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EVALUATION OF TOURISM AT RURAL AREAS IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

ЕВАЛУАЦИЈА ТУРИЗМА У РУРАЛНИМ ПОДРУЧЈИМА У ЕВРОПСКОЈ УНИЈИ

Summary: *Tourism is the industry most affected by the pandemic. However, one form of tourism most successfully "swam" in the flood that hit the tourism industry. It is rural tourism. In this paper, the aim is to assess the capacity and occupancy of rural tourism in EU countries and selected candidates. In order to assess the set goal, the evaluation of tourism in rural areas is analyzed through indicators such as: (1) number of facilities, bedrooms and beds in tourist accommodation, (2) nights in rural tourist accommodation (absolute number) and (3) nights in rural tourist accommodation (relative number). Special emphasis is placed on the time period before the pandemic and the time period after the pandemic. The results show a slight reaching of the level from 2019.*

Keywords: *tourism, rural areas, EU*

JEL Classification: *Z3, T83*

Резиме: *Туризам је грана индустрије која је највише погођена пандемијом. Међутим, један облик туризма најуспешније је „пливао“ у потопа који је задесио туристичку индустрију. То је рурални туризам. У овом раду, циљ је да се процене капацитети и окупација заузетост руралног туризма у земљама ЕУ и изабраним кандидатима. У циљу процене задатог циља, евалуација туризма у руралним подручјима анализираће се кроз индикаторе као што су: број објеката, спаваћих и лежачевог смештаја у туристичком смештају, ноћења у сеоском туристичком смештају (апсолутни број) и ноћења у сеоском туристичком смештају (релативни број). Посебан акценат стављен је на временски период пре пандемије и временски период након пандемије. Резултати показују благо достизање нивоа из 2019. године.*

Кључне ријечи: *туризам, рурална подручја, ЕУ*

ЈЕЛ класификација: *Z3, T83*

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Tourism in Function of developing the Domestic Agri-food Sector"*

1. INTRODUCTION

Rural tourism helps to link the various aspects of economic, social, and environmental development while also generating more jobs and advancing rural development (Dimitrijević et al. 2022). In its strategic documents, the European Union insists on the development of rural areas, in order to lead to the equal development of all regions and the achievement of cohesion policy goals. The LEADER (Liaisons entre Activités de Développement de l'Economie Rural) initiative, which was launched in 1991 with the goal of enhancing the development potential of rural areas, serves as the foundation for European policies for rural development (European Commission 2006). Having that in mind, many rural areas in the EU today are also developed for rural tourism (Maroto-Martos, Voth and Pinos-Navarrete 2020).

Many authors have investigated the impact of the pandemic on the reduction of tourist movements. However, the question arises whether the pandemic has influenced the increase or decrease of tourist indicators in rural tourism. Rural tourism seems to have experienced (and is still experiencing) a boom after the pandemic.

The goals of this paper refer to the identification of indicators of tourism in rural areas in the EU from 2018-2021. Special attention is paid to the economic review of primary indicators published by Eurostat. The data indicate that rural tourism is an important backbone of the future development of tourism, especially in EU countries.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Given that they make up about 91% of the territory and contain more than 59% of the population, rural areas are essential to the European Union (Giannakis, 2014). This is confirmed by the opinion of the author Gallardo-Cobos (2010), who pointed out that rural areas represent key elements that are the basis of the social and economic territory of Europe and shape its landscape. In this regard, many researchers have analyzed the areas of rural tourism as well as their perspectives (Van der Ploeg et al. 2012), where the development of sustainable rural tourism becomes a priority of national tourism policies (Augustyn 1998).

As rural tourism is a very important, but also a heterogeneous concept when looking at EU countries, there are different studies that used evaluation approaches, both from a national and regional perspective. For example, a case study by Díaz-Puente et al. (2008) analyzed the evaluation of development programs that can affect the empowerment of rural development. Some authors, such as Ilbery et al., (2001) found a great advantage of rural tourism in promoting local production of food and services, especially in marginalized regions.

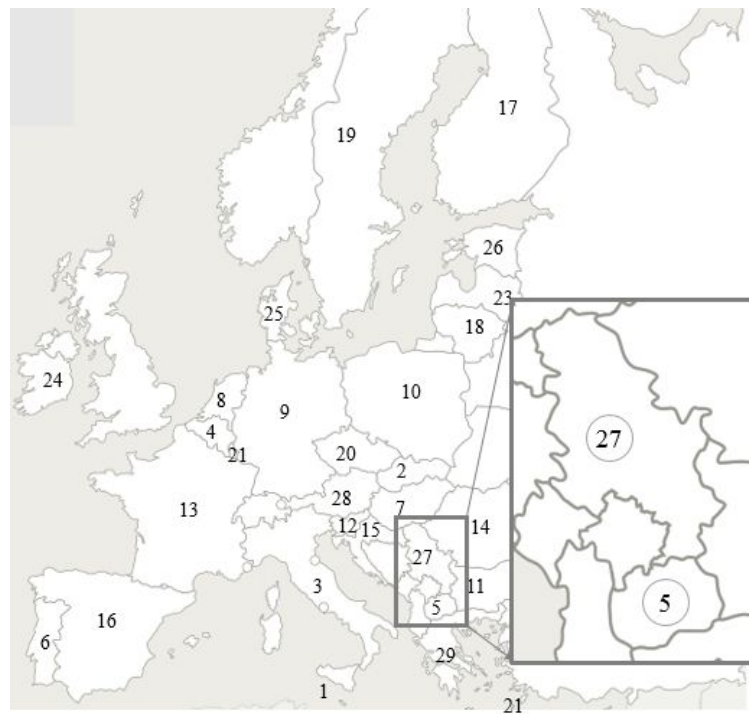
There are a number of key issues that affect how agricultural policy is developed and implemented in the European Union, including the following (Pavliuk et al. 2023): (1) a lack of desire to work; (2) unemployment; (3) labor migration; (4) poverty and deterioration of social infrastructure. These factors all lower the competitiveness of the agriculture sector and raise the inefficiency of the use of resources.

Matthews (2007) concluded that there are EU rural development policy objectives, but that the debate should include whether to implement them at the national or EU level. The fact highlighted by the authors Woods & McDonagh (2011) is that globalization is changing the shape of Europe and that the implementation of rural development initiatives depends on local agencies, which indicates the fact that regional development is different between countries. Because culinary traditions are an integral part of territorial identity and serve as a means of experiencing natural and cultural amenities, Salustri et al. (2022) demonstrate that local food and wine tourism is cited as a key driver of support for rural territories, both during and after the pandemic outbreak.

3. RESEARCH AREA AND DATA

The research area included 27 countries of the European Union and 2 candidate countries: Republic of North Macedonia and Serbia. The original idea was to analyze the complete distribution of tourist activity in all candidate countries, but by looking at the data of Eurostat, as well as individual tourist bureaus of the countries, not all the data necessary for the analysis were available.

Figure 1. Map of researched area



(1. Malta, 2. Slovakia, 3. Italy, 4. Belgium, 5. North Macedonia, 6. Belgium, 7. Hungary, 8. Netherlands, 9. Germany, 10. Poland, 11. Bulgaria, 12. Slovenia, 13. France, 14. Romania, 15. Croatia, 16. Spain, 17. Finland, 18. Lithuania, 19. Sweden, 20. Czechia, 21. Cyprus, 22. Luxembourg, 23. Latvia, 24. Ireland, 25. Denmark, 26. Estonia, 27. Serbia, 28. Austria, 29. Greece)

Source: Authors' illustration

As the map identifies, the research area includes EU countries and selected candidate countries. The group of countries was selected keeping in mind their regional affiliation, as well as the potentials that can be developed in the field of rural tourism within the European Community.

Table 1. Evaluation indicators of tourism in rural areas

Items	Primary indicators	Statistical classification of economic activities in the European Community	Degree of urbanisation
Rural Tourism indicators	Establishments, bedrooms and bed-places in tourist accommodation, by degree of urbanisation and coastal/non-coastal area	Hotels; holiday and other short-stay accommodation; camping grounds, recreational vehicle parks and trailer parks	Rural areas
	Nights spent at tourist accommodation establishments by degree of urbanisation and coastal/non-coastal area	Percentage change on previous period	Rural areas
	Nights spent at tourist accommodation establishments by degree of urbanisation and coastal/non-coastal area	Number	Rural areas
	Share of rural areas in total territorial typology	Percentage	Rural areas/Total areas

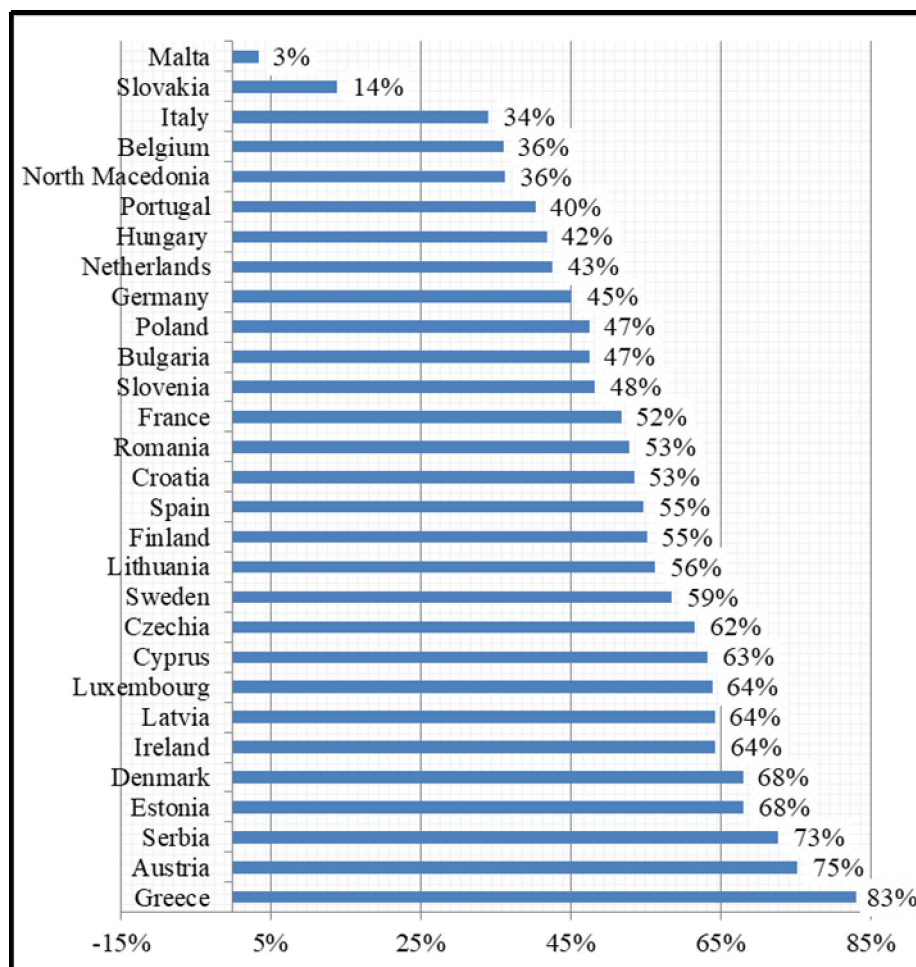
Source: Authors' calculations

The indicators listed in the table were selected keeping in mind their strategic importance for rural tourism in EU. They can be divided into input factors and output factors. The input factor would be the indicators 1) Establishments, bedrooms and bed-places in tourist accommodation, by degree of urbanization and coastal/non-coastal area and 2) Share of rural areas in total territorial typology. Output factors can be: 1) Nights spent at tourist accommodation establishments by degree of urbanization and coastal/non-coastal area (%); 2) Nights spent at tourist accommodation establishments by degree of urbanization and coastal/non-coastal area (absolute).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the displayed measurement parameters, the results are recorded below. Figure 2 shows the share of rural areas in the total territory of a given EU or candidate country. The EU territorial typology divides all EU areas into cities, towns and suburbs, rural areas, coastal areas and non-coastal areas. In this case, the territory of rural areas was taken into consideration in relation to the remaining total territory.

Figure 2. Share of rural areas in total territorial typology (Establishments, bedrooms and bed-places in tourist accommodation, rural/total)



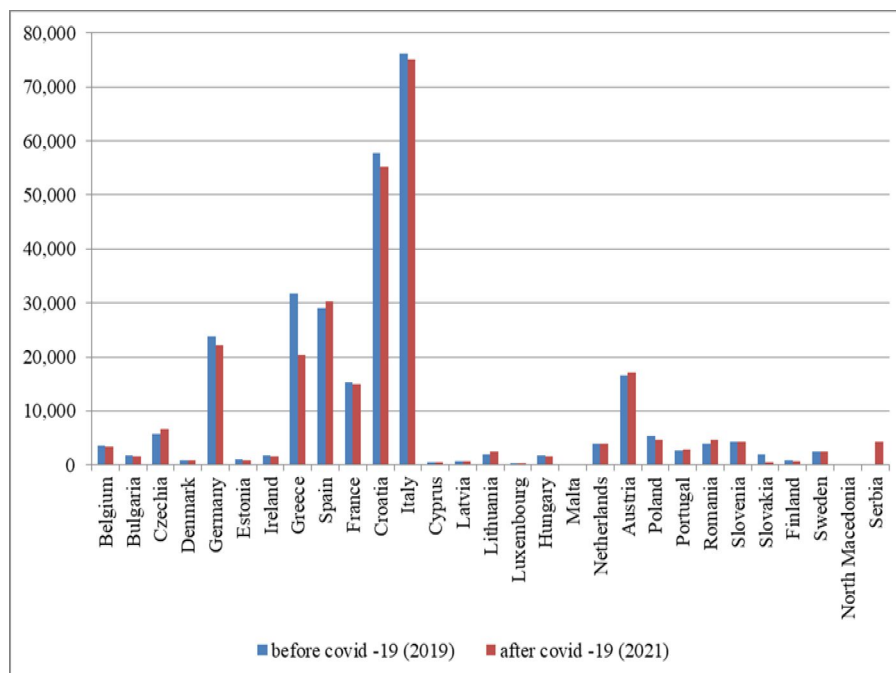
Source: Authors' calculations

It can be seen from Figure 2 that Malta is the country with the least rural area, while Greece is the country with the richest rural areas. This indicator can initially be understood as

an indicator that represents the main input for the further rural development and rural tourism. Due to its geographically small territory, Malta certainly has the smallest area, and therefore the smallest rural areas.

On the other hand, the countries that have a high potential for the development of rural tourism are precisely the countries that have the most rural areas of their territory, such as Greece (83%), Austria (75%), Serbia (73%), Estonia (68%)) and Denmark (68%). It is interesting that Serbia, as a candidate country, is singled out among the first three countries according to the area of its rural territory, which clearly indicates the potential for the development of agriculture and agritourism.

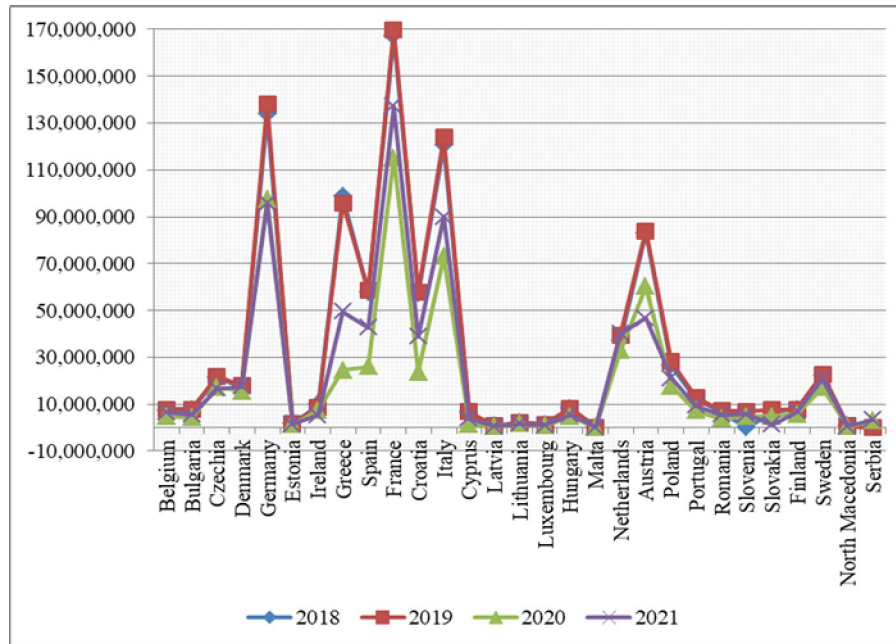
Figure 3. Number of establishments in tourist accommodation - rural areas



Source: Authors' calculations

However, apart from having exclusively rural land, capacity building is also important. In this sense, the indicator that measures the number of establishments in tourist accommodation in rural areas was also analyzed. In Figure 3, special emphasis is placed on the period before the pandemic (2019) and the period after the pandemic (2021). The situation is probably even more favorable today, bearing in mind that the latest available data is for 2021. Namely, countries that are leaders in tourist flows, such as Italy, Croatia, Greece, Spain and France, have the most built capacities in rural tourism. If we compare the period before and after the pandemic, a slight drop in capacity in rural tourism was observed, except for Spain and Austria, the Czech Republic, Romania and Slovenia. In the mentioned countries, there was an increase in the capacity of rural tourism, which indicates that after the pandemic, tourists have increased their demand, so accordingly, the tourist offer in rural tourism has also increased.

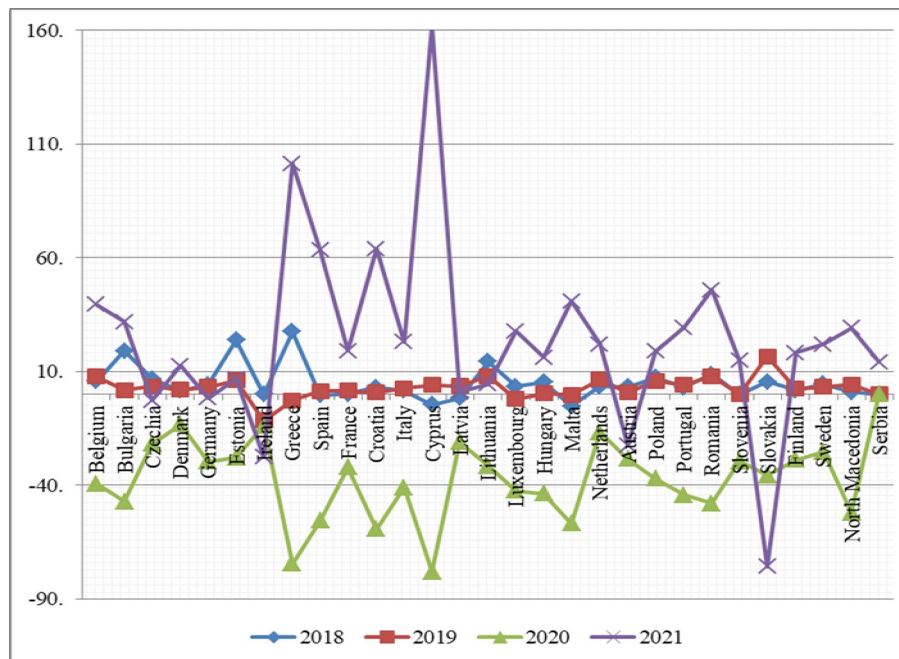
Figure 4. Nights spent at tourist accommodation in rural areas



Source: Authors' calculations

How the capacities are used is best shown by the results of the use of inputs, so overnight stays in rural areas should also be considered. Figure 4 illustrates overnight stays spent in rural areas in the period 2018-2021. According to the largest number of overnight stays, it is clear that all countries stand out in 2019, which was the most favorable year for tourism. However, even in 2020, the drastic drop did not lead to a total decrease in tourist movements thanks to domestic tourism. The situation is improving dramatically and is heading towards that of 2019 when it comes to 2021.

Figure 5. Nights spent at tourist accommodation in rural areas (Percentage change on previous period)



Source: Authors' calculations

Similar to the previous indicator, only expressed in relative numbers, the picture of the percentage of overnight stays in the period 2018-2021 is more clearly presented. It is clear that the 2019 rate is negative, but significant encouragement for tourism, and above all rural tourism, is shown by the data for 2021, which indicates a high participation of rural tourism. However, these measurements should be taken with a grain of salt, bearing in mind that it is difficult to compare participation when there was a drastic increase in certain years (such as the case of 2019) or years when there was a drastic fall (the case of 2020).

5. CONCLUSION

Governments, regulatory agencies, and international incentive institutions are just a few of the decision-makers who may find it helpful to understand the factors that influence rural development. The fundamental elements of rural tourism that define the European Union were addressed in this research in a methodical manner.

It has been shown that rural tourism plays a very important role in the European Union (Negmatovich and Bakhtiyorovich 2022). Bearing that in mind, it is necessary to take advantage of the opportunity that this type of tourism industry has in the future. Rural tourism as one of the selective types of tourism showed its significant potential especially after the pandemic. Rural tourism in the vicinity of cities stands out in particular (You 2022). It is evident that tourist demand is increasingly turning to rural tourism (Wang et al. 2022).

A brand-new type of tourist experience for the present period is produced when rural areas and tourism are combined. Modern tourist demand trends suggest that travelers are seeking out novel experiences. Rural areas are a true treasure with many opportunities to draw tourists because of their traditions, culture, way of life, and customs.

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