

# Rural Tourism in the Countries of Former Yugoslavia: Literature Review

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# RURAL TOURISM IN THE COUNTRIES OF FORMER YUGOSLAVIA: LITERATURE REVIEW

## Abstract

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*Purpose* – The purpose of this paper is to summarize and analyze research on the development of rural tourism in the last 30 years in the countries of former Yugoslavia and the most common topics in each country.

*Design/Methodology* – To create a systematic literature review, the authors analyzed articles from the national library information systems and Google Scholar. Based on a keyword search and content analysis, 647 research articles were identified as relevant to this study. To interpret secondary data sources, general scientific methods such as deduction and desk analysis were used.

*Approach* – The paper aims to provide insight into recent trends in rural tourism literature regarding former Yugoslavia's countries. A detailed review of relevant literature identified the predominant interests of authors and dominant research niches. This study focused on the scholarly perspective to study and analyze the rural tourism literature and its link with sustainable development and special forms of rural tourism.

*Findings* – Countries that were once a part of Yugoslavia have different levels of rural tourism development and the authors research rural tourism from different perspectives. There are many authors that study rural tourism and an emerging number of those that include sustainable development of rural tourism as key.

*Originality of the research* – This research contributes to the theory by presenting relevant literature on rural tourism in the area of former Yugoslavia. Literature reviews on rural tourism are many, but there are no papers focusing only on former Yugoslav republics or collecting data from the national library information systems and Google Scholar.

**Keywords** rural tourism, sustainable development, former Yugoslavia, literature review

## Review

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## INTRODUCTION

Rural areas are specific areas that include a different resource base that can be valorized for tourism. Authors Čagalj et al. (2021) state that in the last decade, rural areas are considered to be areas with a dominant extensive method of land use, small settlements dominated by the natural landscape, and areas where the lifestyle is based on coexistence with nature. Author Defilippis (2005) states that the term rural space is used for a space that is not city or urban, but opposite to city and urban space. Rural areas represent a challenge in the development of tourism both to destination management and to all other stakeholders. It is especially important to look at the impact of tourist activities in rural areas due to the possible negative impact on the area. The problem is that some rural destinations are facing the influx of mass tourism, so it must be ensured that tourism is developed on sustainable principles. Other possible negative effects are overcrowding of public places and facilities, disruption of quality of life, high real estate prices, safety concerns, environmental damage, increased waste and excessive use of resources (An, Alarcón, 2020). Rural tourism is a specific form of tourism that develops in rural areas and its sub-forms are usually based on the most attractive and dominant resource base in the tourist destination. Countries usually encourage the development of tourism in rural areas in order to stimulate economic activities in them, i. e. regional development, reduce the depopulation of rural areas, and encourage the inclusion of new areas in the tourist offer. In any case, different tourist destinations in rural areas develop rural tourism with legislative regulations, but also incentives from the outside. After the breakup of Yugoslavia, states dominated by rural areas emerged in the Balkans. Sustainable development of rural areas and incentives for the development of tourism in underdeveloped rural areas in the countries of former Yugoslavia (Montenegro, Serbia, Croatia, North Macedonia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina) opens up space for researchers to focus their research on determining the degree of development of rural tourism and to determine potentials and opportunities for the development of rural tourism. This paper researches and provides literature review on the development of rural tourism in the countries of former Yugoslavia, i.e. a very naturally and anthropogenically diverse area that develops under the specific conditions of individual state determinants. Rural tourism, like tourism in general in all countries of the former Yugoslavia, is not equally developed, and there are differences even within the countries themselves. Because of this, there was a need for a systematic review of rural tourism in the former Yugoslavia region. In order to expand and deepen knowledge on different topics it is very important to accumulate research in a comprehensive and systematic way. It also raises awareness of new research and may contribute to future research (An, Alarcón, 2020). The authors of this article reviewed relevant research related to rural tourism in the countries of former Yugoslavia and provided an overview of the legal regulations used in certain countries. In the literature research, they used the national repositories of the states that emerged. This study was conducted to answer the following research questions:

Research question 1: What are the general characteristics of research related to rural tourism in individual countries?

Research question 2: What is the development of rural tourism in certain countries of former Yugoslavia like?

Answering the research questions will provide an overview of the literature that will enable the continuation of research aimed at improving the development of tourism in the rural areas of former Yugoslavia.

## 1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### 1.1. Tourism of rural areas

Many researchers tried to define rural tourism, i.e. tourism in rural areas from different aspects. The first known definition was given by the Council of Europe in 1986, which says: Rural tourism includes all tourist activities in rural areas, not only those that could be defined as farming or agritourism. Most authors place rural tourism in the context of development of tourism in rural areas. Encouraging economic diversification by including the promotion of rural tourism into different development strategies is practiced in many European countries (Lun, Pechlaner, Volggager, 2016). Authors Rosalina, Dupre, Wang (2021) point out that in order for tourism to be rural it needs to be situated in areas with different rural functions which are traditional, local, genuine, distant, scarcely populated and predominantly agrarian. Tourists have to be able to engage in such a destination in physical, social or psychological aspects.

The same authors state that rural tourism aims to revitalize “rural resources for local socio-economic benefits and environmental sustainability through active local community empowerment and involvement”. Schmidt et al. (2016) claim that rural tourism is developing rapidly because an increasing number of people are searching for new places to escape from the hectic life in the city.

Many authors emphasize the importance of sustainable rural tourism with the provision that the values that rural destinations possess are not destroyed (Vodeb, Nemec Rudež, 2010; Ammirato et al. (2020). Thus, the authors McAreavey & McDonagh (2010) emphasize that it is imperative to understand the interrelationship of tourism with the environment and local communities. Crucial starting point to successfully approach sustainable development of rural tourism is cooperation and consultation with stakeholders, no matter how complex it may be.

Sustainability is usually more connected to rural tourism as tourists are becoming more interested in encountering the rural environment and being part of the social fabric of the local society (Ammirato et al., 2020). The focus on rural tourism seemed to be an appropriate solution for predominantly agricultural areas with mostly rural population. Ideas of sustainable development succeed best in these environments because serious industrial production is lacking in such countries. In such conditions, it is easier to prove the correctness and applicability of sustainability criteria than in areas that have experienced a high degree of industrialization and urbanization (Vukonić, 2010).

### 1.2. Tourism and rural tourism of the countries of former Yugoslavia

After the separation from the former Yugoslavia, new countries were formed in the Western Balkans in the 1990s: Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, North Macedonia, and Montenegro. The wars of the Yugoslav succession during the ‘90s had a very bad impact on the region’s tourism sector (Naef & Ploner, 2016). Some of the most popular tourist destinations were shelled and others devastated. The area of the former Yugoslavia, especially its coastal part along the Adriatic Sea, has always been attractive to tourists, and summer holiday tourism developed in these areas (before the breakup of Yugoslavia) with distinct seasonality.

The territory of the countries of former Yugoslavia are mostly rural areas, and therefore the direction of this paper is towards the development of rural tourism (especially continental) of these countries. In the period up to the 1990s, rural tourism did not show the kind of expansion it has been showing for the past ten years, not only in the area of the former Yugoslavia, but also in other countries. Especially in recent years, emphasis has been placed on sustainable rural tourism, which some countries have included in their national documents (e.g. Croatia adopted the Strategy for Sustainable Development of Tourism until 2030 in 2023), and regional units in their strategic documents. Former Yugoslavia’s states possess outstanding assets for the development of sustainable rural tourism (advantageous conditions of the preserved environment, with mild climate, pristine waterflows, unpolluted air, and rich biodiversity) (Petrović et al., 2017). Tourism in individual countries of the former Yugoslavia was differently legally regulated. Table 1 shows the laws that were in force from the breakup of Yugoslavia to those that are currently in force in individual countries. In addition to the legal regulations of the government, local administration includes rural areas in the sustainable development of tourism through programs, projects, and incentives.

**Table 1 Legal regulation of tourism in the countries of former Yugoslavia**

Country	Name of the Law	The national gazette
Croatia	Law on Hospitality and Tourism activities	Official Gazette No. 28/88, 38/88, 47/89, 16/90, 19/90, 71/91, 19/93, 44/93, 37/94, 48/95, 8/96
	Law on Tourism activities	Official Gazette No. 8/96, 19/96, 76/98, 76/99
	Law on Tourism activities	Official Gazette No. 68/07, 88/10, 30/14, 152/14
	Act on Provision of Tourism Services	Official Gazette No. 130/17, 25/19, 98/19, 42/20, 70/21
	Tourism Act	Official Gazette No. 156/23
Slovenia	Tourism Development Act	Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia 57/98, 68/00, 21/02, 86/02, 94/02
	Promotion of Tourism Development Act	Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia 2/04, 57/12, 17/15, 52/16
	Promotion of Tourism Development Act	Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia 13/18
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Law on tourism-hospitality activities	Official Gazette of BiH 19/96, 28/03
	Law on tourism activities	Official Gazette of BiH 32/09
	Law on tourism activities of Brčko district	Official Gazette of Brčko district 03/06, 19/07, 11/20
	Law on tourism activities	Official Gazette of Herzegovina Neretva Canton 5/00
	Law on tourism activities	Official Gazette of Herzegovina Neretva Canton 3/11
	Tourism Act	Official Gazette of Sarajevo Canton 19/16, 31/17, 34/17, 13/21
	Tourism and Hospitality Act	Official Gazette of the Republika Srpska 32/94
	Tourism Act	Official Gazette of the Republika Srpska 70/11, 67/13
	Tourism Act	Official Gazette of the Republika Srpska 45/17, 16/23
	Serbia	Tourism Act
Tourism Act		Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia 45/05
Tourism Act		Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia 36/09, 88/10, 99/11, 93/12, 84/15, 83/18
Tourism Act		Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia 17/19
Montenegro	Tourism and Hospitality Act	Official Gazette of Montenegro 16/95
	Tourism Act	Official Gazette of Montenegro 32/02, 38/03, 31/05
	Tourism Act	Official Gazette of Montenegro 61/10, 40/11, 53/11, 31/14
	Tourism and Hospitality Act	Official Gazette of Montenegro 2/18, 4/18, 13/18, 25/19, 67/19, 76/20
North Macedonia	Law on tourism activity	Official Gazette of the North Macedonia 62/04, 89/08, 12/09, 17/11, 47/11, 53/2011, 123/12, 164/13, 27/14, 116/15, 192/15, 53/16, 31/20

Source: Authors

## 2. RESEARCH APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

First, the databases were selected, and the search parameters were defined. In the search for articles, the national library information systems of the countries of former Yugoslavia and the Google Scholar database were taken, and the catalogs for the last 30 years, since the countries began to separate from the mother country, were reviewed. The database was searched for the period 1994 to 2024. The data from both databases was refined and exported. Only papers that include the terms “rural tourism” in English and native languages of each country in titles and keywords were included in the analysis. The analysis only included articles that investigate rural tourism in the countries of former Yugoslavia, and not articles by authors who do not mention any country of former Yugoslavia and generally describe rural tourism and its connections with certain special forms of tourism and sustainable development. Further analysis included determining dominant topics that were researched in those articles in each country separately. All 647 articles were separated into three groups: papers dealing with the general development of

rural tourism, papers dealing with special forms of tourism, and papers that include sustainability which is presented in Table 2. The research was conducted from January to the end of March 2024, and according to the authors Ansorge, Stejskalová & Vološinová (2021), who conducted a bibliometric analysis of the water footprint in the countries of the former Yugoslavia. Authors Ruiz-Real et al. (2022) did a bibliometrical analysis of the Web of Science Core Collection to determine state of the art of research on rural tourism and development, and Leković et al. (2020) made an evaluative bibliometric analysis of recent trends in rural tourism literature that is a detailed review of relevant literature published in the Web of Science.

### 3. LITERATURE REVIEW ON THE COUNTRIES OF FORMER YUGOSLAVIA – RESEARCH FINDINGS

#### 3.1. Slovenia

Slovenia is a country that gained its independence in 1991, and as an independent country it certainly had the best conditions to direct its development towards special forms of tourism. In 1973, the Slovenian Cooperative Union established a platform and framework for the development of “tourism on family farms” in which the conditions that this activity must meet were defined. In 2004, Slovenia already offers accommodation at 360 tourist family farms and is intensively developing through various projects and programs (Svržnjak et al. 2014). Rural tourism in Slovenia is well-arranged and greatly developed, thus improving household income and sustainable development of rural areas, the diversity of the tourist offer and the improvement of the quality of life of the local population. “For decades, Slovenian government and local stakeholders in rural tourism have been making joint efforts to achieve the high economic level and become compared with many leading countries in the rural travel industry” (Petrović et al. 2017). According to Lakičević & Pantić (2020), stakeholders of rural tourism in different government sectors of Slovenia assessed how important government measures are for the future development of the industry and their effect in terms of these actions.

Sustainable diversity of rural economy aspires to improve the quality of life, reduce poverty and prevent social and ecological degradation through social, economic and ecological practices.

For Slovenia, a total of 107 papers were found in the catalogs (Table 2), which in the observed period deal with research and development of rural tourism in Slovenia. Most of the papers deal with sustainable development and rural tourism (Perpar & Udovč, 2007; Juvan & Ovsenik, 2008), but also with special forms of tourism within rural tourism like, for example, wine tourism (Bojnec, Jurin & Tomljenović, 2006; Koščak, 2018), gastronomic tourism (Pavlin & Koščak, 2018; Rangus, Petek & Gačnik, 2023) and cultural tourism.

#### 3.1. Croatia

Rural tourism in Croatia began to develop after the Homeland War, first as an incentive for the development of continental tourism, and then as an important factor in the development of rural areas (Svržnjak et al., 2014). According to Demonja and Ružić (2010), the development of rural tourism in Croatia began at the beginning of the 1990s, when the Ministry of Tourism started its development initiatives. The development can be divided into two periods. It first started in 1995 and lasted until 1999, when the National Program “Development of small and medium-sized enterprises in tourism with an emphasis on sustainable development of tourism in rural areas” was adopted. The second period begins in 2003, when Croatia’s Government begins to take greater care of rural areas through the departments of agriculture and tourism. Applying the OECD criteria, 91.6% of the total area of Croatia is classified as rural. Rural areas in Croatia “have a rich natural and cultural heritage and great potential for the development of rural tourism” (Mičetić Fabić & Šker, 2022). According to the Strategy for the Development of Sustainable Tourism until 2030 (Official Gazette 2/23), rural tourism in Croatia is perceived as low and insufficiently profiled and dominantly linked to continental Croatia and the hinterland in the coastal counties. The tourist offer for rural tourism is poorly developed, but the potential exists considering that only some destinations are working in the direction of international competitiveness.

A total of 157 papers were found in the catalogs (Table 2) that investigate rural tourism in Croatia from 1994 to the present day. Most of the articles refer to sustainable development (Smolčić Jurdana, Soldić Frleta & Đedović, 2018) and rural tourism in general, while some articles deal with special forms of tourism, e.g. agritourism, bicycle tourism (Krošnjak & Lukić, 2022), wine tourism, cultural tourism (Starčević, Vojinović & Glavaš, 2022) and hunting and fishing tourism.

#### 3.2. Bosnia and Herzegovina

Since 1990s tourism in Bosnia and Herzegovina has been affected by special circumstances: war, aggression, refugees, transition, etc. That resulted in general decline in demand for travel to one of the tourist destinations in Bosnia and Herzegovina which have already had a remarkable level of tourism travel before these events (Özlen & Poturak, 2013). 81% of Bosnian territory and 61% of the population could qualify as rural and in many of those areas, tourism is expanding. “From a diversification point of view the types of tourism that BIH could consider focusing on include: cultural heritage, religious heritage, soft adventure, and eco-tourism” (El Bilali et al., 2013). According to Drpić, Kenjić & Milojica (2011) the first initiatives for rural

tourism development started through projects by international organizations and bilateral donors who worked in the country. For Bosnia and Herzegovina, a total of 41 papers were found in the catalogs (Table 2), which have been dealing with research on the development of rural tourism for the last 30 years. Most of the articles describe rural tourism in general and sustainable development, while a smaller number describe special forms of tourism within rural tourism, such as gastronomic tourism (Radosavac, Jovic & Jasic, 2013) and ethno-tourism (Hudović Kljuno & Halilović, 2022).

### 3.3. Montenegro

Even though rural tourism started its development in Montenegro in the '80s, tourism in general underwent significant changes as a result of transitional challenges in the '90s (Moric, 2015 in Stanovčić et al., 2018). Those conditions delayed the development of special forms of tourism. Tourism and rural development began to change most rapidly in the 1990s due to complex circumstances. Most benefits for rural tourism happened in 2006 with financial and technical support through Agriculture and Rural Development Strategy. In 2013, the rural tourism sector in Montenegro was "represented by more than 100 businesses, mostly family owned and developed almost without any or with very little institutional support" (Morić, 2013). Rural areas cover more than 90% of the whole territory of Montenegro. Main problems of the rural tourism development are inadequate accommodation capacity, roads leading to households that are mostly not paved, promotion of rural tourism is very poor, and the workforce is inadequate (Bojić, 2018). Authors Mujevic & Mujevic (2023) claim that rural tourism should play a key role in the protection and improvement of the natural environment, as one of the strongest resources of Montenegro.

A total of 42 papers dealing with rural tourism were found for Montenegro (Table 2). Most of the papers deal with rural tourism in general, while some deal with sustainable rural tourism and some special forms of tourism within rural tourism, for example agritourism (Melović, 2022), gastronomic tourism (Vitomirović & Vitomirović, 2020), cultural tourism, ethno-tourism.

### 3.4. Serbia

Rural tourism in Serbia started to develop during the 1970s, however, unfavorable political events in the latter part of the 20th century significantly impacted tourism, particularly rural tourism. The continuous economic crisis has resulted in limited investments for maintaining transportation and communal infrastructure, as well as accommodation and hospitality in rural regions. Additionally, there has been a decrease in funding for preservation of cultural and landmarks, cultural and artistic institutions, and organizing tourist events - all of which contribute to the overall experience of rural tourism (Radović et al., 2020). In the past few decades, rural tourism in Serbia has not made significant progress, leading to low competitiveness in the global tourism industry. However, the present rural development is considered a top economic focus by the National Government. The rural tourism sector in Serbia is currently not very competitive, despite having the necessary natural, cultural and social conditions for its growth. These include a strong agricultural workforce, fertile land suitable for agritourism, uncontaminated soil, and opportunities for organic food production (Petrović et al. 2017). Serbia is well-equipped for the growth of rural tourism, with abundant natural and social resources, a wealth of cultural and historical heritage, and a favorable geographic location with good accessibility (Gajić et al., 2017). Around 85% of Serbia's territory is rural, between 44% and 55% of the population lives in rural areas and an estimated 41% of GDP comes from rural areas (Erdeji et al., 2013).

Serbia has a total of 257 papers (Table 2) in the reviewed databases in the given time frame. These are mostly papers on the topic of rural tourism in general, however, a significant number of papers deal with sustainable development. Some papers research special forms of rural tourism such as gastronomic tourism (Božić & Mašić, 2022), agritourism, wine tourism, event tourism, eco-tourism, hunting tourism, cultural tourism and ethno-tourism.

### 3.5. North Macedonia

North Macedonia, with 97% of rural territory, has various natural and cultural preconditions to develop rural tourism (Dimitrov, Petrevska & Terzić, 2019). As of the early 2000s, the Republic of North Macedonia began to develop tourism in rural areas mainly by donor funded projects (Dimitrov & Petrevska, 2019).

For Macedonia, a total of 43 papers (Table 2) in the last 30 years dealing with rural tourism were found in the catalogs. As in other countries of former Yugoslavia, the majority of papers describe rural tourism in general and sustainable development (Petrevska & Nestoroska, 2023), while a smaller number describe special forms of tourism in general (Marinoski & Nestoroska, 2017) and within rural tourism such as eco-tourism.

#### 4. COMPARISON OF PUBLISHED PAPERS

The number of published papers in the national library information systems of former Yugoslav countries and Google Scholar on rural tourism (Table 2) indicate that more is written about rural tourism as a specific form of tourism in countries that geographically cover larger areas, but also in those that are more developed in terms of tourism. The largest number of articles was found in Serbia, while the countries with the lowest number of articles are Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia. The general characteristics of rural tourism research in certain countries show that the interest of scientists in rural tourism has been growing for the last ten years, and especially the focus on sustainable development, which imposes respect for the values, resources, and quality of life of the local population. Sustainability is a significant determinant of many papers in the past period in all researched articles. All countries in their strategic tourism development documents state the importance of rural tourism development.

Table 2 Papers on rural tourism in national library information systems and Google Scholar in the period from 1994 to 2024

Country	Number of papers	Number of papers dealing with the general development of rural tourism	Number of papers dealing with special forms of tourism	Number of papers that include sustainability
Slovenia	107	101	12	30
Croatia	157	113	15	29
Montenegro	42	28	7	7
Bosnia and Herzegovina	41	30	2	9
Serbia	257	187	20	50
North Macedonia	43	36	4	3

Source: Authors

#### CONCLUSION

The countries of the Western Balkans (Croatia, Slovenia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia) are characterized by different degrees of rural tourism development, and the authors investigate rural tourism from different points of view. Many authors deal with rural tourism with different specific forms of tourism, and in the last ten years they increasingly include sustainability as a key category. Sustainability is mentioned as an important category by strategic national documents, as well as development documents of individual regions. Emphasis on the involvement of all stakeholders and sustainable development is contained in numerous articles in all observed countries.

This paper is the basis for further elaboration of rural tourism research in the countries of former Yugoslavia and opens many research questions that focus on the role of individual stakeholders in development processes and their connection with the level of tourism development. The development of rural tourism should be seen as a means of revitalization of rural areas that enables the preservation of their valuable tangible and intangible heritage and ensures regional development and reduction of depopulation of rural areas through managed development of rural tourism on sustainable principles.

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