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## **RURAL TOURISM IN FEDERATION OF BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA – CURRENT SITUATION AND PERSPECTIVES**

**Abstract:** Rural tourism stands out as a specific form of tourism. The rural search for peace, rest and recreation is a growing trend at regional, national, European and international levels. It can be said that rural tourism represents a relatively new tourist activity that aims to return people to traditional values and the natural environment.

This type of tourism produces numerous positive macroeconomic effects. These are, first of all: the development of underdeveloped areas, the employment of a larger number of household members, the placement of home-made products and agricultural products, and development of non-agricultural activities.

Development of rural tourism, in addition to contributing to the economic empowerment of the rural population, also contributes to the strengthening of local and regional economies, as well as the overall economy.

The most important consequence of rural tourism development in Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina is the progress of rural communities, the improvement of the socioeconomic status of the rural population so that they would rather choose to stay in their surroundings than to migrate to larger cities in the country or outside the country.

In FBiH, there are already a lot of guesthouses, rural households, camps, vineyard houses, mountain huts and ethnic villages that provide rural tourism services. However, there are also numerous difficulties faced by those who have decided to stay in their local community and develop it through the provision of tourist services.

In the paper, we will point out the current situation in the field of rural tourism in FBiH, the challenges it faces and possible perspectives and directions in the future.

**Keywords:** rural tourism, macroeconomic effects, Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, economic development.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Tourism has become a global phenomenon that has been developing more and more in recent times, taking on new forms. Bosnia and Herzegovina is a country with significant potential for development of tourism. Its geographical location, rich history, numerous natural and historical monuments, its culture, openness and proximity to the European Union have enabled more intensive development of tourism during the last decade. Rural tourism stands out as a specific form of tourism. Rural areas represent particularly sensitive zones for the preservation of natural resources and cultural-historical heritage. The development of rural tourism is a relatively new phenomenon compared to traditional rural economic activities.

In Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the number of interesting and unknown destinations in rural areas on the slopes of beautiful mountains, in lowlands and fields, where people live in a traditional way, preserve customs and cherish natural beauty and timeless and timeless values, is growing. In addition to rural areas that offer a preserved natural environment and healthy nutrition, eco and ethnic tourism has been developed in Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina with numerous tourist centers that offer a unique environment and tourist offer. The beauty of the landscape and the uniqueness give Bosnia and Herzegovina a competitive advantage. Tourism, we can surely say, is one of the activities in rural areas, which creates added value and which very quickly becomes part of economic and social processes.

Within this topic, it is important to mention sustainable tourism. According to the definition, it represents the long-term development of tourism that helps preserve natural, cultural and social resources and has a positive effect on the

economic development and well-being of individuals in a certain community. One of the forms of tourism for achieving sustainability in rural areas is definitely rural tourism.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Rural tourism is an important factor for development of rural areas and it also helps to preserve local identity, traditions and customs. According to the official definition of the European Commission, rural tourism is a collective term for the field of ethnic tourism, and it represents tourism in every rural area and all tourist activities that are carried out in that area.

Lane (1994) defines rural tourism as tourism that takes place in rural areas, characterized by low population density and open space, small settlements with less than 10,000 inhabitants and land use mainly for farms, forestry and natural areas. There are different definitions of rural tourism, from those that observe it through the prism of space and define it as 'tourism that takes place in a rural area', to those that include a wide range of activities and elements of a complete rural tourism product, such as recreation and activities in rural environment, enjoyment of the rural environment, enjoyment of nature and the beauty of the landscape, cultural tourism, tourism in rural households and so on. The term 'rural tourism' is used when rural culture is a key component of the product offered by the destination.

The World Tourism Organization (UN Tourism; UNWTO until 2023) considers rural tourism as a form of tourism that includes any tourist activity in rural areas, organized and managed by the local population relying on local tourist resources (natural, cultural, historical, human) and tourist facilities (guesthouses, farms etc.) (Gašić et al, 2015)

According to the definition of the Council of Europe, rural tourism is tourism in a rural area with all the activities that are carried out in that area, and the most important characteristics of this type of tourism are: peaceful environment, absence of noise, preserved environment, communication with the hosts, local food and familiarization with rural affairs. (Rajko, 2013)

The European Union defines rural tourism as "the provision of complete activities in small settlements where tourists are offered accommodation, food and other services by small businesses in order to fulfillment of their expectations through agricultural and domestic values" (EC, 1999).

Rural tourism, on the one hand, is considered as tourist activity that takes place in rural areas, and, on the other hand, is considered very limited to some specific forms of tourism, such as rural tourism (Oppermann, 1996) or agritourism (Flannigan et al., 2014).

According to Alexandrov (2005), "rural tourism promotes cultural diversity, preservation of national heritage, appreciation of the lifestyle and traditions of the indigenous population, and respect for their privacy and dignity."

Intangible and material cultural contents such as tradition, language, way of life or visual appearance of the area can create specific characteristics related to the attractiveness of the destination for tourists. The word „tradition“ is often associated with rural tourism, therefore there is a trend in rural tourism that focuses on the creation of various activities, such as visits to ethno-villages, theme parks and ethno-homes, participation in events and ethno-festivals, traditional dances or ceremonies (Yang, 2011).

These activities emphasize the unique character of rural areas. The creativity of activities in rural tourism leads to the creation of tourism in which seasonality disappears or is less important. The main focus of rural tourism was for a long time on the development of sustainability, however, modern rural tourism is characterized by two new trends: creativity and authenticity.

The most important motives that make tourism in rural areas interesting and acceptable are classified according to typology as:

- physical, such as relaxation,
- cultural, such as discovering new spaces,
- interpersonal, such as socialization and meeting new people,
- prestige, such as self-knowledge and self-actualization. (Ružić, 2012)

Rural tourism is the fastest growing segment of tourism, and that's why the tourism industry should take into account its impact on the environment, culture, society and economy.

## 3. RESULTS OF SECONDARY RESEARCH

In the continuation of the work, the presentation of the most significant secondary data in the tourism and rural tourism sector in FBiH and in general BiH for the pre-pandemic and pandemic period is given. This is the last period for which the requested data is available.

According to the data of the Federal Statistical Office and the EU4Business project in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the following trends are recorded in the tourism sector:

The tourism industry in Bosnia and Herzegovina has experienced significant growth in recent years in terms of the number of tourist arrivals and overnight stays. In 2019, the number of tourist arrivals reached 1,641,000, which is 25.6% more than in 2017. The number of tourist nights in 2019 was 3,371,000, which represents a growth of 25.9%.

This growth is the result of an almost 30% increase in the number of foreign tourist arrivals and a 26.4% increase in the number of overnight stays by foreign tourists. Arrivals and overnight stays of domestic tourists were slightly lower, but still at a high level. In the period 2017–2019, the number of domestic tourist arrivals increased by 15.4%, and the number of overnight stays by 24.6%. Significant growth in tourist arrivals and overnight stays was recorded in FBiH, RS and BD.

Europe is the main market for BiH tourism. In 2019, European tourists accounted for 65% of all tourist arrivals and 68% of the total number of overnight stays. Tourists from Asia are the second largest market, responsible for 29% of the total number of international tourist arrivals and 26% of overnight stays in 2019, which was also the case in the period 2015–2019, when the highest growth rate was achieved. In terms of tourist arrivals (326%) and tourist overnight stays (291%) in 2019, visitors from Asia made up a larger percentage of the total number of international arrivals in BiH. However, the situation varies between entities and BD. While foreign tourists accounted for 79% of arrivals in FBiH, in RS and BD foreign tourists accounted for 55% and 57% of arrivals in 2019, respectively. Differences are also present among tourist destinations. Nevertheless, the results indicate that FBiH is predominantly oriented towards foreign markets, while in RS and BD the domestic market holds a significant share.

According to the number of tourist arrivals for 2019, the first ten countries of origin are: Croatia, China, Serbia, Turkey, Slovenia, Saudi Arabia, Germany, Italy, South Korea and Poland, which together make up 61.1% of the total number of tourist arrivals for that year. Their individual shares have increased by 3% since 2017. However, there were also significant changes in the ranking of these countries due to a large increase in the number of tourists from China (+223%) and Saudi Arabia (+170%).

In the FBiH, the structure of tourist arrivals is more diverse than in the RS. In the FBiH, the following are among the top ten countries of origin: Croatia, China, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Germany, Slovenia, Italy, South Korea, Serbia and other Asian countries. In the RS, Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia are far ahead of the other countries of origin, followed by Turkey, Germany, China, Montenegro, Austria, Italy and Poland, with much smaller shares in the total number of tourist arrivals and overnight stays compared to the first three countries.

The COVID-19 pandemic stopped positive tourism trends in BiH. Since June 2020, with the easing of measures and the end of movement restrictions, there are signs of a slow recovery. But the pandemic still left significant consequences. In 2020 (January - September), the number of tourist arrivals and overnight stays was at the level of 25.7% and 28.9%, respectively, compared to 2019. The decline in the RS was smaller than in the FBiH. The main reason may lie in the fact that in recent years the RS had a higher percentage of domestic tourists (44%, compared to only 19% in FBiH), as well as the fact that 54% of foreign tourist arrivals in 2019 came from the main tourist markets for the RS, which are concentrated in the region (Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia).

The number of accommodation facilities in the FBiH has grown significantly (by 56.1%) over the past five years (2015–2019). A total of 756 accommodation facilities were registered in BiH in 2019, of which 71% were located in FBiH. Last year, the number of accommodation facilities decreased by 30% in the West Herzegovina Canton, by 28.8% in the Herzegovina-Neretva Canton and by 21.8% in the Una-Sana Canton. For those who provide accommodation in rural tourism in BiH, 50% have recently increased their capacities.

The total number of rooms in BiH in 2019 was 18,740 (of which 71.6% in FBiH, 27% in RS and 1.4% in BD). In the period of five years (2015–2019), there was an increase in accommodation capacity in both entities (by 43.8% in the FBiH and by 7.9% in the RS).

According to statements from a series of analyzes and reports, such as the European Commission Report for Bosnia and Herzegovina for 2020, the Report on the Ease of Doing Business in BiH for 2020 published by the World Bank and the Business Guide for Bosnia and Herzegovina for companies from the USA - Doing Business 2019 for BiH, BiH is described as a place with numerous obstacles and a relatively unfavorable business environment. When we talk about sustainable development, BiH is in the initial phase and the further integration of sustainability principles into tourism will depend on the state's ability to prepare new and effective sustainability policies, which includes economic policies (e.g. eco-taxes, user fees, financial incentives and transferable building permits), regulatory policies (quotas and zoning) and institutional instruments (eg eco-labels).

According to WEF's Tourism Competitiveness Index for 2019, BiH lags behind selected countries of the Western Balkans in almost all indicators except for average income per arrival, where it ranks second in the region. Only North Macedonia is worse positioned than Bosnia and Herzegovina. The major limitations that hinder the competitiveness of BiH tourism are that the authorities do not sufficiently support the development of tourism, which is the low visibility of BiH as a tourist destination, the poor quality of tourist products, services and tourist infrastructure, and the lack of qualified and professional workforce. All these factors are recognized as critically important for the successful development of tourism. These limitations should be solved primarily in order to increase the competitiveness of BiH tourism on international markets.

When it comes to rural tourism in FBiH, no official statistics are available for basic tourism indicators, but all data in this sub-sector of tourism are based on surveys conducted by researchers. According to research by Ljutić (2013), the following advantages and disadvantages, as well as chances and dangers specifically in rural tourism are defined in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

### Advantages

- Rich in natural resources
- Demonstrated interest among the rural population to work in agro-tourism
- Favorable conditions for the development of agriculture, especially livestock, fruit production due to rich orchards, as well as the development of agro-tourism
- Protected environment
- Diverse and abundant quantities of medicinal herbs and forest fruits
- Underdeveloped industry
  - Rich cultural and historical heritage. Some sights are protected by UNESCO
- The existence of hunting grounds and an abundance of game and fish
- The existence of traditional crafts
- The interest of local authorities in establishing any type of cooperation
- The willingness of the local population and authorities to implement development projects
- Favorable geostrategic position
  - Traditional hospitality
  - existence of national parks
  - Unspoilt and beautiful mountain areas
- The region borders Serbia and Montenegro and connects these countries with the Adriatic Sea
  - Quality agricultural products
- Available prices of goods and services
- Good IT network coverage
- Well-organized health care
- One of the safest regions in BiH
- The existence of developed sports, cultural and artistic associations
- Tradition and experience in organizing fairs and other events

### Weaknesses

- High unemployment rate
- Large population migrations, especially young people, to larger cities
- Unfavorable relationship between the old and young population
- The inability of the rural population to invest in the development of rural tourism in order to achieve the minimum international standard in rural tourism
- Rural households are not categorized
- Lack of tourist maps and road signs
- Lack of information points in all cities in the region
- Lack of physical infrastructure
- Lack of legislation in tourism in Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Some areas still have minefields
- Abandoned farms and land
- farmers have no experience in organization, management and marketing
- Insufficient training and training on starting a new business (lack of a quality business plan)
- Low level of awareness about the importance of environmental protection
- Unequal distribution of resources by local communities
- Neglect of tradition, natural, cultural and historical heritage
- Lack of a strategy related to the distribution of donor funds
- Insufficient labeling of tourist attractions
- Insufficient quantities of traditionally produced products (households often produce only for their own needs)
- Bad roads and failure to reflect them
- Insufficient promotion, marking and "exploitation" of cultural and historical monuments
- bad image of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the world
- Weak communication between municipalities and cantons
- Absence of the Ministry of Tourism at the state level
- Weak (bad) work of cantonal and municipal tourist boards
- Weak promotion of tourist potential in Bosnia and Herzegovina and abroad
- Pre-war infrastructure that has not yet been restored
- Increasing distance between the village and the household engaged in rural tourism
- unfavorable length of the tourist season (only 6 months)
- Lack of other tourist attractions such as entertainment facilities
- Lack of regular transport in rural areas
- Absence of making original tourist souvenirs
- Absence of money exchange offices

### Possibilities

- Connecting urban and rural areas
- Agriculture and the development of rural areas are a priority for overall development
- Increased interest of farmers in involvement in agro-tourism and use of additional space in the household
- Confirmation of the territory
- Great natural resources and domestic products
- Establishment of eco and ethno villages
- Increased interest in food production without the use of additives
- Revival of cultural events
- Opening and expanding the capacity of cultural and historical heritage
- Increase interest among tourists in hunting and fishing
- Provide funds and other donations for the development of rural tourism
- Use the existence of local and international and non-governmental organizations in the development of rural tourism
- International donors are interested in the implementation of the program for the development of rural tourism
- Increased interest of women in education and the importance of their role in the development of rural tourism
- Possibilities for the revival of old traditional customs, games and folklore of the Bosnian countryside • Create an internal categorization and standardization of households engaged in agro-tourism
- Create tourist packages with clear offers for 3-4 days of stay

### Potential hazards

- Continued emigration of the population from rural to urban areas
- Strong influence of negative policies
- Reduced international aid
- General economic crisis
- General political instability after the reduction of foreign investment
- Continuous isolation of municipalities from each other
- Limited fund for the development of rural tourism
- Grey economy
- Lack of any measures to help in the development of rural tourism
- Lack of financing of rural areas by relevant institutions
- Inadequate laws in the field of environmental protection, agro-tourism, agriculture and rural tourism development
- Poor maintenance of roads in rural areas during winter
- Disappearance of traditional crafts
- The inability of local authorities to help finance projects for the development of rural tourism
- Incomplete privatization process
- Lack of any measures to help rural areas
- Complicated procedures for obtaining funds

## **4. DISCUSSION**

According to the previously presented statistical data on the tourism sector and the completed SWOT matrix, it is possible to determine the following recommendations and perspectives for this important sector of the BiH economy, which are in accordance with the EU4business project (the recommendations mostly refer to the needs of state intervention, which is also common for small and countries in the development of the tourism sector such as Bosnia and Herzegovina):

1. Strengthening competitiveness through better management, regulation, provision of comparable data and establishment of cooperation and dialogue with actors in the tourism sector

The future success of tourism largely depends on the ability of the authorities to establish an efficient administrative and institutional structure that will ensure the successful development, promotion and regulation of the sector. The introduction of management at multiple levels of government or horizontal cooperation between all competent ministries and public institutions and the strengthening of cooperation and dialogue with the private sector and NGOs are necessary elements for effective management of tourism development. In addition, a clear and firm commitment of the authorities to the development of tourism and the ability of public officials to lead and manage the preparation and implementation of strategies in the field of tourism are necessary factors that will ensure the full implementation of priority policy measures.

2. Greater visibility of BiH and FBiH as tourist destinations on the global tourist market

The public sector traditionally plays a leading role in destination marketing and promotional activities due to the fragmented nature of the sector and the fact that tourism companies are mostly small, so individual companies can hardly break through independently and attract visitors from distant markets. That is why the development and promotion of the image/brand of the country and the range of products that meet the needs of

the market are of vital importance for the competitiveness of the tourism sector. It is about raising awareness and attracting interest, prolonging the stay and increasing the spending of visitors, and encouraging repeat visits and referrals. Defining and articulating a country's recognizable brand is the key to effective marketing and is the basis for crafting promotional messages and developing products that will deliver on brand promises. A brand, which is much more than a simple logo or slogan, succinctly shows the complete identity of a tourist destination, its essence and permanent characteristics. In addition, governments are now looking for ways to take advantage of the digital transformation in tourism.

3. Encouraging the quality of tourist products and services

Recent trends indicate that countries continue to invest in existing tourism standards and quality systems. Governments are turning to official certification systems to indicate the quality of facilities and services in this context. These standards offer the authorities tools that can help local businesses to improve the quality of their products and services and implement a broader policy aimed at improving the tourist offer, for example in terms of easier access for individual businesses. The availability and quality of accommodation facilities is one of the key success factors in tourism. That is why it is important to design a framework that will stimulate the availability and quality of all types of accommodation within the economy. Providing incentives for investment in private accommodation capacities, especially for SMEs, could significantly increase the availability of various types of high-quality accommodation adapted to the needs of tourists. An efficient framework of quality standards for accommodation capacities, with systematic categorization, is necessary to maintain the quality of accommodation at a consistent level. In addition, the quality of public services and tourist infrastructure is important for the competitiveness of tourism.

4. Stimulating new tourist products and experiences, as well as innovations in tourism

Stimulating the development of unique, authentic tourist products is one of the important functions of the government in the process of attracting new types of visitors and accessing completely new markets throughout the year. The development of tourist products and the diversification of the tourist offer are means that contribute to economic growth, regional development, the extension of the tourist season and serving new markets. It is obvious that at the core of a successful tourism sector lies a high-quality and diversified tourism product that reflects the landscapes, heritage and other advantages of the country, and is formed depending on and based on demand. This is a key measure to support the recovery of the tourism sector after the COVID-19 pandemic, which would simultaneously create preconditions for long-term sustainable and competitive tourism development. In the medium-term perspective, the development of tourist products will require an integral approach, with support for investments in public services, traffic and tourist infrastructure, as well as providing support to MSMEs by introducing financing and lending measures, economic incentives, allocating land for use, determining locations, direct promotion, providing advisory and other assistance to investors and incentives for innovations in tourism.

5. Building employee competencies and employment in tourism

In many countries, education and professional development in the field of tourism represent one of the basic areas of government intervention, which ensures a sufficient number of qualified and competent workers, who can apply and maintain high quality standards. Policy measures aim to direct as many (mostly young) people as possible to formal education and vocational training programs in the field of tourism in order to meet the demand for skilled labor and increase the level of professionalism in the sector. These measures are aimed at creating career opportunities and building skills and competencies that will benefit both individuals and employers in the long term.

6. Improving access to destinations

Accessibility of destinations is one of the key success factors in the development of tourism. It refers to the transport connectivity of the country and the quality of the transport network within the country. The visa regime and easy border crossing are also important aspects that contribute to international tourism. Visa formalities require time, effort and expense, which can affect tourists' decisions and global tourist travel patterns. Lengthy and unpleasant procedures at border crossings affect the first impression that tourists get about the destination and make it difficult for tourists to flow through the region.

7. Encouraging the development of sustainable tourism and business

Many governments have recently made strides by integrating sustainability principles into their tourism policies and related strategies. However, the implementation of these strategies and the realization of adopted measures and common aspirations is a constant challenge. In this sense, the participation of local communities is increasingly considered an important factor in the development of an inclusive and sustainable tourism sector. There is a growing interest in allowing local communities to keep more of the benefits of tourism for themselves. The sustainability of tourism development and tourism activities can be regulated by regulations, but sustainability can also be worked on by other means, such as, for example, financial incentives, labels, giving guidelines and capacity building.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Rural tourism is very important factor for development of rural areas and it also helps to preserve local identity, traditions and customs. It is the fastest growing segment of tourism, and that's why the tourism industry should take into account its impact on the environment, culture, society and economy. In Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the number of interesting and unknown destinations in rural areas is growing. In addition to rural areas that offer a preserved natural environment and healthy nutrition, eco and ethnic tourism has been developed with numerous tourist centers that offer a unique environment and tourist offer. When it comes to rural tourism in FBiH, as a special type of tourism, no official statistics are available for basic tourism indicators, but all data in this sub-sector of tourism are based on surveys conducted by researchers. We defined, within this paper, some advantages and disadvantages, as well as chances and dangers specifically in rural tourism in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

According to the presented statistical data on the tourism sector and the completed SWOT matrix, we have determined some recommendations and perspectives for this important sector of the BiH economy, which are in accordance with the EU4business project:

- Strengthening competitiveness through better management, regulation, provision of comparable data and establishment of cooperation and dialogue with actors in the tourism sector
- Greater visibility of BiH and FBiH as tourist destinations on the global tourist market
- Encouraging the quality of tourist products and services
- Stimulating new tourist products and experiences, as well as innovations in tourism
- Building employee competencies and employment in tourism
- Improving access to destinations
- Encouraging the development of sustainable tourism and business.

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