

## RE-ORIENTATION FOR THE RURAL TOURISM DESTINATIONS IN BULGARIA AND GREECE AS A RESULT OF THE COVID – 19

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### **Abstract**

*The paper aims to analyze the re-orientation for the rural tourism destinations in the transborder area between South-West Bulgaria and Northern Greece during the period of COVID-19 pandemic time. The research identifies the effects of COVID-19 in the demand of this sustainable type of tourism including some specific regional sub-types of the rural tourism. The novelty and the contribution brought by this research to the field of tourism studies is based on the research methodology and specifically on the application of criteria regarding the destinations of rural tourism. These criteria have been modified and supplemented so as to include as many dimensions as possible in the examined areas. The used methodology is based on the analysis of in-depth – interviews with managers of tourist enterprises including smaller guest houses, travel agencies and tourist attractions in the region. The conclusions obtained due to the primary data of the research show common trends for the tourism during the times of uncertainties, and especially indicate an increasing re-orientation of tourists when choosing destinations for rural tourism in both regions of South-West Bulgaria and Northern Greece.*

**Keywords:** rural tourism; COVID-19; transborder rural tourism; area Bulgaria-Greece; sustainability

**JEL Codes:** Q01, Z32, Z30, R11

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### **1. Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic has dealt with severe misfortune to global tourism and leisure sectors, including the hospitality subsector. With the isolation of the population since the beginning of the pandemic and the alteration of international environment, the tourist flows have evaporated, starting a procedure (perhaps temporary) of de-globalization (Niewiadomsky, 2020). In this regard, COVID-19 changed the academic community's perspective on tourism issues. Many studies on the subject do not challenge the current process of globalization (Duro et al., 2021). Rural areas have been a new social and tourist outlet. The advantages of rural tourism focus on environmental benefits (Roman & Grudzień, 2021). In general, rural tourism

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encompasses a range of different activities including inter alia farm/agritourism, ecotourism, cultural tourism, heritage tourism, wine tourism, adventure tourism (Fagioli et al., 2014; Viljoen & Henama, 2017). Taking this into account, we can define common trends for the tourism during the times of uncertainties which lead to tourism business recovery and especially indicate an increasing re-orientation of tourists when choosing destinations for rural tourism in both regions of South-West Bulgaria and Northern Greece. In addition, we analyze the meaning of the term cross-border rural tourism, which is part of the fields of alternative tourism (Smith & Eadington, 1996; Dołzbłasz, 2017) and presents significant dynamics, because it successfully combines natural and cultural resources, with emphasis on cultural heritage, physical activity, and leisure. In this way, a dual goal is achieved: on the one hand, tourists are satisfied and on the other hand, the economic development of the regions is favored (Dimitrov et al., 2017; Sofield, 2006; Stoykova, 2008; Saxena, 2016). The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 describes the Problem Statement, Section 3 puts the research questions and the aims of the research, in Section 4 the research methods are presented. The main results obtained are described and further analysis of the results and policy implications are offered in Section 5. Finally, Section 6 summarizes the main results and provides concluding remarks.

## **2. Problem Statement**

Open borders and life in big cities are spreading the virus rapidly (Hilsenrath, 2020), and tourism is playing a positive role in transmitting diseases and creating public health problems. Thus, it is important to identify these risks and the social problems caused during the pandemic, to record, codify and address the spatial adverse effects. An advantage of rural tourism is access to people from lower social classes and vacations away from large urban centers (Roman & Grudzień, 2021), but with the use of all modern amenities (Hristov & Taneva, 2013). We argue that rural areas and ecosystems must be supported in order to lead to a path of sustainable socio-economic development while taking advantage of all their local comparative advantages. There is research gap in the study of the development of all types of rural tourism on transborder area during the times of crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. There are limited studies on the concept of transborder rural tourism and its impact on the surrounding areas and connection with local tourism business recovery. In addition, these areas need to be transformed into a specific domain for tourism knowledge and practice, which will be attractive for the global rural tourism market. In this light, agritourism provides opportunities for new tourist experiences of old and "new" tourists. There will always be a demand for special activities in the countryside in relation to those of mass urban tourism destinations (Page, 2020), including the creation of sustainable partnerships (Kiryakova-Dineva & Chankova, 2022), which depends to a great extent on the effective performance of business communication between professionals (Kyurova & Kiryakova-Dineva, 2019).

### 3. Research Questions/Aims of the Research

The overall purpose of the study is to find tools to support sustainable rural tourism in both regions of South-West Bulgaria and Northern Greece. The main research question is to find the potential of the cross-border area for the development of rural tourism during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, research questions are:

- a) to define if there are public health determinants of rural tourism development on cross-border areas;
- b) to define if there are economic or social reasons for the tourists, to change their traditional tourist destinations and finally to choose a cross-border rural tourism destination.

### 4. Research Methods

The sustainable nature of the areas under study requires the study of certain parameters and the existence of conditions. The paper examines these conditions, which will develop agro-tourism cross-border cooperation in southwestern Bulgaria and northern Greece. The selected areas are the regional unit of Serres in Greece and the province of Blagoevgrad in Bulgaria. The areas present similar geographical locations along the Strouma river (Strymonas) and common trajectories of economic development.

This research is a continuation of previous research (Krasteva & Kiryakova-Dineva, 2018), which analyzed in detail the destinations of agritourism. The criteria of analysis were first set by Ribov (1997) and then modified and supplemented so as to include as many dimensions as possible in the examined areas.

We use a two-step analysis. On the **first step**, we give emphasis on criterion number 4 which refers to a sustainable image of the region as a destination for rural tourism. We conducted in-depth – interviews in the region focusing on this concrete parameter of previous research collecting primary data. Based on the results of the research by tourism experts and representatives of the tourism industry (managers of tourist hotels in rural areas, policy makers, tour operators and owners of alternative tourism businesses), separate evaluations were carried out in each area that develops agriculture and the prospects for possible cross-border cooperation were captured. The experts (10 from each of the two regions), evaluated the tourism competitiveness of each region. The research was conducted based on Ribov's 4<sup>th</sup> criterion (1997).

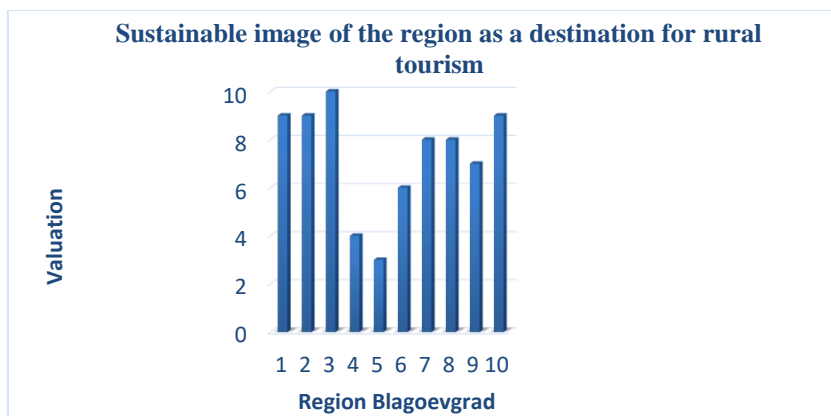
On the **second step** a comparative content analysis is performed for the period 2018-2022. Through the process of comparing the answers, significant findings emerge that show changes in the identity and the promotion of the rural tourist destinations. Specifically, the comparison includes the answers of those who participated in the interviews in 2018 on criterion number 4 which refers to sustainable image of the region as a destination for rural tourism and the answers to the same question this year, in 2022. Moreover, a broader content analysis of the interviews is

carried out in order to ascertain the reasons for the positive increase of the rural tourism destinations.

## 5. Findings

The findings of the interviews are divided into two categories. The **first category** refers to on criterion number 4 (sustainable image of the region as a destination for rural tourism). The next four figures present these answers, firstly in 2018 and secondly in 2022.

Figure 1. Valuation of the Region of Blagoevgrad as a destination for rural tourism (2018)



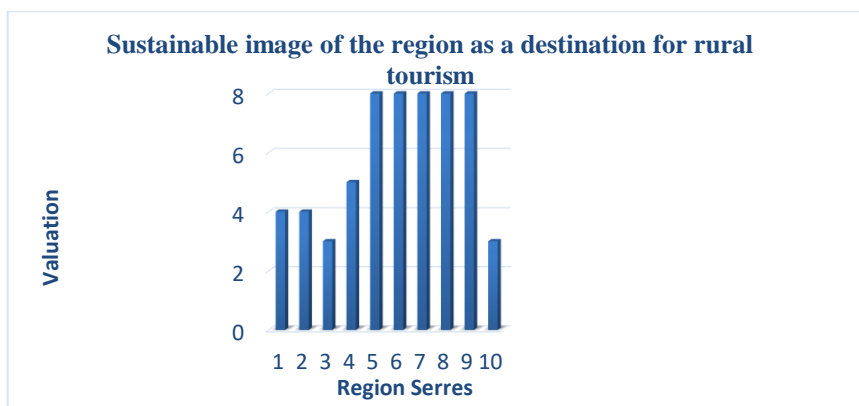
Source: Author's calculations and synthesis based on interviews

**Figure 1** (Region of Blagoevgrad - 2018), presents the valuation of participants on this research project. The results show a wide spectrum of valuations. Two answers are below the base (3 and 4), two answers are slightly positive (6 and 7) and the rest 6 answers are close to the highest scores.

**Figure 2** (Region of Serres - 2018), presents the valuation of participants regarding the sustainable image of the region as a destination for rural tourism. The results show a wide spectrum of valuations. Five answers are below the base or on base (3, 3, 4, 4 and 5) and five answers are quite positive (8). The picture of the interviews in this case is slightly worse.

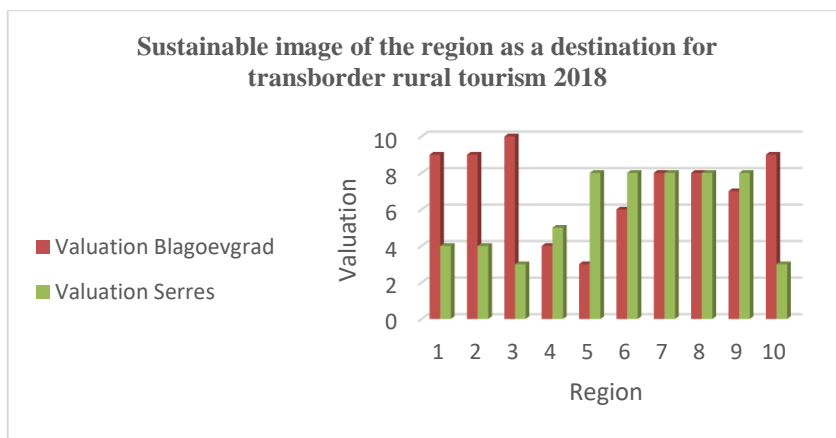
**Figure 3** (Region of Blagoevgrad - 2018), presents the comparative valuation of participants regarding the sustainable image of the regions as a destination for rural tourism. Figure 3 is a synthesis of the two previous figures and give us information comparatively.

Figure 2. Valuation of the Region of Serres as a destination for rural tourism (2018)



Source: Author's calculations and synthesis based on interviews

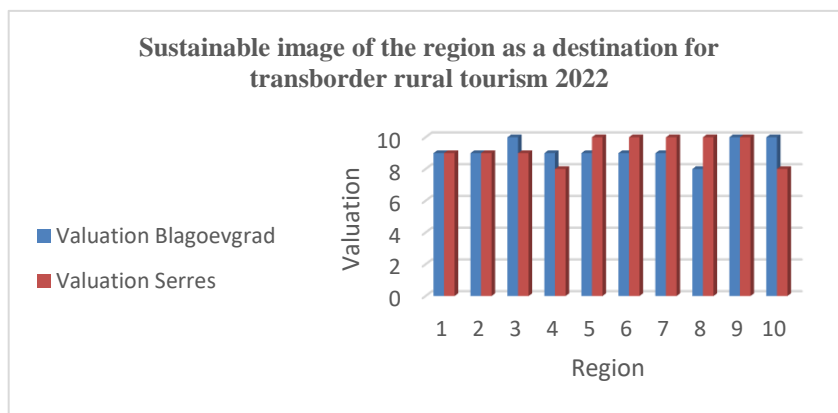
Figure 3. Comparative Valuation of the Regions of Serres and Blagoevgrad as destinations for rural tourism (2018)



Source: Author's calculations and synthesis based on interviews

**Figure 4** (Regions of Serres and Blagoevgrad - 2022), presents the comparative valuation of participants regarding the sustainable image of the regions as a destination for rural tourism. For the case of Blagoevgrad, the results show a small spectrum of valuations, on the top of scores. All answers are found among 8 (1 time), 9 (6 times) and 10 (3 times). For the case of Serres, the results show a small spectrum of valuations, on the top of scores. All answers are found among 8 (2 times), 9 (3 times) and 10 (5 times). In this case the change of valuations of participants, is huge.

Figure 4. Comparative Valuation of the Regions of Serres and Blagoevgrad as destinations for rural tourism (2022)



Source: Author's calculations and synthesis based on interviews

Attempting an **overall assessment of the results of the interviews**, in relation to the extent to which the specific regions are known as rural tourist destinations, there are significant changes that show the impact of the pandemic on the improvement of the image. The answers show that the regions under study have become better known internationally as rural tourism destinations. The overall difference in the answers between 2018 and 2022 shows that many things have changed in the tourist preferences in recent years as people choose the place of their vacation by different criteria. This change in relation to rural tourism is a key pillar on local tourism business recovery.

The **second category** refers to the general question regarding the reasons for the positive increase of the rural tourism destinations and the subsequent local tourism business recovery. Findings from the interviewees' responses show four distinct groups of responses. Thus, there was a clear increase in rural tourism preferences in the surveyed regions due to:

- a) People are afraid to travel far because of measures against COVID-19 pandemic (**17 answers**).
- b) People choose to go somewhere where there is a smaller concentration of tourists because they are afraid of overcrowding and of COVID-19 (**15 answers**).
- c) People because they were locked in their homes due to the successive lockdowns, people wanted contact with nature and free open areas (**13 answers**).
- d) For financial and income reasons, people have discovered nearby destinations that can greatly replace the tourist experience of long-distance travel (**12 answers**).

These are the final research findings that increase international tourism competitiveness in the under study border areas. Additional actions that will promote rural tourism can be joint cross-border tourism actions, institutional transnational cooperation at all levels (promotion, advertising, seasonality, employment, tourist product).

## **6. Conclusions**

The paper addressed the problem of improving the competitiveness and promoting cross-border rural tourism in the study areas and creating a sustainable and attractive identity of the areas as an important rural tourism destination. The image of these areas has been improved significantly from the previous research in 2018. The impact of the pandemic has been catalytic in the rise of rural tourism for several reasons mentioned in detail above, putting these areas on a trajectory of local tourism business recovery. The importance of research is based on highlighting the critical elements that make cross-border areas quality and accessible tourist destinations. The research presents some limitations related to the size of the sample and the fact that it does not include the possible impact of the deteriorating economic situation in Greece and Bulgaria. Extension of the research can be done by studying the other regions with which Greece borders and be presented comparatively creating a more complete picture. This research is also of practical importance. It can be considered by local government bodies and by municipalities and regions located on the land border in relation to the appropriate tourist planning and the creation of necessary infrastructure that will contribute to the rise of the level of economic development. The results obtained following the primary data of the research show common trends for the tourism during the times of uncertainties, and especially indicate an increasing re-orientation of tourists when choosing destinations for transborder rural tourism in both regions of South-West Bulgaria and Northern Greece.

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