

## THE EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE OF ORGANIZING RURAL TOURISM IN THE CONTEXT OF A PANDEMIC

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### Abstract:

The article discusses the European experience of organizing rural tourism in a pandemic. The factors contributing to the development of this sector in a pandemic are indicated. The main criteria for the development of rural tourism in a pandemic are considered.

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Rural and farm tourism as a planned and organized activity has an almost seventy-year history in many European countries. During this time, the continuous improvement of the concept and the development of tourism products have created a highly competitive activity that is crucial for the development of many rural areas in Europe.

At first, rural tourism was understood as diversification and income support of farms, but in recent years, the shift in the structure of demand in favor of the use of rural resources has contributed to the evolution of a wide range of activities in the field of sustainable tourism based on the provision of micro-services in rural regions. Since the beginning of the last century, urban residents who spent their holidays in rural areas have found housing and basic services mainly in farmhouses. Such a spontaneous tourist movement was first organized in 1954, in France, with the creation of "Gites de France" - a network for the organization of guest rural houses. Providing more than 55 thousand services related to rural tourism, with a clearly defined product philosophy, it remains to this day the largest and most famous organization in this field in Europe and the world.

Since 1960, the concept of agrotourism (tourist services as an addition to current activities in the field of agriculture) has become popular again throughout Central and Northern Europe as a means of supporting farmers exclusively. The increase in capacity within a very short time without matching in promotion and market demand has led to oversupply in several countries.

Since the 1980s, the concept of agrotourism has been focused on the provision of small tourist services based on local resources and with the direct participation of local communities, the concept of "rural tourism" as we know it today has appeared. This was accompanied by public support for the development of such services mainly through rural development (common agricultural policy). The EU has led to an increase in the provision of tourist services in the accommodation sector in the countries of southern and eastern Europe with the same effect of oversupply and crisis as in the 1960s. At the same time, countries with developed rural tourism have focused more on product development by improving

standards, market research, segmentation and professional marketing activities. The creation of EuroGites as an umbrella organization in 1991 was one of the examples of professional actions.

Until the end of the twentieth century, the viability of rural tourism depended little on direct and indirect government support. This situation changed significantly at the turn of the century mainly for two reasons:

- there has been a general shift in consumer preferences and values, increased interest in resources and assets available in rural areas;
- the market of experienced customers has matured, who appreciate real identity and good value for money.

This has put rural tourism in a very advantageous position and contributes to its future development. However, efforts and professionalism in the field of quality assurance of tourist products will be required; knowledge of market segments and specific demand associated with it; commercialization of individual services and the ability to generate complex products by combining several.

An example is rural tourism in countries such as France, Austria, Germany or the United Kingdom, and in recent years the Baltic States, Poland, Romania and many others.

In recent years, research and development has been carried out on the theory of rural tourism in terms of its beneficial impact on the local economy, sustainability, rural revitalization or gender equality, among many others. But these positive aspects will materialize if rural tourism services bring benefits and are successful promptly.

After the coronavirus pandemic, this sector proved to be stable and even grew, because certain conditions regarding the professional sanitary system, marketing and organization were met. Also, the decisive factor of tourist activity in this direction was the fact that in the short term, European countries began to develop only domestic tourism.

By evaluating a number of quantitative and qualitative data supplemented by the experience of professionals from different European countries, the factors influencing the success or failure of rural tourism were identified.

The following main groups of criteria are currently the most relevant:

- the location is remote from each other, due to which the owners will not have to comply with the 30% rule, on the contrary, many have already begun expansion and built new houses and expanded the territory during the spring period;
- you can get there by private transport, which prevents contact with outsiders;
- a complete vacation product (not just weekends);
- strong image and brand with reliable promotion based on market preferences;
- cooperation with other service providers in the same region, creating comprehensive high-quality products

To determine the criteria that are crucial for the satisfaction of customers at the present time, a list of positive and negative aspects of rural tourism has been created based on the analysis of reports and criticism published on specialized websites:

- poor management;
- incorrect information (logistics);
- poor equipment and lack of hospitality;
- poor sanitary conditions;

- efficiency of personnel;
- sanitary and hygienic standards;
- standards of cleanliness.

Thus, in order for consumers to be satisfied, it is important not only luxury equipment, the human factor, but also good sanitary conditions, business models converted to digital technologies, contactless relationships, environmental certification of tourist services, alternative destinations to reduce mass gatherings of people, enhanced anti-epidemic measures.

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