Traditional Romanian food products – attraction points and tools for improving Romania’s visibility

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Abstract: A part of the cultural heritage of a nation is the variety of traditional food, kept unchanged for generation to generation. Romania has some traditional ways to prepare food, characteristic for each region of the country and the tourists who tried once a traditional dish will come again to taste it. The Romanian trade and tourism used only a little part of the promotional value of its traditional food products to attract customers and tourists.

The European certification scheme for traditional food gives the possibility to obtain three types of certifications for traditional food products. This paper made a critical analysis of the situation of Romanian food products certificated by EU and proposed some actions to increase the number of certificated products and to improve the international image of the country.

Key-Words: traditional food products, country brand, protected designation of origin (PDO), protected geographical indication (PGI), traditional speciality guaranteed (TSG)

1. Introduction

Food is a very sensitive subject nowadays due to the risks associated to the chain of production, transport, selling and consumptions, and, also, to the necessity of assuring food products for all the inhabitants of the planet. The globalization put its finger print on food products, both on one produced in the industry and, also on one offered by the restaurants.

In USA the big food producing companies pushed out from the market the traditional producers, who have disappeared taking with them old recipes. The EU wanted to avoid these problems and initiated a scheme for certification of the traditional foods in three groups: the protected designation of origin products (PDO), the protected geographical indication (PGI) and the traditional speciality guaranteed (TSG). Local products are one of the most dynamic sectors in European food consumption over the last few years, as well as in other parts of the world. Food consumption has become a distinctive feature of collective as well as individual identities. The tension between “globalisation” and “localisation” stands as a credible development policy framework for the future of food production in Europe [4].

But the development of the food sector was associated with some big problems regarding the food security and safety. Very known food producers were involved in internationals scandals due to the health problems caused by the consumption of different processed food (milk for babies, yogurt, meat products, and others). So, consumers have lost the trust in certain foods as a consequence of contamination events, who affected not only the companies, but also the image of the countries. The European concept of Typicality, expressed by PDO, PGI and TSG certifications has the main aim to regain the consumers’ trust. [5]

The European consumer has access to an extended market formed by products from several countries, and this is a very good opportunity to promote specific products and to create a country image, even a country brand. The role of a country brand is to positively influence people's perceptions of the country, according to Jeff Bezos, the founders of Amazon Inc. Company, brand for a company is the same as the reputation for a men. [6]

The country image – the brand – is a way to differentiate a product, service from that of competitors. Stephen King considers the brand is unique as compared to a product that can be copied, imitated. [7].

According to Nworah, with the brand, countries are seeking to differentiate in the international market trying to become as attractive destinations for trade, tourism and investment. [8]

Traditional products, although are not occupy a very important place in the exports, they have a major impact on a country's brand because bring
with them the specific of a place, a piece of culture and tradition – the typicality of a region and of a people.

2. Country brand and traditional food products

Products exported are an important channel of communication through which a country can build its international image, its country brand. If in the case of tourism, foreign consumers have to travel abroad to form an opinion about that country, the products exported give the possibility to form an opinion in his own country. According to Anholt, the brand of country can be built on the following elements, called in the literature the hexagon country branding:

- Tourism - one of the most visible aspects of country brand;
- Export - whether products have good quality, consumers will make a good impression throughout the country;
- Domestic and foreign policy of the state (state government) – have a very important impact on the citizens of other countries;
- Culture and tradition - national heritage objects, film, music, customs, etc.;
- Attractiveness of the country in terms of foreign investment and immigration;
- Citizens of this country – personalities (actors, athletes, singers) and the ordinary people who interact with foreign visitors. [10]

All the elements listed above, who form the country brand, can be put into connection with traditional food products. They are the image of the culture and tradition, part of national heritage, can be attractive from the point of view of investments and can be exported, are also part of tourism offer. So, it is obvious that the traditional foods are a very strong tool in creating a good image of a country at the international level.

At international level there is a constant preoccupation to measure the power of a country brand; the main technique is market study, taking into account at least the six factors mentioned above. Among the most important companies who are making annual studies to establish an international rank based on the country brand, we can name Future Brand and Anholt–Gfk [11]; even the two companies are using different methods, they arrived at almost the same results. For example, in 2011 the Future Brand ranked on the first place Canada, while the Anholt-Gfk placed the USA on the first position. In both studies Romania has a very unpleasant position, at the end of the hierarchy:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>2012 Rank</th>
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<tr>
<td>Ghana</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>78</td>
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<tr>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>92</td>
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<tr>
<td>Algeria</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>100</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ethiopia</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>95</td>
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Fig. 2 Romania’s position in the rank made by Future Brand for 2012 [12]

This negative result necessarily requires the identification of the causes that led to an image of the country so unfavorable for Romania. We found three types of causes:

- political causes - inappropriate policies and negative images Romanian’s politicians;
- social causes - popularization of the foreign media of crimes committed by Romanian citizens.
- economical causes - Romanian economic environment has not used a number of opportunities provided by the EU; one of these opportunities, not at all used in Romania is registration and promoting traditional products with protected designation of origin;

European Union learned an important lesson from the experience of USA: in the United States, the little food producers were bought by the big food corporations and disappeared from the market; in order to improve the development of rural areas and to avoid the disappearance from the market of small food producers, the EU created in 1992 a
certification scheme containing 3 groups of products.

PDO – Protected Designation of Origin - is the name of an area, a specific place or, in exceptional cases, the name of a country, used as a designation for an agricultural product or a foodstuff. In other words, PDO means that the entire product must be traditionally and entirely manufactured (prepared, processed and produced) within the specific region and thus acquire unique properties.

PGI – Protected Geographical Indication – denominates a food product which is traditionally and at least partially manufactured (prepared, processed or produced) within the specific region and thus acquire unique properties.

TSG – Traditional Speciality Guaranteed - aims to provide a protection regime for traditional food products of specific character. Differing from PDO and PGI, this quality scheme does not certify that the protected food product has a link to specific geographical area, but means that the “specific character” and either its raw materials, production method or processing must be “traditional”.

Although the European scheme had critical views, saying that is a protectionist method used against global agro-economic policy, the positive impact on the customers’ opinions was important. There were developed several studies at the EU level regarding this impact, the main conclusions of these studies being that:

a) European consumers, according to the study conducted by Wim Verbeke et all, perceive label PDO / PGI / TSG as a signal of quality, who improves the country image at European level; [3]
b) Consumers are willing to pay a higher price for products recognized at European level. [1] and [2]

For the producers, the European certification scheme for traditional foodstuff has important advantages:
- Opportunity to enter new markets more easily (export growth);
- Promoting products using European funds;
- Sales growth;
- Can be used as a marketing tool;
- Increasing reputation;
- Maintain viable businesses;
- Increase or maintain market share.

At these advantages we can add some other, specific to the traditional food product:
- Certification scheme increases the added value of the product;
- Gives credibility to the product;
- Sign of quality;
- Help establish product traceability;
- Help product differentiation.

Of course, the EU certification scheme has also some disadvantages:
- increasing production costs (implicit selling prices) due mainly to the limitation of the supply at a restricted area;
- registration process takes at least 2 years;
- limiting innovation.

The registered food traditional products help regional development especially in rural areas, the preservation of traditions and have a positive impact on tourism and country branding.

After the introduction of traditional protection scheme in the European Union till now, there are 1135 registered food products, of which 555 are PDO, 539 products are PGI and only 43 products as Traditional Speciality Guaranteed. [13]

Traditional product protection scheme is recognized in third countries with which the EU has signed bilateral agreements, such as China, USA, Switzerland, etc. Besides that recognition of products made in the EU, third countries may also apply to the protection of traditional scheme.

3. Critical analysis of Romanian traditional foodstuff registered with EU scheme

3.1. Facts and figures from EU level

Although the certification scheme for the traditional foodstuff is known in all European countries, there are big differences between them regarding the number of registered products. Italy has recorded a total of 251 products in three categories, ranking no. 1, followed by France with 193 products and Spain with 162 products.

According to the report by the European Commission, Value of production of agricultural products and food stuffs, wines, aromatised wines and spirits protected by the Geographical Indication (GI), appeared in 2012 (considering the period 2005-2010), food market PDO, PGI and STG was 15.790 billion. Of these 6.307 billion euros (40%) come from the sale of cheese, 20% of the sale of meat and 15% of beer sales. [14]

As we are expected, most of the revenues of the products are made in Italy (5.9 billion euros). Although it ranks 6th in number of recognized traditional European products, Germany is ranked 2 in terms of revenue, with 3.37 billion euros, France stands 3rd, with 3 billion.

In 2010, there were exported PDO, PGI and TSG worth 1 billion euros, representing 2% of all food exported from the EU. Among the major importing
countries are U.S., Switzerland, Singapore, Japan, China and Canada. (Fig. 3)

3.2. The situation in Romania

So far, Romania has recorded only one traditional product i.e. Topoloveni plum jam. On 08/04/2011, Topoloveni plum jam has become a protected geographical indication (PGI) product.

The jam is exported in France, Belgium, Italy and Germany; before the EU certification, the quantities exported were bigger, but after the certification increased the added value of the product.

For the future, the producer of Topoloveni plum jam has a promoting strategy which focused on the markets from Switzerland, Norway and Russia.

Two other Romanian traditional products are in an advanced stage of obtaining the Community protection scheme, i.e. Plescoi sausages and Novac smoked fish from Tara Barsei.

In addition to these products, they start working to registration of other nine ones, especially cheese and milk products.

Upon accession to the European Union, Romania has sent to the Commission a list of 65 traditional products that could be subject to registration as PDO, PGI and TSG. This shows Romania’s exceptional potential. The most important regions with traditional products made with ancient recipes are Bucovina (in the North of the country), Brasov – Sibiu area (in the central – East part of Romania) and Transilvania. Theses food products are very popular not only in the area of origin, but in all country and constitutes attraction points for the rural tourism or eco-tourism, forms of tourism very developed in the regions mentioned above. Now, these traditional food products are made in small quantities for personal consume or for tourists, but there is the possibility to increase the production, with major benefits for local development.

Small number of traditional foods recognized with EU scheme is because Romanian producers are not sufficiently aware of the advantages that entail this certification. Another issue is the lack of cooperation between producers. For example, because of non-cooperation, Sibiu salami could not be registered as PGI.

The third element that hinders the access of the local producers to the European certification scheme is the lack of financial and informational help from the local and national authorities. There are no incentives for the local foodstuff producers to support their costs with the registration fees.

4. Conclusions

The country brand can be built using traditional products, especially the community recognized because the European consumers associate the PDO, PGI and TSG with high quality.

The gap between Romania and other EU countries is difficult to recover especially because the registration of products last long enough; even if now would submit documentation for registration of food products, the results would be seen by at least 2 - 3 years. This should not be a brake, on the contrary, we believe that should be initiated as soon as it is possible the formalities required for a large number of traditional Romanian products that meet the Community scheme, to be able to enter into the evaluation.

According our opinion, the main ways that could increase the number of traditional products made in

![Sales value of GIs by destination (Million €)](image)
the EU, with positive effects on the country brand are:
- Detailed and accurate information of the producers about the benefits and limitations of this certification scheme;
- Providing specialized assistance for the preparation of documentation required for registration;
- Financial support from the state or county councils for the groups of producers or unique small producers in order to pay the necessary registration fees (fees for certification of conformity of the product by an accredited organization).

Given the economic crisis, the local traditional food products can help at the development of the local economy, especially in the rural areas. Also, with an appropriate approach, these products can represent attraction points on tourism maps of Romanian regions and can contribute to the improvement of the Romania’s international image.

References: