
BUSINESS OF RURAL TOURIST HOUSEHOLDS IN THE FUNCTION OF RURAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN SERBIA

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ABSTRACT

The main goal of the paper is, based on research and analysis of the material base and tourist turnover of rural tourist households (RTHs), in the period from 2014 to 2019, to point out to the dynamics of development and the current level of development and utilization of the tourist offer of this sector in Serbia. Quantitative data on accommodation facilities in rural areas of the Republic of Serbia in six years period (2014-2019) are analyzed. In addition to research, various scientific methods were used: the inductive-deductive method, the method of analysis and synthesis and the method of observation. Based on the analysis of quantitative and qualitative aspects of supply it was concluded that a lack of international standards and quality guarantees was noticed, as well as problems related to adaptation, registration and categorization of the RTHs, which confirmed the basic research hypothesis.

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Introduction

Today, tourism in rural areas has become a reality, need and desire of tourists, but also a carrier and instrument of rural development (Christou at al, 2018; Xue at al, 2017; Bălan, Burghilea, 2015). Tourism is one of the few activities that can contribute to the transformation of rural areas, uncultivated or empty space located between rural

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settlements, into landscaped tourist areas suitable for the development of rural, farm, eco tourism, educational or excursion tourism (Pavlović, Kovačević Berleković, 2018). Well-developed and focused rural tourism can become a new source of money and jobs and at the same time it can eliminate social isolation and be an important factor in resettling the country.

Rapid urbanization, fast pace of life, changes in life habits and increasing periods of the day spent indoors and in front of the screen lead to the need for spending free time outdoors, in the fresh air. This affects the orientation of tourist movements from large cities to rural areas. Due to such tendencies, there are more and more justified studies dealing with the preservation of the environment of rural areas and the role and importance of the local communities in creating the tourist offer (Bošković, 2013; Byrd at al, 2009). In Europe more and more overnight stays are recorded in tourist accommodation capacities located in rural areas. Thus, for example, in the total number of overnight stays in 2014, rural areas participated with 36.1%, cities with 33.8% and cities and suburbs with 30.0% (Eurostat regional yearbook, 2017). The mentioned trend is explained by the growing need of people for staying and relaxing in nature, far from the city noise and the stressful way of life characteristic of urban environments. The current global health crisis (Covid-19), one of the biggest challenges for the tourism sector as a whole, has further strengthened the need for people to stay in smaller communities, away from crowds and big cities. Despite the strong impact of the pandemic on the tourism market and stopping tourist arrivals, a solution to revive tourism in some countries has been found in rural tourism (Cvijanović, at al, 2021). The results of the latest research (Covid-19 Survey Analysis Spring 2020), published by the European Rural Tourism Federation (EuroGites), indicate that in the future there will be greater interest in small enterprises, cottages and private houses without shared facilities than in large hotels. Also, quiet, not so well known and small destinations will be more attractive. People living in small flats in densely populated cities are increasingly appreciating landscape enjoyment, safe local food production and delivery, the potential of social separation, and accessible open public spaces, which were formerly undervalued (Lukić at al. 2022). A big chance for tourism in Serbia during the crisis might be in domestic rural tourism.

Rural development in Serbia has been defined as an economic, social, and environmental priority by the Government of Serbia. Rural Serbia represents a key part of the Serbian population and resources. The classification of rural and urban areas presents an important topic both in scientific research and in the practice of spatial planning, regional policy making, and territorial governance (Gajić at al, 2021). Serbia is a predominantly rural country. According to the OECD criteria, rural areas cover 85% of the total territory (and between 44% and 55% of the population lives in rural areas and an estimated 41% of GDP comes from rural areas (Law on the Spatial Plan of the Republic of Serbia 2010–2020). Rural areas in Serbia are very rich and diverse and represented by landscape diversity and cultural heritage.

In the Strategy of Agriculture and Rural Development of the Republic of Serbia for the period 2014-2024, one of the priorities within which the operational goals of the

Strategy are implemented is the diversification of the rural economy and the preservation of cultural and natural heritage, areas that are complementary to tourism (Strategy of Agriculture and Rural Development of the Republic of Serbia for the period 2014-2024).

The main goal of rural tourism in Serbia is to generate additional income of rural population, covering a range of tourism attractions, services and secondary activities provided by the rural population and private households (Strategy for the Development of Tourism of the Republic of Serbia, 2016 -2025). It is believed that rural tourism would contribute to accession of Serbia to the EU (Strategy for the Development of Tourism of the Republic of Serbia, 2016).

The rural areas in Serbia face depopulation, low job opportunities, very low diversification of economic activities, as well as other social problems. Because of all the above, it is concluded that, rural tourism is one of the very few economic opportunities that rural areas in Serbia have.

In this paper, the authors presented information on the level of services provided in RTHs in Serbia, and the aim was to point to the existing problems related to adaptation, registration and categorization of the RTHs as well as existing of regional imbalances in the level of services provided in the rural accommodation sector.

The main aim of the paper is to estimate the point to which legal and administrative procedures reached in recognizing new forms of accommodation in rural tourism in Serbia.

The paper analyzes the conditions for developing tourism in rural areas in Serbia from the aspect of receptive factors, especially rural tourist households. The topic of this paper is the accommodation capacities of rural tourist households (RTHs), which represent a significant segment in the development of tourism in rural areas of the Republic of Serbia. Research into rural tourism and RTHs can help the owners of the households involved in rural tourism to improve their offers. So far, only a small number of authors have pointed to this issue in Serbia, however, this research discusses problems related to adaptation, registration and categorization of the RTHs that have very negative implications for the development of rural tourism in Serbia.

Literature review

A large number of researches in the world deal with the development of rural tourism and the quality of services provided, which is often a limiting factor of development (Albacete-Saez et al, 2007; Christou et al, 2018; Xue et al, 2017; Forcan et al, 2016; Bălan, Burghilea, 2015; Antonsich, 2009; Byrd et al, 2009). Rural tourism is based on the principles of sustainability and involves a range of activities and services that people in rural areas are organized precisely on the basis of the elements that characterize rural areas. This implies that the visitor enjoys the authentic, original experiences and return to the roots and essence of rural life (Đorđević Milošević, Milovanović, 2012).

Tourism on a rural household or a farm or agritourism refers exclusively to a form of tourist service which is an additional activity on a farm with an “active” agricultural

activity, within which products produced on such a farm are offered (Baćac, 2011). This stance is also represented by the European Federation of Rural Tourism (EuroGites - the European Federation of Rural Tourism), according to which agritourism means only tourism on active farms. According to Kušen (2010), the name rural tourism today denotes three tourist phenomena: 1. Rural tourism - for tourism on farms, which is too broad; 2. Rural tourism - for all types of tourism that occur within the rural area, which is realistic; 3. Rural tourism - for all types of tourism that occur in the entire suburban area, which is too narrow. According to Pavlović (2015), rural tourist households are a form of rural tourism in which, in addition to agricultural production, households also provide additional services, i.e. they are engaged in tourism as a supplementary activity.

According to data from the European Federation of Rural Tourism (EuroGites) from 2017, the rural accommodation sector had more than 500,000 accommodation units and more than 5 to 6 and a half million of beds. The economic effects of this sector have been estimated at 900,000 direct or indirect jobs and more than one hundred and eighty million euros in revenues in rural areas. Rural tourist households (RTHs), due to their characteristic offer that is the very essence of a rural tourist product, can be one of the most important mainstays of tourism development in rural areas, but they can also contribute to the economic development of these areas.

Rural tourism in Serbia as well as in other European countries is a significant factor in multifunctional rural development, which is confirmed by numerous theoretical and empirical studies (Erdeji et al, 2013; Dimitrovski et al, 2012; Bošković et al, 2010; Todorović, Bjeljic, 2007; Ploeg, Renting 2000; Ploeg et al, 2000).

The Rural tourism in Serbia does not have a long tradition; 70s of the 20th century, can be considered the beginnings of the development of rural tourism (in the village of Seča Reka, Sirogojno and others (Todorović, Bjeljic, 2007; Todorović, Štetić, 2009). So, rural tourism in Serbia is a new phenomenon, in which, similarly to other regions of the world, agricultural workers and people living in rural areas are looking for some alternative sources of income (Fleischer, Felsenstein, 2000). In the last years of the 20th century, Serbia suffered a very difficult economic and political situation, so especially tourism in rural areas did not take a favorable position on the market. The regional constellation of Serbia is characterized by numerous diversity and a very heterogeneous degree of economic tourism development of rural areas (Gajić et al, 2018). Thanks to its natural, geographical, historical and other features, the Republic of Serbia has favorable conditions for the development of almost all types of tourism, including rural tourism (Đurić, Đurić, 2017). Wealth, maintained and attractive natural resources, a large number of traditional agricultural households, as well as the growing interest of the international tourism market for rural tourism experiences are pretty solid foundation for the development of rural tourism in Serbia, especially in its south-western and south-eastern part (Maksimović et al, 2015).

However, an enormous problem of accommodation capacities in rural areas and the major obstacle for rural tourism development is the categorization of establishments. Regulation in this branch is partially disordered (Penić, 2015). Therefore, there is the

need for law regulation in this area and precise definition of accommodation standards.

According to the results of a survey that included 58 RTHs in Vojvodina (Bošković, 2013), in 2011 most households stated a small number of guests as a problem in tourism, i.e. insufficient turnover, but also lack of capital, as well as problems related to adaptation, registration and categorization of the object. The largest number of surveyed subjects recorded up to 100 visitors/overnight stays per year, with dominating domestic demand. On the other hand, according to a survey of tourist organizations, about 77% believe that accommodation facilities are insufficient, about 18% believe that they are sufficient, but unsatisfactory. Only about 4.5% of respondents think they are enough. The research from 2012 indicated that, apart from the region of central Serbia, the level of accommodation quality and the concrete offer of rural tourism is at a low level (United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) and Young Researchers of Serbia). According to the research from 2015 (Gašić et al, 2015), in the period from 2005 to 2014, the average percentage of registered overnight stays in rural tourism in Serbia was around 21.21%. The lowest percentage was recorded in 2014 and amounted to 20.02%. Identifying the influence factors lie behind the livelihood choices of rural households are of crucial significance for improving the sustainable livelihoods of rural households in tourism regions (Huang et al, 2021).

Materials and methods

The method of observation, analysis and synthesis and inductive-deductive method were used in the paper. Quantitative data on accommodation facilities in rural areas of the Republic of Serbia in six years period (2014-2019) are analyzed. The sources of data are publications of the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia. The sources of information were the data of the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, the Tourist Organization of Serbia (TOS), the Tourist Organization of Vojvodina (TOV) and the National Association "Rural Tourism of Serbia", the European Federation of Rural Tourism - EuroGites, as well as other relevant domestic and international institutions. Also, the paper will present the results of some previous and recent research in this field.

The basic hypothesis of the research is as follows:

H1: Rural tourism accommodation facilities play a key role in the advancement of rural product development but the problems and limitations of rural tourism development in Serbia related to adaptation, registration, utilization and categorization of the RTHs.

The hypothesis of this research is based on critical analysis relevant literary sources, both domestic and foreign authors, who have dealt with the topic of research on the quality of accommodation in rural areas (Huang et al, 2021; Bošković, 2013; Gajić et al, 2018; Christou et al, 2018; Xue et al, 2017; Garrod et al, 2006; Gašić et al, 2015).

Results and Discussion

In 2019, Serbia had a total of 50.110 rooms and 121.289 beds. In order to evaluate tourists' interest in rural areas of the Republic of Serbia, Table 1 provides information on

rural accommodation capacities in Serbia. According to the type of tourist places in 2019, accommodation capacities distributed in “other tourist places” had the most significant participation in the total number of rooms (rooms participated with 23.31%, and beds 22.94%). Accommodation capacities in the so-called “other tourist places” and “other places” can be connected with rural tourism (Radović, 2013, Gašić et al, 2015).

Table 1. Rural accommodation capacities - rooms, 2014-2019, the Republic of Serbia

Year	Number of rooms in all tourist places of RS	Number of rooms in rural areas (in “other tourist places” and “other places”)	Participation in the total number of rooms
2014	43.603	14.544	33.36
2015	45.396	15.369	33.86
2016	46.362	15.224	32.84
2017	44.813	14.492	32.34
2018	48.190	15.381	31.92
2019	50.110	15.955	31.84

Source: Authors, based on the Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Serbia, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020

Rural accommodation capacities, shown through the number of rooms, for the entire presented period make up a little over 30% of the total number of rooms in all tourist places. Also, there is a slight decline in participation in the total number of rooms in the observed period, from 33.36% in 2014 to about 31.84% in 2019.

Table 2. Rural accommodation capacities - beds, 2014-2019, the Republic of Serbia

Year	Number of beds in all tourist places of RS	Number of beds in rural areas (in “other tourist places” and “other places”)	Participation in the total number of rooms
2014	102.940	35.739	34.72
2015	106.102	37.207	35.07
2016	109.469	37.304	34.08
2017	106.029	35.570	33.55
2018	114.771	37.371	32.56
2019	121.289	39.287	32.39

Source: Authors, based on the Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Serbia, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020

Rural accommodation capacities measured by the number of beds make up a little over 30% of the total number of beds in all tourist places. The data also indicate a slight decline in the share of rural in the total number of beds. Rural accommodation includes various types and categories of accommodation in rural areas, which in the Republic of Serbia occupy 70-85% of the territory. “Rural accommodations uniquely differ from traditional hotels, motels, and boarding houses located in cities. Rural accommodations have their own characteristics and harmonize with their surroundings and local cultures” (Hyunsuk Choi et al, 2018, pp.2).

The development of tourism in rural households and farms has multiple significance, not only for tourism, but for the entire rural population and the economic development of rural areas. It can be said that the rural household is the basic “cell” of rural society and the activities it involves affect not only the household but also the entire community. The provision of tourist services by rural households produces numerous economic as well as non-economic effects.

Direct benefits are realized by members of households, by generating income from the provision of tourist services, but also from the sale of products from their domestic production. Tourism is a source of jobs and additional income for members of rural households, which is of particular importance for rural communities that lack the creation of so-called “new” jobs. The possibility of connecting with agriculture, which rural population is predominantly engaged in and supplementing low incomes from this activity is another significant advantage. Indirectly, the development of this type of tourism is reflected favorably on other rural households that can be involved in various ways, and above all, as suppliers of various products included in the food provision for tourists, but also in meeting their other needs for entertainment and amusement, education (introduction to rural affairs, local culture and tradition, customs, old crafts, local gastronomy ...) and the like. No less important are the so-called “non-economic” effects (demographic effects, cultural effects, infrastructure, environmental ...) which improve the living and working conditions of the population in rural areas, but also create conditions for attracting investment in these areas and their revival.

The current Hospitality Law recognizes different types of accommodation facilities, among which are rural tourist households. Rural tourist household is defined as a facility or group of facilities that provide accommodation, preparation and serving of food and beverages or only accommodation services, located in a rural (rural) environment with elements of local landmarks and heritage. (Hospitality Law, no. 17/2019, Serbia). Legal regulation of the status of RTHs as a type accommodation facilities and prescribing their categorization was an important step for improving the field of rural tourism in Serbia, especially from the aspect of service quality.

Minimum standards also need to be determined in rural accommodation development and in concordance with international minimum standards. Rural accommodation should in the future focus on authentic and genuine features. Branding of this accommodation type should be used as a means of future differentiation (Durman-Pušara, 2012). Accommodation strategy defines new types of accommodation that Serbia might offer: tree houses, grass igloos and ship houses. Tree houses are especially interesting for tourism development which is connected to the nature and could be implemented on Stara planina (mountain), primarily for children and young adults.

However, the percentage share of RTHs in the total accommodation capacities (in the total number of rooms and the total number of beds) is very low in the whole observed period (Table 3).

Table 3. Accommodation facilities - rural tourist households (rooms and beds) by type of tourist resorts, Republic of Serbia, 2014-2019.

Type of tourist place	Rooms						Beds					
	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Spas	98	98	104	104	23	19	304	304	318	320	73	61
Mountain resorts	-	92	98	120	155	207	-	227	239	307	391	534
Other tourists' resort	5	141	331	390	391	362	-	319	842	941	1.093	994
Other resort	6	52	50	61	47	56	15	147	141	155	123	143
<i>Total:</i>	109	383	583	675	616	644	344	997	1.540	1.723	1.680	1.732
<i>% participation in the total:</i>	0.3	0.8	1.3	1.5	1.3	1.3	0.3	0.9	1.4	1.6	1.5	1.4

Source: Authors, based on Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Serbia 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020

It can be noticed that *rural tourist households are mostly concentrated in "other tourist places"*. In 2019, about 56% of rooms, and about 57% of beds were located in these places.

Tourist turnover - In recent years, Serbia has registered an increasing number of tourist arrivals and overnight stays. Tourist arrivals in 2019 amount to 3.7 million, and about 10 million overnight stays were realized (Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Serbia 2020). Overnight stays realized in the so-called "other tourist places" and "other places" can be considered overnight stays in rural tourism (Table 4).

Table 4. Overnight stays in rural areas in the period from 2014 to 2019, the Republic of Serbia

Year	Number of nights in all tourist places	Number of overnight stays in rural areas ("other tourist places" and "other places")	% share in total number of nights in all forms of tourism
2014	6.086.275	1.218.552	20.02
2015	6.651.852	1.352.199	20.33
2016	7.533.739	1.485.975	19.72
2017	8.325.144	1.681.237	20.19
2018	9.336.103	1.913.030	20.49
2019	10.073.299	2.108.365	20.93

Source: Authors, based on Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Serbia 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020

Based on previous data, *the average percentage of registered overnight stays in rural tourism in Serbia, in the period from 2014 to 2019, is 20.28%*. Compared to a similar survey from 2015, which covered the period from 2005 to 2014, when the average percentage of registered overnight stays in rural tourism in Serbia was about 21.21%, it can be concluded that this share remained at approximately the same level. The following table (Table 5) shows the results of RTHs turnover and their participation in the total realized arrivals and overnight stays.

Table 5. Tourist arrivals and overnight stays, rural tourist households, Republic of Serbia, 2014-2019.

Years	Total Arrivals	Arrivals RTHs	% in total arrivals	Overnight Stays	Overnight stays RTHs	% in total overnight stays
2014	2.192.268	164	0.01	6.086.275	502	0.01
2015	2.437.165	1.523	0.06	6.651.852	4.910	0.07
2016	2.753.591	4.335	0.16	7.533.739	14.497	0.19
2017	3.085.866	5.061	0.16	8.325.144	16.040	0.19
2018	3.430.522	5.584	0.16	9.336.103	15.039	0.16
2019	3.689.983	8.529	0.23	10.073.299	24.677	0.24

Source: Authors, based on Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Serbia, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020

It can be noticed that in the entire observed period, RTHs record a very low share. Table 6. analyzes the data on the capacity utilization of rural tourist households. The data in the Table 6. indicate a very low level of RTHs capacity utilization on an annual basis. However, the maximum capacity, which is assumed here when calculating the number of possible overnight stays, is not possible in practice and it would be more realistic to start from the so-called working capacity.

Table 6. Number of overnight stays, number of beds, average number of overnight stays per bed, number of possible overnight stays and utilization of accommodation capacities RTHs, Serbia, 2014-2019.

Year	Number of overnight stays	Foreign	Number of beds	Average number of overnight stays per bed	Number of possible overnight stays	% in capacity utilization
1	2	3	4	5 (2:4)	6 (4 x 365)	7 (2:6 x 100)
2014	502	43	344	1.5	125.560	0.4
2015	4.910	708	997	4.9	363.905	1.3
2016	14.497	804	1.540	9.4	562.100	2.6
2017	16.040	727	1.723	9.3	628.895	2.6
2018	15.039	994	1.680	9.0	613.200	2.5
2019	24.677	2.837	1.732	14.2	632.180	3.9

Source: Authors, based on Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Serbia, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020

If, due to the seasonal nature of the demand for rural tourism, it is assumed that the working capacity is 4 months or 120 days, then, for example, in 2018, the number of beds 1.680 would be multiplied by 120 days and 201.600 possible overnight stays would be obtained. In that case, the percentage of capacity utilization would be 7.5 (15.039: 201.600 x 100). Using the data from the table, it is possible to calculate *the days of full capacity utilization* (*% capacity utilization x 365: 100*). Thus, this indicator in 2017, for example, is 9.5 days (2.6 x 365: 100) and means that during 2017, all accommodation capacities in the RTHs in Serbia were occupied for 9 days, and vacant for the remaining 356 days. In 2018, this indicator is 9.1 days, and 14.2 days in 2019. Although, the

analyzed indicators show a trend of growth, they are still at an unsatisfactory level. It can also be noted that the development of tourism in the RTHs relies primarily on domestic demand. The participation of foreign guests, although on the increase in the observed period, can be assessed as modest (for example, in 2018 it amounts to about 7% in the total number of nights in RTHs, and in 2019 about 12%). The following tables (Table 7. and Table 8.) discuss the arrivals and overnight stays of tourists by categories of accommodation.

Table 7. Tourist arrivals at rural tourist households, by household categories, Serbia, 2014-2019.

Year	4*		3*		2*		1*		Total
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	
2014	5	3.05	94	57.32	6	3.66	59	35.98	164
2015	72	4.73	746	48.98	575	37.75	130	8.54	1.523
2016	351	8.10	3.492	80.55	492	11.35	-	-	4.335
2017	1.909	37.72	2.495	49.30	657	12.98	-	-	5.061
2018	1.231	22.05	3.718	66.58	519	9.29	116	2.08	5.584
2019	1.859	21.80	4.134	48.47	2.012	23.59	524	6.14	8.529
Total:	5.427	21.54	14.679	58.26	4.261	16.91	829	3.29	25.196

Source: Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Serbia, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020

The largest number of arrivals in the observed period was realized in RTHs middle category (three-star), followed by households with four stars. The lowest number of arrivals was recorded in the lowest category accommodation. In the last six years, a total of 25,196 arrivals were realized, in which three-star households participated with about 58%; four-star with about 21%; two-star with about 17% and one-star with about 3%. The average annual number of arrivals in the observed period is about 4,199 arrivals. Similar conclusions can be drawn when it comes to overnight stays (Table 10).

Table 8. Tourist overnight stays in rural tourist households, by household categories, Serbia, 2014-2019.

Year	4*		3*		2*		1*		Total
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	
2014	20	3.98	350	69.72	6	1.20	126	25.10	502
2015	323	6.58	2.693	54.85	1.585	32.28	309	6.29	4.910
2016	1.161	8.01	11.610	80.09	1.726	11.91	-	-	14.497
2017	5.306	33.08	7.949	49.56	2.785	17.36	-	-	16.040
2018	3.472	23.09	9.064	60.27	2.239	14.89	264	1.76	15.039
2019	4.575	18.54	12.419	50.33	6.118	24.79	1.565	6.34	24.677
Total:	14.857	16.94	44.085	58.26	14.459	19.11	2.264	2.99	75.665

Source: Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Serbia, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020

Note: table created by the author

In the entire observed period, the largest number of overnight stays was realized in three-star households (about 58%), followed by four-star households (about 17%). The

lowest number of overnight stays was realized in one-star facilities (about 3%). The average number of nights per year is about 12,611 nights.

Conclusions

The development of tourism in rural households and farms has multiple significance, not only for tourism, but for the entire rural population and the economic development of rural areas.

The monitoring of the trends of selected indicators of rural development of Serbia (tourists' arrivals, tourists' arrivals by household categories, household categories and accommodation facilities) indicates generally the positive tendencies recorded in the period of six years (2014-2019). In the development of rural tourism in Serbia, rural tourist households have a unique character and significance that distinguishes them from other facilities that also participate in meeting the tourist needs in rural areas. However, their share in the total accommodation offer, as well as the results of the realized turnover can be assessed as modest. The results of the research in the paper indicate low tourist turnover and low capacity utilization rate of rural tourist households on an annual basis. The analysis conducted in this paper is based mostly on quantitative indicators of rural development, which can be singled out as a key limitation of the research.

However, according to the research, a large number of resources in rural areas are not developed and do not contribute to the development of tourism. In the area of accommodation capacities, a lack of constructed facilities was noticed, as well as international standards and quality guarantees. This research also indicates that categorization is inadequate and it is necessary to estimate the point to which legal and administrative procedures reached in recognizing new forms of accommodation in rural tourism in Serbia. From the above, it can be concluded that the basic hypothesis of the research H1 has been confirmed.

Seasonality plays an important role in tourist business survivability and sustainability and it is also a significant factor for rural households involved in tourism. The problems related to the pronounced seasonality which reflects unfavorably on the occupancy of accommodation capacities in rural areas were also pointed out. The average occupancy of rural units per year is only 4%, which is very low compared to 21% in other accommodation units.

The need for improvement, standardization and diversification of rural accommodation, food and beverage supply and other services, but also for the so-called structured experiences of rural tourism based on activities, accommodation and built facilities was emphasized. Minimum standards also need to be determined in rural accommodation development and in concordance with international minimum standards.

For any further development of Serbian rural tourism it is necessary to support for start-up and investment in non-agricultural activities in rural areas especially in rural

accommodation, shops, restaurants, tours. It is necessary to solve the problem of seasonality in and ensure capacity utilization even out of season. Minimum standards also need to be determined in rural accommodation development and in concordance with international minimum standards.

The current global health crisis (Covid-19), has further strengthened the need for people to stay away from crowds and big cities. In the last two years rural tourism is going through changes due to the Covid-19 pandemic and as a result there have been sudden changes in the demand for accommodation and stays in rural destinations in Serbia. Restrictions increased domestic tourism, especially in rural areas due to the fact that these areas have cleaner air, a small population density and risk of infection is minimal. It is assumed that the Covid-19 pandemic will continue to support the cultural, environmental, ecologic and socio-demographic, as well as economic sustainability of rural areas in Serbia.

When it comes to the development of rural tourism in the future, efforts should be focused on further improving the quality of supply, in line with the observed increased demand for middle and higher category accommodation and marketing instruments to attract certain target groups of tourists to make better use of existing facilities. The mainstay of development should continue to be domestic demand from urban areas. Having in mind the international trends and Covid-19 crisis appropriate measures should be taken aimed at increasing the quality, authentic accommodation capacities that present the local cultural identity of rural areas, the preservation of which is the guarantor of the development of this type of tourism.

Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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