
SEASONALITY AND RURALITY – SECOND HOMES AND TOURISM IN RURAL AREAS OF SERBIA

Aleksandra Terzić¹, Ana Jovičić Vuković², Biljana Petrevska³

*Corresponding author E-mail: dr.ana.jovicic@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The study investigates the growing phenomenon of second homes in rural Serbia and its implications for tourism development. By analyzing the geographical distribution of second homes and their relationship to the territorial capital, the study contributes to the understanding of rural tourism dynamics. The research identifies regions with high concentrations of second homes, often overlapping with attractive natural areas and renowned tourist centers. This overlap with peak tourist seasons intensifies environmental and social pressures on already fragile rural areas. To mitigate these pressures and promote sustainable tourism development, the study advocates for region-specific policies, improved infrastructure and the implementation of sustainable tourism practices. By leveraging second homes as potential rural tourism accommodations, policymakers can support local communities, lesser the environmental disturbance and promote responsible tourism.

Introduction

The trends of abandoning rural spaces and extreme population concentration in urban areas have been experienced worldwide. Throughout Europe, particularly in Southeast Europe, rural problems are numerous and notably severe due to unfavorable socio-economic trends (Chambers, 2006; Errington, 1994; Lipton, 1980; Whitby & Willis, 2017; White, 2012; Petrevska, Terzić, 2020; Ruiz-Real et al., 2020). Here, strong negative migratory trends lead to an aging population and the exodus of young people, resulting in the depopulation and abandonment of rural areas (Ruiz-Real et al., 2020).

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- 1 Aleksandra Terzić, Senior Research Associate, Geographical Institute „Jovan Cvijić“, Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Đure Jakšića 9, 11000 Belgrade, Serbia, E-mail: a.terzic@gi.sanu.ac.rs, ORCID ID: (<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0272-696X>)
 - 2 Ana Jovičić Vuković, Professor of applied studies and Senior Research Associate, Novi Sad School of Business, Vladimira Perića Valtera 4, 21000 Novi Sad, Serbia, E-mail: dr.ana.jovicic@gmail.com, ORCID ID (<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0022-674X>)
 - 3 Biljana Petrevska, Full Professor, Faculty of Tourism and Business Logistics, Goce Delcev Univerity, Stip, Krste Misirkov 10, Stip 2000, North Macedonia, E-mail: biljana.petrevska@ugd.edu.mk, ORCID ID: (<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1238-4158>)

To survive, rural areas must adopt a model of integrated and sustainable development that leverages local resources and creates economic incentives. This approach should capitalize on decentralization trends and emerging sectors, such as leisure and tourism, which are increasingly in demand (Butler Flora & Flora, 2018; Ruiz-Real et al., 2020).

Seasonal migratory flows driven by the vacation and recreational needs of the urban population, direct a significant number of people towards rural areas. This shift has prompted the exploration of rural tourism as a fast-growing economic activity that employs a bottom-up development approach to re-integrate rural areas into the regional economic system (Baoren, 2011; Ferrari et al., 2018; Ruiz-Real et al., 2020), initiating a diversification process in these regions (Petrevska & Terzić, 2020). The overlooked benefits of rural living have regained attention, largely driven by the digital technology revolution. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this shift, fundamentally altering how people live, work, and communicate. Many regions in Europe are experiencing a re-population of rural areas, particularly through a “retirement transition,” where senior age groups (both pre- and post-retirement) seek higher quality of life in scenic rural areas, either as permanent or seasonal residents (Stockdale, 2006). This trend has opened new opportunities for rural areas, enhancing their appeal as desirable living spaces (e.g., second homes) and as economic assets through rural tourism (rural tourist households), which is experiencing growing demand.

Since the 1970s, the importance of studying the spatial distribution of second homes (vacation homes) for spatial planning has been well recognized. Research has highlighted the significance of geographic, social, and environmental factors in explaining the regional concentration of vacation homes (Bell, 1977; Ragatz, 1970; Popović, 1999). This study examines the transformation of rural areas in Serbia in relation to tourism development, focusing on the distribution patterns of second homes primarily used for recreation and vacations. Its objective is to assess the development of territorial capital in attractive Serbian rural areas with a high concentration of second homes and to evaluate their tourism development perspectives. The paper explores the factors driving this trend and its effects on rural areas, analyzing the key patterns and influences at a macro level.

Literature review

Second homes are traditionally defined as households without permanent residents, often located in rural areas (Åkerlund et al., 2015; Slätmo et al., 2019). These properties, motivated by leisure and recreation, provide a home in a natural environment. The trend of second-home (residential) tourism involves people purchasing or renting properties in destinations that are attractive to tourists to spend extended periods there (Nazlı, 2019). Importantly, second-home users and owners are typically urban residents seeking to enhance their quality of life through recreational tourism, choosing less densely populated, yet developed, areas with greater access to nature (Strandell and Hall, 2015; Qviström et al., 2016).

Second home use reflects a desire for a temporary (seasonal) shift from an urban to a rural lifestyle (Adamiak et al., 2017; Ellingsen, 2016; Müller, Hoogendoorn, 2013; Åkerlund et al., 2015). In some instances, a second home is associated with long-term intentions regarding leisure, retirement, or lifestyle migration, but can also be linked to a family property or a region of origin (Åkerlund et al., 2015). The primary motivations for second home expansion include the need for social bonding with family and friends, escaping stressful urban life, accessing nature and recreational activities, but also investment opportunities in tourism (Ellingsen, 2016; Hoogendoorn, Marjavaara, 2018; Hall, Müller, 2018). Its proliferation is typically associated with the natural geographic attractiveness and cultural models of a society, highly influenced by social and economic development.

Temporary populations, such as second home users, play a crucial role in tourism planning. In areas with low numbers of permanent inhabitants and a high number of second homes, the temporary population helps maintain the social fabric and demand for services, cultural, and economic activities that might otherwise vanish (Hall, Muller, 2018). Additionally, second home users often provide much-needed accommodation in rural areas, which generally lack hotels and other tourist facilities. Tourism activities have significant potential to mitigate negative migration trends and support rural development by generating income through tourism services (Perić et al., 2020). Assessing and evaluating both the internal and external capital of a tourism destination is a crucial first step in effective tourism planning (Dimitrov et al., 2020; Petrevska, Terzić, 2020; Terzić et al., 2019). Rural tourism is largely driven by small family businesses and entrepreneurship, and is closely related to the expansion of second homes (Terzić et al., 2020).

Rural diversification and rural tourism – the case of Serbia

Serbia, geographically, is characterized by large rural areas, which constitute approximately 70% of the country's land. Due to historical and developmental processes that encouraged mass migration, these areas have become less inhabited and less preferable for living, resulting in around 58% of Serbia's population being urbanized as of 2020. In this context, rural tourism can be observed as a vital driver of socio-economic development (Cvijanović, Ružić, 2017). With its extensive rural landscapes and attractive natural and cultural resources, rural tourism offers significant opportunities for diversifying rural economies and revitalizing small rural communities. Among the relatively small number of true rural tourists in Serbia, there is a considerable number of seasonal travelers and second-homeowners who continuously use their rural households for personal needs and often open their doors to family, friends, and tourists. The transformation of rural households into rural tourism households is further encouraged by national subsidies aimed at promoting rural diversification. These subsidies come from both national sources and EU funds, such as the IPARD (Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance in Rural Development) program, specifically through Measure 7.

Rural tourism in Serbia is recognized as a significant contributor to rural development by increasing employment, providing alternative income sources, diversifying the rural economy, and revitalizing various economic sectors (Demirović et al., 2017; Gajić et al., 2018, 2020; Terzić et al., 2020). Terzić et al. (2020) indicate that the spill-over effect⁴of tourism activities and small-tourism businesses initiated by second homeowners strongly impacts the diversification levels in rural areas through their direct engagement in providing tourist services. Positive spill-over effects of rural tourism and second-home expansion include job creation, increased incomes, infrastructure development, knowledge diffusion, and tourism promotion. The link between rural diversification and tourism, especially with the growth of second homes, has been also confirmed by Terzić et al. (2020). The authors argue that the greater diversification of the rural economy enhances the attractiveness of villages for both seasonal and permanent living, contributing to the revitalization and long-term vitality of traditional peripheral communities. However, over-tourism can lead to negative consequences, such as resource depletion (over-exploitation and degradation of natural resources), gentrification, increased pollution, and an over-reliance on the service industry. This focus on tourism often results in the abandonment of traditional agriculture, making rural areas more vulnerable to economic shifts.

Rural tourism destinations in Serbia have recorded consistent growth in tourist demand, with rural tourism seen as an important factor stimulating the diversification of agricultural economic activities on rural households. However, non-agricultural profitable activities are present in only 12.4% of total rural households, and the share of rural tourism in such activities across villages in Serbia is only 0.66%. A relatively low share of rural households is involved in tourism with over a quarter of these concentrated in the Zlatibor district (Bogdanov, Babović, 2014). Popović (1999; 2005) notes that leisure and recreation settlements are particularly concentrated and dispersed across lower mountainous regions, near spa centers, lakes, and especially along the Danube area. For example, in the Grocka-Kladovo section of the Danube, there are 49 settlements specifically developed for holidays and recreation, most of which have access to water (Popović, 2005). Numerous studies have examined second homes and seasonal settlements with leisure and recreational functions in the context of tourism development, though most were conducted as case studies. More recently, new technologies have enabled the combination of statistical and geospatial data, providing deeper insights into various factors influencing the rural tourism development process.

Tourist-like activities are especially noticeable in areas with a high concentration of second homes, many of which are not officially designated as tourist accommodations but are common in rural parts of Serbia. This pattern reflects strong seasonal migration

4 Spill-over effects in rural economies occur when economic activities or development in one sector have unintended (positive or negative) consequences on other sectors, playing often a significant role in shaping the overall economic landscape of rural areas, allowing design of policies and strategies that maximize the benefits of economic growth while minimizing potential negative impacts (OECD, 2017).

toward these attractive rural areas. A study of the geographical distribution of second homes shows a considerable overlap with the most attractive tourist zones and protected areas (Fig. 1). This overlap indicates considerable physical pressure on these spatially limited rural areas, which experience distinct seasonal fluctuations. As a result, both the functional and visual characteristics of these destinations are altered, threatening the natural environment and social structure that are vital for high-quality tourism. This situation endangers the sustainability of these already fragile rural areas.

Research methodology

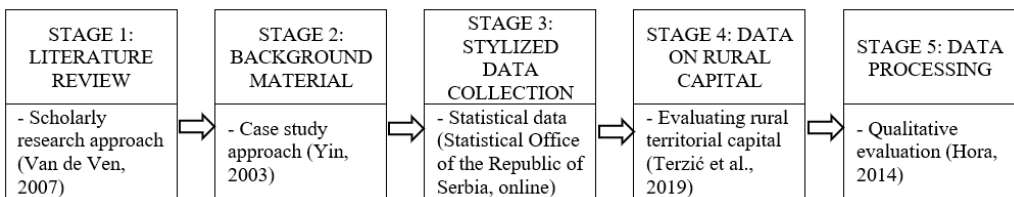
This research addresses the following research questions (RQs):

RQ₁: What is the level of development of rural territorial capital of the regions?

RQ₂: What is the geographical distribution of second homes in the context of rural tourism potentials?

The regional aspect in Serbia, concerning the rural areas, includes the following regions: Belgrade, Vojvodina, West Serbia and Šumadija, South and East Serbia and Kosovo and Metohija⁵. To meet the RQs, a combined methodological approach (Sharpley, 2014) is applied (Fig. 1).

Figure 1. Research methodology



Source: Authors

The first stage integrates theoretical and practical knowledge, drawing from the scholarly research approach (Van de Ven, 2007). This stage involves a literature review on the concepts of second homes, rural tourism, and tourism activities impacting the development of rural areas. The second stage employs a case study approach (Yin, 2003) to provide background material on rural diversification and rural tourism in Serbia. In the third stage, stylized data on rural tourism are collected from secondary sources. The analysis predominantly utilizes data from the national censuses of 2012 and 2022, as well as statistical yearbooks available on the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia's website (<https://www.stat.gov.rs>) applying data visualization using QGIS 3.12 software. The evaluation method of rural territorial capital was also

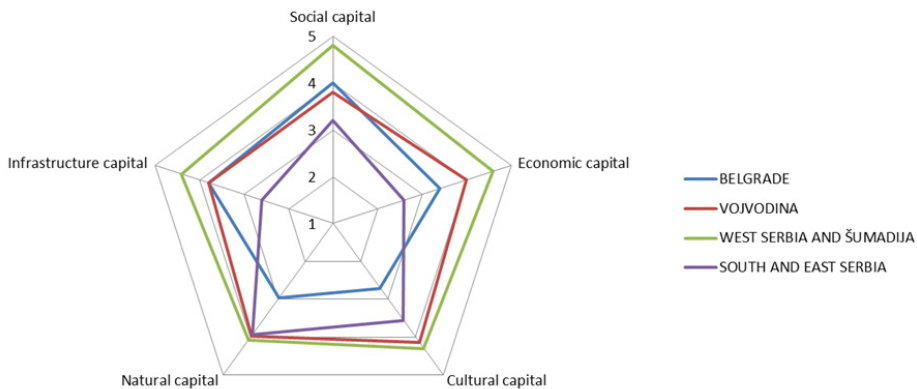
⁵ Kosovo and Metohija region has a specific status which is observed without prejudice in line with United Nations Security Council 1244/1999 Resolution. Due to long-lasting unfavorable political situation statistical data on the population and dwellings in this region are lacking. Therefore, this region was excluded from the study.

applied (Terzić et al., 2019). The final stage involves qualitative data processing based on expert judgment which facilitates empirical generalization and summarization of the findings. The focus is placed on the analysis of geographical distribution of second homes for tourism and recreation purposes, as well as the number of accommodation units classified as “rural tourism households.” The data obtained were analyzed, and suggestions for the multifunctional use of rural areas with proposition for conversion of the second homes into tourist accommodation units.

Assessment of territorial capital development

Rural territorial capital is a holistic concept that includes both the tangible and intangible assets that support the development and resilience of rural areas by examining the complex interplay of natural, social, cultural, economic, and infrastructural (institutional) resources (Camagni, 2006). In this line, natural capital refers to the physical environment, including land, water, biodiversity, and climate. Social capital involves the networks of relationships and cooperation within rural communities. Cultural capital consists of cultural heritage, shared values, and traditions that shape a rural community’s identity. Human capital relates to the skills, knowledge, and education of the rural population, which are essential for economic growth, innovation, and adaptability. Finally, infrastructural (institutional) capital encompasses the physical infrastructure, formal and informal institutions, governance structures, and community action groups that underpin the social and economic base of rural areas.

Figure 2. Rural territorial capital in Serbia, regional aspect



Source: Authors

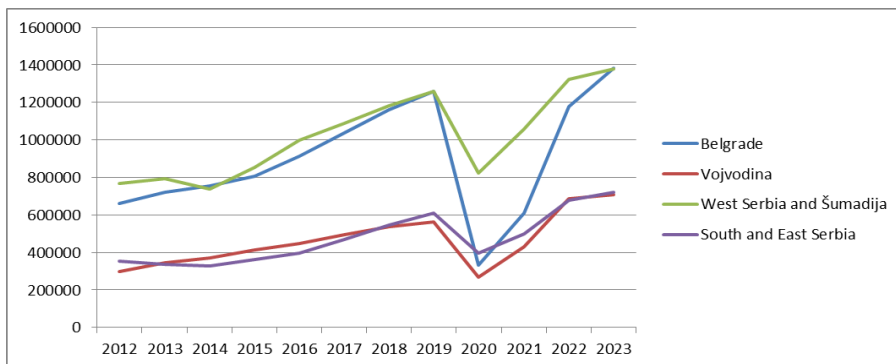
Figure 2 presents the results of investigating the development levels of social, economic, cultural, natural, and infrastructure capital in the context of rural areas. The data indicate that regions in Serbia, including Belgrade, Vojvodina, West Serbia and Šumadija, and South and East Serbia, exhibit varying levels of territorial capital development. Bogdanov and Janković (2013) investigated the levels of tourism

development in different regions of Serbia through the lens of territorial capital and identified significant disparities. In the Belgrade region, rural areas lack natural and cultural capital, but this is compensated by strong social and economic capital. High entrepreneurial potential has led to the creation of popular suburban weekend zones in areas like Barajevo, Ripanj, Vrčin, Rajča, Grocka, and Pančevo, which feature a variety of tourist facilities. The Vojvodina region, known for its highly productive agriculture and strong economy, has sufficient natural and cultural capital to become an attractive rural tourism destination. However, aside from a few attractive areas (such as Fruška Gora Mt., Delibato Sand, the Danube area, Palić Lake, and Vršac Mt.), the region suffers from inadequate infrastructure and low interest in tourism development among local communities. In contrast, the South and East Serbia region boasts abundant, relatively undisturbed natural and cultural resources, but lacks the social capital, infrastructure, and investment needed to fully develop its tourism potential.

In this line, West Serbia and Šumadija region emerged as the leading rural tourism destination, largely due to its social, economic, and cultural capital, coupled with relatively good infrastructure and proximity to Belgrade. However, the high concentration of tourism facilities in this region has severe impact on the quality of the natural environment. In some cases, like in Zlatibor district, this has led to extremely intensive and unplanned urban development. The already intensive construction activity in the weekend zones of Divčibare, Tara, Zlatibor, and Zlatar Mts. significantly increased following the opening of the “Miloš Veliki” (A2) highway, which connects Belgrade and Čačak, reducing travel time to these destinations.

The latter indicates the need for different policies to develop rural tourism in each region.

Figure 3. Tourist arrivals in Serbia, regional distribution 2012-2022.



Source: Statistical office of Republic of Serbia, 2024. (<https://data.stat.gov.rs/>)

As seen in Figure 3, the concentration of tourists in Serbia is primarily focused on urban zones, with Belgrade accounting for one-third of all tourist visits (33%). Western Serbia and Šumadija collectively attract another third (32.9%), with the Zlatibor district alone drawing over 12.5% of tourist arrivals and approximately 40% of the total nights spent in Serbia. In these areas, rural tourism plays a more prominent role, though it

remains a highly seasonal activity, peaking in spring and summer (May-August), which significantly impacts rural environments.

The most common accommodation types used in rural tourism are rural households, apartments, and guest houses, with the highest concentration of these facilities found in western Serbia (Borović et al., 2022). A rural tourism household is typically a private residence or farm that provides accommodations and other services to tourists seeking authentic experiences in a rural setting (Albacete-Saez et al., 2007).

According to the Statistical Office of Serbia, in 2020, there were 631 rural tourist households with a total of 1,500 beds. These accommodations were predominantly located in mountain destinations (243), other tourist destinations/towns (312), spas (20), and other locations (56). In 2020, such facilities accommodated 11,355 domestic and 318 foreign tourists. Over the years, the number of rural tourist households and tourists evidenced in rural areas has steadily increased. By 2022, there was a significant growth in rural tourist households, with 712 households offering 2,101 accommodation units and 4,857 beds. This represents an increase of 112 new rural facilities and a tripling of available beds within two years. In 2022, these accommodations hosted a total of 29,119 tourists (including 6,735 foreign tourists), accounting for 117,320 nights spent (21,859 nights spent by foreign tourists). Despite continuous growth, rural tourism in Serbia remains primarily oriented towards domestic tourist market, that constitutes about 80% of the total demand. However, when compared to the 288,883 registered second homes in 2022, the 712 rural tourist households seem relatively insignificant. This suggests that “second-home tourism” currently dominates rural tourism in Serbia.

Analysis of geographical distribution of second homes

Second homes are a notable feature of rural areas in Serbia, with a relatively low share in urban areas (0.6-2.8% of total housing) where they serve almost exclusively as weekend homes. The former Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia, despite being one of the poorest countries in the region, recorded approximately 33,200 second homes in 1981, with 38.4% of these located in Serbia, placing it among the top socialist countries for second-home ownership (Gosar, 1989). The relatively high number of second homes can be attributed to the country’s attractive natural landscapes and the mass urban migration that followed lifestyle changes in the industrial population after World War II. Additionally, Yugoslavia’s unique form of socialism allowed for real estate investments, even during periods of hyperinflation (Gosar, 1989).

Table 1. Second-home distribution in Serbia in 2011

Census 2012	Serbia		Belgrade		Vojvodina		West Serbia and Šumadija		East and South Serbia	
	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
Total Housing	3231931		734909		848064		903139		745819	
Seasonal	201519		25789		38430		80031		57269	
% of seasonal	6.24		3.51		4.53		8.86		7.68	
Settlement type	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural

Census 2012	Serbia		Belgrade		Vojvodina		West Serbia and Šumadija		East and South Serbia	
	% in total housing	56.9	43.1	80.7	19.3	59.2	40.8	44.1	55.9	46.4
Vacation and recreation (%)	1.8	10.4	0.6	15.4	2.5	6.7	2.9	11.8	1.8	9.9
Seasonal agriculture (%)	0.1	1.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.8	0.0	2.7

Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2013

The 2011 census recorded a total of 201,519 second homes, accounting 6.24% of total housing units. In rural areas, the share of second homes in total housing is significantly higher, with a outlined tourism function (vacation and recreation), ranging from 6.76% in Vojvodina to 15.46% in Belgrade region. In the West Serbia and Šumadija region, second homes constitute 13.55% of rural housing (only 1.8% used for seasonal agriculture), while in South and East Serbia, they make up 12.61% of total housing (2.7% used for seasonal agriculture). In 2011, among second homes used for tourism and recreation 81.1% were located in rural settings (Table 1).

More recent data, from 2022 (Table 2) indicate a further expansion of second homes in Serbia, reaching 8% of total housing (2.4% in urban areas and 15.8% in rural areas). Compared to a decade ago, the increase of 1.76% seems modest, but the most dynamic rise in second homes occurred in rural areas, in average by 5.4%, most notably in West Serbia and Šumadija (6.9%) and South and East Serbia (6.6%). However, significant differences exist in the patterns of second home expansion. In West Serbia and Šumadija, the growth was primarily driven by the construction of new second homes (weekend settlements), while in South and East Serbia it was a direct consequence of rural abandonment and the spontaneous conversion from permanent living to seasonal use. Consequently, there are large concentrations of second homes in the suburban zones of capital cities and regional centers. The greatest concentration is evidenced in the Zlatibor district, accounting for 18.5% of total households. Observing rural areas only, Zlatibor district leads with over 28.3% of second homes in total rural housing. One most note that in the last decade the number of second homes in Zlatibor district doubled, jumping from 14,403 (2012) to remarkable 30,335 units in 2022.

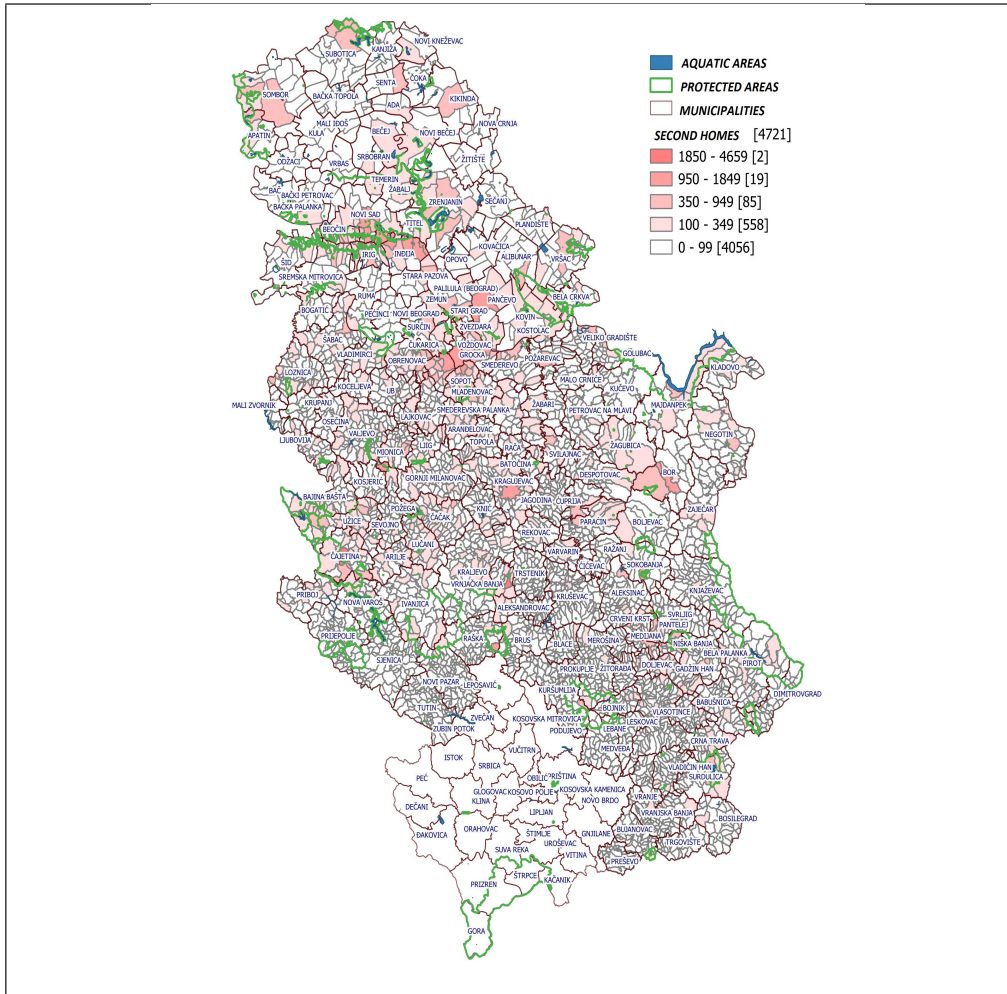
Large concentration of second homes is present in Kolubara (17.3%), Moravica (14.3%), Srem (10.9%) and Raška (10%) districts. Those concentrations in rural areas are much higher (Moravica - 25.4%, Kolubara - 24.6%, Šumadija - 20.9%, and Srem district - 17.3%). Medium concentrations are present in rural municipalities of Raška (14%), Pomoravlje (13.6%), Mačva (12.3%), and Rasina (11.9%) districts. The lowest share of second homes in total housing is in North Bačka (2.5%) and North Banat (3.2%) district.

Table 2. Second home regional distribution in Serbia in 2022

Census	2022	Serbia		Belgrade		Vojvodina		West Serbia and Šumadija		South and East Serbia	
Total Housing		3613352		868752		894275		1013756		836569	
Second homes		288883		34924		46970		121693		85296	
% of Second homes		7.99		4.00		5.25		12.00		10.20	
Regional distribution of Second homes (%)		100		12.09		16.26		42.13		29.53	
		Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
% Total Housing		58.3	41.8	81.7	18.3	61.3	38.7	45.2	54.8	46.4	53.6
% of Seasonal		2.4	15.8	0.7	18.1	2.8	9.1	4.0	18.7	2.9	16.6

Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2022

Figure 4. Spatial distribution of second homes in Serbia



Source: Authors

At the regional level, Vojvodina shows low concentration of second homes in rural areas (9.7%), particularly in Northern Banat (2.5%), Northern Bačka (3.4%), Middle Banat (6.3%), and Western Bačka district (6.5%). Municipalities with highest number of second homes are: Čajetina (8,376 units), Inđija (7,726), Niš (6,660), Grocka (6,622), Valjevo (6,194), Čačak (6,005), Sopot (5,902), Barajevo (5,848), Kragujevac (5,449), Novi Sad (5,434), Užice (5,306), Vrnjačka banja (5,286), and Obrenovac (5,006).

Discussion

Analysis reveals a widespread prevalence of seasonal tourism-related activities across all Serbian regions. Figure 4 underscores the concentration of second homes in suburban areas, established tourist centers and protected nature areas. Belgrade, with its large population and economic prominence, is the primary demand center for such housing units. This urban-rural migration trend is evident in the concentration of second homes in suburban zones of Belgrade regions, where Avala and Kosmaj Mts., as well as coastal areas of Danube and Sava rivers have a high density of such units. Notable concentrations of second homes are present in Grocka, Vrščin, Ripanj, Barajevo, Ralja, Surčin, Borča and Pančevo.

In Vojvodina, although second homes have more modest share in total rural households compared to other regions, there is a significant concentration of such housing in Srem districts, especially in Inđija and Fruška Gora area. Despite efforts to develop rural tourism in Srem, challenges such as accommodation shortages and workforce scarcity persist, and tourism is often viewed as a secondary income source (Kosanović et al., 2024:449). High concentration of second homes are to be found also in Petrovaradin, Beočin, Irig, Sremski Karlovci, and along the Danube banks. Additionally, areas around Sombor, Apatin, Subotica (Palić Lake), Vršac, and Pančevo (Delibato Sand) have a significant presence of second homes.

In West Serbia and Šumadija, second homes account for 13.55% of rural households, exceeding 15% in certain districts (Kolubara, Šumadija, Zlatibor, and Moravica). This region, known for its natural beauty and established tourist centers (Zlatibor, Kopaonik, Tara, Zlatar, Divčibare) has the highest tourist concentration (45.3%) and has witnessed substantial rural tourism development.

South and East Serbia also have a significant number of second homes (12.61%) with great concentrations near Bor (Brestovačka banja), Rtanj, Sokobanja, and Pirot. In particular, in Pirot district second homes constitute 25.7% of total housing due to extreme depopulation but also attractive potentials of the Balkan Mts. Niš, the largest city in the region, also has a notable presence of second homes around Niška banja. Second homes in Braničevo district are set in proximity to the Danube and Mt. Miroč while in Zaječar it is concentrated on Rtanj Mt. and Sokobanja. However, southern parts of this region seem less attractive to tourists and prone to extreme depopulation processes (Toplica, Nišava, Jablanica and Pčinja districts) with few exceptions around renowned spa centers. In these regions, the higher share of secondary housing indicates

shift from permanent to seasonal settlements. Municipalities with a high concentration of agriculture-related second homes are Žagubica, Pirot, Zaječar, Negotin, Leskovac, Vranje and Boljevac, all located in the southeastern parts of Serbia, considered the poorest in the country.

The use of second homes in Serbia is primarily for personal purposes during the holiday season, which coincides with the peak tourist season (June-August). This creates intense pressure on the natural environment within a relatively short timeframe, particularly during spring holidays like Easter and May 1st, as well as during the summer months (June-August). The demand for tourist facilities in attractive rural areas can become strained, not only due to increased demand but also because many second-home owners - especially those who rent out their properties - tend to prioritize personal use, such as for family gatherings. Despite discrepancies between official statistics and actual visitation numbers, the economic impact of rural tourism in Serbia remains less significant compared to its social effects. With proper planning that aligns with the common interests of local communities, these tourist or tourist-like activities have the potential to enhance community well-being and sustain vitality over the long term.

Tourism's Impact on Rural Areas

Introducing tourism to rural areas through the provision of tourist services and activities can have both positive and negative impacts on a destination. On the positive side, tourism can enhance local resources, strengthen communities, and contribute to the resilience and sustainability of rural areas (Baoren, 2011; Ferrari et al., 2018; Ruiz-Real et al., 2020). It promotes local economic development by increasing the attractiveness of the environment and encouraging lifestyle changes (Petrevska, Terzić, 2020). Additionally, tourism stimulates the local economy, leading to growth in both economic and socio-cultural sectors, improved services, infrastructure investment, and better living standards. Rural tourism also plays a key role in multifunctional agriculture, offering a path to rural economic diversification and enhancing the marketing of agri-food products (Cvijanović, Ružić, 2017; Perić et al., 2020). This leads to positive economic diversity and peripheral growth in rural areas (Åkerlund et al., 2015). Notably, Gornji Milanovac stands out among Serbian municipalities with the highest number of categorized rural tourism households (Cvijanović, Ružić, 2017; Borović et al., 2022). On the negative side, tourism can lead to issues such as the gentrification of rural spaces, disruption of local cultures, rising housing prices, and increased living costs, all of which can strain local resources. Uncontrolled or unsustainable development can alter the visual and cultural identity of rural destinations and disrupt the functioning of local communities, as has been observed in some villages in the Čajetina municipality.

To implement tourism-related actions effectively, it is important to assess potential impacts based on the unique environmental, economic, and social conditions of each rural area. Rebuilding rural capacities is essential to preventing emigration and further degradation of these areas in Serbia. This involves renewing rural infrastructure, increasing the availability of public services, diversifying economic activities,

supporting small and medium-sized enterprises, encouraging rural tourism services, and promoting local knowledge initiatives in areas like organic agriculture and food safety (Drobnjković et al., 2021). For villages with declining populations and limited economic viability, such as those in South and East Serbia, a networking approach is recommended to support remaining communities and improve their quality of life. In demographically and economically stable areas, such as Šumadija and West Serbia, efforts should focus on stimulating both agriculture and the service sector, improving access to public services, and enhancing tourist infrastructure and cultural amenities to prevent youth migration. Organized rural tourism and creative industries can also help counter negative stereotypes about rural life, fostering demographic renewal (Rikalović, Molnar & Nikić, 2016).

Community development is another critical aspect of rural tourism. By stimulating entrepreneurship, creating jobs, and driving local production, tourism can meet the growing demand for high-quality food and crafts, relying on local networks. Additionally, attracting tourists to rural areas often brings greater attention to environmental preservation and local heritage conservation, which are vital to the sustainability of tourism.

Second homes, which can easily be converted into rural tourism households, offer the potential for additional income and can also contribute to revitalizing local economies. However, successful transitions require careful planning and a balanced approach. Potential benefits include utilizing existing real estate, renovating and increasing property values, generating additional income, stimulating local investments, and improving the overall appeal of villages without putting undue strain on primary housing markets.

Conclusion

This study explored the interplay between rural development, second homes and rural tourism in Serbia, particularly considering their alignment with the country's rural revitalization strategies. The data presented revealed a spatial distribution of real estate primarily used for leisure and recreation.

The study suggests re-conceptualizing existing rural vacation homes as valuable economic resources for tourism development. To achieve sustainable growth, it proposes reducing the pressure on high-concentration zones by discouraging the unnecessary construction of new tourist accommodations in popular areas, thus mitigating overexploitation and overcrowding. A key strategy is to promote the spatial dispersion of tourists into surrounding rural areas by giving an "economic function" to existing rural real estate, such as converting second homes into small guesthouses or rural tourism households.

The analysis highlights West Serbia and Šumadija as regions with the highest concentration of second homes and tourists. This uneven distribution raises concerns about the negative impacts of concentrated tourism activity on fragile rural environments, especially when

second-homeowners, along with their families and friends, flock to these destinations at the same time as traditional tourists. The underutilization of second homes outside peak seasons also poses sustainability challenges. Furthermore, the growing demand for tourist rentals can reduce housing availability for permanent residents, driving up housing and living costs. Seasonal tourism variability leads to inconsistent occupancy rates, placing additional strain on the natural environment and disrupting the daily lives of local communities. Therefore, a balanced approach that incorporates second-home tourism into broader sustainable development strategies is essential.

The study highlights the significant potential of second homes as a resource for tourism development. However, a strategic and responsible approach is crucial. It prioritizes utilizing existing capital before constructing new facilities and ensures responsible tourism practices that minimize disruption by prioritizing resident well-being and protection of the natural environment. Drawing inspiration from successful West-European models (Austria, Slovenia, Italy) where living in attractive rural setting is considered prestigious, Serbia has the potential to emulate such approach. However, integrated rural development necessitates a well-coordinated, long-term strategy, based on combining traditional practices with modern methods to leverage local resources. There is a need for implementation of effective policies with continuous financial support in encouraging economic diversification to create a more robust rural economy, while enhancing the competitiveness of rural households. Initial steps include significant investments in rural infrastructure and providing access to basic services such as healthcare and education, followed by improving cultural and tourism-related amenities in attractive rural areas.

The study concludes that different policies are required at the regional level in Serbia to facilitate the effective development of rural tourism, with a particular emphasis on the interests of local communities and environmental protection.

The present study is limited in several ways, which should be borne in mind when considering its findings. Future research should address the following points: While the study identified several challenges, including standardisation and effective management of tourism activities, it was limited by the lack of detailed tourism statistics at the settlement level. This impeded a more precise assessment of rural tourism's distribution and impact. Future research will integrate socio-demographic and economic data with geospatial information to provide a more nuanced understanding of the diverse processes shaping rural development, ranging from rural abandonment to tourismification.

Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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