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PRODUCTION AND DISTRIBUTION OF NATURAL HONEY. CASE STUDY - PRODUCERS OF NATURAL HONEY FROM "HAȚEG COUNTRY"

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Abstract: *Honey is a natural, sweet and healthy food that is produced all over the world. In Romania, honey production has a long tradition and is an important source of income for many farmers. Currently, Romania is the third largest producer of honey in Europe, after Spain and Germany. In recent years, honey production has increased significantly, mainly due to the increase in the number of beehives and the growing interest in natural food products. Unfortunately, the adulteration of honey is a globally widespread phenomenon, and many countries are involved in this practice. These products, being cheaper, affect the producers of natural honey all over the world, therefore also in Romania. Through this paper, we highlight the main problems faced by the Romanian producers of natural honey, with an emphasis on those from the Hațeg region.*

Introduction

The current state of Romanian agriculture, including its level of development and rural space, are largely determined by Romania's agrarian structure.

Honeybee colonies are essential for agriculture and the environment. They ensure plant reproduction by pollination, while beekeeping contributes to the development of rural areas. Honey is a foodstuff consumed in Romania for thousands of years, and the production of honey in the country has a long tradition. Being an important food in Romanian culture, over time, it was used as food, medicine and even a religious offering. Currently, Romanian honey is famous for its flavor and quality, and honey production is an important source of income for many farmers.

During the Roman Empire, beekeeping was a widespread practice in Dacia. Later, in the 19th century, Romania was one of the main producers of honey in Europe. Currently, Romania is the second largest producer of honey in Europe, after Spain and before Greece. In recent years, there has been a significant increase in honey production, mainly due to the increase in the number of beehives and the growing interest in natural food products.

Material and method

The data presented in the paper were taken after face-to-face discussions with two apiaries administrators, as well as with the persons directly engaged in the company's activities and were supplemented with those existing at the town halls of General Berthelot and Răchitova communes. These data were aggregated and compared with those reported at local and regional level, as well as with those provided by various national and international statistical data sources. This accumulation of data and information has been compared and processed, in order to obtain an image as close as possible to the reality regarding the situation and the problems beekeepers have.

Results and discussions

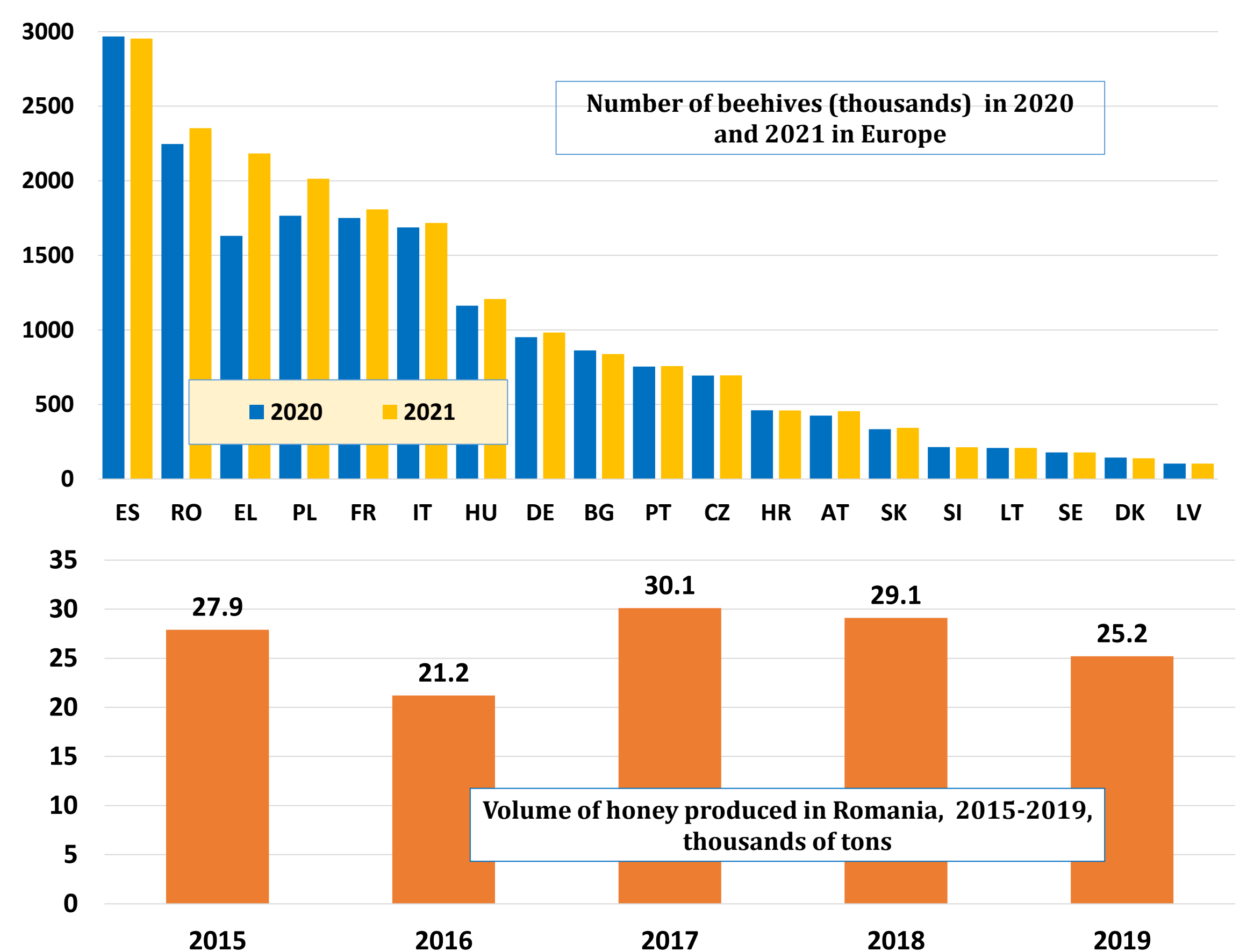
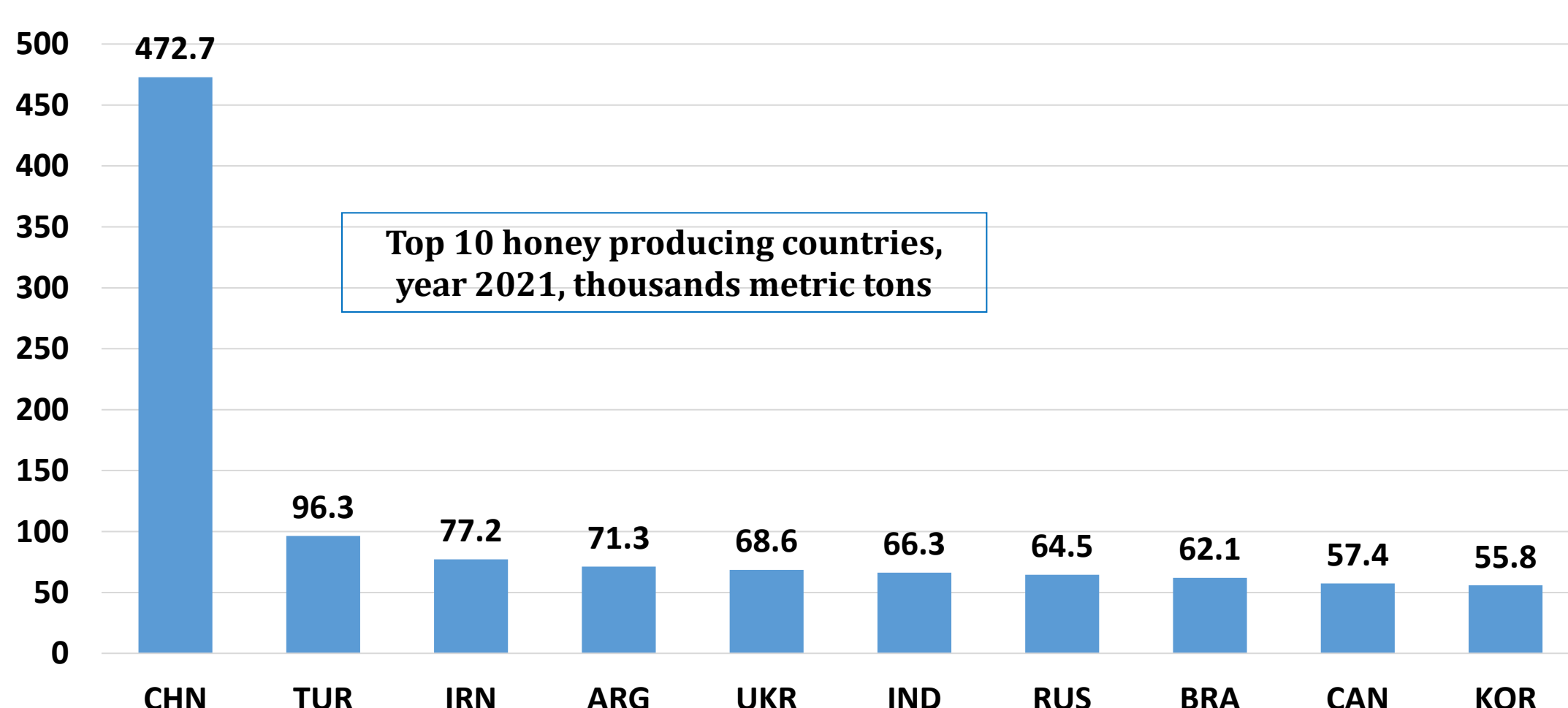
The number of bee families has registered important increases in Tara Hațegului, from 2,123 in 2000 to around 10,000 in 2020. This increase is mainly due to the subsidization of this sector, both from national and European funds. There are many beekeepers in the area who have benefited from the installation measure for young farmers and the measure to support semi-subsistence agricultural farms. This activity benefits both the environment and obtaining additional sources of income, by capitalizing on the obtained products. Also, the beekeeping products obtained are of high quality, due to the floristic richness (biodiversity) and the absence of pollution in the area.

One of the beekeepers with whom it was discussed, is Mr. H. Alin, who has been raising bees for 12 years, in General Berthelot commune, Tuștea village, when he owned 10 bee families. In 2017, the farmer registered with the Trade Register, as an individual enterprise, in order to benefit from various national and European financing programs. Today it owns a number of 140 bee families.

One of the biggest beekeepers in Tara Hațegului is Mr. M. Marcel, who owns 170 families of bees, in Răchitova commune. He, together with his wife, are medical assistants, and in order to supplement the family's income, they raise bees, an activity that they do in their free time with great passion. In order to obtain high productions, the apiary is transported in a pastoral system to the acacia, in the forests near Drobeta-Turnu Severin, in the linden forests in Bocșa and in Timiș county to the sunflower culture. Moving and transporting the hives is carried out with a 7.5 t van, which he owns.

The production obtained in recent years from a family of pastoral bees is 40 - 50 kg of honey per family. The high productions are also due to the very good quality genetic material, the queens being purchased only from apiaries certified and authorized by the National Veterinary Sanitary and Food Safety Authority (A.N.S.V.S.A.).

Of the total amount of honey obtained, 20% is capitalized on the local market, in jars, and the rest is sold wholesale in barrels. In 2022, the farmer encountered problems selling honey, because its price dropped a lot compared to previous years with the start of the war in Ukraine. The prices offered on the market for polyfloral honey of 12 lei/kg, linden honey 14 lei/kg, and acacia honey 29 lei/kg, unfortunately, do not manage to cover the production costs, which are quite high, so, at the time of the discussion, the beekeeper decided not to sell, yet, the honey obtained from that year.



Conclusions

Honey production is an important and traditional activity in Romania, which provides benefits both for the local economy and for the health and well-being of the population. The quality and diversity of the honey produced in Romania is appreciated all over the world, and represents, in addition to a source of additional income, also one of national pride and identity.

From the discussions held with the beekeepers presented above, as well as with those from the fairs where they presented and sold their products, several problems that they faced resulted.

A major problem that beekeepers have pointed out is the unfair competition on the market of honey and bee products coming from non-EU countries. In these countries, beekeepers do not have to comply with all the rules of welfare and treatments applied to bees as in EU countries, so also in Romania. As a result, bee products have a lower purchase price, and stores in Romania mainly sell this type of honey.

Another big problem is that of counterfeit honey on the market. It is no coincidence that I previously specified the countries that were reported to be responsible for the production and marketing of counterfeit honey. Almost half of the honey consumed in Europe comes from the world's largest producer, namely China, the Romanian market being also invaded by imported honey which is counterfeit or of lower quality. The law does not oblige those who sell honey to write what percentages are used in mixtures, but only the country of origin. Thanks to this gap, they buy honey from China, for example, and package it and sell it under the name of some Romanian brands.

The beekeepers interviewed said that the Romanian state should support them not only through de minimis aid, but through a real subsidy. Establishing a subsidy per bee family, exactly as it is in animal husbandry per head of cow, goat, or sheep, would be beneficial for supporting Romanian beekeeping. The few initiatives that the Government had, to support local production, remained only on paper, and in the absence of regulations regarding the consumer market, buyers are deceived, and producers are left to do as they can.

In accordance with the situation presented so far, the only breath of oxygen for honey producers is the sale of production at specialized fairs.

The beekeepers ask the governors for urgent measures, otherwise, they say they will have to give up because it is not profitable, especially since, for many of them, it is not the main source of income, because they could not support the family from beekeeping alone.