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Agritourism potential as a perspective in Kosovo

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Abstract. Tourism development is a broadly diversified activity from the rest of economic sectors. While in the economy a competition between the sectors is a key to better selection and specialization, tourism in general has some exceptions arising from the state support due to the importance this sector has in promoting the country abroad, through promotion, subsidies and programs, including intrastate programs and from the European Union. The main reason behind such a support lies on the needs of people for holidays, relax, health and food. The Republic of Kosovo has an area of 10.887 km² and a population of 1.8 million, where tourism development is seen as a need for the people at home as well as foreigners who visit Kosovo. The strategy of tourism development should come as a result of interaction between many factors, among others, agribusiness and standardization of goods and services in Kosovo which, if developed at a satisfactory level, can generate new jobs and economic growth. Although tourism potential in Kosovo as a small country does not offer many choices, it has got some exclusive preconditions that are available in the mountains of Sharr, Curst Mountains, historical sites such as the city of Prizren, the Vushtrri Castle and many archaeological sites of different historical periods, are some of many examples for pushing the support in this respect. To find out where does Kosovo stand in this process and perspective, the aim of this paper is to critically assess the interaction between tourism and agriculture products as potential for agritourism, and address some recommendations as which would be a better alternative of its development.

JEL: F53, O24, Q18.

Keywords: Republic of Kosovo, agritourism, subsidies, BE, heritage.

Introduction

Agritourism is that branch of tourism revolving around agricultural activities. It may range from visiting the farms, picking up fruits and vegetables, food production, getting familiar by the visitors on certain farming techniques, walking, leisure, entertainment, and holidays in hotels or restaurants. As such, agritourism is becoming an industry on the rise in many parts of the world. One of the earlier and still ongoing forms of agritourism is organizing the events as host festivals to attract the visitors and potential buyers into rural areas to get familiar with local communities. The visits benefit local farmers or businesses and the visitors, especially if agritourism tends to be unique or different on its own. Different foods, plants, vegetables, natural environment, local customs and traditions, cuisine, and historical differences between the communities provide an opportunity for the development of this

branch of tourism.¹⁶ Interesting, this sector is attracting more attention and commitment in advanced industrialized nations. The main resources of agritourism development are: i) assess potential success and challenges; ii) best management practices; iii) risk management and liability; iv) zoning and health considerations; vi) marketing; vii) associations and networks; and viii) online resources.¹⁷ Apart from the strategies at national level, the sector is rapidly growing in interest in various regions within one country who prepare their own strategies at local level, something which even the national strategies often go on in exploring by districts. This happens due to the specificities each region has or is better known for. For example, as agritourism attracted the attention across North America, a study by a Canadian tourism agency identified it in the Ontario region as one of the seven priority projects.¹⁸ Similar regional strategies were prepared in the USA, to make the regions or states economically more viable, encourage agriculture to diversify their enterprises, make their products more value added and competitive, especially in the states of natural diversity such as Utah.¹⁹

Promoting and supporting agritourism development is made for the purpose of fostering rural development, but not in the manner to which urban construction has grown to large cities and conurbations, but mainly to preserve the environment, and from it to do business. This potential is witnessed in many developing countries, thus they have become aware of its development. The government of Kosovo is also focused on the perspective of agritourism and has prepared respective strategies to foster it.

Methodology and sources

The primary source of material for this paper are the Government strategies for development, especially those related to tourism development, which are taken for analysis. A number of statistics are gathered as secondary data from official publications in Kosovo to find out the trend and the state of tourism in general, then various data are selected for agritourism. All three are analyzed to get a an overview on the potentials for agritourism development.

Agrotourism versus other types of tourism in Kosovo

In the aftermath of 1999 war Kosovo was at the center of many international organizations and visitors. Initially, a United Nations Interim Administration (UNMIK) was established with a mission to restore peace and provide assistance for reconstruction and development. Along with it, a number of individuals apart from their curiosity to get more familiar of the war torn society, begun to explore Kosovo into more details, in particular her cultural heritage and landscape.

¹⁶ Kuehn, D., Hilchey, D., Ververs, D., Lynn Dunn, K., and Lehman, P. (1998), "Considerations for Agritourism Development", New York: Sea Grant Institute.

¹⁷ Chase, L., Ramaswamy, V. M., Burr, S.V., Zeitin, J., Green, G.P. and Dougherty, M. (2007), "Resources of Agritourism Development", Iowa State University: Agricultural Marketing Resource Center.

¹⁸ Southwestern Ontario Tourism Corporation -SWOTC (2011), "Agritourism Development and Strategy and Marketing Plan", Ontario: Agritourism Focus Group Proceedings, SWOTC.

¹⁹ Institute for Outdoor Recreation and Tourism (2011), "Utah Recreation and Tourism Matters", Price: Utah State University, No. IORT/026.

What Kosovo is known for regarding tourism in general? First, ethnic composition where majority of her people under 2 million is Albanian, and including minorities such as Serbs, Bosniaks, Turks, Egyptians and Romani, each of them having distinct ethnic and religious characteristics. Second, religious heritage. The overwhelming majority of Albanians are Muslims with fewer than 2% of them being Roman Catholics. Bosnians, Turks, Egyptians and Romani are also Muslim. The Serbs who are the largest minority, are Eastern Orthodox. Third, derived from the second, cultural heritage involving architecture, cuisine, unique traditions, and landscape. Although a small area, Kosovo is relatively rich in cultural heritage dating back as far as 3 500 BC. One of such proofs is the discovery of the Goddess on the Throne in the outskirts of Pristina capital city in 1956. The heritage of ancient Illyrian civilization has been discovered all over Kosovo, namely of the Dardani tribe.²⁰ Of particular importance were some archaeological excavations in the 21st century, especially the artifacts containing engravings from sacred geometry from the Bronze Age, such as the Flower of Life, Tree of Life, Illyricum Sacrum (Star of David), crescent moon with five-pointed star. These and associated discoveries have been explored from academic and policy point of view for archaeotourism development, though a study by Mulaj found that Kosovo does not have, among others, an organized research apparatus and expertise to make it work, and recommended that foreign scholars and foundations should further research the matter in Kosovo.²¹ the Medieval heritage is rich and diversified, beginning with Byzantine, Slavic, Ottoman and Albanian culture. A part of that heritage has been destroyed or vandalized in the course of historical events. during the reign of communism, a number of religious objects such as churches, mosques and synagogues have been destroyed. During the 1999 conflict, the Serbs burned hundreds of mosques. In the March 2004 riots, Albanian mobs set ablaze dozens of Serb orthodox churches. The diversity when it evolved in ethnic and/or religious hatred, drew the international attention that Kosovo's cultural heritage must be protected.

The number of visitors to Kosovo has been constantly growing over the last three years. There 11,458 foreign tourists visiting Kosovo in the last quarter 2013, a number which has almost doubled to 22,887 in the third quarter 2015. Along with it, the number of days/nights spent in Kosovo also grew substantially from 18,854 to 33,317 over the same periods.²²

²⁰ Berisha, Milot (2012), "Archaeological Guide to Kosovo", Pristina: Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport of the Government of the Republic of Kosovo.

²¹ Mulaj, Isa (2015), "What Marketing Strategy for Sacred Geometry Discoveries to Make Archaeotourism Work?", *Global Journal of Human-Social Science*, Vol. 15, No. 10, pp. 30-38.

²² Kosovo Agency of Statistics (2015), "Statistics of Hostelry: Q3-2015", Series 3: Economic Statistics, Pristina: Kosovo Agency of Statistics.

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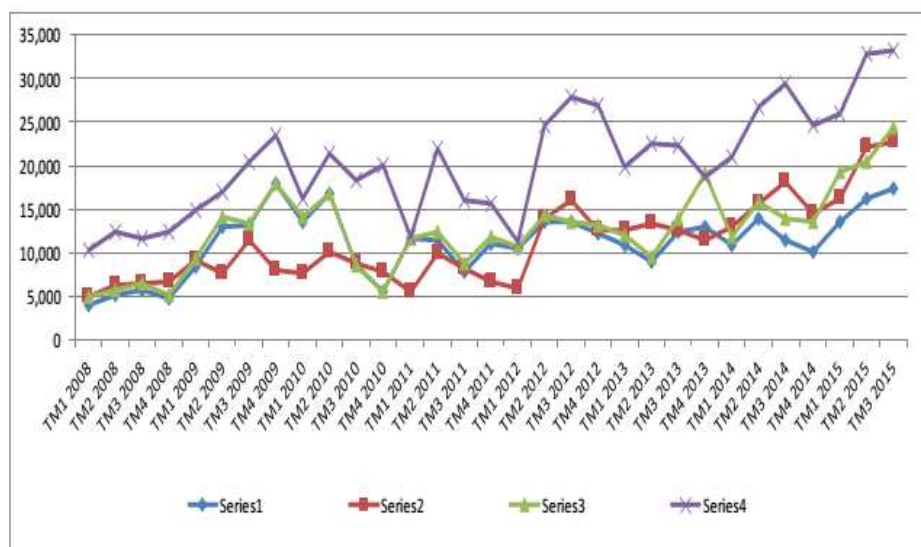


Figure 1: The trend of local (Series 1) and foreign visitors (Series 2) and their days/nights of stay (Series 3 for local and Series 4 for foreign) in Kosovo from Q1 2008 to Q3 2015.

Source: Kosovo Agency of Statistics (2015), "Statistics of Hostelry: Q3-2015", Series 3: Economic Statistics, Pristina: Kosovo Agency of Statistics, p.9.

The plotted numbers in figure 1 suggest that visiting Kosovo has been on a rise since 2008, then for some two years experienced a decline, most likely due to financial crisis. The trend continued to increase since the early 2012. As Kosovo is divided into seven main regions, it is useful see the figures broken down as in the table below.

Table 1: Number of visitor to Kosovo by regions from 2008 to 2014

Regions	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Gjakova	2,263	2,240	2,031	1,640	1,597	1,517	2,062
Gjilan	3,152	3,210	1,976	2,251	1,937	1,718	1,552
Mitrovica	1,873	2,471	2,894	2,646	2,875	2,915	2,631
Peja	4,924	8,288	8,337	6,633	7,593	6,630	11,534
Prizren	3,632	4,639	4,663	5,434	6,212	8,109	8,615
Pristina	27,076	57,569	49,172	46,636	68,537	68,687	77,167
Ferizaj	1,374	10,532	9,972	7,153	10,012	5,878	4,229
Total	44,294	88,949	79,045	72,393	98,763	95,454	107,790

Source: Kosovo Agency of Statistics (2015), "Statistics of Hostelry: Q3-2015", Series 3: Economic Statistics, Pristina: Kosovo Agency of Statistics, table 3, p. 10.

These were only the numbers registered in the hotels where the visitors stayed. The actual number of visitors who might have resided in rented premises or left within a day, was significantly higher. The

number is driven in part by the fact that Kosovo has no visa regime for any foreign citizen, while Kosovo citizens remain the only ones in Europe who are not yet liberalized the visas by the European Union. The difference in numbers by the region is worth explaining a little. Pristina is the capital and the largest city, after which, by the number of inhabitants, follows Prizren. However, Peja as the third largest city attracted more than 30% visitors than Prizren in 2014. The most frequent visits were made to cultural sites and rural areas, namely in the mountains, in which Peja, Prizren and Ferizaj are most known. In other words, their attraction in part came from the interest of visitors in agritourism.

Peja lying to the West of Kosovo has got some attractive agritourism resources such as natural beauties along the Rugova mountains that is home to two major rivers: the White Drin (also the largest river in Kosovo) and Lumbardhi. Both rivers contain the fish of sweet waters. The district of Rugova consists of 13 scattered villages who have access to the city of Peja through the main road leading up to the border with Montenegro. The villages are traditionally known for cattle breeding and producing organic food of animal and agricultural origin. The region has primary attracted Kosovo businessmen who have begun constructing leisure villas, restaurants and small hotels. Family farms are seeing their benefits by offering traditional cuisine to the visitors who went there on daily basis for walking, collecting forest fruits, hitchhiking and skiing. Public spas can be found in many parts of Kosovo, the most known of which (Ilixha) is located in the Peja region. It is home to a thermal spring water and has acted for decades as a health rehabilitation. The range of Curst Mountains (Bjeshket e Nemuna) run from Prizren through Peja to Istog and Serbia. Mokra Gora lies partially in western Kosovo and partially in southwestern Serbia.

A similar agritourism has emerged in Prizren and Ferizaj region. Prizren is bordered from the southeast by the Sharr mountains, with similar features of agritourism like Peja. The "Sharr cheese" is a special type of cheese, which, in addition to being available from household farmers, is also industrially mass produced and branded by a company located in the city of Prizren. To the northeast of the city, lies Prevala mountain, a beautiful natural park which recently has become a matter of controversy as many Kosovo politicians have constructed their villas there, much of them with suspicious money. Public opinion and civil society are complaining that this way of uncontrolled construction is not only damaging the site, but also limiting the prospects of agritourism. From Prevala the way leads to Brezovica skiing center in Ferizaj region. It is one of the most known skiing resorts in the Balkans. Great potentials for agritourism are also found in the Mitrovica region, though here, as the lower number of visitors suggest, still cannot be exploited at a satisfactory level. The primary cause are ethnic disputes between the Serbs who control the northern, and Albanians in the southern part of the city and region.

While some resources and potentials exists to boost agritourism, the sector itself is not without challenges. In 2016, the foot and mouth disease spread in Kosovo (also in the neighboring countries), affecting many cattle. As a consequence, the livestock begun to decrease. Once favored traditional meat products, the consumers now are a little cautious by asking and being sure that the meat they eat is not from affected animals by foot and mouth disease. The Government undertook the needed measures by vaccination and the disease appears gradually to be neutralized.

Strategies of agrotourism development

The Government of the Republic of Kosovo has been preparing reports, strategies and undertaking some measures to promote tourism development in general and agritourism in particular. Tourism in 2004 accounted for around 10% of Kosovo's GDP. A joint report by the Ministry of Trade and Industry and the Ministry of Environment and Spatial Planning of the Republic of Kosovo in 2004, identified three levels that may affect the demand for tourism in Kosovo. Level one, Kosovo's offer for tourism that begins from local, regional, national and international demand. Level two, touristic offer with a focus on regional context or in comparison with Kosovo's neighbors (Albania, Montenegro, Macedonia, and Serbia). Level three, touristic offer with the aim to attract one day or transit visits in and through Kosovo in the form of excursions. In justifying these levels, the report informs about the potentials and available resources in different regions of Kosovo.²³ We referred to some of these available resources in previous section. A further detailed profile in the sector of tourism was produced in 2014 by the Ministry of Trade and Industry, which was based on a survey of the companies dealing with tourism activities.²⁴

The development of tourism as well as of agritourism is further explored in the Government's national strategy for sustainable development 2016-2021. Among others, the strategy envisages to regulate the land parcels or undertake a reform to make local farmers more competitive. The average land parcel in private ownership in rural areas is estimated to be 0.3 hectares, and this has been identified as one of the barriers to economies of scale. It is estimated that if local communities and farmers are capable of providing good products (e.g. wine, spirit, and organic food) who meet the needed standards and may even be better than many others would have to offer, they are not capable in providing these goods in sufficient quantities and be more widespread in local and international market. The Government plans to introduce a land reform to merge several smaller parcels into fewer larger ones.²⁵

Like in many countries, regional strategies for agritourism are also prepared in Kosovo. The main ones focused on the development of tourism and agritourism as branch in western Kosovo.²⁶ Another one, still for western Kosovo, focused on a much smaller area, for Istog municipality which falls in the Peja region, heavily focused on agritourism.²⁷ There are many more reports, strategies, documents, at national and local government as well individual business plans aiming to promote agritourism development which this paper has no space to analyze most of them. What appears as more important after all, is that Kosovo has become aware that agritourism is a sector of activity with probably better perspective for development than the rest. The main remark to the strategies is that, while they acknowledge and well inform about available sites and resources, they fail to address the problem of

²³ Government of the Republic of Kosovo (2004), "A Report on Sectorial Development of Tourism", Pristina, prepared by the Ministry of Trade and Industry and the Ministry of Environment and Spatial Planning of the Republic of Kosovo.

²⁴ Ministry of Trade and Industry (2014), "A Profile of Tourism Sector", Pristina: Ministry of Trade and Industry of the Government of the Republic of Kosovo.

²⁵ Government of the Republic of Kosovo (2016), "The National Strategy for Development 2016-2021: A Plan for Sustainable Development", Pristina: Government of the Republic of Kosovo.

²⁶ See for example Ministry of Trade of Trade and Industry (2015a), "Turizmi në Kosovën Perëndimore: Raport mbi Strategjinë e Tregut" (Tourism in Western Kosovo: A Report on Market Strategy), Pristina: Ministry of Trade of Trade and Industry of the Republic of Kosovo.

²⁷ For more details about the strategy in question, see Ministry of Trade of Trade and Industry (2015b), "Istog: Agriculture and Tourism Development Concept and Project Ideas", Pristina: Ministry of Trade of Trade and Industry of the Republic of Kosovo.

degrading the environment through illegal cutting trees (deforestation) and unplanned construction by corrupted politicians.

Discussion and conclusion

The prospects of agrotourism development in a small country like Kosovo may be relatively small, but when this is combined with archaeotourism and related cultural heritage, then it has a potential of further growth. The central and local governments have shown their commitment in promoting the development by a considerable number of strategies and documents, some of which with the support of foreign donors. While the promise and prospects on site exist, it remains to be seen how much resources would be committed to boost agritourism. A well prepared strategy and a clear plan of action does not mean that the things towards the development will evolve as planned. The strategies are generally short of addressing some serious problems such environmental pollution and degradation, especially by the politicians and the officials who work in the ministries that actually prepare the strategies for agritourism. Furthermore, with general social, economic and political situation in Kosovo being fragile that needs substantial improvement, it would not be so rational to consider all the listed potentials for agritourism to work. Poverty in rural areas on one hand, and usurpation by the politicians of the best available places for their own personal benefits as residences, limits the room for better perspective of agritourism. This problem can addressed through a separate strategy analyzing the risk factors, including unexpected risks such as foot and mouth disease among the cattle. It would be better if these risk factors find their reference in the strategies for agritourism, and recommending measures how to deal with and resolve them.

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