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## AN EXAMINATION OF COMPETITIVENESS OF RURAL DESTINATIONS FROM THE SUPPLY SIDE PERSPECTIVE

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**Abstract:** Tourist destinations are now faced with increased competition at the market and holders of tourist policy and offers have realized that understanding the factors that contribute to a better positioning in the market place, and therefore the competitiveness, is of crucial importance for further development. The aim of this paper is to determine how much Vojvodina is competitive as a rural tourism destination, and to assess the current state of all the factors that affect/could affect the competitiveness of rural tourism destinations in Vojvodina Province (Northern Serbia). The total of 136 tourism experts were interviewed, and we concluded that the key resources and attraction of rural areas in Vojvodina are rated better than the macro and industry-related factors. This suggests that a rural development strategy should have a special bond with resources and attractions of the destination, that priority should be given to maintaining all aspects of safety and security, continuous improvement of services, diversity of culinary products, as well as the application of the principles of sustainability in environmental management. The work of national and provincial institutions should have the aim to ensure that the destination has a clear idea of where it is going and what it takes to become successful in the long term.

**Key words:** competitiveness, rural tourism, rural strategy, Vojvodina Province (Serbia)

### Introduction

In the tourism literature, tourism destination competitiveness is defined as “the ability of destination to maintain its position on the market and/or to improve it over time” (d’Hautesserre, 2000, p. 239) and “to deliver products and services that are better than on to other destinations, particularly regarding those aspects of tourism experiences that are important to tourists” (Dwyer & Kim, 2003, p. 374). Global competition in the tourism industry has become a challenge for

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many countries that are competing to become a desirable tourist destination, and understanding those factors that contribute to the competitiveness of destinations is essential to maintain the current level of development of tourist destination, its growth and vitality (Hassan, 2000; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). Therefore, measurement of competitiveness can be considered a key factor in ensuring the success of tourist destinations.

In the context of tourism, globalization means an increase in the number of destinations and the conditions on the international tourist market have been drastically changed, so it is necessary for destinations to respond to these challenges in order to remain competitive in the market. The development of new tourism products and destinations is one way to increase productivity in the tourism sector (Fadeeva, 2003). Globalization through the democratization of information and communication technologies is a major challenge, together with the effects of other social and economic changes, such as increasing the mobility of individuals, greater economic liberalization, a growing proportion of retired persons with higher purchasing power; increasing importance of environmental issues and other changes. These changes resulted in the increase in demands and expectations of consumers (tourists) in terms of quality of physical facilities and the skills and abilities of those who work in the tourism sector. Competition in the tourism industry has thus become sharper with the need of customer orientation, while professionalism is becoming a key component in the selection of employees (Navickas & Malakauskaite, 2009).

Rural tourism is one of the priorities in tourism development in many European countries. Rural tourism market is on the rise, while at the same time the future of many rural areas is uncertain, due to changes in agricultural production and the attractiveness of urban areas due to higher living standards. Rural tourism is considered to be one of the most appropriate instruments for the revitalization of rural areas and ensuring a sustainable future through job retention or job creation, support for farms, nature conservation and the preservation of rural crafts as a tourist attraction. Destinations of rural tourism are based on a complex tourist product, which consists of several partial products (accommodation, transport, food, shops, attractions and others) (Demonja & Ružić, 2011; Hall, Roberts & Mitchell, 2003; Sidali, 2011). These individual tourism enterprises are interdependent and connected and these are primarily small and medium-sized enterprises. Problems in rural tourism, which contribute to the reduction of competitiveness are reflected (among other things) in the existence of strong competition instead of cooperation among providers of tourist products and services in rural areas. Many authors stated numerous negative cases of the rural tourism impact on the environment pollution, such as

devastation of natural resources, noise and damaging cultural heritage (Brankov, Jovičić, & Milijašević, 2015; Srđanović & Pavić, 2015). Nevertheless, given the importance of tourism to rural areas, determining the factors that influence the improvement of the competitive position on the tourism market is of great importance for their further development.

In the Republic of Serbia, as well as in many other European countries, rural tourism is an important factor of multifunctional rural development (Petrović, Radović, & Terzić, 2015; Petrović, Bjeljac, Demirović, 2016; Petrović, Blešić, Ivolga, & Vujko, 2016). Autonomous Province of Vojvodina in northern part of Serbia is relevant area of research in this paper, because the biggest part of its territory is rural (about 90%) (Rodić, Bošnjak, Janković, & Karapandžin, 2013). Also, Vojvodina has significant natural resources, agricultural land, the traditional approach to agriculture, good potential for development of rural tourism, distinctive traditional local food specialties and possibilities to develop other complementary activities. However, rural areas are faced with many problems, such as reducing the number of farmers<sup>2</sup>, increase in the number of elderly households due to migration of young people to urban areas, and the reduction of agricultural land at the expense of development of industrial areas. Despite individual urban centers in Vojvodina recorded population growth, many rural communities still depend on agriculture, which is their substantial economic support, but which does not provide adequate results. Opportunity for faster development of rural areas of Vojvodina is multifunctional development, which among other things includes the development of compatible non-agricultural activities such as agritourism (and other forms of farm-based tourism), crafts, recreation, and easier access to credit for women living in rural areas and are engaged in agricultural production and rural development, as and other forms of economic activity in the country, including rural tourism activities and organic food production.

In the *Regional Spatial Plan of AP Vojvodina until 2020* (2011), published by the Provincial Secretariat for Urban Planning, Construction and Environmental Protection (2011), rural tourism was identified as a tourist product of exceptional potential, but undeveloped. Also, based on an analysis of key success factors and the assessment of the current situation, the current achieved level of competitiveness of Serbia in the field of rural tourism is very low (mean score is 1.5). This shows that the natural, cultural and social resources for the development of rural tourism are not used to create the appropriate advantages

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<sup>2</sup> According to Novković, Mutavdžić & Vukelić (2013), the total share of agricultural population in the total population is below 11%.

over other destinations in the industry, which can be especially important condition for survival, and then the progression of an organization/region/country.

In the scientific and popular literature in Serbia, analysis of competitiveness factors was performed at the level of individual cities, and at the national level, but not at the level of Vojvodina Province, as a destination for rural tourism. In this regard, there is a need of this kind of research because rural tourism is recognized as one of the key tools for developing regions with low agricultural potential, underdeveloped agricultural structure and preserved natural resources. In order to rural tourism can progressively be developed and contribute to the promotion and diversification of the regional economy, employment growth and the reduction of depopulation, it is necessary to determine the factors that influence the reduction or increase the competitiveness of rural tourism. The aim of this paper is to determine how much Vojvodina is competitive destination for rural tourism, and to assess the current state of all the factors that affect/could affect the competitiveness of rural tourism destinations in the observed Serbian Province.

### **Methodology**

Tourism experts from Serbia were asked to evaluate the current status of all 17 factors that affect/could affect the competitiveness of rural tourism destinations in Vojvodina, classified into three large groups, or determinants:

1. “Key resources and attractions” (Physical and geographical elements of the environment; Cultural heritage; Opportunities for sport, entertainment and recreation; Accommodation capacities and their authenticity; Gastronomy; General infrastructure and tourist suprastructure; Safety and security);
2. “Strategies of tourism destination” (Marketing; Employees in the tourism sector and rural tourism facilities; Policy planning and destination development; Service quality management; Environmental management), and
3. “The environment of tourism destination” (Economic stability; Characteristics of demand and socio-cultural changes; Participation of local communities and their attitudes; Cooperation between stakeholders in the tourism; Incentives and financial support for the development of tourism by the government and local authorities).

Likert scale from 1 to 5 was used, where 1 means “very bad condition of the attribute”, score 2 “bad condition of the attribute”, score 3 “average condition of the attribute”, score 4 “very well condition of the attribute”, and 5 “excellent condition of the attribute”. This survey covered all those tourism experts who

have the knowledge and/or experience relevant to the subject and whose area of research and activities is related to rural tourism and competitiveness of tourism destinations. The respondents are the following tourism experts: teaching staff at higher education institutions, employees of the tourist organizations, employees of national and provincial institutions of importance for the development of tourism, tourism managers of travel agencies, owners of tourism enterprises in rural areas (farms, restaurants, ethno-houses, museums, wineries, souvenir shops, event organizers) and others (associations, clusters). The survey was conducted in two ways — a personal interview (technique of “face to face”) and by sending a questionnaire via e-mail. Selected tourism experts were interviewed in the period from September 2015 to the first half of December 2015. The response rate was about 50%. Statistical analysis of the data collected through the survey will be done in the software statistical program SPSS 17.

Hypotheses in the paper were formed on the basis of a thorough review of the available literature and research in a given area, as well as on expectations during the fieldwork. In order to build a competitive position of Vojvodina in the region as an attractive destination for rural tourism, it is necessary primarily to determine its weak and strong points and, therefore, we set two main hypotheses with the four sub-hypotheses:

1. **H1:** The weakest determinant in the model of competitiveness of Vojvodina as a rural tourism destination is “Strategy of tourism destination”.

$H_{1a}$ : There is a statistically significant difference in the attitudes of respondents on average scores for determinants “Strategies of tourism destination” and “Key resources and attractions”.

$H_{1b}$ : There is a statistically significant difference in the attitudes of respondents on average scores for determinants “Strategies of tourism destination” and “The environment of tourism destination”.

2. **H2:** The strongest determinant in the model of competitiveness of Vojvodina as a rural tourism destination is “Key resources and attractions”.

$H_{2a}$ : There is a statistically significant difference in the attitudes of respondents on average scores for determinants “Key resources and attractions” and “Strategies of tourism destination”

$H_{2b}$ : There is a statistically significant difference in the attitudes of respondents on average scores for determinants “Key resources and attractions” and “The environment of tourism destination”.

### Results and Discussion

The total of 136 valid questionnaires were completed and used in the statistical processing and analysis of data. Descriptive statistics of socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents is shown in the Table 1.

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents (N=136)

Characteristics	Absolute frequency	Share (%)
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	62	45.59
Female	74	54.41
<b>Age</b>		
21–30	19	14.0
31–40	47	34.6
41–50	25	18.4
51–60	27	19.9
Over 61	18	13.2
<b>Education</b>		
High School	21	15.4
Higher education institution	20	14.7
Bachelor	41	30.1
Master	30	22.1
PhD	24	17.6
<b>Workplace</b>		
Faculty / Institute	28	20.6
Tourist Organization	28	20.6
National/ provincial institution	7	5.1
Travel agency	12	8.8
Rural tourism enterprise	52	38.2
Other (associations, clusters)	9	6.6
<b>Working experience</b>		
Less then 5 years	32	23.5
6–10 years	56	41.2
11–20 years	31	22.8
21–30 years	8	5.9
More then 31 years	9	6.6
Total	136	100

It can be seen that, in the sample, women slightly dominate (54.41%) compared to the male population (45.59%). The highest percentage of respondents had between 31 and 40 years, 47 of them or 34.6%. Only 18 respondents had over 61 years (13.2%). The division of the results by the level of education shows that most respondents have a university degree (30.1%). After this group, the most dominant are respondents with master degree, 30 of them (22.1%). These results indicate that the majority of respondents have higher education. Analyzing the structure of the respondents by the organization in which they are employed, it can be seen that the largest number of respondents answered from the perspective of the rural tourism enterprise (38.2%). Only 5.1% of the respondents work in national and provincial institutions, while an equal number of respondents are involved in faculties/institutes and tourism organizations (20.6%). Most of the respondents who participated in the survey have between 6 and 10 years of experience in tourism — 56 of them, or 41.2%. Only 5.9% of the respondents have between 21 and 30 years of experience in tourism, as well as those who have more than 31 years of experience (6.6%).

Based on collected data, it was examined the extent to which characteristics of respondents (age, education, organizations in which they work) are associated with the experience they have in tourism and whether this connection is statistically significant. The connection was examined by Chi-square for independent samples.

Between age and working experience there is a statistically significant relationship. The youngest respondents have less working experience concerning tourism, while older respondents are more experienced in this area. Chi-square test is 85.86,  $p < 0.001$  (Table 2).

Table 2. The connection between age and working experience of the respondents

		Age				
		21–30	31–40	41–50	51–60	over 61
<b>Working experience in tourism</b>	Less than 5 years	12	10	7	1	2
	6–10 years	7	26	7	12	4
	11–20 years	0	11	7	10	3
	21–30 years	0	0	4	3	1
	more than 31 years	0	0	0	1	8

The connection between level of education and length of working experience in the tourism industry (Table 3) was also statistically significant (Chi-square is

43.95,  $p < 0.001$ ). The oldest respondents have mostly PhD degree. The respondents involved in tourism less than 5 years have university degree, while respondents with working experience from 6 to 10 years have master degree. Respondents who have completed higher education are usually engaged in tourism between 11 and 20 years. Respondents who deal with tourism between 21 and 30 years in most cases have a university degree.

Table 3. The connection between education and working experience in tourism

		Education				
		High School	Higher education institution	Bachelor	Master	PhD
Working experience in tourism	Less then 5 years	5	1	16	7	3
	6–10 years	9	8	16	18	5
	11–20 years	5	9	3	4	10
	21–30 years	2	0	5	0	1
	More then 31 years	0	2	1	1	5

The connection is registered with the characteristics — an organization in which the respondent works (Chi-square is 44.32,  $p < 0.01$ ). The number of rural tourism enterprises is the highest in the sample, so it is understandable that the largest number of respondents in each group of experiential belongs to this group. In tourism organizations work those who have up to 10 years of experience, and several respondents who have up to 20 years. The faculty is a place for people with different working experience, as well as for the national/provincial institutions and travel agencies. Those who have the most experience do not work in rural tourism enterprises, tourism organizations and “others” (Table 4).



Table 4. The connection between working experience in tourism and organization in which respondent works

		Organization in which respondent works					
		Faculty/ Institute	Tourism organization	National/ provincial institution	Travel agency	Rural tourism enterprise	Others
Working experience in tourism	Less than 5 years	3	10	2	3	12	2
	6–10 years	10	15	2	2	24	3
	11–20 years	9	3	1	3	14	1
	21–30 years	1	0	1	1	2	3
	more than 31 years	5	0	1	3	0	0

The Figure 1 shows the results of descriptive statistics for all determinants in the models of competitiveness for Vojvodina as a rural tourism destination. On the Likert scale from 1 to 5, none of determinants received the highest marks 4 and 5, suggesting that Vojvodina is not competitive destination for rural tourism. Determinant “Key resources and attractions” is estimated with the highest mark (3.54) compared to other determinants, which proves Hypothesis 2: The strongest determinant in the model of competitiveness of Vojvodina as a rural tourism destination is “Key resources and attractions”. Although it is the strongest determinant in the model, due to low ratings (under 4), it does not constitute a competitive advantage of Vojvodina, but certain attributes within that determinant, are competitive, and Vojvodina should use them to attract foreign tourists and to strengthen domestic demand.

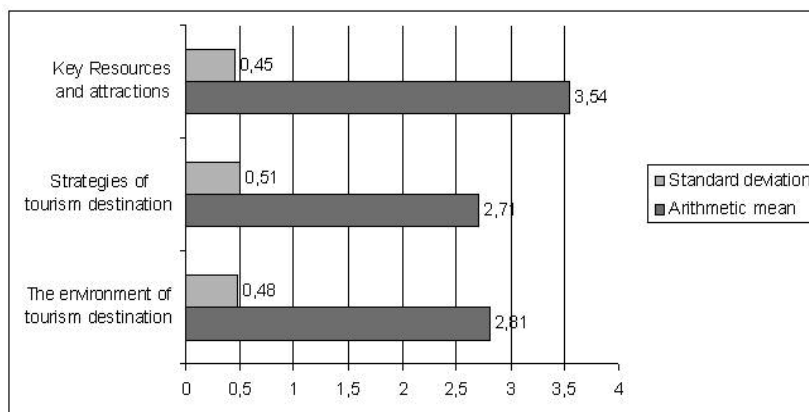


Figure 1. Descriptive statistics for the determinants in the model of competitiveness

Determinant “Strategies of tourism destination” is the weakest link in the model of competitiveness of Vojvodina as a tourist destination (average score 2.71), and it requires special attention to tourism policy makers and holders of tourism development, both at the level of Vojvodina (provincial level), and the level of Serbia (national level). Based on these results, we can confirm the hypothesis 1: The weakest determinant in the model of competitiveness of Vojvodina as a rural tourism destination is “Strategy of tourism destination”.

T-test for dependent samples was applied in order to identify weaknesses and strengths of Vojvodina as a rural tourism destination, and to compare the mean values score (arithmetic mean) of all determinants in the model and prove sub-hypotheses  $H_{1a}$  and  $H_{1b}$  and sub-hypotheses  $H_{2a}$  and  $H_{2b}$ .

From the obtained results (Table 5), it can be concluded that there is a statistically significant difference in the evaluation of the determinants “Strategies of tourism destinations” (determinant with the lowest score in the model) and “Key resources and attractions” (determinant with the highest score in the model) to the level of significance  $p < 0.01$  ( $t \geq 2,58$ ), which confirms the hypothesis  $H_{1a}$ , and the differences in the arithmetic means cannot be ascribed to the random variation in the data samples. Also, there is a statistically significant difference in the evaluation of the determinants “Strategies of tourism destinations” and “The environment of the tourism destination”, at the level of significance of  $p < 0.05$ , which confirms the hypothesis  $H_{1b}$ . Based on these results it can be concluded that according the opinion of tourism experts, the factors in the determinant “Strategies of tourist destination” are insufficient or inadequately developed, which contributed that this determinant is the least evaluated in a model of competitiveness.

Table 5. Testing differences between arithmetic means for determinant “Strategies of tourism destination” and other determinants in the model

Pairs of determinants		Arithmetic mean	Standard deviation	T	Degrees of freedom	Relevance
Pair 1	Strategies of tourism destinations — Key resources and attractions	.83799	.45608	21.427	135	.000
Pair 2	Strategies of tourism destinations — The environment of the tourism destination	-.10042	.40620	-2.883	135	.005

The results in the Table 6 indicate that there are statistically significant differences between the variables, and the determinants of both pairs ( $p < 0.01$ ;  $t \geq 2.58$ ) and this proves both sub-hypotheses H2a and H2b. Thus, the determinant “Key Resources and attractions” is the strongest determinant in the model and this determinant can contribute to increased competitiveness of Vojvodina as a rural tourism destination, while other two determinants are the weak link in the model. Gomezelj and Mihalič (2008) had similar results in their study of competitiveness of tourism of Slovenia, indicating that regardless of the type of tourism and tourist movements, attractiveness of the destination has the primary role in creating a competitive position in the tourism market. However, one should bear in mind that without proper marketing, trained and professional staff, well-defined policy makers, planning and development of rural tourism destinations, tourists will not have in mind Vojvodina as a potential destination for rural tourism, no matter how attractive it is, so the compliance of all the determinants in the model should be the goal to which all stakeholders involved in rural tourism should strive.

Table 6. Testing differences between arithmetic means for determinant “Key resources and attractions” and other determinants in the model

Pairs of determinants		Arithmetic mean	Standard deviation	T	Degrees of freedom	Relevance
Pair 1	Key resources and attractions — Strategies of tourism destinations	.83799	.45608	21.427	135	.000
Pair 2	Key resources and attractions — The environment of the tourism destination	.73757	.46198	18.619	135	.000

Based on the presented results from testing the difference between the arithmetic means for determinants of competitiveness, it can be concluded that determinant “Key resources and attractions” is the strongest determinant in the model, while the weakest determinant is “Strategies of tourism destination” and this determinant significantly reduces the competitiveness of Vojvodina as a rural tourism destination.

### Conclusion

The development of the tourism sector in Vojvodina Province in Northern Serbia in recent years was based on the construction of physical infrastructure. Elements, such as the quality of services, training programs for human resources

development, fostering creativity and innovation and creation of new and interesting tourism products, were ignored. The development of tourist destination management, which is one of the most important factors for competitiveness, was unsuccessful. It is possible that the rural tourism sector does not receive sufficient benefit from government support for the planned development of the destination, and that marketing efforts do not go in the desired direction.

Research has shown that the key resources and attraction of rural areas in Vojvodina are rated better than the macro and industry-related factors. This suggests that a rural development strategy should have a special bond with resources and attractions of the destination, that priority should be given to maintaining all aspects of safety and security, continuous improvement of services, to use benefits of a multicultural environment, diversity of culinary products, as well as the application of the principles of sustainability in environmental management.

Rural tourism, like other forms of tourism, involves many business entities (entities that provide accommodation services, food, goods, etc.) and consumption of these services occurs when a visitor is in the area, so the perception of the quality of visitors overall rural tourism experience is a result of management of all these aspects. The more positive perception of tourism services is, the stronger feeling of quality is present. The functional aspect of quality of services is likely to be more influential than the technical aspects, which means that there is a need for highly skilled labor. During the development of human resources in rural areas of Vojvodina, special importance should be given to the training of personnel, ranging from manufacturing to management level. From the perspective of holders of supply, quality management services and human resource development are co-dependent variables in support of excellence in service. In order to Vojvodina be competitive on a market, destination marketing is crucial and should focus on new products and market development.

The research in this paper has examined the relative importance of action by the industry (private companies) and government efforts to improve the competitiveness of the sector. It was found that companies have a greater impact, because they have a major role in providing services to visitors and allow tourists to experience the rural areas of Vojvodina, while national and provincial institutions are responsible for managing and supervising the work of different rural tourism enterprises and for providing appropriate support. The role of the government sector is to act as a regulatory body and to assume

responsibility for the strategic planning of development of rural destinations, and to undertake a systematic review of the destination attribute. Also, the work of national and provincial institutions should have the aim to ensure that the destination has a clear idea in which direction is going and what it takes to become successful in the long run.

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