

VRANCEA VINEYARD: A RURAL AREA WITH A EUROPEAN COMPARATIVE ADVANTAGE – THE WINE

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ABSTRACT - This article intends to disseminate the partial results of a work that lasted more than three years and involved a substantial number of resources at both national and international level within the COHESION Project, implemented under the C.I.P. Interreg IIIB CADSES Neighbourhood Program. The Vrancea vineyard was the pilot area for the Romanian study and the main activities of the Romanian team (Urbanproiect Bucuresti, Partner Project no.13) within the project has been focused on this area.

The COHESION (Integrated **C**ONcepts **E**n**H**ancing **C**oh**E**Sion of **E**ur**O**pean **N** Space) Project aimed at enforcing the cohesion of the CADSES area, through developing policies to meet the problems of the European rural space. To this context, the project developed during 2003-2005 applied a methodology focused on increasing competitiveness of areas. An indicative product (wine), in which the involved areas provide a comparative advantage, has been targeted and integrated development pilot projects have been implemented in the participating areas.

The Project's area of intervention consisted in the territories of Karditsa, Achaia and Nemea in Greece, the territory of Steirisches Vulkanland in Austria, Meissen in Germany, Appennino Reggiano in Italy, Northwest Bohemia in Czech Republic, and Vrancea in Romania.

The aim of the project was “to investigate the development process in remote agricultural areas from practical point of view, i.e. locate the factors that hamper or promote local development in the remote agricultural zones of the CADSES area, and provide this information to other local development actors, so as to facilitate their action and thus contribute to accelerating convergence of the space in question and cohesion of the European territory” (PINDOS Strategic Planning Centre, 2006).

The approach planned and applied by COHESION was the bottom up approach. Parallel and similar development projects (pilot activities) were generated in a number of the areas involved and the experience acquired by the project partners was compared and examined. A synthesis of the particular experience in the form of recommendations and hints to potential local development actors was elaborated under a final manual, a methodological guide for local development actors, so as to help people involved in the development practice to avoid mistakes and better plan their actions and thus become more efficient in their mission.

Key words: wine growing, local competitiveness, local development, heritage

1. Background

The Romanian team has participated in the framework of three work packages out of five proposed by lead partner at the start of project:

<i>Work Package 1</i>	Creating Study Infra-structure Material
<i>Activity</i>	“Study on Wine and Vine Growing Characteristics”
<i>Work Package 3</i>	Adapting Agrotourism Activities to the Local Productive Identity
<i>Activity</i>	“Developing Tourism Packages”
<i>Work Package 4</i>	Enhancing Local Entrepreneurship
<i>Activity</i>	“Research on investment opportunities”

The results of these activities are as follows:

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I. Study on Wine and Vine Growing Characteristics of the Vrancea Area

Geographical and demographical characteristics

Established as a territorial-administrative entity on the south-eastern side of the Curved Carpathians, round the joining point with the Subcarpathian hills culminating with the Măgura of Odobești, Vrancea County grew at the crossroads of the commercial and the shepherds' routes linking together Transylvania, Moldavia and Wallachia, and evolved over time along with the social-economical and political formations established overtime in these historical regions. Vrancea County has an area of 4 857 km². Out of this area, 28 000 ha are covered by vineyards (the county with the most extended vineyard area in the country). There is a varied relief gradually disposed from west towards east; wild nature, nature reserves, ethnographical values. The total population exceeds 390 000 inhabitants, out of which 62% live in rural areas. The share of the active population in rural areas is around 40%; about 57% of the farming population are older than 65.

The settlement network consists of 5 towns (two of them are traditional wine producing centres) and 68 communes, out of which 24 are within the mountain area, 25 are within the hilly area and 19 – within the plain.

Within the national territory, Vrancea County is situated on the major road and railway transport corridor (road E85 and Main Railway 6) connecting the Capital in the South with the Moldavian North and North-east, as part of the European Transport Corridor IX.

Descending in steps from West to East, the relief consists of the Vrancea Mountains (including depressions and the highest Goru Peak – 1 785 m), the Subcarpathian Hills and the Plain of the Inferior Siret, and the Northern part of the Râmnic Plain.

Vrancea County belongs to the most active seismic region in Romania (the triangle Vrâncioaia – Tulnici – Soveja), with a state-of-the-art earthquake monitoring station in the South-East European space at Vrâncioaia. The earthquakes are of tectonic origin and take place at 80 to 160 km under the surface. Powerful earthquakes occurred in 1940, 1977 and 1986.

The vegetation, as conditioned by factors of relief and climate, belongs to the forest domain in the mountains and hills, to the forest-steppe in the plain and to the steppe south of the Râmnic Valley.

The flora contains some 1 500 species of plants, originating from an area expanding from the Orient to the Atlantic Ocean and from North Eurasia to the Mediterranean Basin. Several species have been declared *monuments of nature*, e.g. Tisa (*Taxus baccata*), the Queen's Flower (*Leontopodium alpinum* Cass - *Figure 1*) and the carnivore Dewdrop of the Sky (*Drosera rotundifolia* - *Figure 2*).

The local fauna includes a large number of species. In the coniferous and leaf-bearing forests, the stag, the deer, the bear, the fox, the wild boar, and the lynx live. Vrancea has 44 hunting areas. In the Tișița Gorges (*Figure 3*), vipers can be met at medium altitudes. In the mountain rivers many fish species live, e.g. the trout (*Salmo trutta fario*) - there is a large trout farm at Lepșa - *Figure 4*), the loach (*Nemachilus barbatulus*) and the burbot (*Lota lota*). The 20 fishing domains of mountain waters amount to 250 km.

Defining the regional identity

The name of Vrancea, documentary attested in 1431 in a letter written in Latin under the form of "Varancha", is etymologically explained by "mountain", "raven" or "cask hole" suggesting the thickness of the forests, as black as the raven. In this area, since 5 000 BC, all material cultures one can find in the regions where Romanians live today (Criș, Cucuteni, Monteoru, Hallstatt, La Tène) have succeeded. The people of Vrancea took part in all crucial events marking the history of the Romanians, culminating in 1859 with the Union of the Romanian Principalities and the battle of Mărășești in August 1917, that decided the destiny of Romania in World War I.

The wooden churches in Vrancea County bear remarkable features that are specific to Vrancean cultural identity (photo 5). Within the limits of the traditional code of symbols and

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ornaments, the architectural aesthetics of wood would transform the church porch into an open book where one can decipher the letters of Baroque design grammar which became so popular in the second half of the 18th century. However, the builders of Vrancea churches did not literally adopt a new vocabulary of adornment, but rather re-interpreted in a Baroque language the pre-existing elements of the local artistic stock.

Vrancean social structure and way of life owe much to the historic type of organization of communities, based on the common property of land, forests, flocks, and herds. Within this “joint property” system only the dwelling estates were individually owned, while the remainder of the territory belonged to the community as a whole. Until the early 19th century, villages had been ruled for hundreds of years by councils of the elderly. This kind of self-government brought about social isolation and Vrancea kept untouched ancient customs that had faded away long time ago in other parts of the country, e.g. the Masked funeral - an ancient ritual dance, based on the idea of fertility and eternal return to life, where the participants (and even the dead) wear grotesque masks of a particular aesthetic value. Today, masks are sported mostly during the winter festivals (photo 7).

The form of human settlements differs according to the form of relief. In the plain, the villages developed along the rivers and near the vineyards, with compact groups of brick houses, centred in the heart of the village. In the mountains, the houses are dispersed, with long distances between them; the main building material used to be wood. In recent years, the historic type of housing has been renewed and even replaced by larger, even two-story houses, covered with tiles or tin sheets.



Figure 1. *Queen's Flower.*



Figure 2. *Dewdrop of the Sky.*



Figure 3. *Tișța Gorges.*



Figure 4. *Trout farm at Lepșa.*



Figure 5. *Monastery at Lepșa.*



Figure 6. *National costumes of Vrancea.*



Figure 7. *Nereju – the Masks dance.*

The wine-growing area

The pilot area for the COHESION project includes three wine growing regions: Panciu, Odobesti, and Cotesti.

The wine-growing study area is a compact territory covering the most important vineyards in Vrancea County, including 9 communes and 2 small towns.

The population of the 9 rural communes represents around 15% of the rural population. The vineyards represents 11,3% from the county's agricultural surface, distributed in 3 main vineyards: Panciu, Odobesti, and Cotesti. All the three vineyards are famous for the wine quality, which is obtained from in-house varieties such as: Plavaie and Yellow of Odobesti, which added to well-known types on the international market: Aligotè, Sauvignon, Cabernet, Merlot, Riesling, etc.

At present the agricultural land accounts for 52,6% of the total surface of the county while the forest surface and the grounds covered by forest vegetation represent 39,4%. The cultivation of field plants (wheat, maize, sunflower) and vegetable crops prevail in the east of the county, while the wine-growing and fruit growing (apples, pears and plums) in the areas of the Subcarpathian hills and in the meadows of the mountainous areas.

The study area is partially affected by erosion phenomena and the soil quality level varies from low to good.

The main crafts are wood processing, carpentry, weaving, milling, and baking. The main industrial activities are textile industry (50%), vine growing and wine production (30%), pulp and paper industry and the construction materials industry.

II. Developing Tourism Packages

A very good knowledge of the area, of the elements characterizing its local identity, of the elements that merge the area with its local product, is needed. The knowledge of the characteristics of the specific area is very important for the planning of tourism itineraries and developing tourism packages. The investigation of the competitive areas (existing and potential) to the examined area helps the area to be better positioned in the market. Each area can imitate other competitive area, as well as inspire from them, and re-determine its services and, in this way, exploit its resources more efficiently.

Folkloric and ethnographical ancient hearth and with remarkable cultural values, Vrancea's land is rounded by picturesque landscape, where many beautiful natural monuments are preserved: Putna's Fall, Tișița's Gorges, Lepșa's Cloister, Lepșa's Trout Farm and the Alive Fire from Andreiașu. The last one is an ex-volcano and represents a great attractive touring point. In order to protect, the unique flora fauna and geological samples, there are in Vrancea over 15 natural reservations.

The "Land of Vrancea"

The realm where doinas, ballads, old stories, and legends have been created is one of the most representative Romanian regions, a true "small scale icon of the big country" (N. Iorga). This is the place of origin of "Miorita" ballad, the poem of Romanian ethno-genesis, a suggestive image of the geographical space of the ancient activity of sheepherding.

The geographical position at crossroads of some important thoroughfares linking the North of the country with the Capital or with the Romanian seacoast of the Black Sea, its territory also being the shortest road between South of Transylvania towards the Danube Delta, on one hand and the natural environment on the other, are in favour of various types of tourism: of circulation, seven-day tourism, cultural, rural, adventure, hunting and fishing. The circulation tourism can be organized in transit or in local circuits including historical and natural monuments, museums, memorial houses. The seven-day tourism in the mountains, vineyards or in the plain area is based on the existence of natural factors such as health resorts, beautiful scenery, unpolluted and particular microclimate features (Soveja and Vizantea).

Vrancea has a huge potential for wine-growing tourism as the most representative form of tourism for this area. The wine-growing tourism includes tasting the wines, the participation in occasional activities: grape gathering, fairs, folk festivals, and vineyard trips.

Regional Vineyards and Identity Marks

The three hilly areas planted with vine include ten wine-growing zones:

- **Panciu** with centres in Panciu, Păunești, and Tifești;
- **Odobești** with centres in Bolotești, Jarișteea, and Odobești;
- **Cotești** with centres in Vârteșcoiu, Cârligele, Cotești, and Tâmboiești.

The predominant sorts of wine are dry white wines, followed by red wines. What sets them apart from other Romanian wines is their softness. In-house varieties are: Plăvaie, Yellow of Odobești and Black Feteasca.

Yellow of Odobești (*Galbena de Odobesti*) is the most representative wine especially for the Odobesti vineyard. This is the most demanded wine of all for its clear taste giving a sense of freshness and coolness.

Black Feteasca (*Feteasca Neagră*) is surnamed "the pride of Vrancea", a red wine, ahead of the others as regards value and fame. It has a bright-reddish colour, glowing like ruby stone. It has a discrete aroma, like dried blackberries and plums in cold smoke. The strong taste from the first years steadily turns into delicate and tempting taste full of harmony. By means of maturation and becoming old it gets a soft sourly taste and slightly ethereal bouquet.

Panciu Vineyard

Panciu vineyard specializes in producing a large quantity of dry white wines, a smaller quantity of red wines and a few aromatic wines.

It is renowned for its sparkling wines but also for its historic cellars situated at 24 meters under the ground, which were discovered by accident in 1952. Having an unknown origin, they were attributed by legend to the revered prince Steven the Great – "*Hrubele lui Ștefan cel Mare*". From the 500 m long main gallery, branch out other 36 galleries, totalizing a length of more than 3 km where over 3 million of bottles can be stored, a fact leading to a bigger halo for Panciu vineyard.

The tourist route passing Panciu vineyard going to Soveja village (an important watering place, known as the place where Miorița poem was discovered) and reaches the 17th century Brazi Monastery and Straoane village, another settlement of wine-growers, with its archaeological site dating back to the Neolithic and its wooden church St. Nicolas, an architectural and historical monument from the second half of the 15th century.

Odobesti Vineyard

Typical for Odobești Vineyard are the many cellars, basements and underground caves - secret corners dating "since ancient times", including the most famous, of certain historical significance, namely *Beciul Domnesc* (The Princely Cellar). The tourist route passing Odobesti Vineyard goes to Mera Monastery, founded by Romanian Cantemir princely family, along the most picturesque Putna Valley, attested as the old road used to bring the sheep from Transylvania to Ramnicu-Sărat Valley, in Wallachia. It is bordered by the two natural monuments – Tișița Gorges and Putna Waterfall.

Cotești Vineyard

The Cotești Vineyard, with an area of about 6 589 ha, produces some sorts of wine like: Royal Fetească, Aligoté and Black Băbeasca ("*old women's wine*"), White Feteasca ("*young girls' wine*"), Italian Riesling, Muscat Ottonel, Sauvignon, and Yellow of Odobești, in the Vârteșcoiu centre. Wine-growers consider the Vârteșcoiu centre as one of the best locations, known as "the land of quality".

In the frame of this activity, tree thematic routes have been mapped, taking into consideration the social, natural, and cultural heritage of each vineyard.

The three thematic routes are as follows:

1. Ethnographical heritage route (including Cotești and Odobești vineyard);
2. Archaeological site and natural reservation route (including Odobești vineyard);
3. Architectural monuments route (including Panciu vineyard).

Local initiatives to promote tourism

The Vineyard Club (Association of Wine-Growers from Vrancea) in cooperation with the non-governmental organisation National Association for Rural, Ecological and Cultural Tourism (ANTREC) created a new tourism project: "*The Wine Road*".

The project provides for a group of vineyard and cellar owners from Cotești, Odobești, Jariște, Tifești, Panciu, Movilița, and Păunești to set up locations for wine tasting: Merlot, Fetească Neagră, Cabernet, Galbena de Odobești, and provide accommodation in their agro-tourism pensions (agreed by ANTREC). The programs include a number of wine tasting sessions associated with the opportunity of visiting several significant tourist attractions for about 3 - 5 days. A prerequisite to be included in the project is the availability of wine tasting and accommodation locations with a capacity of more than 10 - 15 persons.

III. Research on investment opportunities

A local research on investment opportunities was carried out as a useful tool in the future for potential investors in the area. The objectives of the research were the following:

- To present a sufficiently documented overview of business and investment opportunities in each of the investigated areas to the regional entrepreneurs and to the external business community;
- To indicate strategies and measures for area marketing and investor targeting, and to mobilize capital resources;
- To identify suitable means for supporting the implementation of the investments and the implementation of business proposals in the region.

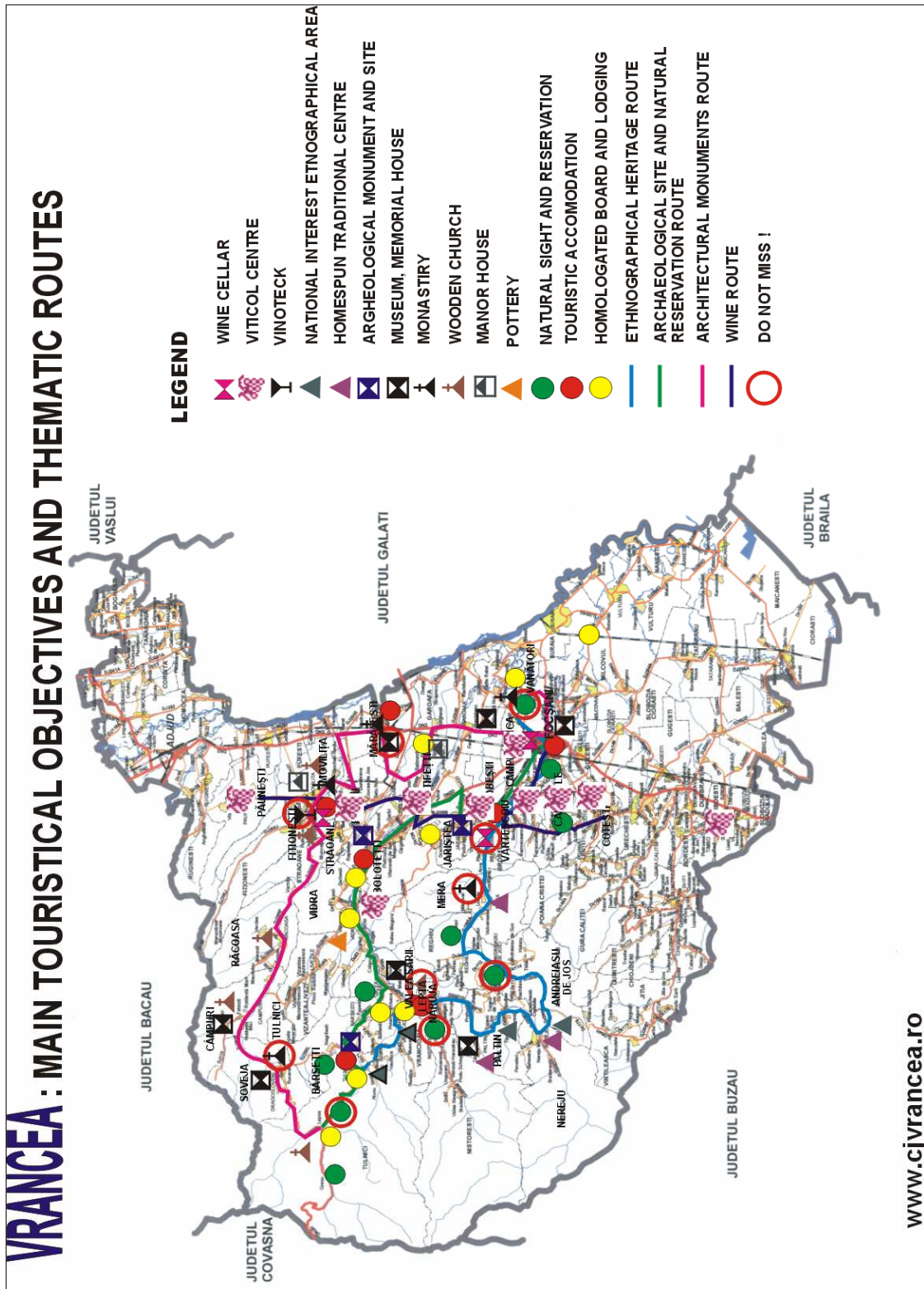


Figure 8. Vrancea: main touristical objectives and thematic routes.

Source: “Instrumente de promovare a dezvoltării spațiale durabile in zonele rurale specializate”, faza 1, oct. 2004, URBANPROIECT, București.

The methodological approach

The research was designed to cover 3 dimensions:

- Assessment of the area potential by natural environment, the production infrastructure and the varieties of wine;
- Assessment of the business environment (marketing, distributions, pricing and sales of wine);
- Identification of the issues which the entrepreneurs confront (legal frame work and arising problems, investments - founding).

The research methods were quali-quantitative thus: quantitative tools - 105 questionnaires given to the entrepreneurs from the area (35 questionnaires for each of the three vineyards of Vrancea) and qualitative tools - 15 interviews with the entrepreneurs from the area (5 interviews for each of the three vineyards). The interviews were used as a tool to obtain qualitative information in the specific area, which might provide a more clear picture of different issues than the one deriving from the analysis of statistical data, that refer to workforce development at the region level and not only the specific area.

Cotești Vineyard

The most frequent exploitation form is the in-house viticulture farm (65%) at household level by vine growing on small lots. There are no association forms implemented that could counteract the land breakage effect as a result of enforcement of Law 18/1991 on re-privatisation of real estate. Cotești is the vineyard where we met most frequently this kind of exploitation as compared to other vineyards. In this context, Cotești has the highest rate of table grapes producers.

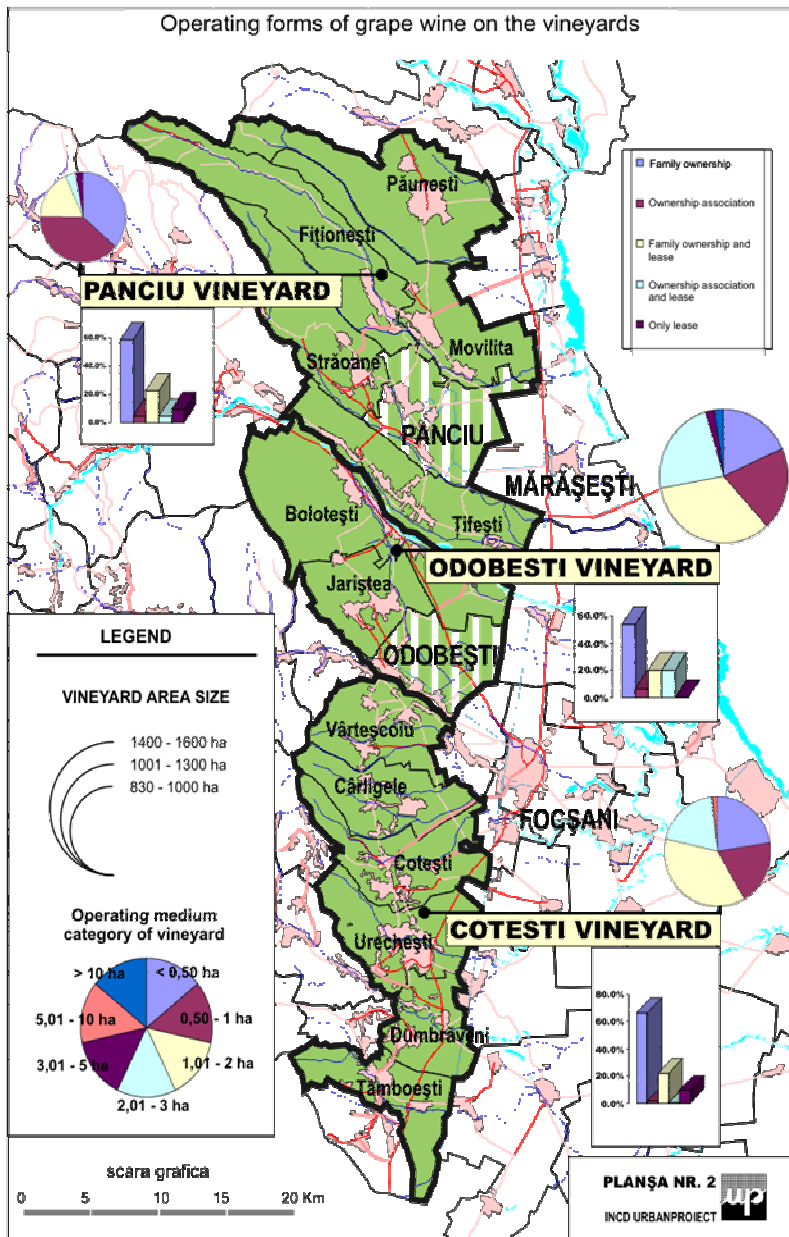
There are also a significant number of leased exploitations.

Odobești Vineyard

The small entrepreneurs from Odobești assert that the local wines are more competitive than any other wines in the country, but the verdict of the great investors is not the same. They believe that the quality of vine can be improved. In this vineyard, the two private companies (limited liability) operate, specializing themselves exclusively in industrial wine-making, without producing their own raw material – grapes.

A few wine-growers associations exist in all vineyards. The difference between the associations in the three zones is made by the size of the land plots owned by their members. The associated wine-growers of Panciu and Cotești own very small exploitations, of about 2 hectares, while in Odobesti the exploitations may reach 6 ha. Consequently, the larger surfaces of exploitations in Odobești give the possibility of more efficient production.

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Strengths

Good conditions for winegrowing, especially for light sorts of wine

Specialised wine-growing workforce

Area favourable for red sorts of wine

Weaknesses

Lack of distribution markets

Lack of financial support

Expensive work force

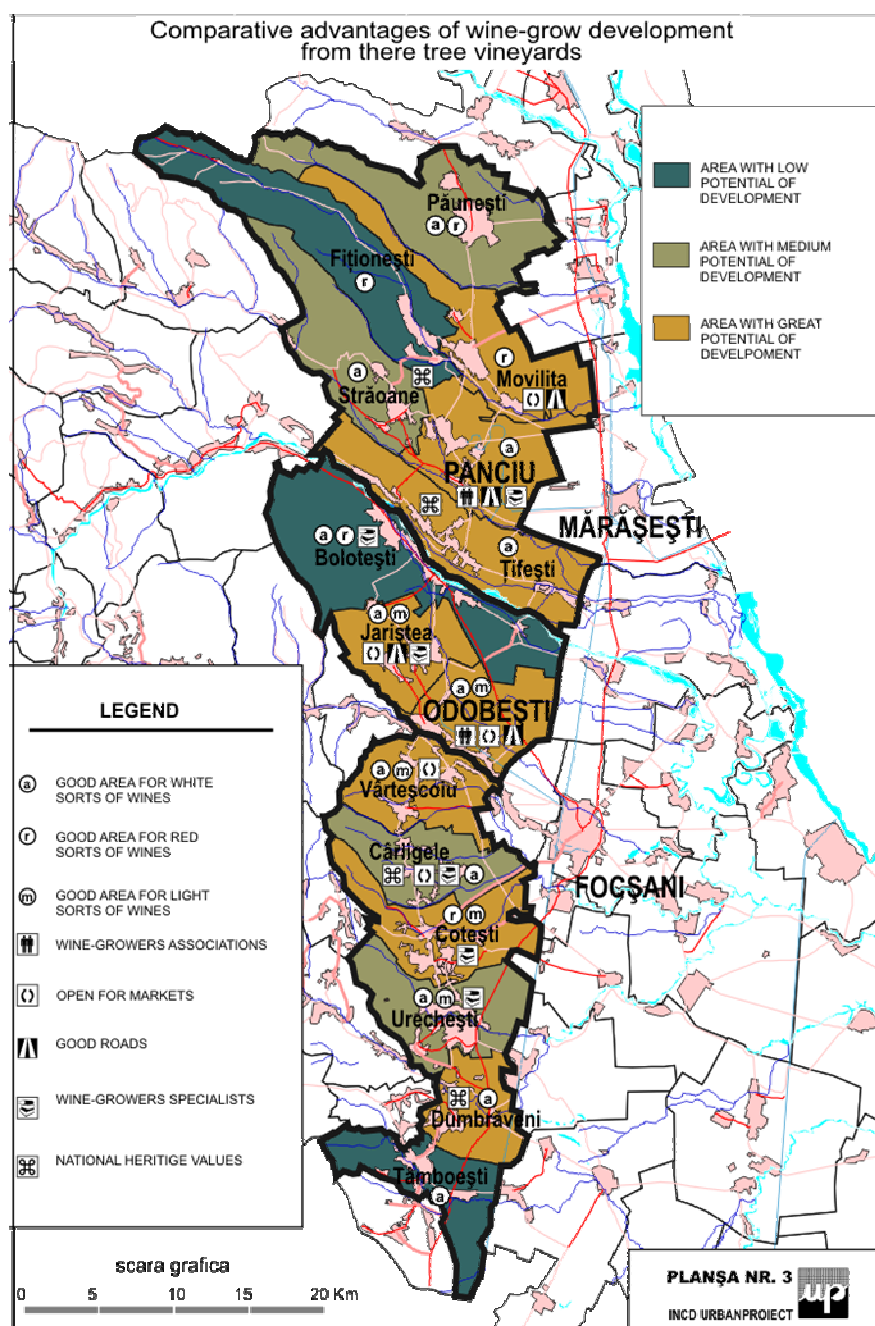
Pseudo products

Lack of an irrigation system

Agriculture practised on very small plots of land

Figure 9. Study of the investment opportunities in the wine-growing sector of Vrancea county. Cotești Vineyard.

Source of data: Studiul “Instrumente de promovare a dezvoltării spațiale durabile în zonele rurale specializate”, faza 2, ian. 2005, URBANPROIECT București.



Strengths

Good conditions for wine-growing, especially for light sorts of wine

Trade mark of “Galbena de Odobești”

Accessibility to the markets

Tourism attractive area

Wine-growers association in place

Weaknesses

Lack of workforce

Lack of financial support

Lack of an irrigation system

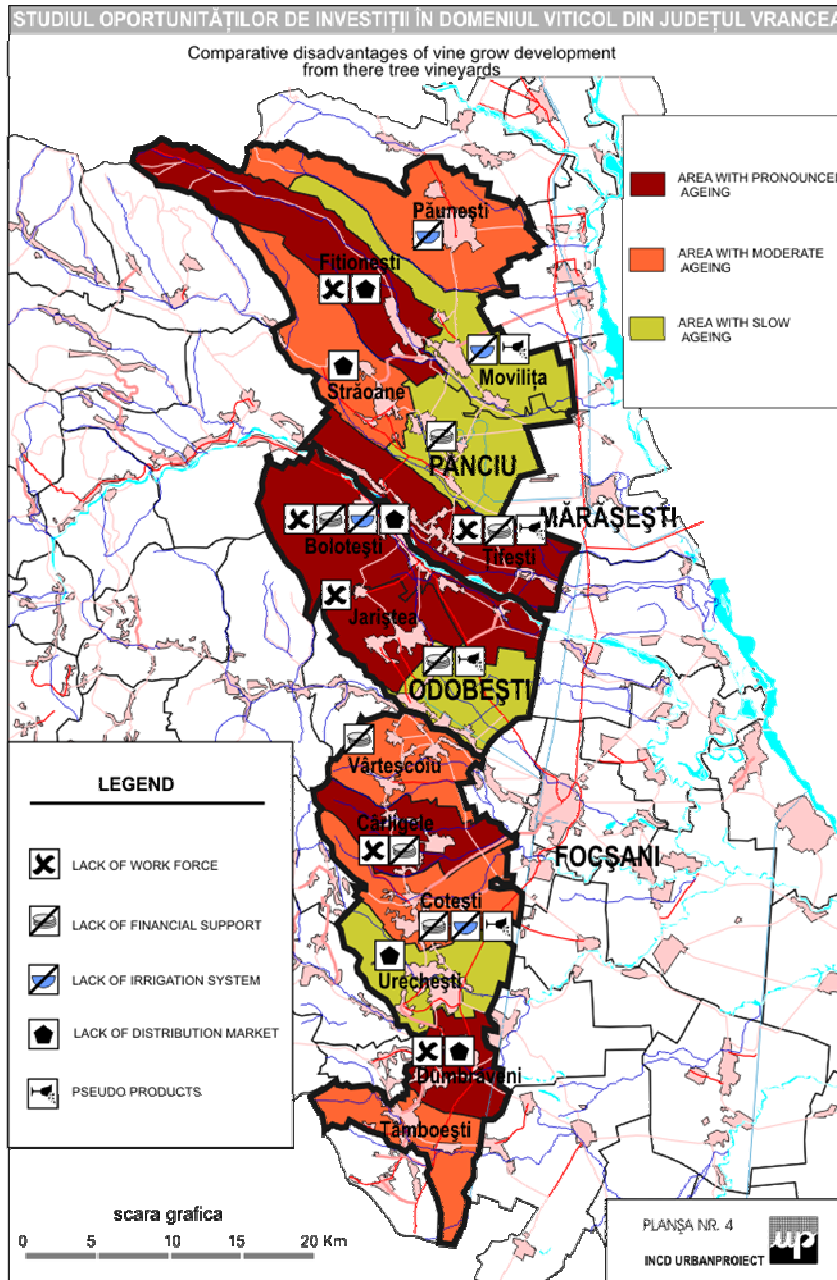
Unsatisfactory promotion

Ownership oligopoly

Figure 10. Study of the investment opportunities in the wine-growing sector of Vrancea county. Odobești Vineyard.

Source of data: Studiul “Instrumente de promovare a dezvoltării spațiale durabile in zonele rurale specializate”, faza 2, ian. 2005, URBANPROIECT Bucuresti

Panciu Vineyard



Strengths

Good conditions for wine-growing, especially for white sorts of champagne wine

Good transport infrastructure

Tourism attractive area

Wine-growers association in place

Specialised wine-growers

Weaknesses

Lack of workforce

Lack of funding

Lack of distribution markets

Pseudo products

Ownership monopoly

Figure 11. Study of the investment opportunities in the wine-growing sector of Vrancea county.

Source of data: Studiul “Instrumente de promovare a dezvoltării spațiale durabile în zonele rurale specializate”, faza 2, ian. 2005, URBANPROIECT Bucuresti.

“Veritas Panciu” is the great producer of sparkling wines of Romania. This is a very long tradition for Vrancea region like an identity brand. The other type of exploitation is the wine-growers associations – owners and leaseholders in the same time, who work the own land and the lease land. These associations belong to Panciu vineyard.

Evaluation results - the SWOT Analysis

A general picture of the area can be presented as a SWOT analysis. The aim of the analysis is supporting the delivery of a *Local Development Plan (LDP)* for the pilot area and to contribute to the formulation of an action plan to implement the strategy.

<i>Strengths</i>	<i>Weaknesses</i>
Important traditional area of vine-growing and wine-making	Poor infrastructure (roads, utilities)
Diversified offer of local agricultural products: vegetables, fruits, milk, game products	High share of small farms combined with the lack of the processing equipment and discrepancy between income and work expenditure
Picturesque scenery	Tendency of reducing the cultivated surfaces
Valuable natural and cultural heritage	Decrease of the product quality
Rich ethnographical heritage	Tendency of population aging
Good connectivity to urban centres	Lack of trust in associative forms
Relatively good accessibility to road and railway major routes	Ceasing of the activity of new plantations
Increasing penetration of modern telecommunication means	
<i>Opportunities</i>	<i>Threats</i>
Strategies and projects in place	Prevailing of politics in promoting local development decisions
Local development plan for the wine sector	Increase of the development gap as compared to other counties
Legal framework (Law 244/2002 on vine and wine)	Growing out migration of young people

Events

Vrancea has a rich history, the largest wine-growing area in the country and preserves many customs. All of these are embodied in specific events that are associated with wine as the main local product for enhancing the local economy:

- In Focsani and in Vrancea, the beginning of each year is the time to celebrate the Union of the Romanian principalities in 1859;
- In July and September, the Folklore Festival “Vrancea’s Treasure”, includes a series of events that take place in the main folklore centres of the county: Naruja, Paltin, Jitia, Andreiasu;
- The fair “Patrimony – tradition and creativity in the field of traditional techniques in Vrancea” presents arts and crafts items;
- “The Bacchus Festival – Vrancea International Festival of Vine and Wine“ is held each year in October.

IV. The Local Development Plan

A Local Development Plan in the pilot area would use *wine* as a thematic focus of interventions and a homogenization factor of interventions. The aim of the LDP would be to introduce the principles and action directions for the further development of the wine sector that will be undertaken within the Urban Development Plan of each locality of the pilot area.

The objectives of LDP

- increasing the local people's quality of life, by improving the infrastructure, promoting sustainable agricultural practices, improving the quality of wine-growing farming with EU certified varieties of wine, promoting tourism development (especially the agro-tourism and wine tourism), improving the quality of tourism services and multiplying accommodation facilities;
- increasing the area's potential of competitiveness;
- enhancing local entrepreneurship and attracting direct investments;
- promoting the area by improving the information network.

Indicative measures and actions for the development of the wine sector

- implementation of LDP action plans and Urban Development Plans in each commune and town in the pilot area;
- dissemination of good practices among wine-growers;
- provision of permanent access to the COHESION site (www.cohesion.gr) and to other specific sites (<http://www.ici.ro/romania/turism/cpodgorie.html> , <http://www.vinbun.ro>, etc);
- establishment of Information Centres on wine in local city halls;
- organization of events with investors and potential customers;
- participation in relevant national and international events;
- organization of local/regional festivals of wine;
- consulting activities for tourism development;
- improvement of the quality control of wine;
- offensive promotion of the area by mass-media.

The planning approach of COHESION is based on the concept of local competitiveness. Considering that local communities do not provide lots of resources, local practice should focus and concentrate on a small number of objectives, so as to obtain a higher degree of efficiency of the mobilized capacities. Thus, applying integrating planning and securing focus on a particular form, the areas of interest product, considered as significant and of special interest for the areas involved, should help organize the local development efforts and obtain additional advantages as economies of scale and synergies. Although the wine was selected as the product to experiment under COHESION, this should be viewed only as an example, and similar concepts could be applied for other products or sectors, where a local community provides comparative advantage, identified by research and analysis by using the tools of human geography.

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