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TOURISM ACTIVITIES IN THE DEPOPULATED RURAL AREAS: ASSESSMENT OF SELECTED VILLAGES IN NORTH MACEDONIA

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ABSTRACT

The main focus of the study is the analysis of the depopulated rural areas in order to identify potential for undertaking tourism activities. For this purpose, several villages from all regions of North Macedonia are selected, particularly those which are facing with the problem of continuous depopulation. The study found that the sampled locations have a well-preserved natural rural environment, traditional ambiance, local organic food and gastronomic cuisine, and offer unique experience with no pollution and stress. Hence, they may start introducing tourism activities in the line of attracting tourists and visitors. As such, developing rural tourism may be identified as an alternation for boosting rural economy.

KEY WORDS: Rural areas; Tourism; Depopulation; Rural development.

INTRODUCTION

Global changes in economic and social life have caused great modification and enormous transformation in the concept of the functioning of small rural communities. This has resulted in low production, declined agricultural income, high unemployment rates, mass migrations, rural abandonment of young, productive and vital population, unbalanced demographic pattern (Gallent et al., 2008; Khaleel & Ngah, 2013). Also, in many rural areas, small villages have been heavily influenced by adverse demographic and socioeconomic changes, increasing social and cultural divergence, affecting local values and lifestyles (Theodoropoulou & Kaldis, 2008; Khaleel & Ngah, 2013). All this destroys the vitality of the villages and rural communities. Therefore, over the years, tourism is considered a way out of providing additional financial contribution to rural households and recovery of rural economy.

Rural tourism has become very popular in the international tourism market, especially for small and less developed rural destinations. Rural areas are often identified as places of local beauty and places for relaxation and escape from overcrowded cities and places where rural tourism is often practiced. So, rural areas that have local beauties, such as: historic sites, natural beauty and clean air (Fredericks, 1993; Dong et al., 2013), distinctive specifics (Bogdanov & Jankovic, 2013; Mahdavi et al., 2013), traditional values and cultural experience (Hardy, 1998; Miller, 1989; Pesonsen & Tuohino, 2015), museums, monuments and historical landmarks (Pedford, 1996; Turnock, 1999; Weiler & Hall, 1992). As such, rural areas are places for relaxation and escape from the crowded and stressful urban life (Urry, 2002), where mental balance and peacefulness is found (Mak et al., 2009). At the same time, they are places where employment, vitality and sustainability are promoted as important concepts (Hall et al., 2003; Kneafsey, 2000; Ploeg, 2008).

Rural areas in North Macedonia, especially small depopulated villages, are considered extremely vulnerable to social and economic problems. This paper discusses the possibilities of introducing tourism as an alternative to sustain rural economies in several selected villages, given that their rural livelihoods have capabilities, resources (material and social resources), and activities needed to provide basic livelihoods in rural communities. So, rural tourism can be encouraged for such rural areas in North Macedonia.

The paper is structured in several parts. After the introduction, next section presents the research methodology and the main results. This is followed by the discussion and general conclusion. The paper adds to the current literature on rural areas in North Macedonia, in addition to some previous findings (Dimitrov & Petrevska, 2012, 2019; Dimitrov et al., 2019a, 2019b, 2020; Petrevska & Dimitrov, 2013; Petrevska et al., 2019; Petrevska & Terzić, 2020).

METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

The study assessed the main environmental and general characteristics of selected villages in North Macedonia. Based on a qualitative research method, mainly through literature review and a field work, a rapid assessment of selected rural areas was performed. Data were collected during September 2018 and November 2019. The following main criteria were applied for sampling the locations:

- To be a depopulated, economically depressed and small village in terms of number of residents;
- To have attractions in the rural environment;
- To offer accommodation or at least in the near vicinity;
- To have potential for activities in traditional way with direct contact with the nature.

The sample consisted of 14 villages belonging to six municipalities from six statistical planning regions in North Macedonia (Figure 1).



Source: Dimitrov & Petrevska (2019: 46)

Figure 1. Sampled rural tourism destinations in North Macedonia (No.1: B's, Varovište; No.2: Konsko, Sermenin, Huma; No.3: Velmevci, Golemollino, Železnec; No.4: Janče, Tresonče, Gari; and No.5: Nežilovo, Oreše, Papradište)

Due to the territorial dispersion, the sampled villages were grouped (2-3 villages), thus creating five potential destinations for rural tourism. Table 1 presents summarized tourism motives in terms of natural, anthropogenic and communicative-receptive factors of selected rural destinations.

Table 1. Tourism motives in selected rural destinations in North Macedonia

Destination 1: Northeast planning region (Municipality of Kirva Palanka)				
No	Settlement	MOTIVES		
		Natural	Anthropogenic	Communicative - Receptive
1	B's	1,210 m a.s.l. Mountain Osogovo	1 church, old houses, 2 archeological sites, livestock, 25 residents	Asphalt road, water supply
2	Varovište	800-1,160 m a.s.l. Mountain Osogovo	2 churches, 1 monastery, old houses, livestock, 35 residents	Asphalt road, water supply
Total: Small villages, mountainous area, 3 churches, 1 monastery (St. Joachim Osogovski), 2 archaeological sites, 2 monuments, old houses that can be adapted for rural tourism, few new weekend houses.				
Destination 2: Southeast planning region (Municipality of Gevgelia)				
	Settlement	MOTIVES		
		Natural	Anthropogenic	Communicative - Receptive
1	Konsko	790 m.a.s.l., Kožuf Mountain (2,172 m.), Kanska River, mineral healing water, spring, artificial lake under construction, endemic flora	2 churches, old houses, memorial plaques, village fountain, agriculture, skiing, mountaineering, mountaineering, paragliding, hunting, 2 residents	Asphalt road, plumbing, water supply, tourist site, "Smrdlivavoda" (850 m), Mountain Lodge, Ski Center Kožuf, 1,550- 1,700 m), cottages, apartments, restaurant
2	Sermenin	540 m a.s.l. foothills of Kozuf mountain, waterfall, Sermininska Reka, small artificial lake, fountain, springs	1 church, 1 monastery, old houses and new cottages, memorial fountain, agriculture, 2 manifestations, 10 residents	Asphalt road, water supply, plumbing, ethno- restaurant
3	Huma	850 m a.s.l. foot of Kožuf Mountain, old volcano	1 church, new houses and weekend houses, monument from the New Liberation War (NLW) manifestation, 2 residents	Asphalt road, water supply, plumbing
Total: Small villages, mountainous and hilly area, 4 churches, 1 monastery (St. Prophet Elijah), 2 monuments, old houses that can be adapted for rural tourism, also new weekend houses, tourist site "Smrdliva Voda", mountain lodge, Ski center "Kožuf"				
Destination 3: Pelagonia planning region (Municipality of Demir Hisar)				
	Settlement	MOTIVES		
		Natural	Anthropogenic	Communicative - Receptive

1	Velmevci	950 m a.s.l. Ilinska Mountain, caves	4 churches, old houses, several memorials from Ilinden and NLW, historical place, agriculture, 7 residents	Asphalt road, water supply, weekend houses
2	Golemollino	980 m a.s.l. Ilinska Mountain, mineral spring, Ilinska River	2 churches, 1 monastery, old houses, monuments from Ilinden and NLW, agriculture, 15 residents	Asphalt road, water supply, weekend houses, small flow hydropower plant
3	Železnec	720 m a.s.l., sources of Crna Reka, narrow valley, caves	1 churches, typical old houses, ancient archeological site, memorial from the Ilinden and the NLW, 18 inhabitants	Asphalt road, water supply, weekend houses
Total: Small villages, mountainous area and valleys, 7 churches, 1 monastery (St. Prophet Elijah), 5 monuments, old houses that can be adapted for rural tourism, and few new weekend houses.				
Destination 4: Southwest planning region (Municipality of Debar) and Polog planning region (Municipality of Mavrovo-Rostuša)				
		MOTIVES		
	Settlement	Natural	Anthropogenic	Communicative - Receptive
1	Janče	760 m a.s.l. River Radika, Lower Radika, Mountain Stogovo	2 churches, 1 mosque, old houses, 3 archeological sites, NLW memorial, 50 residents	Good traffic Connection, water supply, several restaurants and accommodation
2	Tresonče	1,314 m a.s.l. Bistra Mountain Mala Reka, Alilica Cave	4 churches, old houses, 3 archeological sites, memorial fountain, agriculture, traditional architecture, 3 residents	Narrow asphalt road, water supply, tourist signposts through the village, horse riding, mountain biking
3	Gari	1,485 m a.s.l. Mount Stogovo Garska Reka,	3 churches, old houses, agriculture, traditional architecture, old village hydropower plant, village fountain with a memorial plaque from the NLW, 5 residents	Narrow asphalt road, water supply, one restaurant and accommodation
Total: Small villages, mountain area, 9 churches, 1 monastery (St. John Bigorski), 1 mosque, 6 archeological sites, 2 monuments, old traditional houses that can be adapted for				

rural tourism, weekend houses, a motel, a hotel and a restaurant, hiking and mountain biking in National Park Mavrovo.				
Destination 5: Vardar planning region (Municipality of Časka)				
	Settlement	MOTIVES		
		Natural	Anthropogenic	Communicative - Receptive
1	Nežilovo	680 m a.s.l. Mountain Jakupica, River Babuna and other smaller rivers, village fountain, hiking, Nežilovski Steni, peak Solunska Glava	1 church, 1 monastery, old houses, 1 archeological site, 2 memorial plaques, village fountain, limestone in the village, fishpond, 30 residents	Asphalt road, water supply, fishpond with a restaurant, accommodation
2	Oreše	760 m a.s.l. Mountain Babuna, River Oreška, village fountain	2 churches, 1 monastery, old houses, a memorial fountain from the NLW, 40 residents	Asphalt road, near the railway Skopje – Bitola, water supply
3	Papradište	950-1,000 m a.s.l. Dautica Mountain, Babuna River	1 church, 1 monastery, old houses, memorial plaque, 2 mountain cottages, stockbreeders, migrant workers, 15 residents	Asphalt road, water supply, bicycle trails
Total: Small villages, mountain areas, 9 churches, 1 chapel, 3 monasteries (Oreški - St. Geopge; Nežilovski - St. Petka of Rome; Papradiški - St. Prophet Elijah), 1 monument, old traditional houses that can be adapted for rural tourism, few weekend houses, fishpond and a motel with restaurant.				

Source: Authors' field research

DISCUSSION

From the field research, it was found that the selected rural areas have a complexity of rural natural environment, traditional cultural values and have an opportunity to offer various activities that can be further developed as tourism products. They have a wide range of activities and practices that can be profiled for tourists and travelers, thus contributing to local economic development.

Namely, it was found that selected villages have basic elements for initiating, introducing and boosting small scale rural tourism development. All possess natural and anthropogenic motives that may act as strong tourism attractors. Almost all have opportunities for transforming the traditional houses into tourism accommodation facilities. Locals can offer certain groceries and provide personalized contact, thus enabling activities in authentic and traditional way.

The field research revealed that sampled rural destinations can identify and offer visitors specific rural activity packages, like: walking, hiking, horse and donkey riding, sightseeing local natural sites (spring, river, waterfall, lake, cave, etc.), pick forest fruits, mushrooms and herbs, visit religious buildings (churches, monasteries, monuments), enabling the "life practising technique" (to involve visitors in the process of gardening, cattle breeding, participation in local traditional celebrations, religious holidays and cultural events), experiencing active holiday through a nature therapy, etc. Furthermore, when tourism is supported, residents may offer visitors fresh food (meat, eggs, honey, vegetable, fruit), dairy products, local home-made drinks (wine, brandy), local specialties, etc. This may cause several

positive impulses to the local economy and encourage new forms of business activity among the residents.

On the other side, the research revealed that selected rural areas are facing some general weaknesses which may have serious negative impacts on their development, such as: a constant decline in the population size, unfavorable age structure, small and old households, unfavorable educational structure, lethargy, lack of awareness, lack of finances, neglect of traditions, degradation of the natural and anthropogenic environment, fear of a new way of thinking and acting, etc.

In addition, it was found that not only to these selected villages, but generally to all small and depressed villages in North Macedonia, one must give serious incentives to: improve the infrastructure, renovate and adapt the traditional houses and other accommodation facilities, improve the electricity empowering system, reanimate the private sector, revive neglected and forgotten traditional professions, educate, train and raise awareness among residents about the positive effects of developing rural tourism, support financially the returners, etc.

CONCLUSION

Based on the first-hand experience supported with a literature review, a rapid assessment of selected rural areas in North Macedonia was made. The research revealed that the initiative for developing rural tourism depends on:

- Public policies directed towards specific investments tailored to the needs of a particular region;
- Increasing tourist accommodation capacity and occupancy rate; and
- Increasing revenues from rural tourism as a prerequisite for tourism development in the region.

Finally, the study concludes that small and depressed villages are not expected to be able to attract tourists and travelers on their own, but they must be seen as an additional supply of an already well-known attractive resource base (tourist centers, attractions and destinations). This implies the need to establish and maintain a strong connection between the small village and the near-by main attraction, which will contribute to the development of less developed and some of the underdeveloped regions in North Macedonia.

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