

## AN OVERVIEW OF RURAL TOURISM IN CROATIA AND SERBIA

**Damir Demonja**

*Institute for Development and International Relations, IRMO,  
Zagreb, Croatia*

**Vladimir Stojanović**

*Faculty of Sciences, University of Novi Sad, Novi Sad, Serbia*

**Mirjana Penić**

*Faculty of Sciences, University of Novi Sad, Novi Sad, Serbia*

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*In the tourism development plans in Croatia and Serbia, rural tourism has a place of special importance. Taking into account the total population of rural areas, total surface area they occupy in these countries and the presence of diverse tourism potential (preserved nature and cultural heritage), rural tourism could become a powerful tool in achieving the goals of sustainable development of rural areas. Regardless of all social differences between Croatia and Serbia, it can be assumed that rural areas share common problems. They are exposed to depopulation, slow economic development and poorly developed infrastructure. There is a dilemma that raises the question of how much these two countries in their joint tourism development initiatives can contribute to resolving problems of rural areas, and in particular their border regions.*

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**Keywords:** *Croatia, Serbia, rural tourism, sustainable development*



## **INTRODUCTION**

The influence of tourism on destinations in rural setting has been the focus of attention for the past few decades. A lot of empirical research in the first years of this trend related to the economic effects of tourism on the population of rural areas. This was followed by research in the area of its influence on ecological components of space, with the emphasis on national parks and other forms of protected regions which are, above all, situated in these areas (Butler, 1998). Tourism which is organized according to economic, ecological and social principles of sustainable development, can improve significantly the economy, the society and the environment of rural areas.

Rural tourism is the factor of numerous changes in the rural areas which are prone to changes, firstly because this form of tourism comprises a series of activities, services and additional content realized in rural regions – agritourism, recreation, education, cultural and other events (Stojanović, 2011). The changes are happening under the influence of other activities. In the western countries, the growth of agribusiness and the decline in traditional family farming has caused unexpected changes in the character and functioning of rural farms and rural areas. The effects can be observed in the changes of numerous resources. These changes can be characterized as: endogenous (e.g. multicultural policy, depopulation, migration of population with higher education; increase in average age of the population; increased free time and changes in family structure) and exogenous (e.g. changes related to the business of transnational corporations and globalization). Rural restructuring is certainly intertwined with numerous external factors (Roberts and Hall, 2001). Some external factors are concerned with the influence of law, legislations, strategies which, as a rule, come from larger city centers, and in the case of smaller countries, such as Croatia and Serbia, from their capital cities where the government

prescribes the paths and directions of social development. It is very important that tourism has an adequate treatment in the development plans and strategies, since through their implementation desired objectives can be achieved.

## **RESEARCH RESULTS**

### **RURAL AREAS, VILLAGES AND THEIR POSITION IN THE TOURISM PLANS AND STRATEGIES OF CROATIA AND SERBIA**

Rural area in the Republic of Croatia covers 91.6% of its total surface and it is determined by its territorial division according to which smaller administrative units, municipalities, are considered as rural areas, and cities as urban areas. Based on such administrative criteria, out of the total population of 4,437,460 in Croatia, 44.4% is considered to be rural population, and 55.6% urban (Rural Development Strategy of the Republic of Croatia for the period 2008-2013, 2008). Croatian rural space is characterized by large biological and social diversity representing a huge potential for rural tourism development. In rural tourism development, Croatia has a series of inherited, historically bound issues. For example, very small (2.8 ha on average) and segmented (land units of 5 ha on average) family farms, old households without entrepreneurial experience, and poorly developed communal and social infrastructure) (Demonja et al., 2009: 3).

In the rural space of Croatia we can recognize: basic activities of rural tourism, special forms and diverse forms of entrepreneurial activities (Regulations on the provision of catering services in rural households, Official Gazette of the Republic of Croatia 5/08; Act on the provision of service in tourism, Official Gazette of the Republic of Croatia 68/07). Basic activities in rural tourism in Croatia are catering activities (food preparation and catering services, beverage

preparation and service, provision of accommodation service, food preparation and catering for external consumption) and tourism activities (provision of services in tourism). Special forms of rural tourism can be classified as: tourism in rural households, hunting, fishing, holiday, sports and recreational, health, cultural, gastronomic, eno-gastronomic, ecological, adventurous, religious, nostalgia, tourism in preserved areas and other forms of rural tourism (Demonja and Ružić, 2010: 50-59).

The development of rural tourism in the Republic of Croatia began sporadically in the early 1990s, and systematically in 1995 when the Ministry of Tourism of the Republic of Croatia started the initiative and preparation for its development. At the time, it was primarily boiled down to the development of tourist rural households, i.e. to the search for adequate agricultural households and the animation of their owners to restore them for the provision of tourism and catering services, and creating conditions for their development (Demonja and Ružić, 2010: 47-48). In the following years, a variety of prerequisites were met, such as normative, organizational, educational, developmental, financial, promotional, and others, for the more comprehensive and quality-oriented development of rural tourism (Demonja and Ružić, 2010: 88-138).

The Republic of Croatia, for now, has developed Tourism Development Strategy of the Republic of Croatia up to 2020, but it does not have rural tourism development strategy. Based on the mentioned Strategy, rural tourism is referred to as a product with a prominent strategy for development, with a comment and conclusion that rural tourism, including mountain areas, participates in total international travel with a share of about 3%, with the annual growth of about 6% (Tourism Development Strategy of the Republic of Croatia up to 2020, 2013: 9). Furthermore, it should be mentioned that Croatia had the Rural Development Strategy of the Republic of Croatia for the period 2008-2013 which directed rural development towards: 1. the increase of competitiveness in agriculture and forestry, 2. improving the state of the environment

and the landscape, 3. improving the quality of life in rural areas and supporting the diversification of rural economy and 4. improving the efficiency of the institutional environment (Rural Development Strategy of the Republic of Croatia for the period 2008-2013, 2008: 37-40).

Rural areas in the Republic of Serbia cover up to almost 90% of its total territory and are inhabited by around 43% of total population (Košić, 2012). Based on the preliminary census results for agriculture in 2012, there were 631,122 agricultural households in Serbia. The prevalent types are family agricultural households, which make up to 99.6% of the total number of registered households. Prevalent households are up to 2 ha in size. As such, they cannot be competitive in the market of agricultural food products, but within this scope they can develop additional, non-agricultural activities such as rural tourism (Radović and Pejanović, 2013).

Rural development in Serbia was defined by the Government of the Republic of Serbia as an economic, social and ecological priority. Diversification of the rural economy, in a socially, economically and ecologically sustainable way, is necessary for meeting the objectives of improving the quality of life, decreasing poverty level, and also fighting against social and ecological degradation. These objectives have been focused primarily on eradicating extreme poverty, sustainability of environmental preservation and developing global partnerships for development.

Rural tourism in Serbia has been developing since 1970s (Petrović, 2014). However, it has not been supported by adequate stimulative measures, nor it has been adequately valued, despite available resources and constantly increasing demand (Košić, 2012). The following problems in the development are still present: insufficient level of education in this type of tourism, poor relationship between households and tourism organizations, and

insufficient and inadequate tourist infrastructure (Todorović and Bjeljac, 2009).

In the National Sustainable Development Strategy of Serbia, rural tourism has been given a priority. Rural tourism is seen as a sector with a potential and this is reflected in the fact that there is a vertical institutional structure for its development. Special importance of rural tourism is reflected in the contribution of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management of the Republic of Serbia which, within its jurisdiction for rural development, has a support programme for expanding rural economy through the affirmation of agritourism and rural tourism at rural agricultural households. This support is especially important for rural areas where agriculture, due to its natural and other limitations, cannot be the carrier of rural development. Meeting objectives and implementing planned activities represent incentives for the development outside big cities, better spatial distribution of population and improving overall social conditions (National Sustainable Development Strategy of Serbia, 2008).

Tourism Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia (2005) defines rural tourism as one of the priorities in the future development of tourism. The initial analysis gives an insight into basic problems of its development. The current level of competitiveness of Serbia in the field of rural tourism is not particularly favorable (average grade 1.5 out of the maximum value 5), regardless of the fact that there are all natural, cultural and social prerequisites for its development, including: natural resources, significant agricultural land, a significant number of agriculturally active inhabitants, traditional approach to agriculture, good potential for agritourism, uncontaminated soil and possibilities for organic food production, good potentials for the development of complementary activities (e.g. traditional local gastronomic specialties).

## **RURAL TOURISM IN APPLICABLE LAWS AND REGULATIONS OF CROATIA AND SERBIA**

The development of rural tourism in Croatia has been regulated by applicable laws and regulations. In view of the fact that rural tourism is conducted in rural households, laws which regulate tourism and catering activities in rural households are of special importance:

- Act on the provision of services in tourism (Official Gazette of the Republic of Croatia 68/07 and 88/10), and
- Act on catering activity (Official Gazette of the Republic of Croatia 138/06, Amendments Official Gazette of the Republic of Croatia 80/13),

as well as implementing regulations:

- Regulation on the provision of catering services in rural households (Official Gazette of the Republic of Croatia 5/08, 44/11 and Amendments (Official Gazette of the Republic of Croatia 118/11),
- Regulation on the classification and categorization of facilities providing catering services in rural households (Official Gazette of the Republic of Croatia 88/07, 58/08, 45/09),
- Regulation on the register of catering facilities and the provision of catering services in households and rural households (Official Gazette of the Republic of Croatia 5/08),
- Regulation on the form, content and the manner of keeping a guest register book and a guest list (Official Gazette of the Republic of Croatia 5/08),
- Regulation on keeping a list of tourists, including the form and content of the tourist registration form for the tourist board (Official Gazette of the Republic of Croatia 113/09), and

- Regulation on the lump-sum payment of tourist tax for the people offering accommodation services in the households or rural households (Official Gazette of the Republic of Croatia 92/09).

There are still numerous problems related to implementing legislations and unharmonized regulations, because a large number of ministries are directly or indirectly responsible for rural tourism. In the following period, in the field of legislations referring to Croatian rural tourism, the efforts should be focused on dealing with familiar problems and improving the existing legislation and implementing regulations. As far as possible, legislation should be designed to be more functional, practical and easily implemented.

The Law on Tourism in the Republic of Serbia (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia 36/2009, 88/2010, 99/2011), as well as the Tourism Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia (2005) and the Master Plan for Sustainable Development of Rural Tourism in Serbia (2011), recognizes rural tourism as one of the priority forms of tourism. The Law on Tourism, within tourism planning and development sections, emphasizes the importance of the programme for developing tourist product which, as a planning document, establishes the priorities of tourist products including rural tourism. The programme for the development of tourist product is enacted by the Government of the Republic of Serbia on the proposition of the Ministry of Trade, Tourism and Services of Serbia.

The Law on Tourism has also established the concept of rural tourist households. It is a facility or a group of facilities providing the services of accommodation, food and beverage, or only food and beverage, which are situated in the rural (countryside) environment with the elements of local features and heritage. Intermediation in the provision of accommodation and food services in rural households and rural tourism is provided by travel agencies. The Law on Tourism also stipulates that a rural tourist household is a catering facility providing other common services in the catering

industry. These catering facilities (rural tourist households), are classified into categories with standards which are regulated for individual types of these facilities.

Special attention in a separate section in the Law on Tourism is given to catering services in rural tourist households. Here the standards are specified for physical persons to comply with so that they can provide food and accommodation, and also for the ways of intermediation between these persons and potential tourists. It is also mentioned that the minister should more specifically regulate the conditions and ways of catering activities and other standards related to the catering facility.

## **THE LEVEL OF RURAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN CROATIA AND SERBIA ACCORDING TO STATISTICAL DATA**

According to publicly available data of the Ministry of Tourism of the Republic of Croatia, the latest data being collected in 2007, from 1998 to 2007 the number of rural households increased 11 times, so in 2007 there were 352 in the entire territory of the Republic of Croatia (Demonja, 2014: 76). Although, this has, undoubtedly, been a positive trend, the distribution of these rural households in 20 Croatian counties has been very uneven (Demonja, 2014: 77). Furthermore, these 352 rural households in Croatia have a total of 886 beds, 288 of rural households offering food services and 207 have tasting rooms (Demonja, 2014: 79; Demonja and Ružić, 2010: 54).

According to the official statistical data of the Central Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Croatia, in 2014, rural tourists in Croatia had access to 8,836 accommodation facilities in 12 predominantly rural counties (Bjelovar-Bilogora, Brod-Posavina, Karlovac, Koprivnica-Križevci, Krapina-Zagorje, Međimurje, Osijek-Baranja, Požega-Slavonija, Sisak-Moslavina, Varaždin,

Virovitica-Podravina and Vukovar-Srijem) (Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Croatia 2014, 2014: 440).

As far as the total number of arrivals and overnight stays of domestic and foreign tourists in 12 predominantly rural counties of the Republic of Croatia, in 2014, there were 580,411 tourist arrivals and 1,201,642 overnight stays (Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Croatia 2014, 2014: 441).

In Serbia, there are 1,000 registered households in rural areas providing catering and tourism services. The members of 300 households have been involved in tourism as a primary activity. In the total offer there are about 8,000 beds. One household has recorded from 750 to 1,500 overnight stays. More than 1,000 overnight stays have been recorded in 60 households. Around 240 facilities have recorded 700 to 1,000 overnight stays, and 150 households have had 350 to 700 overnight stays. About 300 households have less than 350 overnight stays a year. The average length of tourist stay in households is 2.8 days (Petrović, 2014). Noting that the number of households is constantly increasing, it is necessary to add that the development of rural tourism in Serbia would also be helped by a better statistical analysis of this type of tourism and its offer.

## **POSSIBILITIES FOR JOINT COOPERATION AND PROJECTS IN RURAL TOURISM BETWEEN CROATIA AND SERBIA**

What can be considered as a missed opportunity in the current development of tourism in Croatia and Serbia is the lack of joint development of tourist programs and products in the field of rural tourism. In such an analysis we cannot forget that recently borders between two or more countries have become potentially attractive tourist destinations because of the possibilities for getting to know more countries, peoples, cultures and customs. Such conclusions should motivate tourism experts and employees in the two countries

to intensify cooperation in this area. Bordering regions of Slavonija and Vojvodina have multiple advantages for such activities (the Danube, the nature along the river banks, local culture, traditional cuisine, institutional structure of tourist organizations, etc.). Possibilities could even become much wider if such concept of rural tourism development would include border areas of Hungary, especially at the time of intensive actions to declare Biosphere Reserve Mura-Drava-Danube. Since the protection of biosphere reserve demands the concept of sustainable development where rural tourism takes a special place, with the emphasis on the affirmation of local communities, it can be concluded that trans-border regions of Croatia (Slavonija and Baranja) and Serbia (Vojvodina) have a good chance for rural tourism development. This type of tourism could support ecological, social and economic aspect of the development of trans-border regions. Benefits could be mutual, especially if we take into account that trans-border regions often experience problems with economic development and depopulation.

## **CONCLUSION REMARKS**

In the development of rural tourism, Croatia and Serbia have faced similar problems. After taking into consideration these problems, it is possible to design a framework for the future development of rural tourism. Considering the intensity of its presence in the plans, strategies, laws and regulations, and the available offer, overcoming current problems would have a significant impact on the development of sustainable tourism of these countries.

Guidelines for the future development of sustainable tourism in Croatia are as follows:

- raising the quality of accommodation, catering and tourism services,

- creating a quality product of rural tourism according to predetermined quality criteria,
- enriching overall tourism offer in rural areas because it directly stimulates the development of rural tourism destinations,
- creating a more efficient legal framework and tax regulations,
- wider application of new technologies (the Internet and communication technologies) in creating online reservation database,
- systematically educating all participants in rural tourism to gain theoretical and practical knowledge,
- encouraging self-employment and motivating young people to stay in rural areas, and
- making further efforts in environmental preservation which is the basic resource of attraction in a rural destination.
- Guidelines for future development of sustainable tourism in Serbia are as follows:
  - finding solutions for preventing depopulation of villages and rural areas in the concept of tourism development (strengthening infrastructure, diversification of rural economy),
  - standardization and uniformity within the sector of rural tourism (e.g. categorization of facilities),
  - bigger and better integration of agriculture and tourism in the planning documents and in practice,
  - educating and raising awareness among local population of the possibilities of rural tourism (education in continuity, and not sporadically),
  - preserving original rural ambiance, finding better solutions for preserving cultural heritage in villages and the concept of construction which cherishes the values of traditional architecture,

- designing better policies of economic incentives which would support and accelerate the development of rural tourism, and
- overcoming legal restrictions and changing legal regulations that are hampering population to run their business within rural tourist households.

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**Damir Demonja Ph.D.** ([ddemonja@irmo.hr](mailto:ddemonja@irmo.hr)) is a Senior Scientific Adviser at Institute for Development and International Relations, IRMO, Department for International Economic and Political Relations, Ljudevita Farkaša Vukotinovića 2, HR-10000 Zagreb, Croatia.

**Vladimir Stojanović Ph.D.** ([vladimir.stojanovic@dgt.uns.ac.rs](mailto:vladimir.stojanovic@dgt.uns.ac.rs)) is a Professor at Faculty of Sciences, University of Novi Sad, Department of Geography, Tourism and Hotel Management, Trg Dositeja Obradovića 3, 21000 Novi Sad, Serbia.

**Mirjana Penić** ([mirjana.penic@dgt.uns.ac.rs](mailto:mirjana.penic@dgt.uns.ac.rs)) is a Expert Assistant at Faculty of Sciences, University of Novi Sad, Department of Geography, Tourism and Hotel Management, Trg Dositeja Obradovića 3, 21000 Novi Sad, Serbia.

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