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Article

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF AGROTOURISM IN AZERBAIJAN: BASED ON THE ITALIAN EXPERIENCE

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***Abstract:** Agrotourism, an innovative type of rural tourism, is growing quickly across the world. Agrotourism is seen as a vital factor in increasing farmer prosperity, boosting economic growth, and improving the general quality of life in remote areas by visitors' incoming. Promoting this type of tourism in Western European nations has been a main goal as attaining long-term growth and started developing during the 1960s. Azerbaijan's principal priority is the sustainable development of diverse economic sectors, and increasing agrotourism stands out as a vital goal within this context. This article investigates Italian viewpoints regarding agrotourism and strategies to implement and promote its growth, as well as, submit proposals for the expansion of agrotourism and policy implementation in Azerbaijan. The study encompassed in-depth information on the Azerbaijani tourism industry, including programs implemented through cooperation between governmental and non-governmental organizations to promote advancement of agrotourism. The exploration bases its findings on recent investigations, information from statistics, and research papers.*

***Keywords:** Agrotourism, rural areas, farmers, agriculture, activities of agrotourism*

INTRODUCTION

The notion of “agrotourism” firstly published in the international literature in the previous century. The name "agrotourism" arose with the complex in two terms: “agro” and “tourism”. So, the phrase of “agro” was taken from the Greek context: “agros” meaning “soil” and “agronomos” who possesses land as manager, on the other hand, “tourism” consists of a wide range of leisure activities motivated by intellectual, recreational, business-related, and other goals (Michał Sznajder et al., 2009). While there is no clear definition of agrotourism, it is often defined as activities in which local inhabitants participate in rural regions to cater to tourists. It may also be referred to as a rural business concept that combines well with the agricultural sector and the tourism industry (Dr. Nicole L. Vaugeois et al., 2017). Farmers, tour operators, and local communities all benefit with the help of agrotourism. It can be thought of as a supplement to the budget of farms, involving the manufacturing of various products and services, as well as the exchange of local culture and customs between visitors and inhabitants.

This industry first emerged in Western Europe in the 1960s, contributing to the transformation of mountains, as well as, rural locations in numerous countries into tourist attractions. This type of tourism has developed extensively in European countries, positively influencing people's lifestyles, financial growth, and more. European Union also is interested in this industry because of sustainable progress goals. The European

Union is also heavily invested in it since it coincides with its sustainable development goal (Ramona Ciolac et al., 2019). Agrotourism is growing in countries such as Italy, Austria, Germany, France, Denmark, and others.

Several agreements were signed, and multiple meetings were held to enhance Azerbaijan-Italy collaboration. The declaring of 2020 as the Year of Azerbaijan in Italy, the establishment of an Italian-Azerbaijani university in Azerbaijan, and ongoing collaboration in sectors such as tourism, defense, economy, and others highlight Italy's role as Azerbaijan's most reliable and prominent partner among members of European Union. That is why the researcher discussed below agrotourism in Italy and generated suggestions to stimulate agrotourism growth in Azerbaijan.

The scientific novelty of the presented research is the using of experience in agrotourism of Italy in Azerbaijan. It should be acknowledged that one of the most significant objectives for governments throughout the world, including Azerbaijan, is to guarantee that the progress of any industrial sector is based on sustainable development goals. It is extremely important to take into account that, despite the potential for agrotourism expansion in Azerbaijan, the lack of adequate scientific research is a barrier to the sector's advancement.

The goal of this study is to investigate the agrotourism in Italy and to implement this experience in Azerbaijan. The second goal is to promote agrotourism industry in Azerbaijan in the scientific area.

The following research objectives will aid in the achievement of the goal:

- *To investigate the main characteristics of agrotourism in Italy*
- *To investigate programmes which implemented in Azerbaijan to enhance agrotourism*

METHODOLOGY

The secondary data plays the important role in the research article and was utilized. The sources included scientific articles and journals, books, statistics. Statistics data were gathered from Italian National Institute with qualitative methodology.

Literature review

The tourism industry in the Republic of Azerbaijan

Tourism in Azerbaijan is booming, due to the country's rich cultural legacy, the great hospitality of its people, the country's diversified landscapes, and a variety of other elements. Azerbaijan implemented a number of laws to support the advancement of the tourism sector.

The approval of the "State Program for Tourism Development in the Republic of Azerbaijan from 2002 to 2005," as per Presidential Decree No. 1029 issued on August 27, 2002, created a favorable environment for the tourism sector's growth and laid the groundwork for Azerbaijan's entry into the international tourism market. Under Presidential Decree No. 838, dated April 6, 2010, the "State Program for the Growth of Tourism in the Republic of Azerbaijan from 2010 to 2014" was sanctioned in accordance with this ongoing plan. Its purpose was to develop a progressive tourism industry that meets demanding economic, social, and environmental standards, by an ultimate goal of making tourism a cornerstone of the country's economy (Strategic Roadmap for the Development of Specialized Tourism Industry in the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2016).

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The Strategic Road Map for the Advancement of the Specialized Tourism Sector in the Republic of Azerbaijan was approved by Presidential Decree on December 6, 2016. The Strategic Road Map strives to accomplish numerous major results as part of its broader objectives. These include promoting tourism development, providing top-tier and competitive tourism services on both domestic and international levels, creating experience in tourism rooted in culture of community and values, catalyzing new investment ventures driven by contemporary concepts and innovation, and fostering coordination among relevant tourism authorities. The Strategic Roadmap includes goals such as assisting the growth of tourism sector within specified timeframes, guarantying the delivery of high-quality, competitive tourism services in both global and local markets, shaping experience in tourism industry that reflect national values, stimulating new investment initiatives rooted in contemporary concepts and innovations, and fostering collaboration among relevant authorities for tourism advancement (Madina Hashimli, 2019).

The 1999 tourist Law was changed in 2021 to improve the basic components of public administration in the tourist sector, the regulatory framework for the tourism industry, recommendations for the effective usage of tourism resources, and tourism financing sources (About Tourism Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2021).

The foundation of the Azerbaijan State tourist Agency in 2018 resulted in the construction of a specific body entrusted with tourism management and the creation of tourism rules, among other functions. Tourism zones or regions were formally formed in the Republic of Azerbaijan on February 8, 2023, in compliance with a presidential proclamation, including Baku-Absheron Regional Tourism Administration; Ganja Regional Tourism Administration; Sheki Regional Tourism Office; Lankaran Regional Tourism Administration; Mingachevir Regional Tourism Administration; Guba Regional Tourism Administration; Karabakh Regional Tourism Administration; Ismayilli Regional Tourism Office (Azerbaijan State Tourism Agency, 2023)

Table 1. Types of tourism and opportunities in Azerbaijan

Types of tourism	Opportunities
Cultural tourism	Customs and traditions, multiculturalism
Historical tourism	Rich history and historical monuments
Culinary tourism	Delicious cuisine
Rural tourism	Landscape, hospitable people
Health tourism	Naftalan, mineral springs
Business tourism	Hosting international events, conferences (also convention centers and conference rooms of hotel)
Agrotourism	Landscape, agriculture
Ecotourism	National parks, landscape

Source: Azerbaijan Tourism Board

Table 1 represents the main types of tourism in Azerbaijan as well as the resources contributing to the development of the tourism sector. It is understood, in Azerbaijan more types of tourism are advanced or can be improved because of culture, franchise hotel, history, holding international events, landscape and so on. According to the table, Azerbaijan is growing or has the potential to develop many types of tourism as a result of elements such as culture, franchise hotels, historical monuments, hosting international events, picturesque landscapes, and etc.

Because of elements such as friendly local people, rich culture, delicious food, agriculture, and other contributing aspects, agrotourism, as an emerging kind of rural tourism in Azerbaijan, has progress for expansion. Azerbaijan's principal objective is to promote growing kinds of tourism and welcome the number of visitors. State initiates programs and collaborates with international unions and other states in this context. The foundation of the Agrotourism Association in Azerbaijan in 2023 signified the start of efforts to advance and broaden agrotourism in the country (Ministry of Agriculture of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2023).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

"Guidebook on the organization of agrotourism activities" was published by State Tourism, as well as, the United States Agency for International Development in order to contribute the utilizing of agrotourism actions that were made between tourism and agriculture. The major goal of book was to deliver assistance and to train professionals who are engaged in agrotourism or want to be expertise in this industry; including information and advice on providing and organizing agrotourism services. In the process of preparation of book specialists met with 15 farmers from various villages, including Lankaran, Gadabey, Dashkasan, Tovuz, and Goygol, and drew on the expertise of global and regional agrotourism experts. The book gave precise details about definition of this type of tourism, evaluation in tourism assets within rural communities and farms for the motivation of launching such initiatives, marketing activities and so on(State Tourism Agency, 2021)

For three years in the past, rural guesthouses were established in Azerbaijan as part of the "Development of entrepreneurship and self-employment in villages" project, capitalizing on the country's immense opportunities for rural tourism. The project has been underway since 2021, with aid from the Ministry of Economy's Small and Medium Business Development Agency (KOBTA), the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of the Population's State Employment Agency, and the State Tourism Agency. Within the scope of the initiative, 15 rural accommodations were first created in the region of Ismayilli, and they were suitably furnished and equipped. Over 220 people from various places were registered in the project's second phase, which intended to stimulate entrepreneurship in diverse locations, generate self-employment possibilities, improve rural tourism, and improve inhabitants' well-being. Individuals satisfying the required standards were picked from this group and provided with the appropriate resources. Participants in the project received training in business and tourism-related topics such as developing business plans, efficient leadership, maintaining satisfied clients, selling methods, the hospitality field methods, maintaining cleanliness and hygiene, following to health and safety guidelines, nutrition, and online communication management.

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Individuals also received business management and tourist consulting help and mentorship, as well as company growth assistance. Similar guesthouses will be established in the western areas. A two-phase selection method is used to choose project members. In the beginning, partners evaluate the proposals based on their location on the tourist route, the existence of required infrastructure, and the present status of the home. Individuals' citizenship status in the labor and employment system is checked in accordance with legislative laws in the next step. Citizens who pass all parts of the selection process are eligible to participate in the project. Sessions of instruction are set up for these persons to develop relevant background in tourism and service-related industries, and rehabilitation and restoration work is carried out in the specified area planned for use as a tourism facility. In the next step, relevant assets are given to establish agrotourism business facilities. It is vital to mention that a rural guesthouse was created as part of this project to accommodate a total of 65 people from various places. In terms of the criterion for selecting designated locations, the Agency stated that the initial selection is made on the basis of increased tourism prospective. The project has already been executed in the mountainous Shirvan, Sheki-Zagatala, Lankaran-Astara, and Guba-Khachmaz areas, and it is scheduled to be implemented in the western regions at a later time. Overall, it can be concluded:

- The project's goal is to advance entrepreneurship in rural areas, facilitate self-employment, boost agrotourism, also improve the well-being of local societies;
- Initially, partner institutions examine the applications, taking into account variables such as the house's location on the tourist route, the existence of required infrastructure, and the present state of repair;
- Each residence is expected to get equipment and merchandise worth around 8,000 manats;
- The suitable rural guesthouse must have been functioning in this direction for the previous three years in order to participate in the project (The Small and Medium Business Development Agency of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2023)

The "AgroVision" project, which will last 24 months, is being carried out in the Lankaran economic zone by the Eurasia Partnership Foundation and the Constitution Research Foundation, with funding from the European Union. The project's goal is to formulate and verify a supportable and replicable agrotourism and ecotourism development model. The basic goal of this approach is to raise the income of rural families in Azerbaijan's southern region and to strengthen ties between urban and rural areas within the nation. One of the actions planned for the project's early stages is to identify and assess the capacities of families and farmland in the region with prospects of tourism. The report will assess each Tourism Destination's (TD) progress, assess the capacity of consortium members, and identify significant financial, infrastructure, promotional activities, and other impediments that hamper the TD's advancement. The evaluations' findings will provide the foundation for consortium members' future development of TD strategies. To attain these goals, foreign specialists in this sector are being encouraged to work with native specialists as a member of a collaborative team. The following duties will be carried out by specialists:

- Examine relevant territorial and national rural development programmes to aid in the preparation of the evaluations;
- Provide direction for evaluating the selected tourism locations;
- Assist the development strategy design process and offer input on the produced documents (Eurasia Partnership Foundation, 2020).

DISCUSSIONS

Agrotourism, like a great example, owns achieved vast success on a international scale in Italy. It is recognized for its scenic landscapes and the production of diverse exquisite foods such as olives, grapes in vineyards, cheese-making enterprises, pasta manufacture, and farms that create the famed mozzarella (Umidjon Matyakubov, 2016).

Agrotourism emerged in Italy as a natural form of hospitality and a supplement to the major occupations of farming, forestry, as well as animal husbandry (Margherita Ciervo, 2013). Agrotourism, which merges the tourism and agrarian industries, is governed by particular rules in Italy. Italy is the only Western European country having such legislation in force (Claudio Lupi et al., 2017). Italy experienced a significant rise in popularity during the last two decades as a result of the incredible growth and development of its agrotourism business (Harshavardhan Reddy Kummitha et al., 2018)

A pioneering group of persons, mostly from a renowned farmers' union centered in Tuscany, founded "Agriturismo" in 1965 with the goal of developing this type of tourism both nationally and locally. The family farmers' union Coldiretti executed a project called "Terranostra " in 1973. "Agriturismo" executed an initial educational course in partnership with the national Ministry which is engaged in agriculture to educate native stakeholders, along with future operators in this field in 1978. In 1980, a second group called "Turismo Verde" was founded by small-scale farmers. The national organization "AnagraTur" was established with joining of these three groups in order to manage their efforts and operations (Fabio Maria Santucci, 2011). Italy has had a statewide regulation, known as regulation 730/1985, in place since 1985 to control agrotourism operations throughout the country (Matyakubov U., 2018). Beginning in the 1990s, Italy saw a shift in agricultural techniques on its farms. This transition has had obvious environmental implications as well as beneficial benefits (N. Galluzzo., 2015)

A more stringent national law, No. 96/2006, states that agrotourism can only be performed by the farmer and their close family members. Furthermore, rather than financial concerns, the fundamental criterion for establishing priority should be the proportion of working hours allocated to agricultural operations (Barbara Zanetti et al., 2022). Italy is divided into 19 regions and two provinces, each with its own set of legislation controlling agrotourism, agriculture, customs, and history (Fabio Maria Santucci, 2013)

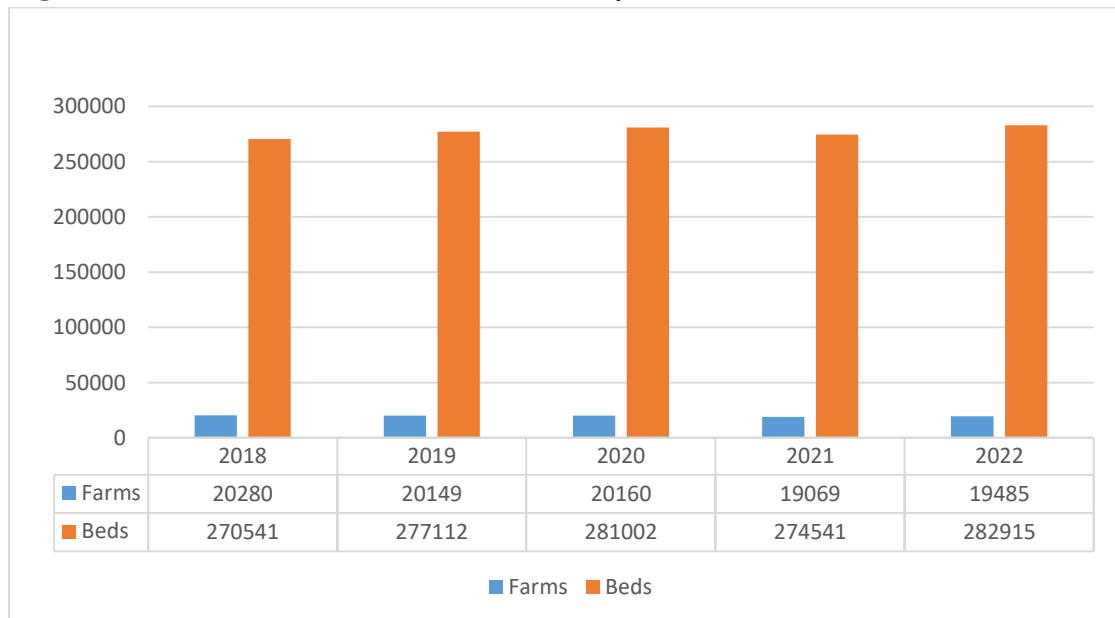
Beginning in 2013, Italy adopted the trademark "Agriturismo Italia," which was followed by the introduction of a new categorization system. The brand denotes farms that follow existing norms and regulations. Its distinguishing emblem is a sunflower surrounded by a farm. Because of these characteristics, the sunflower, a lovely flower signifying recognition, an icon of Italian summer, a depiction of holidays, and the joy in its bright hues, has been designated as the categorization trademark. Farm classification, similar to hotel rating, strives to provide the public a thorough impression of the degree

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of comfort, range of services (hospitality), and quality of the natural environment (nature, landscape, quiet) that each farm can deliver. In order to construct this framework, the Ministry of Agriculture cooperated with regional and national agrotourism organizations to perform significant research at both the national and global levels. The primary aim was providing insight into the tastes and needs of both Italian and foreign tourists in agrotourism. Each farm will be rated from 1 to 5, and its categorization level will be represented with an appropriate symbol (The Agriturismo Italia Trademark, 2013).

Agrotourism is rapidly expanding throughout Italy. However, this expansion has been unbalanced, with some regions seeing faster and more significant growth than others. The Tuscany area and the province of Bolzano, for example, account for one-third of all Italian agrotourism firms (Emilio Chiodo et al., 2019).

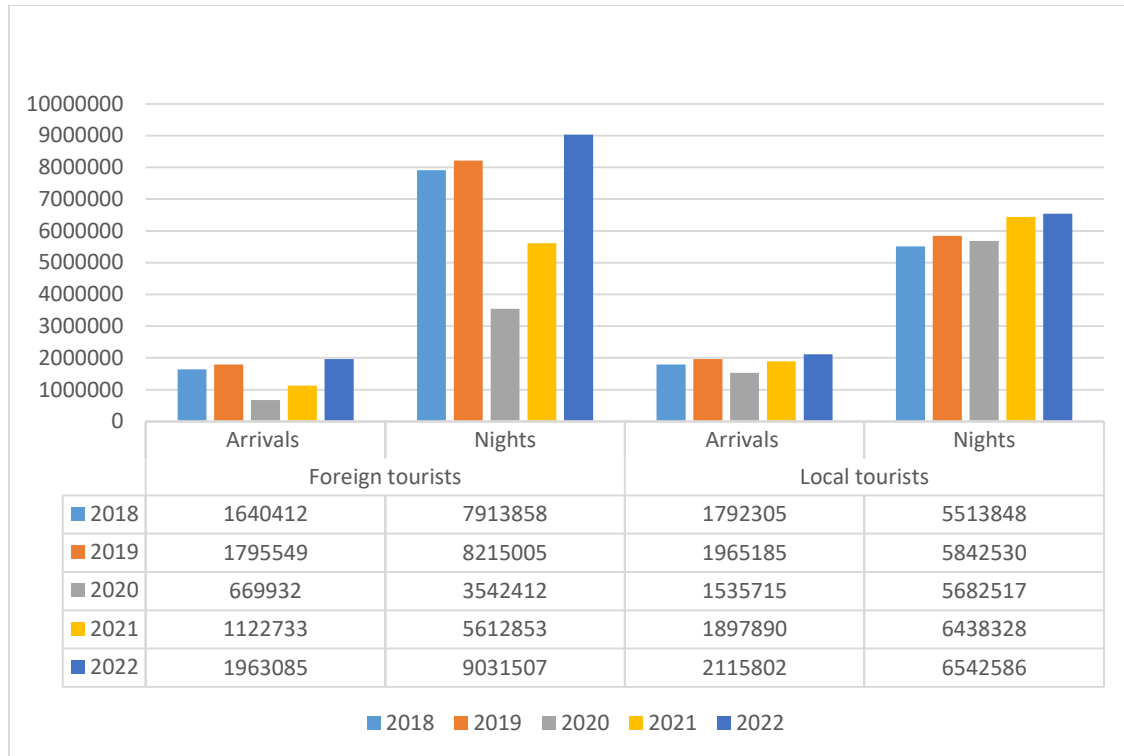
Figure 1. The number of farms and beds in Italy



Source: Italian National Institute of Statistics

The data in Figure 1 demonstrate the entire amount of farms and beds in Italy from 2018 to 2022. Between 2018 and 2022, the total number of farms did not change much. There will be 4% fewer farms in 2022 than there had been in 2018. There were 270,541 beds in 2018; by 2022, the count had increased by 4% to 282,915. In comparison with the quantity of farms, the number of beds increased, with 2021 beds included. During the same time period, this amount of farms and beds did not considerably rise or decrease.

Figure 2. The number of local and foreign tourists in Italy



Source: Italian National Institute of Statistics

Figure 2 shows how many local and foreign tourists stayed on farms and used services in Italy between 2018 and 2022. In general, the number of overnight guests (both foreign and domestic) greatly surpasses the plenty of tourists who utilize services. There are more arrival domestic tourists than international visitors. Foreign visitors were banned from visiting Italy for agrotourism due of the global COVID-19 epidemic in 2019, which had a severe detrimental impact on the travel and tourism business. There is no question that fewer visitors, both domestic and foreign, visited in 2020. However, data on overseas tourists shows that this loss is especially noticeable, with a 62% and 57% decline in arrivals and overnight visits from 2019 under post-pandemic conditions. Following the epidemic in 2022, there was a discernible increase in both categories, with a particularly substantial increase in international tourists. In comparison to 2019, there was a 193% rise in arriving tourists and a 154% increase in overnight passengers.

CONCLUSION

The article focused on the growth of agrotourism in Italy, traced its development and analyzed initiatives to promote agritourism in Azerbaijan. It is essential to point out that achievements of Italy in agrotourism were aided not only by its natural beauty, landscape, history, and culture, but also by a variety of initiatives such as the formation of an association, the classification of guest houses, and the passage of supportive legislation. Given experience of Italy in agrotourism and friendly relations of Azerbaijan with Italy, Azerbaijan has an opportunity to benefit from experience of Italy in this type

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of tourism. Implementing these principles can have positive results in just a short period of time. Azerbaijan is notable for its multiracial setting natural beauty, diversified landscapes, hospitable population, current culture, rich history, and delicious cuisine. These elements function as drivers for the rapid growth of agrotourism. The formation of an agrotourism association may be viewed as a driving force in the expansion of this type of tourism. Some ideas can be offered to promote the growth of agrotourism:

- In order to execute pre-planned projects, the government should work closely with local citizens. Prior to project implementation, it is critical to examine the community's viewpoints, which are an important aspect in development of sustainability, particularly in agrotourism;
- Furthermore, there is a possibility to give assistance to farmers active in agritourism or those with a future interest in agrotourism by exempting them from income taxes for a particular period of time;
- Collaboration between public, private and governmental organizations will drive continued growth of this industry, and the government may facilitate such collaboration;
- It is critical to organize seminars and training sessions on tourism, agriculture, culinary skills, management of farms and sales;
- The Agritourism Association ought to coordinate with the State Tourism Agency, Ministry of Economy's Small and Medium Business Development Agency, Food Agency, Ministry of Ecology, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Agriculture, and Ministry of Emergency Situations and evaluations of activities of farms should be done in collaboration with these groups.
- Similar to Italy, categorizing of farmers in the Republic of Azerbaijan can be performed via the use of a star system or other methods. Farms can also be grouped based on the surnames of individual craftsmen, since many family members carry on their predecessors' professions.
- Furthermore, museums and parks concentrating on agriculture and agrotourism must be established inside the remote areas to fascinate tourists.

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