH ORGANIC PRODUCTS

In fulfillment of the research objectives of the dissertation, Section 3.1 systematizes the trends and prospects for agritourism in Bulgaria through organic products, based on the results obtained from market analyses and the conducted empirical study (Figure 3).



Fig. 3. Trends in agritourism development through organic products in Bulgaria

Source: The figure has been compiled by the author.

Social trends are associated with the tendency of the Bulgarian population to move away from globalization and mass tourism; the healthy lifestyle model; the growing interest in knowledge about organic product production; and the offering of artisanal production in rural areas and cultural experiences (food and tourism). Consumer trends are directed towards the short distance between tourists and agritourism locations; the consumers (mostly families with children, elderly people, and children's groups); the visitation by the local population; preferences for short, intensive, and active vacations; and the positive correlation between agritourism and other alternative forms of tourism. Demographic trends include the type of tourism (individual or group), the target audience (a small number of visitors aged between 35 and 45 years and over 65 years), the high purchasing power of tourists, education, individualism, frequency of visits, factors influencing the decision to choose an agritourism location, and awareness. Economic impacts are related to the development

of the local economy and the creation of new jobs in rural areas; the reduction of migration processes; the aging of the rural population; the improvement of quality of life and increase in leisure time; the sustainable connection between agritourism and environmentally friendly strategies; the institutional framework; typical local production; transportation and communication; and natural resources.

Section 3.2 presents a marketing strategy for the sustainable development of agritourism through organic products. The possibilities and mechanisms for this type of progress are examined; the documents influencing agritourism sites. Among the mechanisms are training and education, collaboration, funding, marketing, legislation, certification, research and development, monitoring, and evaluation. To implement the marketing strategy, the marketing mix—product, price, distribution, and promotion in this area—is analyzed. Sustainable development has a positive impact on agritourism and organic products, turning them into an integrated form of tourism through the application of biological practices, combining economic development with social responsibility and environmental conservation. Researching and implementing a marketing strategy for each agritourism site would lead to numerous benefits for farmers and all stakeholders in rural areas, as well as for tourists. By focusing on the combination of the presented mechanisms and approaches, agritourism and organic production have the potential to become more sustainable, efficient, and environmentally friendly. Practicing them could be a distinguishing feature for Bulgaria's progress among developed countries in this field. Achieving the formulated goals such as poverty and inequality reduction, diversification of farmers' activities, application of biological and ecological practices, and environmental conservation provides numerous ways to achieve sustainable development more quickly.

Section 3.3 examines the problems and challenges facing agritourism and organic production. The development of agritourism, combined with the production, consumption, and distribution of organic products, is accompanied by certain risks in building, applying, and maintaining such a business model. These can be classified as common challenges and potential problems in implementing agritourism and biological practices in rural areas. The first type is related to the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, unsustainable development, social issues, dependence on foreign tourists,

and climate change. These challenges are characteristic not only of agritourism through organic products but also of any tourist destination in Bulgaria. The second type of risks pertains to the economic, biological, and physical environment in which agriculture is carried out. These are mainly related to the specifics of agriculture, the production process, and the economic efficiency of various systems in the industry. Potential problems for agritourism and organic products in Bulgaria are summarized in Figure 4.

To fulfill the tasks in Section 3.4, suggestions and recommendations for improving agritourism through the use of organic products in Bulgaria have been formulated and analyzed. Agritourism is associated with the sustainable development of rural areas by achieving harmony between humans and nature. This alternative form of tourism is developing based on increasing demand and new forms of implementation. To achieve sustainable development in agritourism through the adoption of biological practices in agriculture, the following aspects, which require attention, have been considered:

- ✓ Construction and improvement of existing accommodation facilities and dining places;
- ✓ Creation of agritourism activities through organic products and expansion of the product range;
 - ✓ Increase in quality;
 - ✓ Enhancing awareness;
 - ✓ Use of digital technologies;
 - ✓ Support from the government and attracting investments;
 - ✓ Changing the image of organic products;
 - ✓ Development of research and development;
 - ✓ Creation and implementation of a system for assessing agritourism and organic products and conducting control;
- ✓ Achieving international cooperation.
- ✓ Environmental conservation.

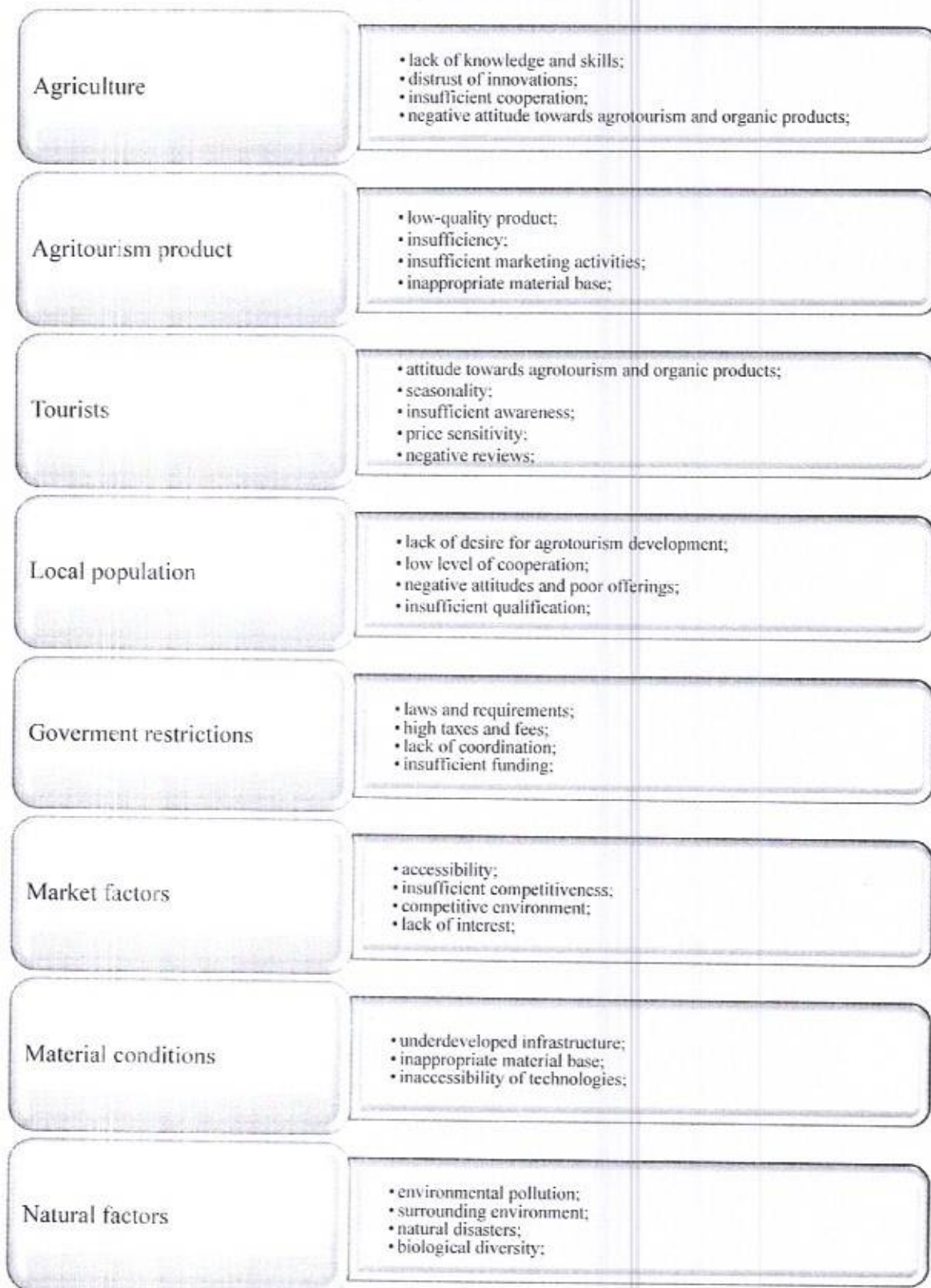


Fig. 4. Potential challenges for agritourism and bioproducts in Bulgaria

Source: The figure is created by the author.

Examples of unique offerings in agritourism are presented, through which agricultural producers have the opportunity to increase interest and attract a large number of visitors. These include agro spas, agrotherapy, astronomical observations, gourmet tastings, agritourism adventures, educational programs for children, art studios, themed festivals, events, and volunteer programs.

The dissertation analyzes the available market information regarding agritourism and organic products in Bulgaria and presents results from personal author research. These findings can be applied in various areas to develop this alternative form of tourism. Based on the study results, their application is possible in several areas: achieving progress in agritourism by identifying tourists' preferences and evaluating existing products and services (surveys help determine agritourists' preferences regarding activities, accommodation, dining, attractions, etc., and evaluate visitor satisfaction with existing agritourism activities); conducting marketing activities in this alternative form of tourism in the country by developing target groups and selecting communication channels (respondents focus on identifying target groups and determining the most effective channels to reach end tourists); planning and managing agritourism destinations by assessing their potential and determining their priorities; research and education through tracking trends in agritourism, discovering new opportunities and challenges, and developing informative programs and materials for agritourism; policy development, impact assessment, and regulation achievement. In addition, the results of the research can be used to attract investments by revealing market potential and tourist demand; improving the quality of products and services by identifying areas for improvement; strengthening local communities by providing additional income and stimulating the local economy. The author's research results contribute to developing agritourism products and services that meet demand, improving the agritourism package, and identifying new opportunities. They should be considered alongside other data sources when making decisions in agritourism.

Control over activities in agritourism is a continuous process, where adaptation to changing conditions and sector needs is key. The aim is to ensure high standards of quality and safety for agritourism products and services and to contribute to sustainable development in rural areas. Depending on the aspects of this alternative form of tourism,

control over activities in Bulgaria is carried out by institutions in multiple ways. Examples include registration and licensing by the Ministry of Tourism (responsible for registering agritourism accommodation facilities in the database and issuing licenses for conducting tourism activities), the Food Safety Agency (ensuring control over food products produced and offered at agritourism sites), and Regional Health Inspectorates (checking sanitary-hygienic conditions at agritourism sites); compliance with existing laws and regulations (Tourism Act, Regulation on categorization of tourist accommodation sites, Regulation on minimum requirements for conducting tourism activities, etc.); control bodies (Inspectors of the Ministry of Tourism, Authorities of the Food Safety Agency, Employees of regional health inspectorates, etc.); sanctions (for non-compliance with laws and regulations in the field of tourism, agritourism sites are subject to fines, administrative penalties, and in extreme cases, closure of the facility). In addition to institutional control, the agritourism sector has the opportunity for self-regulation through Associations of Agritourism Operators (they develop their own codes of conduct and ethics, which their members adhere to), Certification Systems (certification of some agritourism sites is carried out according to various quality systems such as the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP) food safety management system or organic certification). Control over activities in agritourism ensures the quality and safety of agritourism products, protects consumers, supports sustainable development, creates fair competition, and enhances the image of a particular place. Effective control can position Bulgaria as a leader in this sector and attract both Bulgarian and foreign tourists seeking authentic and organic experiences.

In conclusion, Bulgaria has the necessary potential for the development of agritourism through the use of organic products. Progress in these two sectors of the economy requires targeted actions by the state, municipalities, non-governmental organizations, and agricultural producers. The main goal of all stakeholders is to establish agritourism practices and implement organic principles in food production by attracting financially capable consumers. Efforts for the sustainable development of agritourism and organic products can be ensured by focusing on the following main directions:

✓ Engagement of all stakeholders in the construction and development of agritourism and organic products in Bulgaria by improving the quality of offered agritourism products and services;

✓ Preparation of personnel and human resource management in this alternative form of tourism by creating a policy for training professionally trained individuals, retaining them permanently in the sector, and adopting new approaches for progress;

✓ Increasing the number of tourist visits and raising the level of awareness among Bulgarian and foreign tourists by introducing modern practices for a healthier and more environmentally friendly way of life and recreation;

✓ Support from the state through the development of unified legislative and regulatory frameworks in agritourism and organic products, creation of additional funding programs, construction, and maintenance of modern infrastructure in rural areas;

✓ In the field of marketing, actions should be taken to present and promote the Republic of Bulgaria as a tourist destination with developed agritourism and organic production;

✓ Building local and international partnerships, networks, and associations to unite efforts and resources (financial, intellectual, etc.), support initiatives and innovations, plan and improve the agritourism product;

✓ Achieving sustainable development through environmental conservation and providing a natural environment that delivers satisfaction to the local population and its visitors.

CONCLUSION

The exploration of the potential for the development of agritourism through the use of organic products in Bulgaria in the present dissertation is based on contemporary trends for sustainable progress in rural areas. This alternative form of tourism creates avenues for strengthening the local economy, providing numerous jobs and new enterprises, developing and promoting training and certification programs, which directs society's attention to agriculture and the environment. The relevance of the investigated issue is determined by the growing interest in a healthy lifestyle and the

lagging development of rural areas in the country. Environmental conservation and the growth of agricultural production, based on tourism, are rapidly growing sectors globally. The author of this dissertation attempts to present the opportunities for establishing a connection between agritourism and organic products in the country, resulting in the formulation of directions for improving the agritourism business.

Based on the formulated research objective, the first chapter of this dissertation provides a comprehensive characterization and classification of agritourism. The theoretical foundation of the concept is analyzed, expanding and deepening our understanding of it. In this regard, the dissertation makes a contribution through the author's definition, wherein agritourism is defined as "a variety of rural tourism involving tourist and agricultural activities offered by agricultural producers to generate additional income and voluntarily undertaken by visitors (tourists) for relaxation, entertainment, enjoyment, and education." There is difficulty in deriving a typology due to the fact that this variety of rural tourism is not fully researched and developed. Nonetheless, an attempt has been made to develop a system of criteria for its grouping. The role and significance of agritourism are highlighted in the analysis of the market for this type of alternative tourism on a global scale. Its study directs attention to the need for additional research in the field. The lack of state and private studies on this specific market and the lack of consensus in its definition are the main factors leading to misinterpretation and the implementation of incorrect actions in planning, management, regulation, and analysis of agritourism. All of this necessitates contemporary theoretical progress and unified efforts for the sustainable development of agritourism. The dissertation provides a thorough analysis of the term "organic product" by presenting the interrelationship between the concepts of "biological," "organic," "natural," and "ecological." On the one hand, they differ in content and legal regulation; on the other hand, they can mean the same thing. The importance of studying organic production is determined both by its role in the sustainable development of rural areas and local employment and by directing attention to a healthy and ecological lifestyle. The contribution of the dissertation to assessing the potential for the development of agritourism through the use of organic products is made based on the created conceptual model. It encompasses input and output information, supplemented

by internal and external factors and empirical studies at the national level. Through it, sustainable development is achieved by the suppliers (agricultural producers) aiming to satisfy the needs, desires, and expectations of end consumers (tourists).

Chapter 2 presents an analysis of the agritourism market in Bulgaria. The agricultural and tourist sectors in the country play a significant socio-economic role and influence environmental preservation. Tourists' preference for this alternative form of tourism is conditioned by recent events, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic, and the change in tourists' desires and needs – a preference for a limited number of visitors, visits to small farms, selection of quality food, connection with nature, and immersion in the culture and lifestyle of rural populations in the country. The offering of organic products in agritourism locations directly depends on the existing legal framework in Bulgaria and the European Union. The development of organic farming is analyzed by presenting key data on organic agricultural land area, the number of traders, cultivated organic products, animals, and the regulatory framework for these products in the country. Examination of legislative documents provides guidance on the existing requirements for such goods - production conditions, trade, labeling, and control. The dissertation contributes a situational analysis and survey research linking agritourism activities with organic practices in Bulgaria. The conducted situational analysis presents and forecasts the positive and negative characteristics of the internal and external environment of agritourism through organic products in the country. Its result is the identification of agrarian tourism as a suitable and contemporary strategy for achieving sustainable growth. The conducted online survey regarding Bulgarians' attitudes towards consuming organic products in this form of alternative tourism outlines the main social and demographic characteristics and peculiarities in their consumer habits.

The guidelines for the development of agritourism through the use of organic products in Bulgaria, in the third part of the dissertation, are based on social, economic, demographic, and consumer trends, and define a series of perspectives for it. Achieving sustainable development is possible through the development of training and education programs, fostering cooperation between governmental institutions, non-governmental organizations, and businesses, state funding, marketing activities, regulatory framework creation, monitoring, and impact assessment of agritourism on the economic, social,

and natural environment. The common challenges are focused on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, unsustainable development, social issues, dependency on foreign tourists, and climate change, while potential problems are related to agriculture, agritourism products, tourists, local populations, government restrictions, market factors, material conditions, and natural factors.

Achieving unity between agritourism businesses and the organic products market in Bulgaria is a winning niche that offers the opportunity for diversification of agricultural activities, implementation of sustainable practices, support for local communities, preservation of local traditions and culture, and conservation of the environment. The foundation for the long-term development of this sector lies in offering a combination of quality agritourism products and sustainable practices aimed at achieving a balance between the capabilities of agricultural producers and the desires of tourists. Successful development of this tourism activity requires a comprehensive approach that combines various aspects such as financial support, human resource development, infrastructure improvement, quality assurance, collaboration, innovation, marketing, and more. By implementing these measures, the country has the opportunity to position itself as an attractive destination in the field of agrarian tourism and organic production, attracting tourists seeking authentic and ecological experiences. In conclusion, the author of the dissertation asserts that there are opportunities for the development of agritourism through the use of organic products in Bulgaria and emphasizes the need for future scientific and practical work in this area.

IV. Summary of contributions to the dissertation

The conducted research in this dissertation achieves results that correspond to the formulated objectives and tasks. Based on this, the following main contributions, which have both theoretical and practical significance, can be outlined:

1. Formulation of an author's definition for agritourism, including the derivation of its typology and the tracing of its role and significance for the development of the tourism sector.
2. Development of a conceptual model for exploring the possibilities for the development of agritourism through the use of organic products in Bulgaria.

3. Conducted a situational analysis of agritourism.
4. Conducted empirical research, based on which the attitude of Bulgarians towards the consumption of agritourism and organic products in Bulgaria was studied.
5. Formulation of strategic guidelines for the development of agritourism through organic products in the Republic of Bulgaria.

V. Publications related to the dissertation

Articles

1. Koseva, D. (2017). Sustainable development of agritourism and organic products. *Annual Journal of the Higher School of Management*, Volume 10, 47-55, ISSN 2367-7368.
2. Koseva, D. (2018). Certification and labeling of organic products in the field of agritourism. *Proceedings of the Union of Scientists - Varna*. Volume 7. No. 3. 91-100. ISSN 1314-7390 (print).

Reports

1. Koseva, D. (2017). Sustainable cities. *Regional Economics and Sustainable Development. Collection of Reports from a Scientific Conference*, Volume 2, No. 14, 186-199, ISBN 978-954-21-0957-0.
2. Koseva, D. (2017). Attitude of Bulgarians towards agritourism and organic products. *Tourism. Innovations. Strategies. Jubilee Collection*. 366-372. ISBN 978-619-7125-34-4.
3. Koseva, D. (2018). Green buildings and agritourism. *Construction Entrepreneurship and Real Estate. Collection of Reports*. No. 33. 305-315. ISSN 1313-2369.
4. Koseva, D. (2018). Best practices in agritourism development. *Fourteenth International Scientific Conference of Young Scientists*. 490-498. ISBN 978-954-8590-68-6.

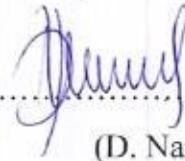
VI. Declaration of Originality

I, the undersigned Denitsa Miladinova Nankova, declare that the dissertation entitled "Opportunities for the development of agritourism through the use of organic products in Bulgaria" is entirely my own work and in its development no copyrighted materials or developments of others have been used in violation of their intellectual property rights. This dissertation has not been submitted for the acquisition of an academic degree at another higher education institution, university or research institute.

Date: 31.05.24
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Varna

Signature:



(D. Nankova)