

IS COVID-19 PANDEMIC AFFECTING RURAL TOURISM IN SERBIA?

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Abstract: *Having in mind the importance of rural tourism for economic progress and sustainable development of predominantly agricultural and rural countries, such as Serbia, the authors of this paper discuss the implications of covid-19 pandemic on rural tourism in Serbia from economic, social, environmental and legal standpoint, with the focus on its impact on sustainable development of local rural communities. After analysing the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on global tourism trends, the authors discuss the definition of rural tourism, its positive and negative consequences on both – visitors and locals. Furthermore, the authors provide an insight into current state of rural tourism in Serbia, including the relevant legislative framework regulating the areas of tourism, agriculture and rural development and sustainable development. Finally, the authors examine the effects of covid-19 pandemic on rural tourism in Serbia, through the empirical findings gathered via questionnaire designed for rural tourism services providers in Serbia. Within concluding remarks, the authors highlight key issues in rural tourism that emerged due to Covid-19 pandemic and make suggestions for future development of rural tourism in Serbia despite new challenges and risks on the global level.*

Keywords: *rural tourism, sustainable development, rural communities, Covid-19*

1. INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus disease (Covid-19) pandemic shook the entire world, causing the loss of lives and disruption of livelihoods, which is undermining human well-being on the global level (World Health Organisation, 2020). The negative influence of Covid-19 pandemic is not restricted to human lives loss, but it also produced numerous short and long-term social, political and economic consequences (Farzanegan et al., 2020: 1, in: Luković, Stojković, 2020: 80). The unstoppable spread of Covid-19 caused radical repercussions in the area of global tourism, which has suffered severe consequences (Luković, Stojković, 2020: 82). According to United Nations World Tourism Organisation (hereinafter: UNWTO), in pre-pandemic times, there were 1.5 billion international tourists and millions of employees in tourism sector, including a high share of women. Before the pandemic, tourism represented a key sector in many advanced

and emerging economies and made 50% of total exports for small developing countries (UNWTO, 2021: 2).

After World Health Organisation (hereinafter: WHO) declared the outbreak of pandemic on March 11th 2020, all travel destinations across the world introduced travel restrictions on April 20th 2020 and as of November 11th 2020, altogether 27% of all destinations worldwide kept their borders completely closed for international tourism (UNWTO, 2021; 4). This caused a drastic fall of international tourism, with the decrease of 74% in international tourist arrivals (from 1.5 billion in 2020 to 381 million in 2020) (UNWTO, 2021: 6-7) and a total loss of US \$ 1.3 trillion in tourism exports (UNWTO, 2021: 8). Moreover, measures applied with the intention to prevent the spreading of Covid-19 (including social distance, bans regarding travelling and movement, self-isolation and gathering restrictions) paused global travel tourism as well as leisure activities (Luković, Stojković, 2020: 83).

Covid-19 pandemic undoubtedly affected all tourism branches, including, for example, cultural tourism (Vodanović Lukić, Lukić, 2020: 1), nautical (Kustura, 2020: 27-29), ecotourism (Fletcher, 2020: 42) and, of course, rural tourism. Among them, due to its specific characteristics and the important role it plays in sustainable development of tourism in Serbia, rural tourism in the era of Covid-19 pandemic is in the focus of this paper.

2. METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of the research, the results of which are presented in this paper, the following methods were applied. *Descriptive method* (Williams, 2007: 66) was used to define the theoretical concept of rural tourism. *Secondary analysis* (Johnston, 2014: 62-621) was applied for the purpose of analysing the data depicting current state and importance of rural tourism for sustainable development in Serbia, gathered from the reports of the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia¹. *Doctrinal (black letter) method* (Smits: 2009: 46) was applied to the analysis of normative framework (including laws, bylaws and strategic documents) relevant to the development of rural tourism in Serbia with particular attention given to the measures prescribed because of Covid-19 pandemic. *Qualitative content analysis* (Saldaña, 2011: 57-58) was applied for the purpose of the analysis of media reports about current state of tourism in Serbia, particularly in the field of rural tourism. For the purpose of qualitative research *structured qualitative research interview* (Brinkmann. 2013: 18) was distributed via

¹ Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, <https://www.stat.gov.rs/en-US/>

email to 200 rural tourism services providers in Serbia with the aim to provide the insight into this issue from their perspective. The same interview was applied as a research method for the purpose of data collection via telephone conversation with the rural tourism services providers in Serbia, who did not respond to the email but still expressed willingness to share their experience about the topic.

The sample included the providers of rural tourism services listed on relevant tourism portals in Serbia – Serbian Tourism Association and Vojvodina Tourism Association, with particular focus on those specialized for the promotion of rural tourism: Seoskiturizam.eu, Seoskiturizam.rs and Selo.rs. For the purpose of part of the research, a structured interview was applied as a research method. A questionnaire comprised of ten questions was designed with the intention to explore the changes that rural tourism has undergone in the period of Covid-19 pandemic. The questionnaire is included in Appendix 1.

The insight into current state of rural tourism in Serbia and the impact of Covid-19 on its future development is also analysed from the viewpoint tourism services providers – the owners of rural households providing this type of tourism offer.

3. RURAL TOURISM – DEFINITION AND IMPORTANCE FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Residents of urban areas are increasingly seeking leisure and relaxation in rural areas, enjoying traditional activities (hiking, horse riding, bird watching) and adventure activities (kayaking, snowboarding, windsurfing) (Ayazlar, Arslan Ayazlar, 2015: 167). Rural areas are relevant to tourism development because they are usually poor and lack economic opportunity, but, at the same time, they can offer scenic/cultural/agricultural experiences, providing a tourism asset (Okech et.al., 2012: 41).

Although the interest of tourists in rural destination constantly increasing, unanimously accepted definition of rural tourism has not yet been established. Due to its complex and multi-faceted nature, rural tourism is commonly interpreted as an umbrella concept that includes: 1) ecotourism, 2) nature tourism, 3) farm holidays or agrotourism, 4) activity tourism, 5) adventure tourism, 6) sports tourism, 7) equestrian or equine tourism, 8) cultural tourism, and 9) food and wine tourism (Lane, 2009: 356-357).

According to Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (hereinafter: OECD), rural tourism should be:

- 1) located in rural areas;
- 2) functionally rural, built upon the rural world's special features such as small scale enterprise, open space, contact with nature, heritage, "traditional" societies and "traditional" practices;
- 3) rural in scale (both in terms of buildings and settlements);
- 4) traditional in character, growing slowly and organically, and connected with local families;
- 5) sustainable;
- 6) covering various types of activities that represent the complex pattern of rural environment, economy, and history (OECD, 1994: 14).

When the benefits for local communities are considered, rural tourism increases their participation in the development of tourism and brings wider benefits to rural areas, providing more opportunities for transactions and enterprises (Okech et.al., 2012: 42). It enhances economic growth, employment generation, out-migration, public services' development, infrastructural developments, social contact, and environmental protection (Okech et.al., 2012: 42). Rural tourism also makes remote and non-urban areas more accessible (Ayazlar, Arslan Ayazlar, 2015: 174). It is particularly beneficial for rural economies and society due to providing retention of current jobs, emergence of new workplaces and business opportunities, especially for younger population, service retention, community diversification, strengthening of community's pride, conservation of rural tradition and cultural heritage, encouraging arts and crafts, providing landscape conservation and environmental improvements (Irshad, 2009 in: Ayazlar, Arslan Ayazlar, 2015: 174). Therefore, it can be stated that rural tourism represents a chance for developing countries to revive and strengthen their economies (Cawley, 2009: 313-317), particularly in the countries that have been economically and socially depressed since the 1970s (Ayazlar, Arslan Ayazlar, 2015: 167). This also refers to the economies in transition (mostly the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union), converting from a socialist-type command economy to a market-based economy while undergoing a series of structural transformations with the aim to develop market-based institutions (Trukhachev 2015: 3053).

However, it should also be noted that the development of rural tourism may produce some negative effects as well, such as: conflicts between various activities conducted within a rural environment, numerous ecological problems caused by enhanced ballast and excessive exploitation usage of a rural area, the increase of living costs within a local settlement and the general commercialization of rural areas (Muhi, 2010).

4. RURAL TOURISM IN SERBIA – SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, ECONOMIC AND LEGAL ASPECTS

Serbia represents a country of rural character and it is also one of the most agrarian countries in Europe (Đenadić et al., 2016: 519). The potential of Serbia for the development of rural tourism is rather high (Dašić et al., 2020: 725) thanks to natural resources, agricultural land, high level of agricultural population, traditional approach to agriculture and food production, capacities for complementary activities including hiking, recreation, hunting, fishing, horseback riding and daily countryside activities (Dašić et al., 2020: 726). The village population still conscientiously preserves the traditional way of life, including working in the field, taking care of domestic animals, producing local food specialities, all of which is very attractive for visitors from urban surroundings (Đenadić et al., 2016: 520).

The development of rural tourism in Serbia does not have a long tradition, since the organized travel of tourists in this region started at end of the '70s, and recent development of rural tourism offer is commonly described as uncoordinated and unsynchronized, without integration with other factors of rural development, forming an incomplete and insufficiently differentiated tourist offer (Hrabovski-Tomić, 2008, according to Đenadić et al., 2016: 520). In Serbia, rural tourism is developed in some parts of Autonomous Province of Vojvodina (Northern part of Serbia) as well as in some areas of Central and Western Serbia, but it still remains insufficiently used and promoted as a means to reduce rural poverty and contribute to sustainable development of local communities (Dašić et al., 2020: 727).

Current legislative framework of the Republic of Serbia regulating tourism, agriculture and rural development is familiar with the term of rural tourism and prescribes some measures aimed at its promotion and strengthening. The Law on Tourism (*Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, No. 17/2019) introduces several financial enhancement measures, which are to be implemented by relevant state bodies, with the intention to improve current situation in the field of tourism. According to its Article 28, financial resources need to be provided within the budget of the Republic of Serbia for the purpose of directing and promoting the development of tourism, including the participation in the financing of the projects pertinent to the development and improvement of rural tourism. Moreover, The Strategy of Tourism Development in the Republic of Serbia for the Period between 2016 and 2025 (*Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, No. 98/2016) highlights tourism products that are considered to be

of particular importance for tourism development and rural tourism is marked as one of them.

In its introductory part, the Strategy of Agriculture and Rural Development of the Republic of Serbia for the period between 2014 and 2024 (*Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, No. 85/2014) emphasizes that, despite numerous difficulties, a visible progress has been made in the fields such as: organic production, wine production, production of products with geographical indication and rural tourism. It also states that the development of rural economy through the support of incomes diversification of rural households and the improvement of infrastructure have been modestly covered by the support structure. Significant funds for these purposes were only spent in 2007 (from the National Investment Plan), whereas after that, these activities were financed only from small budgets. However, the financial support was implemented through financial enhancements for craftsmanship and renovation of venues for the purpose of rural tourism development. These activities were also financed from other funds, including the resources of the Ministry in charge of economy, donor projects and budgets of local self-government units. Despite these issues, the Strategy confirms that there are some examples of good practice in the area of rural tourism development.

Agricultural policy of the Republic of Serbia, as declared by the aforementioned last Strategy, encourages rural households to make additional incomes within agriculture and similar activities, including rural tourism. For that purpose, the following goals have been set by the Strategy: 1) providing a more diverse offer of products and services provided by rural households, 2) the expansion of rural tourism, 3) the increase in the number of products based upon the local identity of rural environments, 4) protection and conservation of cultural heritage, 5) empowerment of vertical and horizontal coordination of rural development stakeholders and 6) improving public infrastructure in rural areas. The Strategy also prescribes the intention to provide various types of investment and advice support with the aim to facilitate rural tourism development through investment in venues providing accommodation and other services.

5. STATE MEASURES FOR MITIGATING NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON TOURISM IN SERBIA

In the period after Covid-19 outbreak, the government of the Republic of Serbia adopted several normative acts (including laws, bylaws, regulations and decisions) with the intention to prevent the spread of virus,

as well as to provide financial support for companies and entrepreneurs in the private sector, including the sector of tourism and agriculture.

General supportive measures, applied to all areas within the private sector are prescribed by the following regulations:

1) Regulation on the fiscal benefits and direct financial support for business entities within the private sector and financial support for citizens with the purpose of the mitigation of economic consequences of Covid-19 disease (*Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, No. 54/2020 and 60/2020).

2) Regulation on the establishment of the Program for financial support for business entities for liquidity maintenance and working capital under aggravated economic circumstances due to Covid-19 pandemic caused by SARS-CoV-2 virus (*Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, No. 54/2020).

In accordance with the aforementioned regulations, at the beginning of April 2020, four sets of economic measures were introduced, with the purpose to mitigate the consequences of Covid-19 pandemic, to provide economic stability of the state as well as to support micro, small and medium enterprises within the private sector to cope with recession (Marjanović, Đukić, 2020: 96). These measures include four groups: 1) Fiscal policy measures; 2) Direct financial support for entrepreneurs, for their employees; 3) Measures intended to provide the liquidity of economy and 4) Other measures (Marjanović, Đukić, 2020: 96). The total value of budget intended for these measures is 608,3 billion RSD, which is around 11% of Serbia's national GDP (Marjanović, Đukić, 2020: 96).

Along with the aforementioned general measures of financial support for enterprises and entrepreneurs in the private sector, the state provided special financial support for the sector of agriculture and tourism, both of which are relevant for the survival of rural tourism in Serbia.

The following regulations are the most relevant for rural tourism services providers:

1) Regulation on financial support for agricultural households for the purpose of mitigation of consequences of Covid-19 disease caused by SARS-CoV-2 virus (*Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, No. 57/2020).

2) Regulation on financial support for agricultural households through simplified access to the use of credit under aggravated economic conditions due to Covid-19 disease caused by SARS-CoV-2 virus (*Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, No. 57/2020).

3) Regulation on the establishment of programme for the distribution and use of subventions for the support of catering and tourism industry due to the difficulties affecting their business caused by Covid-19 disease caused by SARS-CoV-2 virus (*Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, No. 11/2021).

4) Regulation on the offer of a substitution for tourist travel that has been cancelled or missed due to Covid-19 disease caused by SARS-CoV-2 virus (*Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, No. 63/2020)

Regulation on financial support for agricultural households for the purpose of mitigation of consequences of Covid-19 disease caused by SARS-CoV-2 virus is of indirect relevance for the area of rural tourism because it provides a one-term financial support for natural and legal persons working in the field of agriculture in accordance with the Law on Agriculture and Rural Development (*Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, No. 41/2009, 10/2013 and 101/2016) (Article 1). The Regulation prescribes the preconditions that need to be met by the applicants in order to obtain the aforementioned financial support (Article 3) and the exact amount of financial support, depending on the size of agricultural lands on which vegetables are planted under protected conditions, the number of cows, sheep, goats and beehives (Article 4). Having in mind the fact that numerous rural households also provide the services in the area of rural tourism, these financial enhancements are relevant to that aspect of their work as well.

Regulation on financial support for agricultural households through simplified access to the use of credit under aggravated economic conditions due to Covid-19 disease caused by SARS-CoV-2 virus is also indirectly pertinent to rural tourism development, since it provides financial subventions for the payment of parts of interest for credits granted to natural and legal person working in the area of agriculture (Article 1 and 3). The subventions are provided for the following purposes: 1) animal husbandry development; 2) development of crop farming, viticulture, fruit, vegetables and flowers growing; 3) investments in agricultural mechanization and equipment; 4) providing food for farm animals; 5) investments in particular types of mechanization and equipment that are used for agricultural production of plants and 6) liquidity (Article 2). The support is provided under general and specific conditions (Article 4) and the maximum amount of credit for which it is given is also determined by this Regulation (Article 5).

Regulation on the establishment of programme for the distribution and use of subventions for the support of catering and tourism industry due to the difficulties affecting their business caused by Covid-19 disease

caused by SARS-CoV-2 virus is of direct relevance for all legal persons and entrepreneurs registered as tour operators, because it provides one-term financial subventions in the amount of 30.900 RSD (approximately 262 €) for each employee for these entities, under conditions prescribed by this Regulation (Paragraph III). The aim of the Regulation is to maintain the sustainability in the field of catering industry and tourism, including rural tourism as well. However, it should be noted that no specific type of tourism (such as rural tourism, for example) is prioritised by the Regulation, despite the fact that Covid-19 consequences might affect them differently.

Regulation on the offer of substitution for tourist travel that has been cancelled or missed due to Covid-19 disease caused by SARS-CoV-2 virus (in its Article 2) allows travel organiser to offer another travel arrangement as a substitute for the travel arrangement that has been cancelled or missed due to Covid -19, provided that the customer has totally or partially paid it before March 15th 2020. The important precondition for the substitution of travel arrangement is the fact that the travel was cancelled or missed either during the state of emergency or after, due to the circumstances caused by Covid-19. The details of the substitution are arranged by this Regulation. This measure is beneficial for both – travellers as well as tourism services providers, since it allows them to re-allocate and transfer from one tourist destination to another, preventing the losses caused by these unpredicted circumstances.

6. THE EFFECTS OF COVID-19 ON RURAL TOURISM IN SERBIA – STATISTICS AND MEDIA REPORTS

Covid-19 pandemic has produced a series of negative consequences, affecting tourism industry on the global, as well as on the national level. The reports of the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (hereinafter: SORS) show that the number of tourists in Serbia significantly decreased since the beginning of Covid-19 pandemic.

According to the number of overnight stays of tourists, Serbian tourism was progressing before the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic. Namely, in January and February 2020, the increase in the number of overnight stays of tourists was 25,1% and 20,1% (Stančić, 2020a: 43). However, after the outbreak, in March 2020, a decrease of overnight stays was 45,7% (Stančić, 2020a: 43). Moreover, in the period between January and June 2020, there were 2,5 million registered overnight stays, which is 44,1% less than in the same period in 2019. The most significant perennial decrease (94,6%) was registered in April 2020, whereas in May and June the number of overnight stays was a bit higher, but still much lower than in

the same period in 2019 (perennial decrease of 82,6%, i.e., 44,3%) (Stančić, 2020b: 58).

SORS Statistics also show that the number of domestic tourists represent the majority of tourists in Serbia in the first half of 2020, with 1,8 million of overnight stays, which is 36,5% less than in the first half of 2019. In the aforementioned period, domestic tourists made 71,3% of the entire number of overnight stays in Serbia (Stančić, 2020b: 58). Due to Covid-19 outbreak, the number of overnight stays of foreign tourists significantly decreased in the observed period – 56,9%, compared to the same period in 2019. The decrease in the number of foreign tourists was particularly radical in the second quarter of 2020, when the number of their overnight stays was 91,1% lower than in the same period in 2019 (Stančić, 2020b: 59).

SORS Statistics for the third quarter of 2020 suggest that in the period between January and September 2020, domestic tourist made 4,1 million overnight stays in Serbia, which is 16% less than in the same period in 2019. In that timeframe, domestic tourists represented the majority of tourists in Serbia, i.e., 80,8% of the total number of overnight stays. After an extreme decrease in the number of overnight stays made by foreign tourists (91,1% lower than in the same period in 2019), their number increased a little bit in the third quarter, which made it 82,1% lower than in the same period in 2019 (Stančić, 2020c: 51).

The words of many tourism services providers in Serbia, confirm the statistics, claiming that the situation in the tourism sector has seriously aggravated due to Covid-9 pandemic.² The loss of the tourism sector is very high and its total amount cannot be predicted yet.³ The media also keep emphasizing that the number of visits has significantly decreased, particularly when it comes to foreign tourists, and that tourism agencies, tour operators, hotel owners and tourist guides are facing serious economic problems, threatening the survival and future development of their business. Despite the supportive measures undertaken by the Serbian government, lack of foreign tourists and limitation of activities related to tourism offer make theirs and the future of their employees uncertain.⁴

However, the situation seems to be slightly different when it comes to rural tourism. SORS statistics show that the most visited tourist

² “Korona virus, turizam, ekonomija i Srbija: „Pandemija nas je gurnula na ivicu propasti”. Last modified August 5, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-53567468>

³ “Turizam u Srbiji trpi milionske gubitke”. Last modified April 16, 2020. <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/turizam-srbija-pandemija-korona/30558905.html>

⁴ “Korona virus, turizam, ekonomija i Srbija: „Pandemija nas je gurnula na ivicu propasti”. Last modified August 5, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-53567468>

destinations in Serbia include either mountains or spas, depending on the part of the year. Between January and June 2020, the most visited tourist destinations in Serbia were mountain resorts, with 936.000 overnight stays, representing 36,9% of total number of overnight stays of tourists in Serbia in the observed period. Out of that number, 564.000 overnight stays were made in the most popular winter tourism resorts – mountains Kopaonik and Zlatibor. The visitors of mountain resorts were mostly domestic tourists (81,7% of the total number of overnight stays) (Stančić, 2020b: 60). On the other side, in the period between January and September 2020, the most frequently visited tourist destinations in Serbia were spas, with around 1,8 million of overnight stays (out of which 1,2 million were made in Vrnjačka and Sokobanja) and the visitors of spas were predominantly domestic tourists (95%) (Stančić, 2020c: 52).

SORS statistics confirm that non-urban areas remained the most popular tourist destinations in Serbia, during Covid-19 outbreak. Nevertheless, the question remains how and to which extent is and will this opportunity be used by the rural tourism services providers. A renowned Serbian internet portal for agriculture “Agro-Club” published a text based upon the analyses conducted by the experts in the field of agricultural economy, explaining that, despite the degradation of all tourism activities worldwide due to Covid-19 pandemic, rural tourism in Serbia is becoming increasingly popular⁵. Lockdown, isolation, social distance and gathering restrictions caused a high level of stress and anxiety, particularly in the urban areas. That is the reason why urban population tends to be more prone to spending leisure time in nature, including rural areas, and especially countryside and agricultural households. This new trend seems to be particularly present in Serbia, since the risk of disease and travelling restrictions actually directed domestic tourists toward national tourism offer, including the one in rural areas⁶. Future research will show whether these positive predictions regarding rural tourism development in Serbia are grounded.

5 “Krizna popularizovala ruralni turizam, sve više zainteresovanih za seoski oblik odmora”, Agro Klub. Last modified 23 June 2020. <https://www.agroklub.rs/seoski-turizam/kriza-popularizovala-ruralni-turizam-sve-vise-zainteresovanih-za-seoski-oblik-odmora/61627/>

6 *Ibid.*

7. THE EFFECTS OF COVID-19 ON RURAL TOURISM IN SERBIA –PERSPECTIVE OF TOURISM SERVICES PROVIDERS

Out of 200, only 7 respondents answered via email, whereas 52 agreed to answer via phone call, which makes the total sample of 59 respondents.

The average period during which the respondents have been working in the field of rural tourism is 9 years. The most experienced respondent has been working in this field for 40 years, whereas the least experienced one has been working in the rural tourism sector for only 6 months (which means that they started the business during the pandemic). A small percentage (around 10%) of respondents were forced to close their venues due to Covid-19 pandemic because they did not have any visits.

The largest number of respondents were generally very satisfied with their work in rural tourism sector before the pandemic. However, the things radically changed during the pandemic and the majority of them confirmed that they are not as satisfied as they used to be. Actually, more than half of the respondents said that the situation is much worse now. However, 9 respondents confirmed that they had more visits during the pandemic, and that their business is functioning much better now. The venues of these respondents are predominantly located in the mountains or have swimming pools within their venues.

All respondents confirmed that the number of foreign visitors radically decreased during the pandemic. Actually, the majority of them said that they had no foreign visitors at all, whereas only 3 said that the only visitors that come from abroad are actually the citizens of the Republic of Serbia who live and work abroad and who came here for a vacation.

In some cases, the length of visitors stay has also changed. The respondents who have venues in the mountains said that the visitors tend to stay longer in comparison to the period before pandemic. These respondents are predominantly located in the most visited mountains in Serbia such as Tara, Divčibare, Golija, Stara planina. For example, in 3 cases, the respondents said that the guests that used to stay for 7 days asked them to stay for a month, whereas some also said that the guests now tend to stay at their venues for one week instead of just for weekend. One of the reasons why the length of stay has changed lays in the fact that the structure of the visitors has also been modified. Namely, foreign visitors used to stay for a shorter period of time because they were usually travelling through Serbia to some other destination. Since now there are no foreign visitors, but only

domestic, the length of stay is different. On the other hand, a smaller number of respondents said that the guests now tend to stay shorter.

The largest number of visits occurred during the summer – in July and August, whereas only 3 respondents said that they also had guests in spring and 3 that they had guests during winter months.

It is interesting to mention that the absence of foreign tourists was most visible in the autonomous province of Vojvodina, covering the Northern part of Serbia. Namely, the respondents who have venues in this area used to have more foreign visitors before the pandemic and now they almost do not have any guests at all. These respondents work with domestic visitors as well, but their number is not sufficient to cover the loss caused by the lack of foreign visitors. On the other hand, the majority of respondents who have venues Southern from the Danube were not affected by the fact that foreign visitors could not come to Serbia due to pandemic, since foreign tourists did not visit these venues predominantly before the pandemic.

The majority of the respondents did not receive any financial support from the state. Around 1/5 of them did receive only the financial support for entrepreneurs, which was actually the support for their employees. It is important to mention that the respondents who did not receive any financial support from the state actually do not fulfil the preconditions for receiving it, either because they are not registered as hotels, but only as rural households, or because they are not registered at all (3 respondents confirmed that this is their additional source of income).

When it comes to plans for the future, the majority of respondents confirmed that they wish to continue their work in the rural tourism sector. However, one of them said that is not willing to continue working in this field, one said that there is 50% probability that will stay in this area, whereas 5 respondents admitted that they had to close their venues because of financial difficulties. The respondents who said that they are willing to stay in the rural tourism sector expressed their wish to expand their capacities and/or the content of their tourism offer. However, they emphasized that the completion of these plans depends on the situation regarding the pandemic and that at this moment they cannot make any decisions or start new projects.

Summarizing the results of the analysis and comparing it with the adopted regulations for encouraging the development of tourism in Serbia, it is concluded that it is necessary to more encourage rural tourism in the country. Rural tourism should be more recognized as the best form of tourism in the Covid-19 pandemic. It would be enough for the hosts to be

exempted from paying taxes and fees, since they did not receive any financial assistance. In this way, the whole rural area would be more developed.

8. CONCLUSION

Tourism at the global level suffers significant losses, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, affecting tourism industry on the global, as well as on the national level. However, some types of tourism do not stagnate. Among them is rural tourism in Serbia, due to the fact that it provides the best available service for local tourists, who are the most numerous visitors to tourist destinations during the pandemic in the country.

The largest number of respondents were generally very satisfied with their work in rural tourism sector before the pandemic. However, the things changed during the pandemic and most of them confirmed that they are not as satisfied as they used to be. Those who confirmed that had more visits during the pandemic, and that their business is functioning much better now are predominantly located in the mountains or have swimming pools within their venues.

All respondents confirmed that the number of foreign visitors radically decreased during the pandemic. The absence of foreign tourists was most visible in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina (the Northern part of Serbia). On the other hand, the majority of respondents who have venues Southern from the Danube were not affected by the fact that foreign visitors could not come to Serbia due to pandemic, since foreign tourists did not visit these venues predominantly before the pandemic.

The length of visitors stay has also changed. The respondents who have venues in the mountains said that the visitors tend to stay longer in comparison to the period before pandemic. These respondents are predominantly located in the most visited mountains in Serbia. A smaller number of respondents said that the guests tend to stay shorter in the Covid-19 pandemic.

The structure of the visitors has also been modified. More business people and more new guests came to rural households.

The largest number of visits occurred during the summer – in July and August 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Most of the respondents did not receive any financial support from the state because they did not fulfil prescribed preconditions, either because they are not registered as hotels, but only as rural households, or because they are not registered at. This indicates insufficient support for the

development of rural tourism by the state, and thus inadequate support for the development of villages and rural areas.

Nevertheless, the majority of hosts confirmed that they wish to continue their work in the rural tourism sector.

It is necessary to encourage rural tourism more in the country. Rural tourism should be more recognized as the best type of tourism in the Covid-19 pandemic. In this way, the whole rural areas would be more developed.

Appendix 1 – Interview for rural tourism services providers

1. How long have you been working in the rural tourism sector?
2. Are you satisfied with the work in this field? Please describe.
3. Have you noticed any changes in the work of your venue during covid-19 pandemic? Please describe these changes.
4. Do you have more or less guests compared to the period before covid-19 pandemic?
5. Has the duration of guests' stay changed compared to the period before covid-19 pandemic? Do they stay for a longer or a shorter period now?
6. How many guests do you usually have at the same time and is this number bigger or smaller compared to the period before covid-19 pandemic?
7. Throughout which period of the year during covid-19 pandemic did you have the largest number of visitors?
8. Has the number of foreign visitors changed compared to the period before covid-19 pandemic?
9. Did you receive any kind of support from the state due to covid-19 pandemic?
10. What are your plans for future work having in mind the covid-19 pandemic? Please describe them.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This paper is the result of authors' research engagement in accordance with the Working Plan and Programme of the Institute of Criminological and Sociological Research for 2021.

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