

ORGANIC AGRICULTURE AND PRODUCTS CERTIFIED UNDER QUALITY SCHEMES IN ROMANIA

Ioan Sebastian BRUMĂ¹, Alexandra Raluca JELEA², Steliana RODINO³

Abstract. *Organic farming and agri-food products certified through voluntary quality schemes are areas of interest for both authorities and consumers. In recent years, this sector has been developing steadily in Romania, and producers have begun to realize the potential for growth in this niche sector. This research aims to highlight the stage of development of organic agriculture and certified products in Romania. Nationally, it was observed that organic farming covers approximately 0.5 million hectares, unevenly distributed across land use categories. This area represents only 3.5% of the national agricultural land, a proportion well below the European target of 25% of the EU's agricultural land, set to be achieved by 2030. Regarding agri-food products certified through voluntary quality schemes, there are 3815 certified products nationally, unevenly represented in certification categories, with the majority belonging to mountain products.*

Keywords: Organic agriculture, voluntary certification, agri-food products, digitalization

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1. Introduction

We find ourselves at the intersection of two significant decades, as declared by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO): the Decade of Family Farming (2019-2028) [7] and the Decade for Ecosystem Restoration (2021-2030), while also commencing the European effort under the auspices of the New European Green Deal (2021-2027) [14]. Simultaneously, EU Faced the COVID-19 pandemic, an unprecedented challenge, with complex effects on the economy, public health, and food systems. The EU's response includes a recovery plan supported by the "Next Generation EU" instrument (COM(2021)) [6].

The European Green Deal was conceived as a strategic and legislative plan with a significant impact on the European economy and society, its primary

¹PhD. Eng. Academy of Romanian Scientists, Bucharest, Romania; Romanian Academy – Iasi Branch, "Gh. Zane" Institute for Economic and Social Research, Iași County, Romania; (e-mail: sebastianbruma1978@gmail.com).

²Academy of Romanian Scientists, Bucharest, Romania (e-mail: alexandra.jelea19@gmail.com).

³PhD. Eng. Econ. Institute of Research for Agriculture Economy and Rural Development, Bucharest, Romania; National Institute of Research and Development for Biological Sciences, Bucharest, Romania. (e-mail: steliana.rodino@yahoo.com).

objective being for Europe to become the first climate-neutral continent by 2050. It encompasses all economic sectors and proposes numerous strategies and projects, including a sustainable agricultural strategy "From Farm to Fork" [5]. In relation to the agriculture-applicable strategy, "From Farm to Fork" strategy is targeting more sustainable and resilient food systems.

In line with the goals set by the European Commission through the Farm to Fork strategy, a part of the New Green Deal [10], organic farming will play a significant role in the European agri-food sector. By the end of 2030, approximately 25% of the European Union's agricultural land should be cultivated under organic system, as per the targets set in the Farm to Fork strategy. Moreover, a 50% reduction in the use of medicines for farm animals is foreseen. The Farm to Fork strategy establishes a new approach to ensure that agriculture and the food distribution chain appropriately contribute to this process.

At the same time, the EU's food quality policy aims to protect the names of certain products to promote their unique characteristics related to their geographical origin, as well as traditional techniques and practices.

2. Materials and Methods

To investigate the development status of organic agriculture and certified agri-food products in Romania, this research employed a mixed approach, combining the analysis of available data with field studies. Data concerning the total area dedicated to organic agriculture and the number of certified agri-food products were obtained from official sources, including government reports, agricultural organizations, and databases of the European Union.

Subsequently, the data were analysed to determine the trends and current distribution of organic agriculture and certified products in Romania. This analysis included calculating the percentage of agricultural land dedicated to organic farming in relation to the total agricultural land and the distribution of certified products by categories.

To investigate the voluntary certification of agri-food products and the impact of digital marketing on small producers, a qualitative and quantitative approach was used. Data regarding certified products were obtained from the application developed by AFIR, and the analysis of digital marketing included the evaluation of strategies and their impact on product positioning in the market.

3. Results and Discussions

Organic agriculture in Romania has seen significant growth in recent years. Currently, Romania is one of the important producers of organic agri-food

products in the European Union, with a certified area of approximately 0.5 million hectares, which is increasing each year.

While there are extensive global studies on the development of organic agriculture, detailed by countries, product categories, cultivated areas, and animal species, such as "The World of Organic Agriculture. Statistics and Emerging Trends" by IFOAM, SOL, FIBL, BioFach [13], which has reached its 24th edition in 2023, offering a comprehensive overview, this situation does not apply to Romania.

In comparison to comprehensive global studies that analyse the development of organic agriculture in different countries, research specific to Romanian territory is more limited. Data regarding the development status and the evolution of specific indicators for organic agriculture are presented only at the national level, lacking territorial breakdown or categorization by product or animal species.

In Romania, as of 2020, approximately 470,000 hectares were being cultivated according to the rules and principles of organic agriculture, at different stages of certification (year 1 conversion, year 2 conversion, year 3 conversion, or certified), unevenly distributed at the national level, as can be observed in Figure 1.

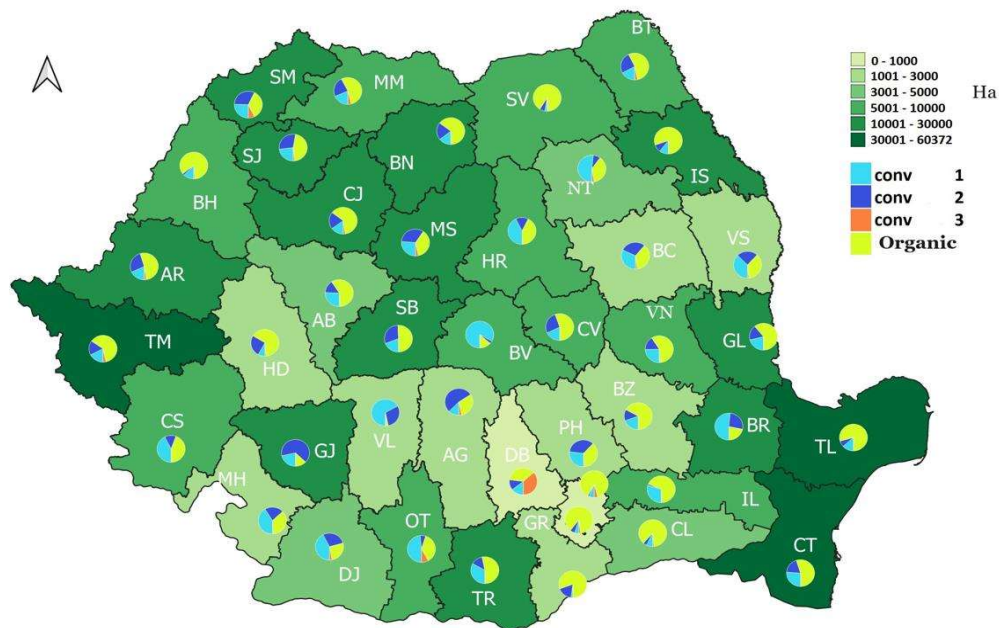


Figure 1. National dispersion of ecological surfaces, 2020

Source: processing according to MADR data [8].

In Romania, organic agri-food products and food products certified by quality schemes represent two fundamental aspects of a modern agricultural sector, marking the transition towards more responsible production and consumption. Organic farming has seen notable growth in recent years, with an increasing number of farmers adopting environmentally friendly practices. This trend is supported by the growing consumer demand for healthy and sustainable food. At the same time, products certified by quality schemes, such as those with protected designations of origin or protected geographical indications, represent ambassadors of Romanian authenticity and tradition in the food industry. These products contribute to the development of local communities and to the protection of traditional culinary identity. Overall, organic agriculture and products certified by quality schemes in Romania represent a significant step towards a more sustainable and authentic agricultural production, which values the wealth of the country's natural and cultural resources.

Voluntary certification of agri-food products refers to the process by which an authorized authority evaluates and confirms that an agri-food product meets certain standards of quality, safety, sustainability, or other specific criteria. In addition to compliance with hygiene and food safety rules, the criteria considered for voluntary certification are based on the use of sustainable, traditional production methods, respect for animal welfare, the absence or limited use of pesticides or other harmful chemicals.

Certification of agri-food products can help small farmers and agricultural producers to demonstrate the quality of their products, differentiate their offer in the market and attract consumers interested about the quality, safety, and sustainability of the food they purchase.

Certifications can also be used to support smallholder farmers' online marketing strategies. This can be achieved by using the logo or other specific certification marks to indicate that the product meets high standards of quality and durability, which can increase consumer confidence in those products. Through online marketing platforms, producers can promote the benefits of these certifications and reach a wider audience of consumers interested in healthy, sustainable, and ethical food products.

Regarding the products certified by quality schemes, these include protected designations of origin (PDO), protected geographical indications (PGI) and other quality marks that attest to the provenance and authenticity of food products. Thus, consumers can trust that the products are authentic and respect the traditions and standards of the place of origin. In Romania, some food products, such as Sibiu cheese or Topoloveni plum magiun, are recognized on international markets for their superior quality and the authenticity of local traditions.

In Romania, there is an application developed by AFIR (Agency for the Financing of Rural Investments -Agentia pentru Finanțarea Investițiilor Rurale) dedicated to certified products. AFIR [2] is a government agency in Romania responsible for financing and managing programs and projects aimed at rural development, agriculture, and the rural environment. Using the information from this application, we created a database with products certified as Traditional Product, Mountain Product, Protected Designation of Origin, Protected Geographical Indication and Guaranteed Traditional Specialty, at the county level.



Figure 2. Products certified through voluntary schemes in Romania, 2023

Source: processed according to AFIR data [2].

In the year 2023, at the national level, 3,815 products were registered, distributed discrepantly by certification categories, as can be seen from Figure 2.

Analysing in territorial profile, it can be observed that the products certified by voluntary certification schemes are mainly found in the mountainous area of the country (Figure 3), an aspect also influenced by the large number of Mountain Product Certified products.

Certification of organic products and digital marketing are two interconnected elements that can play a crucial synergistic role in the development of organic agriculture in Romania. On the one hand, certification offers producers a pathway to validate the quality and sustainability of the products offered on the market, which represents an asset in front of the modern, educated consumer, interested in the origin and quality of the food they purchase. On the other hand, digital marketing is gaining ground in the promotion of these products, allowing manufacturers to reach an expanded market and create a direct connection with consumers. Using digital marketing methods can help

highlight the qualities of green products, increasing consumer confidence. In this way, certification and digital marketing can be useful tools to strengthen the market position of organic products and support agricultural producers in their efforts to meet the demands of a consumer concerned with quality, food safety and sustainability.

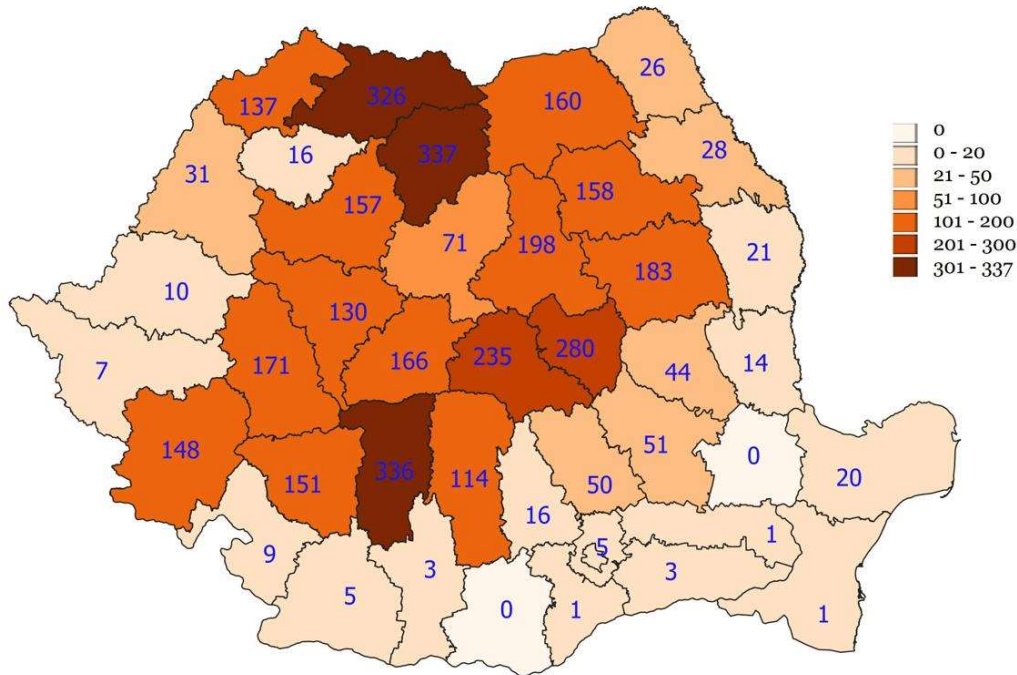


Figure 3. National dispersion of products certified by voluntary schemes, 2023.
Source: processed according to AFIR data [2].

Digitalization represents one of the great trends of modern societies, influencing both people's lives and the business world [9]. Currently, digital marketing represents one of the most effective tools for promoting agri-food products. Small producers, in order to succeed in promoting agri-food products through digital marketing, must provide clear and detailed information about products and production methods, build a coherent and authentic brand image, and provide customers with a pleasant and easy shopping experience.

Using an integrated method in digital marketing [1], possibly leading to satisfactory results (increase in the number of delivery addresses, i.e. calls and orders; higher sales; higher market share, etc.) can strengthen the position of small agri-food producers in relation to their competitors. Before selecting the most effective ways to promote products, it is essential to determine the main

groups of potential consumers, but also the strategy of promoting and/or distributing products for each target group, based on a serious analysis. Popova also recommends et al [11].

Against the background of the development of the digital economy, in particular, the ways offered for an integrated online marketing arouse special interest, the techniques that can be used in the case of small producers focusing especially on contextual advertising, promotion on social networks, on the creation of stores online etc. [11]. Despite the fact that the importance of digitization is universally known, organizations often face numerous obstacles and obstacles to the implementation of this process. On the one hand, it implies a major paradigm shift regarding the way and methods of work, based on collaboration and very strong interactions [9]. On the other hand, a recent study [3] brings up the fact that, in specific cases, there is a community of consumers interested in a distribution system very well adapted to the digital transformations in contemporary society. Moreover, when searching for information and placing orders, consumers express their desire to have access to additional data about the products purchased. All these observations highlight the need to impose digital transformation also for small producers for the development of innovative digital marketing solutions.

Unfortunately, many of the local producers are still very far from what modern interactive environments can offer [11], and this especially in countries that have not yet reached the last stage of development (i.e. economies based on innovation), Romania being included here [12]. It ranks 27th out of 27 EU member states in the 2021 edition of the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) [10]. With investment support of almost 6-billion-euro, Romania's Recovery and Resilience Plan includes highly significant measures for the full integration of digitization in all DESI dimensions, namely digital skills, connectivity, business support and digital public services [4]. Small agri-food producers can represent direct beneficiaries, at least in two components, namely digital skills, and business support. It is important to highlight their digitization needs, including from the perspective of establishing digital marketing strategies.

Conclusions

(1). The transition to sustainable agricultural and food systems represents an undeniable economic opportunity for small producers and processors. Organic farming and certified products (organic, traditional, mountain) can be important development engines for the well-being of the local economy, contributing to food safety and optimal product traceability as well as to the future of food security.

(2). Voluntary certification of agri-food products has become a key element in supporting small agricultural producers. This process involves evaluating and confirming that products meet high standards of quality, safety, and durability, thus helping to differentiate the offer on the market and attract consumers concerned about these aspects.

(3). An essential factor for achieving the EU objectives regarding the food safety of citizens, the development of ecological agriculture, the encouragement of brand and product protection, the increase of consumer confidence, the development of short supply chains as well as the increase of the resilience of farmers, is the digital transformation, including of small agri-food producers.

(4). In addition, digital marketing has become a crucial tool for promoting agri-food products, allowing producers to expand their customer portfolio and create a direct connection with consumers. However, for small agricultural producers in Romania, there is still a gap in the adoption of digital technologies. With appropriate support from authorities and institutions, these manufacturers can significantly benefit from digitization in developing innovative digital marketing solutions.

(5). Digital technologies can help identify, track, locate and update information and data on certified or attested organic farming systems, products, and producers. The certified agri-food sector (organic, traditional, mountain) could benefit from the use of new technologies, as it is characterized by increasingly complex value chains and a growing need for transparency. Artificial intelligence, blockchain technology, social media channels, online platforms and other similar technologies can help strengthen ecological certification, traditional or mountain attestation for agri-food products, in particular by ensuring transparency along the supply chain and traceability of products, contributing thus increasing the confidence of end consumers.

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