

„Gheorghe Zane” Institute of Economic and Social Research, Iași  
Department of Economic Research

**ROMANIAN RURAL TOURISM  
IN THE CONTEXT OF SUSTAINABLE  
DEVELOPMENT. PRESENT AND PROSPECTS**

VOLUME XL

**Coordinators**

**Teodor PĂDURARU    Georgiana TACU**

*Volume Dedicated to the 150th Anniversary of Romanian Academy*

**PERFORMANTICA  
IAȘI - 2016**

Acest volum a fost elaborat de un colectiv de autori care și-au prezentat lucrările în cadrul celei de a XVIII-a ediții a conferinței internaționale „**Turismul rural românesc în contextul dezvoltării durabile. Actualitate și perspective**”, care s-a desfășurat la Vatra Dornei în perioada 26-28 mai 2016.

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Institutul de Cercetări Economice și Sociale „Gheorghe Zane”  
Iași  
Colectivul de Cercetări Economice

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ACTUALITATE ȘI PERSPECTIVE**

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**Teodor PĂDURARU    Georgiana TACU**

*Volum dedicat aniversării a 150 de ani de la înființarea  
Academiei Române*

**PERFORMANTICA  
IAȘI - 2016**

Foto: Internet

**Editura PERFORMANTICA**  
**Institutul Național de Inventică, Iași**  
performantica@inventica.org.ro  
Iași, Campusul Universitar „Tudor Vladimirescu”,  
Corp T24, Etaj 1, CP 2002, OP 10, Iași  
Tel/fax: 0232-214763

EDITURĂ ACREDITATĂ DE CNCSIS BUCUREȘTI, 1142/30.06.2003  
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Descrierea CIP a Bibliotecii Naționale a României

**PĂDURARU, TEODOR (coord.)**  
**ROMANIAN RURAL TOURISM IN THE CONTEXT OF**  
**SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT. PRESENT AND PROSPECTS**  
Teodor Păduraru, Georgiana Tacu.  
- Iași: Performantica, 2016  
**ISBN: 978-606-685-409-2**

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2. Georgiana Tacu (coord.)

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# COMPETITIVENESS OF RURAL TOURISM DESTINATIONS. CASE STUDY OF VOJVODINA (SERBIA)

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## Abstract

*In the tourism industry, the competition between tourist destinations and products has become very intense which has contributed to greater market transparency, price and other elements of products and services. Global competition in the tourism industry has become a challenge for many countries that are competing to become a desirable tourist destination, and understanding the factors that contribute to the competitiveness of destinations is essential to maintain the current level of development of tourist destination, its growth and vitality. Therefore, measurement of competitiveness can be considered as a key factor in ensuring the success of tourist destinations. Rural tourism is one of the priorities in tourism development in many European countries. Rural tourism market is on the rise, while at the same time the future of many rural areas is uncertain. Given the importance of tourism to rural areas, determining the factors that influence the improvement of the competitive position of the tourism market is of great importance for their further development. Rural tourism in Vojvodina is marked as a tourist product of exceptional potential, but insufficiently equipped and reasserted. This shows that the natural, cultural and social conditions for the development of rural tourism are not used in order to create the appropriate advantages over other bidders in the industry which can be especially important condition for survival, and then the progression of an organization. In order to determine the factors that affect on the reduction of competitiveness of rural tourism of Vojvodina, survey was conducted among 138 tourism experts.*

**Key words:** competitiveness, rural tourism, destinations, Vojvodina (Serbia)

**JEL:** Q13, Z10

## 1. Introduction

The importance of tourism for the national economy is confirmed by intensifying competition among tourist destinations. Selection of a country, city or region as a tourist destination by tourists means more revenue,

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increased employment and tax revenue for a destination that receives tourists. For this reason, the measurement of the intensity of the factors that encourage or restrict the development of tourism has become the main activity for the strategic planning of destination development.

In the context of tourism, globalization means an increase in the number of destinations, and the conditions on the international tourist market are drastically changed, and it is necessary for destinations to respond to these challenges in order to remain competitive in the market. The development of new tourism products and destinations is one way to increase productivity in the tourism sector [1]. Globalization through the democratization of information and communication technologies is a major challenge, together with the effects of other social and economic changes, such as increasing the mobility of individuals, greater economic liberalization, a growing proportion of pensioners with high purchasing power; increasing importance of environmental issues and other changes. These changes resulted in the increase in demands and expectations of consumers (tourists) in terms of quality of physical facilities and the skills and abilities of those who work in the tourism sector. Competition in the tourism industry has thus become sharper with the need of customer orientation, while professionalism is becoming a key component in the selection of employees [2].

Rural tourism is one of the priorities in tourism development in many European countries. Rural tourism market is on the rise, while at the same time the future of many rural areas is uncertain. Given the importance of tourism to rural areas, determining the factors that influence the improvement of the competitive position of the tourism market is of great importance for their further development [3]. Rural tourism in Vojvodina is marked as a tourist product of exceptional potential, but insufficiently equipped and reasserted. This shows that the natural, cultural and social conditions for the development of rural tourism are not used in order to create the appropriate advantages over other bidders in the industry which can be especially important condition for survival, and then the progression of an organization. In order to determine the factors that affect on the reduction of competitiveness of rural tourism of Vojvodina, survey was conducted among 138 tourism experts.



## **2. Theoretical framework**

### **2.1. Competitiveness of tourism destination**

In order to achieve competitive advantage, a tourist destination shall ensure that its overall attractiveness and tourism experience offered to tourists are superior than experience offered on alternative destinations [4,5]. Therefore, the quality of the tourist experience is the basis for competitive advantage of destinations. From the perspective of tourists, quality tourism experience can be a key factor that has an impact on the perception of tourists on the competitiveness of specific destinations, and can have a significant impact on the choice of destinations and its image.

Growth and competitiveness in tourism has forced organizations to the use of highly effective marketing and management strategies for tourism destinations. In addition, the evaluation of the competitiveness of tourist destinations is increasingly recognized as an important tool in the strategic positioning and marketing analysis of destinations [6,7]. In tourism, the most appropriate type of territory for more detailed research is the destination - and intensified competition in tourism is between destinations [8]. However, very often, for technical reasons, many researchers [9, 5, 10] elected the entire country as a tourist destination, primarily due to the clearly defined borders, but also because the fact that most of the statistics are available at this level. The generally accepted definition of competitiveness of tourist destinations in the literature is from author Ritchie and Crouch, according to which *"the competitiveness of tourist destinations can be considered as its ability to increase tourist spending, to attract significantly more tourists by providing them with experiences which they will remember, and that coexistence it does this in a profitable manner while improving the well-being of inhabitants of the place and keeping the natural treasures for future generations"* [11, p. 2]. This definition includes all aspects of the competitiveness of the destination - the effectiveness and efficiency (economy), consumer satisfaction - tourists (marketing approach), community participation (capacity building of local communities) and the concept of sustainability (protection of natural resources access). This definition, with all the concepts of competitiveness, shows why the mass tourism ("old tourism") has been replaced by a new tourism development.

Competitiveness, in essence, is the capacity to achieve greater profitability than the average of the specific sector, which consists of companies that sell the same product to the same customer through the same

system of commercialization and distribution, as well as using the same technological tools. The competitiveness of individual products means their capacity and ability of holders to sell their own products and services faster than others while achieving better financial results. Competitiveness of the destination in terms of supply holders on tourist destinations includes economic benefits in the form of income, taxes, employment opportunities and sustainable development of destinations and related businesses. From the aspect of demand, the perspective of tourist destination competitiveness is closely linked with the overall quality of the overall tourist experience.

### **2.2. Rural tourism in Vojvodina**

The development of tourism activities in the villages of Voivodina has a long tradition, as organized tourist traffic in this region began to take place from the late 70's of the last century. In the tourism development strategy of Serbia (for the period 2005-2015, adopted in 2006.) rural tourism is recognized as one of six key tourism products of Vojvodina. However, it was concluded that despite good resource potential of rural tourism is not adequately structured and organized, and it should take the necessary actions in order to create a rural development process.

Since 2006, Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management of Republic of Serbia have financially supported and encouraged the development of tourism and the diversification and expansion and improvement of economic activities in rural areas. As far as the purposes for which the Ministry granted funds are concerned, the majority of funds in Vojvodina have been invested in the restoration of traditional rural households in the function of rural tourism (renovation, construction, renovation, purchase, etc.) [12].

Products in rural tourism in Vojvodina are represented by the offer of the farms, tourist villages, ethno-houses, rural architecture and rural manifestations, i.e. all services which are offered to tourists, such as room and board, sightseeing of the destination, participating in work of a country host, organizing creative workshops etc.

1) **Farms** are a specific form of traditional agricultural households, and it makes a particular segment of rural tourism. Although after the Second World War thousands of farms were demolished, several have been turned into tourist sites [13].

2) **Tourist villages.** The villages, in addition to their basic residential function with agricultural, they gain also recreational tourist function [14]. Rural tourism should contribute to the preservation of the rural environment

and cultural heritage, but also to provide economic motivation for local population to stay there and to get engaged in traditional crafts among others.

3) **Country architecture.** Old farmhouses represent one of the most impressive forms of material folklore creativity of Vojvodina. The original houses were built of mud and covered with reeds, according to the colonial model. In time they gain a number of other details typical only for these parts of the Pannonian Plain [15].

4) **Ethno houses.** Ethno-house is the house with the overall economy, which is built in the traditional style of folk architecture of Serbian, Slovakian, Romanian, Croatian and other nationalities in Serbia. According to [16], ethno-houses contribute to the preservation of material and non-material traces of local culture, but are also indicator of the struggle of the local community and culture with the accelerated process of globalization.

5) **Rural tourism events.** The event organizers have different professional staff, logistical support and financial opportunities. This influences the content, the amount and quality of events, regardless of their importance. On the other hand, the organizers insufficiently involved in the market research, or they are not involved at all in testing of desires and expectations of potential tourists, but they are more concerned with solving the problem of acquiring donors and sponsors for the events.

From one side, the development of rural tourism in Vojvodina can play important role in increasing the variety of tourist offer in entire Serbia and formation of one richer and picturesque image of the country. From the other side, tourism in villages and on farms should not only be the goal, but also the means for inducing the economical growth, strengthening undeveloped regions and improving the life standards of local population. With the development of tourism in those regions there is the occurrence of multifunctional agriculture which gives to people on the farms and in villages additional possibilities for economical strengthening.

### **3. Methodology**

Tourism experts from Serbia were asked to assess the current state of 24 attributes which affect/could affect the competitiveness of rural tourism destinations in Vojvodina (Serbia). Likert scale of five scores was used, where "1" means very bad condition of the attribute, score "2" bad condition, "3" average condition, "4" very well and "5" excellent condition

of the attribute. Respondents were not offered to assess the current state of the attribute in relation to the set or a competitive destination (which would tourism experts identify by themselves) because it would not give a true picture of the competitiveness of Vojvodina, because experts would compare rural tourism in Vojvodina with several different destinations.

In this paper, survey research covered all those tourism experts who have the knowledge and/or experience relevant to the subject, and whose area of research and action is related to rural tourism and competitiveness of tourist destinations. In Vojvodina, interviewed tourism experts are as follows: teaching staff at higher education institutions, employees of the tourist organizations, employees of national and provincial institutions of importance for the development of tourism, tourism managers of travel agencies, owners of tourism enterprises in rural areas (farms, restaurants, ethno-houses, museums, wineries, souvenir shops, event organizers) and others (societies, associations, clusters).

The survey was conducted in two ways - a personal interview (technique of "face to face") and by sending a questionnaire via e-mail. Research in Vojvodina was conducted in the framework of its three regions - Bačka, Banat and Srem. Selected tourism experts in Vojvodina were interviewed in the period from September to the first half of December 2015, while in Hungary from the second half of December 2015 until the end of January 2016. The response rate in both countries is about 50%.

Statistical analysis of the data collected through the survey will be done in the software statistical program SPSS 17.

#### 4. Results and discussions

In Table 1 are presented results (mean, standard deviation) for Vojvodina. The values of the mean, or average marks of attributes are ranged from 2.4 (the lowest value) - which is the nearest to poor/disagree, to 4.2 (maximum value) - well/I agree. No items were rated extremely negative or extremely positive.

The highest average ratings have attributes: *Favorable weather conditions for the development of rural tourism*, *Attractiveness of a rural destination as a multicultural environment*, *Diversity of local culinary products*, and *The feeling of safety and security in the entire destination and the feeling of safety and security in agrotourism facility*.

Vojvodina is located in the temperate climate zone and because of its position, its climatic conditions are favorable and moderate, without any temperature extremes. Climatic conditions are important factors to be taken into account when taking a decision on a destination for tourists who will travel, but also affect the performance of tourism enterprises. Climatic conditions may be indirect element that will make tourism activities possible and enjoyable.

Weather conditions which tourists are exposed to during their stay at the destination are important for several reasons. First of all, the weather allows to organize certain activities, or they can encourage tourists to participate in them. For example, a wind speed of over 15 km/h can be harmful for fishing. Also, the safety of tourists depends on the weather conditions (extreme weather conditions can jeopardize the safety of tourists). Tourism experts have estimated that the climate conditions are suitable for the development of rural tourism in Vojvodina, and with the appropriate tourist offer (activities outdoors or indoors consistent with weather conditions) should be used in order to overcome the problem of seasonality.

Mixture kitchen, and therefore a large number of different products can be linked to multicultural environment. The importance of gastronomy for rural areas of Vojvodina can be twofold - food preparation, ie. local specialties respecting the authenticity of hearthstone and hospitality protocol can bring tangible asset hosts, while on the other side of gastronomy with its activities can greatly contribute to the attractiveness of content during the stay and thus enrich the experience of visitors.

It is extremely important that the factor "Safety and Security" received a high rating from tourism experts because this factor is one of the primary condition for the successful development of rural tourism destination. Competitiveness of Vojvodina as a destination for rural tourism can be achieved if the tourists indicate that they will feel safe and secure during their stay at the selected destination or and the particular facility.

Attributes of the determinants "Key Resources and Attractions" that received the highest average ratings can be considered as primary competitive advantage of Vojvodina, and a multicultural, rich and authentic gastronomic offer and a sense of security and safety can be particularly attractive factors for foreign visitors.

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics for individual attributes of the determinant „Key resources and attractions”

<b>Determinant „Key resources and attractions”</b>			
<b>Factor</b>	<b>Attributes</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>
The physical and geographical elements of the environment	Preserved nature and the beauty of the landscape of rural environment	3.5368	.78795
	Suitable climatic conditions for the development of rural tourism	4.2721	.68277
	The use of rivers, lakes and canals in rural tourism	2.6103	1.05531
	The diversity of flora and fauna	3.0956	1.00280
	Presence of protected natural areas and natural parks in the rural tourism offer	3.9853	.76966
Cultural heritage	Tourist offer of local museums and galleries	3.0882	.99978
	Preservation of rural architecture	2.9779	.97727
	Cultivating folk traditions (art, music, folklore, costumes, customs)	3.7059	.93585
	The attractiveness of rural destinations as a multicultural environment	4.3309	.75085
Opportunities for sport, entertainment and recreation	Opportunities for sports and recreational activities in nature	3.8750	.93045
	The quality and originality of the events and festivals	3.6103	.87070
Accommodation capacities and their authenticity	The quantity of accommodation facilities in rural areas	2.9706	.82499
	The quality of services in accommodation facilities in rural areas	3.2426	.78407
	The attractiveness of properties (eg. the traditional building materials, animals, the possibility of insight into production)	3.0662	.92057
Gastronomy	The variety of local culinary products	4.0221	.89829
	The authenticity of local gastronomic products	3.9118	.88167
General infrastructure and tourism superstructure	The quality of basic infrastructure in rural areas (eg. electricity and telephone network, water supply)	3.2941	.94373
	The quality of basic infrastructure in the agrotourism object (eg. electricity and telephone network, water supply)	3.3603	.89998
	The quality of the rural road network	2.6471	.98529
	Cleanliness and tidiness of the place	2.9338	.95996
	Travel signaling (eg. information boards, signposts)	2.4559	.94960
	Tourist facilities superstructure (eg. restaurants, cultural institutions, sports and recreational centers)	2.9044	.79702

Safety and security	The feeling of safety and security in the entire destination	4.0294	.80683
	The feeling of safety and security in agrotourism facility	4.0662	.79071

Source: Authors based on analysis of data from the survey research

The lowest average ratings (from 2.45 to 2.64) are with attributes: *Use of rivers, lakes and canals in rural tourism*, *Quality of rural road network* and *Travel signaling* (eg, information boards, signposts).

The results showed that while Vojvodina has significant water resources (rivers, lakes and canals), they are for the development of tourism in rural areas insufficiently or not at all used. The Danube has the greatest significance for the development and completion of the offer in rural tourism. The river flow is characterized by a series of characteristics that allow the exercise of a number of tourist activities (fishing, excursion and other holiday recreational activities). Beside the Danube, Tisa river has a significant tourism potential and is characterized by a natural phenomenon that can also be used for tourism offer in villages located next to the river. From the tourist point of view, the most important lakes are represented by a group of lakes in the north of Bačka district. Recreational, aesthetic and other values of these lakes form a key component of the offer of activities for tourists during their stay in rural tourist destinations.

Attributes that may pose a major obstacle to the further development of rural tourism in Vojvodina were the poor quality of the rural road network and lack of tourist signs in rural areas. Transport infrastructure is poorly developed in almost all municipalities in Vojvodina. Constructed roads of all categories are in poor condition and traffic signs are inadequate and insufficient. A significant part of the roads is not yet paved, pavements and asphalted roads are dilapidated and damaged. A particular problem may be a lack of inadequate approach to agrotourism facilities. In order to enhance the value of this attribute, it is necessary to signpost the rural tourist destinations which include: mark board, tourist route direction arrow and tourist information boards.

## 5. Conclusions

Development of Vojvodina's tourism sector in recent years was based on the construction of physical infrastructure. Elements such as the quality of services, training programs for human resources development, fostering creativity and innovation and creating new and interesting tourism products, were ignored. The development of tourist destination

management, which is one of the most important factors for competitiveness, was unsuccessful. It is possible that the rural tourism sector does not receive sufficient benefit from government support for the planned development of the destination, and that marketing efforts do not go in the desired direction. This suggests that a rural development strategy should have a special bond with resources and attractions of the destination, that priority should be given to maintaining all aspects of safety and security, continuous improvement of services, the use of benefits of a multicultural environment, diversity of culinary products, as well as the application of the principles of sustainability in environmental management. It is increasingly recognized and accepted the need to manage destination resources in a sustainable way in order to preserve them for future generations.

Rural tourism sector in Vojvodina has an abundance of natural resources and special attractions. However, ancillary services and facilities are very limited and this may affect the reduction of attractiveness, and the possibilities for the sector to highlight its potential. In the absence of supporting infrastructure and resources, the outcome for the destination can range from the provision of services under the expectations of visitors to major failures, thus preventing long-term development of the destination. Three main elements have the potential to increase the length of stay and tourist spending, and these are the folk tradition, gastronomy and opportunities for sports and recreational activities in nature. Development of the key elements can stimulate visitors to stay longer, spend more money and participate in a wider range of activities.

Rural tourism and other forms of tourism involve many business entities (entities that provide accommodation services, food, ...) and consumption of these services occurs when a visitor is at the destination. The more positive perception of tourism services, the stronger the feeling of quality. The functional aspect of quality of services is likely to be more influential than the technical aspects, which means that there is a need for highly skilled labor. Special importance during the development of human resources in rural areas of Vojvodina, should be given to the training of personnel, ranging from manufacturing to management level. From the perspective of holders of supply, quality management services and human resource development are co-dependent variables in support of excellence in service. Destination marketing is crucial and should focus on new products and market development.



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