

## INTERCONNECTION AND INTERDEPENDENCE OF KEY ECONOMIC SECTORS - AGRICULTURE AND TOURISM IN THE CONDITIONS OF A PANDEMIC CRISIS

Marina NIKOLOVA, Pavlin PAVLOV

D. A. Tsenov Academy of Economics, Department of Agricultural Economics, 2 Em. Chacarov Street, 5250 Svishtov, Bulgaria, Phones: +359/882027451, +359/886171667; E-mails: m.nikolova@uni-svishtov.bg, p.pavlov@uni-svishtov.bg

*Corresponding author:* m.nikolova@uni-svishtov.bg

### Abstract

*The rural development policy in Bulgaria is aimed at achieving sustainable development of the economic sectors, as the rural area is a place for development not only for agricultural activities, but also it offers good prospects for economic development on a regional scale, through adequate business support, job creation and tourism development. Therefore, the interconnection and interdependence between the two economic sectors is especially important to find opportunities for the development of alternative tourism with the formation of unique tourism products and the application of environmentally-friendly agricultural practices in order to achieve higher living standards and economic benefits for local communities. The problem is that the current pandemic conditions of last year and this year impose a number of restrictions to a greater or lesser extent on each of the economic sectors. The aim of our research is related to the study of interconnection and interdependence of key economic sectors – agriculture and tourism in crisis conditions. The research methods used in the study include: basic scientific research methods, questionnaire survey, summary and synthesis, logical method, tabular and graphical presentation of characteristics and trends. The results of the research can be systematized in several directions: analysis of the connections and interdependence of the sectors through the opportunities for creation of unique tourist products and through diversification of the activities in the rural areas. In conclusion, the pandemic inevitably affects the economic sectors, with greater constraints on the tourism business, where the preferences of potential tourists are focused on domestic alternative tourism. In the construction of unique and specific tourist products in rural areas, the relationship agriculture – tourism is strongly emphasized in terms of requirements for clean and healthy foods, incl. organic food or the purchase of local food products from the region. The diversification of activities in rural areas through the development of tourism provides an opportunity for the development of entrepreneurial initiatives. The strong connection and interdependence between the economic subjects in the indicated economic branches of key importance is fully manifested in a good combination of the interests of all participants concerned in the process of development of the specific territory/region.*

**Key words:** Covid 19, interconnection, interdependence, agriculture, alternative tourism, rural areas, Bulgaria

### INTRODUCTION

There have been pandemics in human history before, but Covid-19 is the first pandemic in the age of globalisation. It follows that the virus spreads more quickly and easily, and that coping with it requires a coordinated effort at global level [3]. In economic terms, among the most affected by the global pandemic is undoubtedly the tourism sector, which until before the advent of COVID-19 was one of the main drivers of global economic development [17]. According to Popescu et al., tourism is a real opportunity for business development and strengthening of the local economy, due to which it has a

socio-economic impact and an impact on the environment [18]. It has been proven that tourism is one of the most dynamic sectors of the world economy with a profound impact on the economic, social and cultural development of many countries [19, 20]. Bulgaria is considered a little-known, safe and stable tourist place located near Western Europe. At the same time, its imposition as a destination of alternative tourism in a separate or combined tourist product is a condition for sustainable economic and social development with environmentally-friendly solutions. The high degree of landscape diversity, as well as that of the cultural and historical heritage contribute to the formation of almost unique

tourist products for individual settlements and micro-districts [12]. The industry generates approximately 1/10 of the turnover of the world economy [24]. The essence of tourism is the understanding of an economic sector associated with many industries (agriculture, food industry, etc.), and this is a fact that unconditionally requires mastering the ecological and social balance in a particular tourist destination or location. In modern conditions, tourism in general has become an important factor in improving the quality of life and maintaining the competitiveness of business practices in many areas through the development of sustainable alternative tourism and the introduction of environmentally-friendly agricultural practices. According to the national legislation (Bulgarian Rural Development Programme 2014-2020) the definition of rural areas at the municipal level (LAU 1) includes the territory of 231 municipalities (out of a total of 265), in which the largest settlement has a population of up to 30,000 people. Thus, rural areas occupy 81% of the territory and 39% of the country's population. In the rural areas of Bulgaria, in addition to villages, there are many small towns (Ministry of Agriculture and Food, 2014). In general, in most rural municipalities in Bulgaria there are unfavourable demographic, social, cultural and economic problems. Their solution is at the heart of local initiatives (e.g. the RDP Leader approach) and the search for the application of European models for mobilising available resources, creativity, entrepreneurship and preserved traditions. In recent years, the application of a number of ideas of the Green Revolution has been growing in agriculture, constantly looking for opportunities to apply the principles of sustainable agriculture, include environmentally-friendly practices and create products with high performance, such as quality, usefulness for human health and environment, authenticity and traditions. Critical issues of rural development remain unresolved, namely the extent to which agriculture is the engine of rural development, the future viability of small farms, the potential of the rural non-farm economy in the current pandemic crisis.

Despite the unfavourable characteristics and unresolved problems, rural areas have a unique natural, human, economic and cultural potential that must be developed and fully exploited. Harizanova points out that by adapting policies and in particular measures for rural development in Bulgaria, sustainable positive development can be achieved in all sectors, and the rural area is a place for the development of agricultural activities, but it also offers good prospects for progress in the economy, through appropriate support for business, job creation and tourism development [4]. Other authors [11] point out that rural tourism in Bulgaria is a socio-economic phenomenon, providing great opportunities for municipalities. Therefore, the interconnection and interdependence between the two economic sectors is especially important to find opportunities for the development of alternative tourism with the formation of unique tourism products and the application of environmentally-friendly agricultural practices in order to achieve higher living standards and economic benefits for local communities.

The aim of the research is related to the study of the opportunities and challenges for the development of alternative tourism in rural areas through an analysis of the relationship with agriculture.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research methods used in the study include: basic scientific research methods, questionnaire survey, summary and synthesis, logical method, tabular and graphical presentation of characteristics and trends. The survey was conducted in the period January-March 2021, covering questions about the preferences for tourist travel in pandemic conditions and attitudes towards local food. The tasks of the research include outlining the challenges facing alternative tourism and agriculture in the context of a pandemic crisis, as well as outlining the interrelationship for their development to achieve sustainability. To achieve the formulated aim, the interconnection and interdependence of the unconditionally connected economic sectors

(agriculture and tourism) is monitored and analysed in the direction of the possibility to create unique tourism products and diversify activities in rural areas in order to increase the competitiveness of the local economy.

The nomenclature of the territorial units for statistics NUTS divides the territory of Bulgaria into three levels: NUTS 1, NUTS 2 and NUTS 3, respectively 2 regions (in Bulgaria they are called statistical zones) [22], 6 planning regions and 28 districts. Planning regions or the so-called NUTS-2 statistical regions, according to the classification of territorial units for statistical purposes in Bulgaria are regions, separated for the main purpose of statistical reporting, according to the requirements of Eurostat [10]. The study focuses on the North-West Planning Region (NUTS-2), as one of the six planning regions, including the districts of Vidin, Vratsa, Lovech, Montana and Pleven. Based on statistical data on key economic indicators for the last 10 years, it was found that the city of Pleven is not only the largest in population, but also has become an economic, social and cultural centre, i.e. it can be defined as the economic core of the district and the North-West planning region. In the research it is necessary to study the opinion of the population of both those living in towns and villages. Therefore, the authors choose the empirical study to be conducted in the municipality of Pleven, which includes 2 towns and 23 villages. From the distribution of the population in Pleven municipality, it was found that that about 90% of the population lives in the towns, and in the villages there are about 10% of the population, as it is concentrated mainly in the villages: Bukovlak, Yasen, Opanets, Grivitsa, Brestovets, Koilovtsi. On this basis, the implementation of a survey by filling in a questionnaire by people living in the settlements in the municipality is justified. The survey received the support of the "Agriculture" Municipal Service – Pleven, thanks to which the questionnaire can be filled in by citizens visiting the municipal administration in Pleven, the town halls in Slavyanovo and in the villages: Bukovlak,

Yasen, Opanets, Grivitsa, Brestovets, Koilovtsi.

To determine the total number of respondents or in particular the required number of questionnaires to be completed, a standard formula was used to determine the sample size, under the following conditions:

-As the variation in the totality and variance of previous surveys are not known, it is assumed that the percentage of people who would complete the survey and those who refuse to complete it is 50% each;

-The confidence coefficient is 95% or  $p(z) = 0.9500$  ;

-Maximum permissible error of 10%.

As a result of the calculations, it was found that the number of completed questionnaires should be 984. The obtained sample is zoned by settlements, as the distribution of the number of respondents is according to the relative share of the population in them and is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of the questionnaires by settlements

Settlement	Number of questionnaires	Relative share
the city of Pleven	842	85,6
the town of Slavyanovo	50	5,1
Bukovlak	40	4,1
Yasen	20	2,0
Opanets	10	1,0
Grivitsa	10	1,0
Brestovets	6	0,6
Koilovtsi	6	0,6
<b>Total:</b>	<b>984</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: Survey data.

Table 1 clearly shows the number of questionnaires that must be obtained within the survey in order to meet the requirements for representativeness and to use the opportunities provided by statistical evaluation methods. Random non-repeated selection is applied, and one person is given the opportunity to fill in a questionnaire.

Prior to the actual survey, a pilot survey was conducted to determine the quality of the questionnaire used and, if necessary, to adjust it. The results of the control testing of 30 randomly selected citizens, identifying themselves as potential tourists, showed that the questions are understandable, well-

formulated, do not create confusion and do not make it difficult to fill in the questionnaire. The completion of questionnaire is anonymous and in order not to raise doubts about the confidentiality of the information provided and to avoid the involvement of officials assisting in the survey, there is no section with questions characterizing age, gender, social status, etc.

The survey was conducted in the period January - March 2021 through a survey of residents of the municipality of Pleven, who used public services in the municipal administration of Pleven and the mayoralties of the settlements included in the sample, and the condition to fill in the questionnaire is to identify potential tourists from the Pleven region.

After the end of the research period, all questionnaires were subjected to subsequent logical control, after which the information from them was entered into specially designed table layouts, the data were grouped and summarized. The data are processed using specialized statistical software – Microsoft Excel.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### **The pandemic and challenges to alternative tourism**

The pandemic and challenges to alternative tourism. Despite numerous warnings from scientists, in early 2020, politicians and societies around the world were largely unprepared for a pandemic of such scope, depth and duration. The American professor Dipesh Chakrabarty believes that Covid-19 is not just a pandemic, but a new episode in the evolutionary history of life on Earth. The rapid growth of the human population and the aggressive destruction and change of the environment create conditions for easier passage of various coronaviruses from their natural reservoirs in nature to humans. This is a long-term trend that calls into question the thesis that man is the main engine and ultimate goal of the evolution of life on our planet, especially considering that microbes have existed on Earth for 3.8 billion years, and Homo sapiens - only 300 thousand [2].

The Coronavirus inevitably changes many activities and sectors, but hardly else are these changes as visible and direct as in the tourism

industry. On the one hand, significant changes have taken place in the demand for mass tourism destinations that are being avoided. However, at least in the near future, boutique, sustainable and alternative products and destinations will certainly be in greater demand, incl. outdoor activities in clean and preserved nature. In this sense, logically, domestic tourism is developing and to a greater extent the alternative types, incl. rural tourism, ecotourism, etc. The tranquillity, the beautiful nature and the good cuisine are the basic characteristics that determine Bulgaria to remain a preferred destination not only for the active seasons, but also outside them. In this regard, alternative tourism may be able to fully reveal its potential with all its diversity and tourists' preferences for its practice.

According to a study by Lulcheva for the period June 1, 2019 - February 31, 2020 in the Western Rhodopes Region (Bulgaria) after the COVID-19 pandemic, mass travel is unlikely to be as popular, although it will be relatively cheaper. Tourists will seek more individualization and consumer interest to focus on a better quality tourism product, ensuring greater security and safety [6]. Other authors also argue that the impact of the global health crisis, both at European level and indirectly in other countries, necessitates the identification of strengths in the current crisis, mainly through the location of tourist reception structures in rural areas, some of which are isolated, which offer high health protection [23].

The advantages of our country for the development of alternative types of tourism are indisputable, as each of these alternatives can "coexist" with the others in a unique and characteristic way. And this is an opportunity for unique tourist products and satisfaction from positive experiences. From the Strategy for sustainable development of tourism in the Republic of Bulgaria with Horizon 2030, it is described that rural tourism is practiced by 21.7% of Bulgarian tourists in summer (in second place after the sea tourism) and 30.2% outside the active summer and winter seasons, when it is most popular among Bulgarian tourists [8]. According to Ivanova, "The symbiosis agriculture – tourism has many

expectations..." related to the contribution to sustainable development [5].

In this regard, we aim to examine the relationship between the two economic sectors based on the unconditional role of agriculture in creating a unique and specific tourism product and through diversification of activities in rural areas in the development of rural and agritourism.

**Interconnection based on the creation of unique and specific tourist products**

The set of tourist services offered and/or provided in one or more tourist sites is referred to as a "tourist product" [1]. The tourist product "rural and agricultural tourism" includes the creation of service packages, reservation systems and monitoring aimed at specific target groups. In this regard, a number of authors consider accommodation and meals as "basic tourist services", and the term "additional tourist services" includes all other activities. The meals, together with the accommodation and the transport, are the main elements in the structure of the tourist product. The main interconnection and interdependence between the two economic sectors derives from here. Food products are a natural necessity for sustaining the life of the human body. Therefore, it is important for each person to be able to meet their needs, depending on their individual diet. There are more and more people who prefer Bulgarian products on their table [13]. Food as a product of agricultural production and an opportunity for added value from agricultural activities is an important component in the structure of the agritourism product. In this regard, in recent years the production of quality food products has become a cause for innovative entrepreneurs in the agricultural sector, as well as an important need for modern consumers of guaranteed certified organic foods, incl. in the field of tourism. It is not only a vital biological need, but also a component that leads to an increase in the positive difference depending on the cultural traditions of the region and the preferences of tourists. According to the Association of Ecotourism in Romania 80% of the purchased products (food, organic farm products, souvenirs and other goods) are mainly

produced by the locals and/or are typical local products, the certified products from the region are considered/consist of commercial products of good value - organic products (at least 80% of the product) [16]. For most tourists, local dishes are the healthiest and home-cooked meals in rural areas are the most delicious. Garden vegetables from own farm, home-made skim milk, marmalade, etc. are highly valued. And when, in addition, the food is served to the guests with a story about its origin, it arouses great interest and satisfaction. One of the main requirements in Bulgaria for the target groups of tourists who visit certain destinations is the authenticity and quality of the products in their food. Moreover, now in the conditions of pandemic crisis and the development of mainly domestic tourism, the attention is shifting from large complexes to smaller, secluded guest houses and family hotels with preserved nature. For the period January - March 2021, through a survey of potential tourists from the Pleven region, we studied the attitudes to travel during the Easter holidays (Fig. 1).

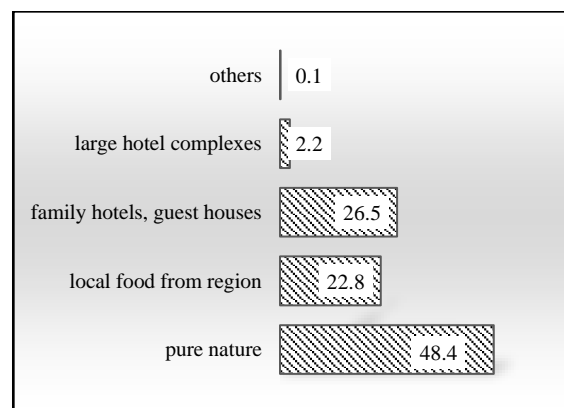


Fig.1. Attitudes and preferences of potential tourists to visit during the Easter holidays, 2021 – relative share. Source: Own calculation based on data from the questionnaires.

The presented Figure 1 shows that a large part of the respondents prefers travelling to destinations with pure nature and family hotels or guest houses. Here the interrelation between the mentioned sectors is further emphasized and is expressed in the preferences for food from own farm or food from the respective region – (e.g. organic products). Recently, there has been a growing interest in producers and producer groups of

Protected Designation of Origin (PDO), Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) and Traditional Specialities Guaranteed (TSG). Local producers of these foods not only enhance the image of their products, but also provide access to new markets, incl. tourist. For instance - PGI Gornooryahovski sudzuk, TSG Fillet Elena, TSG Pastrami beef, TSG Kayserovan vrat Trakiya, TSG Role Trapezitsa, TSG Lukanka Panagyurska, PDO Strandzhanski manov med/Manov med ot Strandzha. This year, registration is expected to be approved for PGI "Lutenitsa Parvomay" / "Parvomayska Lutenitsa", PDO "Bulgarian White Brine Cheese" and PDO "Bulgarian Yogurt" in the European Register of Protected Designations of Origin and Protected Geographical Indications [9]. It has been proven that traditional Bulgarian dishes with a specific character are an attractive means to visit, not only by foreigners but also by Bulgarian tourists. They are an image and trademark of the specific region or cuisine and become an important factor for holiday satisfaction in Bulgaria.

Proven their advantage in a number of European countries with experience in rural and agricultural tourism, and now in our country, the development of a country house and a farm is considered as a winning formula for creating an attractive product. The hostess offers traditional hand-made dishes, and the farm is most often a plant-breeding farm (e.g. white brine cheese and curd cheese are made by hand) and the owners have a certificate for direct sale. They sell not only to the tourists, but also to regular customers from the region and in restaurants (Fig. 2).

Direct farm sales are an opportunity to design unique tourist products. They can be successfully realised by including them in the agritourism product (products that are not available in large supermarkets).

In this regard, of particular importance in our country is the publication of the Regulation on direct deliveries from small farms [21], which allows small farms to look for good alternatives for offering their products and their inclusion in tourist offers.



Fig. 2. Opportunities for own product realization  
Source: Author's figure.

For instance, a list of operators registered under Ordinance № 26 on the specific requirements for direct deliveries of small quantities of raw materials and food of animal origin is available on the website of the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Forestry in the subsection "Bulgarian production" [9]. And not only this, often when visiting tourists prefer to buy a specific local product (Fig. 3).

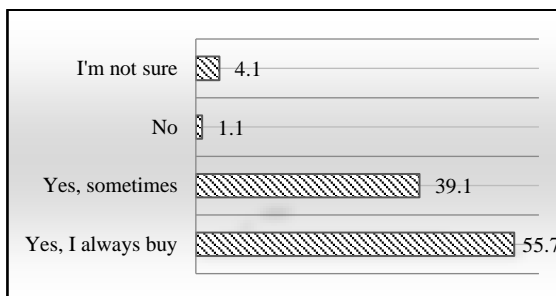


Fig. 3. Assessment of preferences for purchasing local food products, %  
Source: Own calculation based on data from the questionnaires.

When asked "Would you buy a local product", the opinions of the affirmative respondents are the most common. At the very least, there are preferences for not buying a local product or answering "I am not sure". In recent years, many tourist sites (hotels, restaurants, family hotels, guest houses) offer in their menu food that is entirely prepared with organic products – from their own farm or direct deliveries from the area. Consumer expectations are associated with increased interest in such sites. In order to determine whether the place of residence influences the propensity to purchase locally



produced products, the correlation coefficients of association, contingent and colligation were calculated, the groups “town” and “village” were formed for the factor “place of residence” and for the “buying a local product” - the groups are “yes” and “no”. The results of the study of this dependence are as follows: the coefficient of association is 0.9856, the coefficient of contingency is 0.6688, the coefficient of colligation is 0.8428. The coefficients are statistically significant and show the presence of a strong, even very strong correlation between the place of residence and the tendency to buy local products. The population in the cities has a much stronger desire to buy local products, which shows that the demand for healthy and quality products of Bulgarian origin is becoming an increasingly conscious need for the modern urban consumer.

To the question “Do you think that the supply of organic products in the restaurant and hotel chain is enough?”, 89.36% of respondents answered negatively (Fig. 4). This undoubtedly confirms the orientation of the modern consumer in the direction – clean and healthy food, food of local origin and , high-quality indicators.

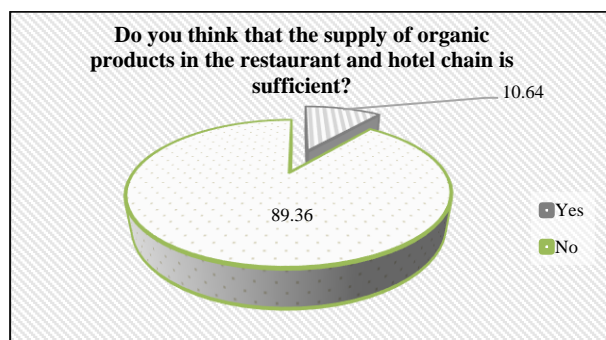


Fig. 4. Relative share of the used organic products in the restaurant and hotel chain (%)

Source: Own calculation based on data from the questionnaires

The dependence between the place of residence and the opinions of the consumers for sufficient supply of organic products in the restaurant and hotel network was also studied. The results of the analysis show that there is a strong relationship between them, as the following correlation coefficients are obtained: the coefficient of association is

0.9746, the coefficient of contingency is 0.5573, the coefficient of colligation is 0.7963. The population in the cities almost categorically expresses the opinion that the supply of organic products in the restaurant and hotel network is not enough, which means that there are unused reserves in terms of both supply and consumption of organic products of local regional nature. The goal of modern farms is to introduce innovative management approaches. The planned diversification of the activity, independently related or unrelated to agricultural production, is aimed at processing and sale of agricultural products. And the motivation of the farmers is for continuous improvement and generation of added value from the production, which is reflected in the realisation not only through the main service of the tourists – food, but also through the direct sales.

From researched destinations of Central Balkan regions – Veliko Tarnovo (Emen, Elena, Zlataritsa, Mindya, Mihalci); Gabrovo (Dryanovo, Sevlievo, Tryavna); Lovech (Apriltsi, Oreshak, Troyan) and Western Rhodopes (Devin, Trigrad, Borino, Shiroka Laka, Yagodino) on the basis of surveys the assessment of the possibilities for forming an agritourism product in Bulgaria has been made [14]. The main findings of the authors show that the approaches to solving problems are most often sought not in internal change and restructuring (optimisation of product strategy, expansion of activities by including non-agricultural profitable activities, including rural and agricultural tourism), but in support of the state and state institutions. The responsibility for business success is transferred to the insufficient or untimely financing of agriculture by the state, without looking for reserves within the business unit itself and the possibilities of one's own initiative. We can summarize that nutrition, in addition to being a natural necessity for the human body, is a highly valued component of the tourist product and an important factor for full tourist satisfaction. The possibilities of this interconnection can become a tool that has a significant impact on the development of local economies.

### **Interrelation based on the diversification of activities in rural areas through the development of rural and agricultural tourism**

The diversification of activities in rural areas, through the development of tourism, for some regions has a significant impact on employment and income of the population, quality of life and increasing the competitiveness of the Bulgarian economy. In these areas non-traditional tourism other than mass tourism can be developed. At the current stage, in rural areas, the following types of alternative tourism are developing most dynamically: rural, agricultural and ecotourism. They have a specific impact on local development, in particular on socio-economic development, employment and the income of the population in typical rural areas. This type of tourism enables farmers to expand their activities by increasing the value of their products and increasing their capital.

A number of holiday farms have been set up in Austria, France, Germany and England. They are a combination of agriculture and tourism, which reach their peak load at the same time of year (for holiday farms, the season is until July or August). In a number of Bulgarian regions where agriculture is not the main source of income (e.g. mountainous areas), tourism is becoming the main source of income. These places specialize in providing accommodation and food to tourists. The popularity of this form of rural tourism in many European countries, and already in our country, leads to the emergence of a large network of specialized tourist material and technical basis and includes typical rural houses with a variety of entertainment services. Despite the lost direct connection with agriculture, it plays an important role in the economy at the local level and is considered one of its most important forms. A typical example is the Wild Farm in the Eastern Rhodope Mountains - a secluded hereditary house at the entrance of the Gorno Pole village, which is not the generally accepted "guest house", but an open home for all friends, seeking freedom, the call of the wild and the colour of life. The owners produce organic products and extract bio-

honey, prepare delicious Eastern Rhodope specialties, raise in a natural way several hundred cattle of the local breed Rhodope shorthorn cattle and Bulgarian gray cattle - an old protected Bulgarian breed. The farm has certificates for the veal, honey and vegetables, as well as for the pastures where the animals graze. There are many adventures on offer: horse riding, boating, picnics in the forest, searching for honey from wild bees, catching a wild cow with a lasso, watching vultures, a tour for minerals and extraction of gold nuggets [25].

Farm tourism, also called the residence in a rural region, for the purpose of recreation and getting to know or practicing certain elements of the activity of the agricultural holding with which the offered tourist service is closely connected. The services can include almost all forms typical of rural tourism, but they are more closely related to agriculture: rural guest houses, a farm for horses and equestrian sports, an inn, an old farm, etc. A characteristic feature of agrarian tourism, as a more specialized tourist activity, is the offering of a specific tourist product. In countries where rural and agrarian tourism have a long history (France, Belgium, etc.), agrarian tourism has "melted" in favor of purely tourist specialization, leaning towards rural (even mass) tourism. For countries such as France, Italy, Spain, Belgium, England, Austria, rural tourism is highly developed and is already an established business. In some countries such as Austria, southern Germany and others, agrarian tourism predominates, including in high mountain areas [7]. Despite the stronger trends for the development of rural tourism, in a number of countries not only rural but also agricultural tourism is increasingly developing. The motivation for its accelerated development in developed countries can be sought mainly in two directions:

*-lack of highly economically developed agricultural sector;*

*-increased interest in the use of fresh and healthy food.*

For Bulgaria, at this stage, there is a stronger interest in rural tourism. In the coming years, the expectations for the development of



tourism in rural areas are aimed at combining the different alternative types in order to obtain higher incomes. Great hopes are placed on the development of rural and agricultural tourism, as a prerequisite for the revival of the Bulgarian countryside and for sustainable development of rural areas.

Despite the great rise in the development of rural tourism in the last few years, it should not be seen as a tool that will by itself solve the complex socio-economic problems of sustainable rural development. The readjustment in the direction of increasing the share of the persons using the services of the rural and agricultural tourist product, as well as the economic interest in this type of business is connected, among other things, with a change in the value system of people. And this is a long and difficult process, requiring a period of over 10 years. In order to support the further development of this part of the tourism industry, it is necessary to activate at the local level the various organisations, associations and others in solving specific local and regional problems. It is they who can contribute to the restoration and development of sites and manifestations of local rural culture: old houses, monasteries, historic sites, traditional holidays, etc., to seek various sources of financial support in order to strengthen the local and regional economy. Rural tourism has a significant contribution to the rural economy and has untapped potential for contribution to regional economic growth. Among the reasons why alternative tourism is considered a promising factor for regional economic growth is that sometimes in regions where conditions are unfavourable for the development of other economic activity (agriculture) there are a number of favourable prerequisites for its development. Thus, especially in rural areas that have undergone economic restructuring with a declining role in agriculture, hopes are placed on the development of the tourism sector as a key factor for economic development and income opportunities for the rural population.

Bulgaria is considered a little-known, safe and stable tourist place located near Western Europe. At the same time, its establishment as a destination for alternative tourism –

ecological, cultural, rural – in a separate or combined tourist product is a condition for sustainable economic and social development in environmentally friendly practices [15]. Therefore, the diversification of activities in rural areas through the development of rural and agricultural tourism plays an important role in the economy at local level, as the motivation for its accelerated development in certain territories is related to the impossibility of a highly economically developed agricultural sector, interest in the use of fresh and healthy food and clean nature.

## CONCLUSIONS

The performed analysis gives us reason to formulate the following more important conclusions, namely:

*First.* The pandemic inevitably affects the economic sectors, and to a greater extent it is a negative impact on the tourism business. Logically, domestic tourism, and in particular alternative tourism, is more represented.

*Second.* Food is an important part in the construction of unique and specific tourism products in rural areas, as the relationship agriculture – tourism is strongly emphasized in terms of requirements for clean and healthy food, incl. organic products or the purchase of local products from the region. Research on potential tourists shows high preferences for it, as one of the main services in tourist sites – guest houses, family hotels. In this way, the development of alternative tourism in rural areas contributes to sustainable development on a regional scale, while providing employment, income and improving the quality of life of local communities.

*Third.* The diversification of activities in rural areas through the development of tourism is an opportunity to develop entrepreneurial initiatives and stimulate the production of food and local crafts, especially in areas where agriculture is not the main source of income. The strong connection and interdependence between the economic subjects in the indicated economic branches of key importance is fully manifested in the successful combination of the interests of all

concerned participants in the process of development of the specific territory/region.

## REFERENCES

- [1]Aleksieva, J., Stamov, St., 2005, Specialized types of tourism. Rural tourism - part 2, Publishing House "Kota", St. Zagora: 335 -356.
- [2]Chakrabarty, D., 2020, An Era of Pandemics? What is Global and What is Planetary About COVID-19. Critical Inquiry, 16.10.2020; <https://critinq.wordpress.com/2020/10/16/an-era-of-pandemics-what-is-global-and-what-is-planetary-about-covid-19/?fbclid=IwAR2Sj1gSo7-boxGMg4hFzl7u4Ea8jl2oo8a7ldwc-VEJbxM9YiANo59y80k>, Accessed on Sept. 13, 2021.
- [3]Dimitrov, P., 2021, Socio-economic and geopolitical consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic. Geopolitics, count 1, 2021. <https://geopolitica.eu/2021/189-broy-1-2021/3337-sotsialno-ikonomichestki-i-geopoliticheski-posleditsi-ot-pandemiyata-ot-covid-19>, Accessed on Sept. 13, 2021.
- [4]Harizanova, H., 2012, Rural development in EU countries through restructuring of agricultural policies. Management and sustainable development, 6(37): 19-24.
- [5]Ivanova, P., 2009, Economics and management of agriculture. Sofia, Issue 6/2009: 62.
- [6]Lulcheva I. 2021, Assessment of the service quality in a small family hotel in the rural tourism of Bulgaria. Scientific Papers Series "Management, Economic Engineering in Agriculture and rural development", Vol. 21(3):539-548.
- [7]Ministere de l, Agriculture, 1995, Les agriculteurs en Autriche, L, Agriculture et la Sylviculture autrichiennes.
- [8]Ministry of Tourism, [https://www.tourism.government.bg/sites/tourism.government.bg/files/uploads/strategy-policy/strategy\\_2014-2030\\_13.05.2014-sled\\_ms\\_26.05.2014.pdf](https://www.tourism.government.bg/sites/tourism.government.bg/files/uploads/strategy-policy/strategy_2014-2030_13.05.2014-sled_ms_26.05.2014.pdf), Accessed on Sept. 13, 2021.
- [9]Ministry of Agricultural Food, 2021, Direct deliveries of small quantities of raw materials and foods of animal origin, <https://www.mzh.government.bg/bg/ministerstvo/blgarsko-proizvodstvo/direktni-dostavki-na-malki-kolichestva-surovini-i-hrani-ot-zhivo>, Accessed on Sept. 13, 2021.
- [10]National Statistical Institute. Accessed on October 17, 2021.
- [11]Nedelcheva, N., 2012, Rural tourism in Bulgaria - status and guidelines for improving its organization for its sustainable development, Business directions, Vol. 1 (19): 6-7.
- [12]Nikolova, M., 2011, The complex agritourism product - an opportunity to realize the principles of sustainable development, Management and sustainable development 4(31): 32-38.
- [13]Nikolova, M., 2020, Opportunities and challenges in the sale of agricultural products from small and family farms in Bulgaria. Trakia Journal of Sciences, Trakia University, 2020, Vol. 18, Suppl. 1: 549-559.
- [14]Nikolova, M., Linkova, M., 2009, Barriers to the development of rural tourism in Bulgaria. Scientific Research Almanac – Vol. 10. AI „Tsenov“, Svishtov, 2009: 198-238.
- [15]Nikolova, M., 2017, Agricultural tourism. AI „Tsenov“, Academic Publishing House. Svishtov, 144-145.
- [16]Online Ecotourism Guide, 2021, <https://bsc.smebg.net/ecotourguide/modules/files/Module 7-8.pdf>, Accessed on Sept. 13, 2021.
- [17]Pavlov, P., 2021, Alternative tourism in Bulgaria in the conditions of COVID-19. // Tourism and the global crises, proceedings of the International scientific conference organized by Tourism Department at Faculty of economics of the "st. Cyril and st. Methodius" University of Veliko Turnovo, Bulgaria, 21.04.2021, Publishing House "I and B" Veliko Turnovo, 2021:762-770.
- [18]Popescu, A., Marcuta, A., Marcuta, L., Tindeche, C., Hontus, A., Plesoianu, D., 2020, Romania's tourism trends and characteristics on the seaside resorts of the Black Sea in the period 2010-2019. Scientific Papers. Series "Management, Economic Engineering in Agriculture and rural development", Vol. 20(4):417-430.
- [19]Popescu, A., 2014a, Considerations on the trends of international tourist flows, Scientific Papers Series Management, Economic Engineering in Agriculture and Rural Development, Vol.14(4):179-192.
- [20]Popescu, A., 2014b, Considerations on the trends of international tourism receipts, Scientific Papers Series Management, Economic Engineering in Agriculture and Rural Development, Vol.14(4):201-210.
- [21]Regulation 26 on the specific requirements for direct deliveries of small quantities of raw materials and food of animal origin, SG no. 84/2010, last edited and supplemented SG No 87/2015.
- [22]Republic of Bulgaria. National Statistical Institute (NSI), 2016, Classification of territorial units for statistical purposes in Bulgaria [https://www.nsi.bg/sites/default/files/files/pages/Classifications/NUTS\\_V2016\\_BG\\_BUL.pdf](https://www.nsi.bg/sites/default/files/files/pages/Classifications/NUTS_V2016_BG_BUL.pdf), Accessed on Oct. 17, 2021.
- [23]Stoicea, P., Iorga, A.M., Dobre, C.A. 2021, The economic-financial and social effects of the pandemic on tourism. Scientific Papers Series "Management, Economic Engineering in Agriculture and rural development", Vol. 21(2):619-628.
- [24]The Graphic Truth: Who depends the most on tourists? Gzero media, 14.05.2020; <https://www.gzeromedia.com/the-graphic-truth-who-depends-the-most-on-tourists>, Accessed on Sept. 13, 2021.
- [25]Wild Farm, <https://bedandbirding-rhodopes.bg/za-fermata/za-fermata.html>, Accessed on Sept. 13, 2021.