

## TRADITIONAL SERBIAN COUNTRYSIDE AND SECOND-HOME TOURISM PERSPECTIVES

Aleksandra Terzić<sup>1</sup>, Marija Drobnjaković<sup>2</sup>, Biljana Petrevska<sup>3</sup>



---

<sup>1</sup> Terzić Aleksandra, PhD., Senior Research Associate, Geographical Institut “Jovan Cvijić” of Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Belgrade, Serbia, e-mail: a.terzic@gi.sanu.ac.rs, ORCID: 0000-0002.0272-696X

<sup>2</sup> Marija Drobnjaković, PhD., Research Associate, Geographical Institut “Jovan Cvijić” of Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Belgrade, Serbia, e-mail: m.drobnjakovic@gi.sanu.ac.rs

<sup>3</sup> Biljana Petrevska, PhD., Fulltime Professor, Faculty of Tourism and Business Logistics, Goce Delčev University – Štip, North Macedonia; e-mail: biljana.petrevska@ugd.edu.mk, ORCID: 0000-0002-1238-4158

**Abstract** Rural tourism offers opportunity to local communities to oppose the process of rural abandonment. This study assesses the tourism potential of two almost depopulated villages in Serbia, Gostuša (Pirrot) and Poganovo (Dimitrovgrad), and identifies their second-home tourism perspectives. They have similar geo-demographic characteristics, but different development patterns. A practical understanding of residents' perception was gained along with identifying the socio-economic indicators. A comprehensive comparison is made to identify the diversification level of the rural economy in these villages. The study also assesses the rural capital and concludes that it is not realistic to expect fast and sustainable tourism development in these peripheral rural areas. Finally, the study extracts the factors of influence and predicts trends of the diversification process and second-home tourism expansion in rural areas of Balkan Mt.

**Key words:** rural tourism, second-home tourism, traditional villages, evaluation

**Сажетак:** Рурални туризам, нуди локалним заједницама могућност супротстављања процесу напуштања села. Ова студија врши процену туристичких потенцијала два готово напуштена села у Србији, Гостуше (Пирот) и Поганова (Димитровград), и идентификује перспективе развоја викенд туризма кроз експанзију секундарних домова. Ова села имају сличне географске и демографске карактеристике, али различите развојне праксе. Практично разумевање перцепција становништва је вршено упоредо са идентификацијом социо-економских индикатора од утицаја на туристички развој. Компарација је извршена са циљем да се идентификује ниво диверзификације руралне економије ових села. Студија такође укључује оцену руралног капитала, на основу чега се закључује да се не може очекивати брзи и одрживи туристички развој овог периферног руралног простора. Коначно, издвојени су фактори који утичу и предвиђају тренд диверзификације и експанзије викенд туризма на руралним просторима Старе планине.

**Кључне речи:** рурални туризам, викенд насеља, традиционална села, оцена стања

## 1. Introduction

Majority of European population live in urban areas, while rural areas in Europe experience long-lasting depopulation trend (Kotzeva & Brandmüller, 2016). In this regard, "second home" is becoming a dominant real-estate type in 'empty' villages of Europe. Economic collapse and global changes lead to a situation where many rural areas are coping with existential problems. So, the rural economy in most European countries faced the need to find productive alternatives in fighting low production and incomes, abandonment, and ecological contamination. The economy transformation brought structural changes in agricultural production, higher unemployment and poverty levels, leading to extreme levels of emigration of the youngest, the most active and educated reproductive groups, and therefore eroded the vitality of villages and rural communities (Petrevska & Terzić, 2020). Rural communities in peripheral rural areas, therefore, face many challenges.

Less than 50% of farms in European union earn majority of their income from farm production, while 35–75% comes from off-farm jobs (Sznajder et al., 2009). Diversification is generally recognized as a strategy for decreasing livelihood vulnerability, representing a process by which rural households construct an increasingly diverse portfolio of activities and assets in order to survive or improve their livelihoods (Elis, 2000; Niehof, 2004). In those areas where traditional primary production, such as farming and fishing, is in decline, the existence of local resources, heritage and culture provide the possibility for tourism development that can contribute to job creation and rise of the living standard of small rural communities (Fleisher & Falsenstien, 2000;

MacDonald & Jolliffe, 2003). However, developing tourism in rural areas is still generally related to the resilience strategy of a single household, focusing on the factors that create the ability of the farm to respond to the change. Most farm-tourism businesses are family businesses on small farms, whose decisions depend on the family life-cycle concept, which can generate supplementary income to retain family farmland (Potočnik-Slavič & Smitz, 2013).

Rural tourism is particularly attractive to European travelers seeking authentic, unique experiences and local lifestyles, natural and preserved landscapes, local traditions and gastronomy. Since the number of tourists attracted to rural areas is constantly growing, rural areas can be severely threatened (Hall, 2004). Instead of highly uniformed and fabricated “rural tourism product”, the demand growth is directed towards seeking authenticity and originality of rural destinations. Therefore, the traditional countryside is changing fast, physically and psychologically, adapting to urban-vision and demands, thus evidencing a fast-cultural change in rural areas. Specific rural amenities become highly valued in terms of achieving better living conditions (Deller, 2010; McGranahan et al., 2011; Josipović, 2018), and becoming attractive for elders, pensioners and returnees. A large proportion of rural stays, on the other hand, generate low expenditure on accommodation, as visitors staying in rented accommodation are in the minority (about 10%). So, the main purpose of stay in rural areas tends to be a visit to family and friends, or a stay at second homes (Bel et al., 2015).

Developing tourism, particularly in small traditional villages, is a new economic opportunity for local communities, opposing the ongoing rural abandonment. Such a process is also evident in peripheral high-mountain villages in South-east Serbia, where the trend of the seasonal revitalization of villages through second-home tourism is appearing as of 2002. The study aims to assess tourism potential and second-home tourism perspectives, by examining villages in Balkan Mt. area, with a focus set on two almost depopulated villages. In this manner, it identifies the diversification level of the rural economy, extracts significant factors of influence of tourism development and assesses the rural capital. It highlights that it is not realistic to expect fast and sustainable tourism development of traditional Serbian countryside, despite its great potential.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1 Rural vs Cultural tourism: Parallels and Paradigms**

Recently, a focus has been put on the high tourism consumption patterns with extreme growth of “special interest tourism” (SIT), reflecting the continuously increasing diversity of leisure interests of the late-modern leisure society (Douglas et al., 2001; Trauer, 2006) and suggesting non-commercialized individual travel. Various authors explain the emergence of SIT by a desire for achieving a greater level of quality of life and escape contemporary urban life as traditionally major push factors for travel (Trauer, 2006). This led to the creation of various tourism typologies in various SIT segments, like cultural tourism, educational tourism, cycle tourism, wine tourism, event tourism, sports tourism, adventure tourism, senior tourism, eco-tourism, rural tourism, agri-tourism, etc.

Cultural tourism refers to the tourist's engagement with a country, region or local culture, more specifically the lifestyles, history, art, architecture, religion, customs, traditions, gastronomy and other elements that shape the way of living in a specific geographical area. It includes tourism in urban areas with a high concentration of cultural sites, monuments and facilities, but it also includes tourism in rural areas as places of old traditions, social practices, and festivities. Rural tourism focuses on active participation in a rural lifestyle, an exploration of the indigenous population and their respective culture and traditions, often closely connected to nature and environment (Mohnacki, 2017). Cultural tourism is expected to continue its growth in the future, increasing diversity of cultural demand and supply, shifting towards intangible heritage and “soft cultural infrastructure”, refocusing from urban to rural areas, from “high culture” to “living culture” (Richards, 2018). Moreover, cultural experiences and interaction with locals are becoming increasingly popular, as tourists increasingly want to “live like a local” which became the new touchstone of experiencing the authenticity of destination (Richards, 2018).

enables revitalization and prolonged vitality of traditional peripheral villages, as found in the case of villages of Balkan Mt., like Gostuša and Poganovo.

## 7. Conclusions

The study elaborates the cases of Gostuša and Poganovo, two demographically similar villages located in the same tourist macro-destination, and evaluates their development patterns from different perspectives. An opportunity is recognized and the potential of these two villages can be employed for tourism development purposes, but with different development paths. Based on a field-research, it was found that both villages possess a kind of tourism facilities that function, even though with small capacities and strictly seasonally.

Gostuša village is facing many severe problems, particularly with the infrastructure and deterioration of physical amenities. Since it is proclaimed as a cultural heritage, it must follow strictly defined procedures and fully relies on governmental support and direct investments. Even more, locals and second-home owners who want to make some adaptations in their “original and unique” but deteriorated households, have their “hands chained” stuck in the official policies and slow administrative procedures. Poganovo village is much more visited mainly due to better infrastructure and transit geographical position to Sofia (Bulgaria). The better ambiance of the village itself attracts more tourists and tourism development is initiated by private entrepreneurship, so it provides different services engaging locals in the production chain. However, the village itself needs to be aware of the potential danger of becoming the “reserved tourist landscape” where the local community is left out of the development process in favor of the dominance of seasonal residents (returnees and pensioners). This is consistent with the findings of Park et al. (2012) that residents who have lived in their village longer (autochthonic population, such in the case of Gostuša) are likely to indicate lower social capital. Struggling with unfavorable socioeconomic conditions, traditional villages have been losing traditional local leadership and newcomers in the tourism business are establishing new decision-making processes (Park et al., 2012). Therefore, we outline that in the beginning stages of tourism development in these peripheral rural areas, tourism services are provided almost exclusively by the “newcomers”, the second-home owners. As outlined in different studies (Xiao & Li, 2004; Hao, Long, & Kleckley, 2010), it is difficult to generalize about tourism impacts and attitudes as they are often shaped by site-specific conditions. Such seems to be highly dependent on the development stage and confirms the existence of certain differences in attitudes toward tourism development between residents and second-home owners, being mostly related to the community attachment, while socioeconomic factors play only a minor role (Hao et al., 2010).

Similarly to the findings of Fabusoro et al. (2010), socioeconomic factors may serve as predictors for livelihood diversification, while regression model revealed that educational level and household size can predict rural diversification. Furthermore, the research outlined factors of greatest influence to the rural diversification process in peripheral rural areas: the rise of single-member households directly related to the expansion of second-homes, and therefore the change of use, from productive to the service sector, while higher educational levels of residents indicate greater entrepreneurship potential and predict more prosperous tourism development. Also, the significance of income sources to livelihood diversification may indicate that availability of alternative sources of income will enhance an individual's capacity uptake non-farm livelihoods, such as tourism. Among principal problems of rural households and individuals who want to start tourism business seems to be access to capital or credit (Fabusoro et al., 2010), which is why almost all rural tourist households in this region were started with direct governmental aid (non-refundable credits). Thus, the current diversification level identified in the study suggests that such activities have the potential for enhancing the capability of individuals and households to construct positive livelihoods, while traditional agriculture still remains the main resource of rural livelihoods among permanent residents. It was confirmed that most tourism units are based on activities of second-home owners and that diversification level among residents actually represents a spill-over effect. So, the study revealed that the level of diversification of the rural economy of the sampled villages is relatively low, and

based on the service sector, therefore, tourism-related. As the main characteristic of sustainable rural tourism is to remain small-scale and in “locals’ hands”, in these two villages the diversification of tourism supporting businesses reveals several weaknesses: lack of continuous governmental support, inadequate supporting infrastructure, low-quality products and services, lack of local entrepreneurship initiative, limited market knowledge, lack of finance, low educational levels of the majority of residents, and lack of opportunities and awareness among locals for tourism and hospitality issues, etc.

As Brandth and Haugen's (2011) discussed, the ongoing changes in the agricultural sector in these peripheral areas, along with the development of rural tourism, was mostly based on individual farm resources. The main driving force for this was the survival strategy found in fitting to the modern tourism demands, along with a desire for autonomy and financial independence, and better livelihood. As noted by Lange et al. (2013), it was found that the geographical location of the sampled villages, especially the landscape attractiveness (including natural and cultural amenities) and impact of the nearby urban areas, has a strong influence on the decision-making of rural households in terms of diversification of the rural economy, by direct engagement of locals in the tourist sector. Diversification levels may also indicate the possibility to improve the economic status of villagers and provide better livelihood opportunities and prolonged vitality of the village. Yet, due to the extremely unfavorable socio-demographic and economic conditions, particularly poor households and infrastructure, it is not realistic to expect fast and sustainable tourism development of the traditional countryside in Serbia. The development process should be slow and careful, with granted governmental aid and professional support, along with provided understandable and strictly defined guidelines. On the other hand, the peripheral Serbian area (Serbian side of Balkan Mt.) is detected as favorable for tourism development and been recognized within the national strategy for tourism development as a priority for support of tourism development plans in the next 5–10 years. It is reasonable to expect that rural tourism development in this area will eventually flourish. However, such activities will likely be fully dependent on second-home expansion, while traditional and cultural patterns constantly endangered, with disappearance of authentic cultural space and the autochthonic population in favor of seasonal residents.

## Acknowledgement

This paper is the result of the project of inter-academia cooperation of the Academy of Sciences and Arts of the Republic of North Macedonia (MANU) and the Serbian academy of sciences and arts (SANU) “Evaluation of preconditions for tourism activities in rural depopulated areas: Comparative study between Macedonia and Serbia” (07-1521/1).

## Academic references

- [1] Ana, M. I. (2017). Ecotourism, agro-tourism and rural tourism in the European Union. *Cactus Tourism Journal* 15(2), 6–14.
- [2] Bel, F., Lacroix, A., Lyser, S., Rambonilaza, T. & Turpin, N. (2015). Domestic demand for tourism in rural areas: Insights from summer stays in three French regions. *Tourism Management* 46, 562–570. DOI: 10.1016/j.tourman.2014.07.020.
- [3] Bieger, T., Beritelli, P. & Weinert, R. (2007). Understanding second home owners who do not rent: Insights on the proprietors of self-catered accommodation. *International Journal of Hospitality Management* 26(2), 263–276. DOI: 10.1016/j.ijhm.2006.10.011.
- [4] Bogdanov, N. & Janković, D. (2013). Territorial capital of rural areas: an example of analysis of the potential for rural tourism development in Serbia. In Škorić, D., Tomić, D. & Popović, V, eds., *Agri-Food Sector in Serbia: State and Challenges* (Nr. 157552). DOI: 10.22004/ag.econ.157552.
- [5] Borge, J. H. (2007). Linked population and second homes in Galicia. *Boletín de la Asociación de Geógrafos Españoles* 43(73), 84, 375–377.