

RURAL TOURISM IN MEĐIMURJE COUNTY: SYNERGY OF PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN DIASPORA, ECONOMY AND LOCAL COMMUNITY

RURALNI TURIZAM MEĐIMURSKE ŽUPANIJE: SINERGIJA PARTNERSTVA DIJASPORE, GOSPODARSTVA I LOKALNE ZAJEDNICE

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SUMMARY

Rural tourism entails all the activities that take place in a rural area. Over the last decades, this form of tourism occurs in the north of the Republic of Croatia, in Međimurje County. Following this consideration, the rural homeland is extremely important for the development of Croatian society through various sectors of the economy in the form of investments in that area as well as for emigrated Croats and returnees. Through the rural tourism of Međimurje County, diaspora tourism is also promoted in Croatia and with Croatia joining the European Union great development opportunities are offered. Emigrants from Međimurje County, who are maintaining close relations with the homeland, emerge in the role of investors or consumers of rural tourism through the objective and the subjective elements, which are products of tradition, and through cultural services which are offered by individuals or communities. One of the basic bonds Croatian emigrants have with the homeland is, among others, heritage, development of the rural area with contents that area offers and local community tourism. This research paper aims to offer a pilot program that could be applied to other parts of the Republic of Croatia, with great potential for rural and diaspora tourism.

The Croatian diaspora, with cultural and economic strength, should become imperative for further development and the promoter of its homeland in the world. Following that, rural tourism represents a great potential in developing Croatian society through the tertiary sector.

Through the analysis of the current state and the rural tourism offer in Međimurje County, it will be shown how certain economies have aimed to preserve the current rural

tradition with the purpose of the synergy of the partnership between diaspora, economy and the local community.

The expected results and contribution of the research paper can be distinguished as: academic (dissemination of the research results, promoting a new methodology and practical contribution: (conclusions which may serve in the preparation of special programs and program contents which will be adapted to the target local and diaspora groups: young age, students, pensioners).

Key words: diaspora, Međimurje County, rural tourism, synergy

Ključne riječi: dijaspóra, Međimurska županija, ruralni turizam, sinergija

INTRODUCTION

In the north-west of the Republic of Croatia there is the northernmost continental tourist destination, Međimurje County, which along with the Istrian County, the City of Zagreb and Zagreb county, is one of the most economically developed counties in the Republic of Croatia. In addition to the highly developed economy, existing tourist resources and richer cultural life as well as good transport connections in Croatia and in the region, Međimurje County stands out for its natural beauty, hills and plains, rivers - Mura and Drava and lakes, which are considered necessary for the existence of a functional tourist destination system as well as for the process of developing various forms of tourism, including rural tourism, which is discussed in this paper. The paper will also discuss people who play a key role in tourism such as employees, investors, consumers and hedonists.

The rural tourism framework covers all activities and forms of tourism that occur outside cities as well as all those places where mass tourism has developed. In this defined framework, the development of rural tourism is conditioned by the existing attractions of the area and the interaction of traditional gastronomy, tourist services, traditional products, presentations of tradition, agriculture and its products. It can generally be said that tourism today is the fastest growing component of economic activities in the world, which in addition to generating income and creating different jobs, it also raises the quality of life of the local population. It is quite logical that every country, region, city, settlement, place or village wants to gain the status of 'visited', being an excellent tourist destination, that tourists of all categories and interests will want to continuously visit and return, which in our case applies to domestic and foreign tourists, but also to expats who return to their country of origin every summer and during different holidays. When tourism takes root deeply in the daily life of the local community population, which is itself part of the destination product, with the common goals of the tourist board system, only then will tourism not only be a seasonal activity that will benefit exclusively individuals (Petrić, 2011), but will pass the success and benefit of tourism to the local community and beyond. Only when common synergies are achieved, can an opportunity open up for a partnership between stakeholders: the diaspora, the economy and the local community. The primary task of any existing tourist destination is good promotion, creating a recognizable identity for the destination, attracting potential tourists and retaining existing ones. Međimurje County, as the northernmost tourist destination of continental tourism in Croatia, has the future potential of even wider development of other types of tourism, not only because of its natural beauty as the most valuable resource, but also because of Međimurje emigrants and returnees, who are also a kind of guarantee for the quality development of rural tourism, and whose actions influence the lives of the local population, but also the wider community.

LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

There are many scientific papers about rural tourism that have been of great benefit to us in the emergence of this work, while there are not many articles exclusively on rural tourism and the link with emigration so far. Mesarić Žabčić, in the article "Rural tourism and entrepreneurship: an example of Međimurje County", *Acta tourist nova*, Vol. 2 No. 2, 2008, p. 181-204., analyzed the current situation and the rural tourism offerings in the area of Međimurje County, while noting that some economies have

focused on preserving the existing rural tradition with the aim of developing small business. In this paper, the author investigated the quality of rural tourism in Međimurje County, county houses and rural tourism facilities/farms, wine roads, and what other tourist offerings are related to rural tourism in Međimurje County. At the same time, she investigated whether there are any difficulties in terms of regulations and regulations that hamper the prosperity of rural tourism development in the county, and by which legislation facilities/economies are registered. See more about laws and regulations related to rural tourism at: https://mint.gov.hr/180301_zoug_izv and https://mint.gov.hr/UserDocsImages/arhiva/Prirucnik_Seoski_turizam.pdf

The author questioned whether the development of rural tourism in Međimurje was positively influenced by neighbouring Slovenia, but also by the ideas and experiences of returning expats from Austria, Switzerland and Germany where this form of tourism took hold many years ago.

Gentileschi and Pisano (2006) in the article “Productive reintegration of returning emigrants and rural tourism: life and work experiences in Sardinia (Italy) and in the highlands of Marrakech province (Morocco) represented a contribution to shaping migration return policies that seek to harness the acquired skills of expats and channel their savings into opening small businesses within local development programmes. In formulating measures that can create positive opportunities for migrants to return to their birthplaces using their skills acquired in the industry of countries of receipt and investing savings in their country. The authors relied on the experiences of returning emigrants collected in the Sardinia and Marrakech provinces in Morocco and the initiative to start rural tourism in coastal and inland areas as an alternative for nautical and coastal tourism. They found that after a review of the conditions imposed by control regulations and policies for assisting returnees, here we should also mention the major role played by family solidarity. Several students of the University of Zagreb and Osijek have produced their final papers in which they investigate rural tourism in some chapters and try to define and locate rural tourism areas in Croatia. Thus, among others, Ivo Marjanović in his final work entitled “The role of emigrant tourism in the Republic of Croatia” From the University of Josip Juraj Strossmayer in Osijek, Faculty of Agrobiotechnical Sciences Osijek, 2020, believes that progress would be made in rural tourism if the forms of tourism developed in rural tourism were exclusively related to the way of life associated with the area, historically, and nowadays. The offerings should be tailored to certain wishes that this rural area can offer to tourists. With limited work in this exact area, this research is grounded in pertinent theories relating to the specific needs of the area and return migrants and emigrants living abroad.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS FOR NETWORKING

Since, in addition to rural tourism, the article also addresses emigrants as well as the return migrations of Međimurje emigrants, it is also necessary to build on the importance of social network theories, which rely on transnational theory and provide a broader analytical framework for exploring the complexities of return migration, as the basis for the exchange and formation of networks is seen in the common interests and migration experiences of migrants (Cassarino, 2004, 265). The formation and maintenance of networks requires years of long-term interpersonal relationships and the regular exchange of mutually valuable resources between current migrants, former migrants and non-migrants in the country of origin and country of receipt based on kinship, friendly, professional, cultural and other types of links (Massey, 1993 as cited in Kuschminder, 2013, 27). The central importance of social networks is in accessing the material and intangible resources and information used by migrants to prepare their return (Kuschminder, 2013, 25) which includes opportunities to develop work in the country of origin, including investments in a particular type of tourism, various service activities and the like. The very fact that emigrants are willing to invest their acquired capital from outside the borders of the Republic of Croatia in their country of origin, and for the most part in the local environment from which they or their parents originate by birth, speaks in fact of the exceptional opportunity and joining forces and joint efforts from which the local community will benefit not only through promotion but also materially. In our work we focus only on investments of expats and returnees in activities related to rural tourism.

Networks, formed on the basis of family or kinship relationships manifesting themselves as strong bonds (Pavlov, et al 2013., 280), are a source of social capital in the country of origin and are a huge help for returnees in the realization of desired projects in practice. Modern changes in international migration flows, influenced by globalization and technological progress, have contributed to the increased heterogeneity of returning migrants, which has been reflected in their reintegration process, possible impact on the country of origin and development potential (Cassarino, 2004, 270), which is also the case in Međimurje County. The development potential of Međimurje County in rural tourism is enormous and is crucial for the development of Međimurje County as an attractive tourist destination for both Croatian emigrants and all other tourists who decide to spend their holidays in Međimurje. In the domain of natural and cultural and historical heritage, Međimurje County offers many attractions that draw local tourists, and participates alongside the local population and the emigrant population, mostly originally from Međimurje County, who are also promoters of Međimurje County outside the borders of the Republic of Croatia, as well as potential drivers for further development of rural tourism in Međimurje.

TYPES OF FACILITIES IN THE RURAL AREA OF MEĐIMURJE COUNTY

Many respected Croatian and world scientists have proposed numerous definitions of rural space. In his article, Lukić (2010) analyses theoretical approaches to rural space in great detail, extracts key definitions and explains, among other things, the discourse and meaning of the term rural space. Therefore, in this paper we will not single out one definition, but we will only mention that during the research so far, characteristics such as a small population, the dominant use of land and forest for the survival of people and social structure, customs and rural identity have been used to define the rural area. According to the above, rural space could generally be defined as "... an environment with a small concentration of the population, whose main occupation is agriculture, and which is characterized by special customs and rural identity ... " (Ružić, 2009, 12). Therefore, we come to the conclusion that this is a space located outside the building space of the city, whose economic prosperity and development is based on agriculture of a traditional character. In the rural area of Međimurje County, there are several types of facilities for rural tourism:

- family farm (*obiteljsko poljoprivredno gospodarstvo – OPG*)
- wine-tasting rooms (wine cellars, wine tasting rooms, wine camp, wine roads, wine-tasting room accommodation)
- excursion site-restaurant (facilities for traditional food preparation, traditional craft, souvenir shop)
- accommodation in rural areas (traditional and other rural holiday homes)
- farms with ethno-collections

RURAL TOURISM AS ONE OF THE FORMS OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN MEĐIMURJE COUNTY

For the sustainability of tourism, the most important thing is the balance between the economic development of a destination and the preservation of the quality of life of the local population with all the existing resources of a particular destination, be they natural or social. We have witnessed a new trend in tourism, rural tourism, emerging in recent decades. Following this reflection, the importance of the homeland on the one hand for the development of Croatian society is exceptional, and on the other hand, because of the participants in the rural areas, including all involved, emigrants and Croats who have returned to their country of origin. Rural tourism frameworks include eco, sports and recreational, gastronomic, cultural, nostalgic and native tourism in rural areas in Međimurje County and include the offer of services of local facilities, programs and cultures on which economic development is primarily based.

The environment among tourists plays a big role in choosing to travel to a particular destination. At the same time, the environment provides attractiveness to tourists and supports local people where ecotourism is focused on a more significant market niche of the tourism industry. The area of Međimur-

je County offers tourists a personalized experience of rural attractions in lesser-known local environments, the possibility of connecting man and nature, increasing awareness and knowledge about the need to preserve the environment for humanity and the like.

The expressions showed that the development of rural tourism in Međimurje County was positively influenced by the neighbouring countries of Slovenia and Austria, where this form of tourism took hold many years ago. Presentations of traditions through folk customs, then specific rural estates, production of traditional products and preservation of the natural environment at a high level, are forms and ways in which the rural tourist offerings of Međimurje County is based. In Međimurje County, rural tourism refers to the agrarian area, and it covers tourism on the peasant farm, hunting tourism, fishing, cultural, gastronomic, health, ecotourism, wine, native, sports and recreational and other types of tourism (Mesarić Žabčić, 2008.).

Gasterbeiters, so-called guest workers, are specific to the area of Međimurje County in that in the 1960s they moved out largely due to the need to feed themselves and/or their families, the desire to achieve a higher standard of living, the need to earn more than they could then in Međimurje with the ultimate goal of investing in the desired and yet unfulfilled businesses due to financial constraints at home. Mostly men moved out (there were family reunifications) from their birthplace to the Central and Western European countries of Europe with the desire and ultimate goal of returning to Međimurje at some time. In frequent and permanent trips between the country of origin-the-receiving country, due to family, nostalgia, investments in houses, work, a link spontaneously formed that gradually passed into synergy between Međimurje County- *gasterbaiters*-local community-tourism.

Although rural tourism in Međimurje County already had preconditions for development, with the accession of the Republic of Croatia to the European Union, it offers significant development opportunities. Many examples of good practice of rural tourism at the local and regional level in the Republic of Croatia are well known, which can also be recognized in new possibilities and projects of tourist offerings such as the development of agrotourism, rural and family tourism, renovation of old and neglected houses, development of winemaking, eco-nutrition, cultural tourism, alternative tourism and so forth. The emphasis of rural tourism also includes a balance related to the experiences of individuals in that space. As enjoyers of rural tourism use a total of five experiences of their own (sight, taste, hearing, touch, smell), we claim that it belongs to the branch of experience tourism! Experience tourism, especially in the cases of displaced Croats since we are talking about the diaspora, offers experiences connected with the tourists' native birthplace, reminds them of childhood emotions, evokes experiences from the time of growing up through memories of the native environment, local customs and so forth.

As experiential tourism becomes an increasingly popular trend of tourism in the world, it is also necessary to clarify it in this work because it is in relationship with rural tourism. Tourists express their experiences and experience from the visited location, show and comment primarily publicly through pictures or videos on social networks, which is great promotion of all aspects of each visited and experienced location. Many people write their experiences in impression books, but they also live stream them to their circle of friends.

In our investigated case, we have noticed that displaced Croats and descendants of emigrants who maintain close contacts with their country of origin appear in the roles of investors or consumers of rural tourism through many objective and subjective elements that tradition produces in addition to experiences, and through the services of culture offered to them by the individual or the local community in the space.

The essence of the entire offering is primarily the satisfaction of all participants in the process of synergy of the created partnership and tourists, diaspora, local population and local community. Every attraction, festival and event, must have its own space, its own interesting story, its visitors/local audience/tourists for which the most important thing is the creativity of the individual, the local community. Also, it is necessary to provide material resources for the realization of the idea, the support of local authorities and in the end the goodwill of people is also important. With the first return investments in rural areas, Međimurje County recognized and supported investments that enrich the already existing

offerings of the rural space. Practice has shown that returning expats are very creative, full of ideas and opportunities related to investments in their homeland. Therefore, a part of the local population is involved in the further development of rural tourism in the area of Međimurje County by presenting Međimurje culture and customs with its authentic way of life. The modern type of tourism is very interesting, especially when interpreting heritage and customs that are in contact with experiential tourism. Experiences are types of tools by which we create (in)satisfaction for tourists with the destination. That is, experiences are processes that create an experience as a “product” that denotes what a tourist thinks and feels about a particular destination! Experience, opinions and feelings influence the recommendation of the destination (Jelinčić, 2017). The Tourist Experience/Experience Economy (EIDT) highlights the effects that products/services can have on people's lives. Unlike the general economy that offers material satisfaction, the economy of experience offers psychological satisfaction. It (EIDT) can also find a close ally in rural tourism through offering meaningful, often individualised events that engage tourists in ways they will remember and return to with joy. Due to the need for different destinations, recently, the experiences of displaced Croats are becoming a trend in creating tourist offerings from the local environment because the tourist perceives it as a personal source of information and a story about the real identity of the local communities with which they come into contact. From this point of view, we imply the importance of individual satisfaction with a particular product, service or, in tourist terms, destination. With this we conclude that a positive experience creates a positive image about a particular destination and ultimately results in the satisfaction of tourists.

THE ABILITY TO MARKET IN RURAL TOURISM - GAINING EXPERIENCE AND CREATING AN EXPERIENCE: AN EXAMPLE OF MEĐIMURJE COUNTY

In the process of the development of rural tourism, a significant place is occupied by marketing at home and outside the borders of the Republic of Croatia through the offering of experiences from the local location in the form of all existing attractions, festivals and events. The result of creating a certain event is visible only if the event, manifestation, product/and emotion has also produced emotions in tourists, they are influenced by the mood that affects experience tourism (Jelinčić, 2017). Međimurje County, in particular, has a rich resource-attraction base. This is confirmed by numerous awards that county destinations or attractions have received at national competitions. It should be noted that Međimurje County is the only Croatian county that received two national winners at the European Destinations of Excellence (EDEN) competition from 2007 to 2015 (Gornje Međimurje in 2015 and Saint Martin on the Mura in 2007). Also, in 2010, St. Martin (*Sveti Martin*) on the Mura received a silver flower from the European Association Entente Florale Europe, and the village was repeatedly singled out as one of the most beautifully decorated small towns of continental Croatia at the Green Flower competition.¹ It is important to emphasize that these award-winning destinations are the areas which boast the most types of rural tourism facilities in Međimurje County.

Tourists come to the destination for various reasons, business trips, professional education, treatment or satisfaction of religious or spiritual renewal, but still in the greatest number, mainly for rest, recreation, relaxation and pleasure (Berc Radišić, 2009). In Međimurje County, many presentations of local culture, local restaurants, local customs, fests such as the International Oldtimer Meeting, MEF-Međimurje Festival of Entertainment Music, Međimurje Beer Festival, Forestland Festival, Terme Life Class Saint Martin and so forth have been recognized. Especially notable is the largest event in Međimurje County every year, *Porcinkolovo*, which lasts from July 28th to August 2nd, which provides an extraordinary eno-gastro offering, contains a religious part to the ceremony, promotes many exhibitors of old customs and the like. Croatian emigrants and returnees from Central and Western European countries in Europe, with the greatest number of emigrants with origins from Međimurje County, appear and are visible at the event and in the roles of exhibitors, investors, buyers of products, visitors and tourists. The

¹ <http://medjimurska-zupanija.hr/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Masterplan-razvoja-turizma-Međimurske-županije-2020.pdf>

essence and ultimate goal is to be an innovator at events, create the existence of various innovative spectacular “products”, present them, make sales, increase consumption and contribute to the earnings of the local environment. On this track, in practice we have noticed many novelties in the market; pumpkin oil tasting rooms, ‘*tiblica*’ meat tasting rooms, thematic paths (crossroads) and indigenous wine houses have been opened. The ultimate goal is to create synergy, the partnership of connection between the diaspora, the economy and the local community through the Međimurje general tourist offerings into one complete product that will be recognized by tourists through various forms of existing trends of tourism, including rural.

Expats, returnees and locals believe that connecting the tourist offerings of Međimurje County and joint continuous market appearance can create a “miracle of supply” in the native homeland, which is desirable for the local community, the local economy, and thinking more broadly for Croatian society.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For the purposes of this paper, we have analyzed a total of three experiences related to Međimurje County as a destination for rural tourism. The number of respondents was limited but representative as return migrant investment activities are relatively new in the area and there is a limited number of people participating in such activities. The analyzed data were collected through semi-structured interviews with available respondents during the summer period in Croatia in June 2021. Each interview with the respondents lasted forty-five minutes, was conducted in an extremely pleasant atmosphere, taking into account all data protection standards for the respondents' data and ethical measures for the whole procedure.

We were able to develop the interview guiding questions on the basis of information that stems from interactions and conversations with the respondents at informal gatherings over many years. Conversations and socializing have allowed us to develop a basis of understanding of the life experiences of the respondents, at the same time, the migrant experiences of the respondents, and personal acquaintance with the respondents made it easier to conduct interviews. The analysis of the experiences (from a perspective of experience tourism), reflections and ideas of emigrants is proposed as a new academic method for investigating rural tourism, contributes to the existing knowledge about the possibilities of further investments in rural tourism in the rural area of Međimurje County, which raises other questions, but also gives signposts for future research.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Potentials and capacities for rural tourism in Međimurje County

Attractiveness of the offerings of a particular destination is the most important determinant of the competitiveness of tourist destinations. What can be offered and considered attractive to a particular individual, a tourist, and what will interest them precisely in traveling and rejecting these tourist destinations is very difficult to say, but it is definitely related to nature and cultural heritage. The long-term success of tourism depends on attractions that contain a human factor and that can satisfy the desire to travel, there is a constant need for new attractions, which requires constant financial investments and without it this process of progress is not possible (Kotler et al., 2010.). Our focus is on exploring the rural area of Međimurje County, which abounds in tourist attractions within the preserved natural and cultural heritage. Along these lines, and in accordance with the Tourist Board of Međimurje County, the top attractions of rural tourism include the Spa & Sport Resort Saint Martin with all its accompanying facilities, Mill on the Mura, Međimurje Wine Road, Mađerkin breg, Old Town Zrinski with garden, Museum of Old Timers, Mura Drava Bike, Memorial House of Mining, City of Labyrinth, and Eco-Company Mura.²

² See more: <http://www.tzm.hr/>

Several times a year, Međimurje County is visited by its diaspora. They often plan their arrivals during national and religious holidays, but also in accordance with programs and events in Međimurje County that they do not want to miss. One of the most important events for the local community, but also for tourists, especially the so-called *gasterbaiters*, is the already mentioned Porcinkulovo when the center of Čakovec is transformed for a few days into a large exhibition of indigenous traditional crafts, presentations of folk customs and food offerings of old “mothers”. Also important are the very visited Međimurje wine days known as *Urbanovo* with the aim of promoting the wine road of Međimurje County, which is a new opportunity for visiting the native homeland, family and friends and relax with them with a glass of wine, conversation and the authentic scents and tastes of local food. Fašnik and carnival parade with participants wearing original masks characteristic only for Međimurje are visited in the greatest number by *gastrebaters* employed in Slovenia and Austria who stop by the event and enjoy their holiday homes and vineyards in Gornji Međimurje along the way. The younger population of tourists and lovers of adrenaline sports in the rural area are attracted to the Speedway Grand Prix in Donji Kraljevac and the BIMEP Bike Tour.

With the aim of preserving local and national identity as an attractiveness factor in the rural area of Međimurje County, each individual event has its own interesting story that aims to achieve a degree of attraction among tourists while events are more important for the life of the local community in Međimurje County.

Exact experiences and present experiences of the three respondents

For the purposes of the work, three individual interviews were conducted. The aim of the interview was to gather information through exact experiences and experiences on the possibilities, challenges and perspectives of rural tourism in Međimurje County. The interview contained about 20 questions related to rural tourism in Međimurje County. For the purposes of the work, we have singled out only the most important and impressive opinions of the respondents. Consistent themes presented in the interview results. Key concepts expressed by all three respondents included: appeal of the rural lifestyle, the quality of food, good climatic conditions.. They responded particularly stressed the sense of community, even when a family does not live there but returns each year, as being invaluable.

M.V. “... I am of the opinion that Međimurje County is a great example for all other rural areas in Croatia of how tourism should be developed. Family farm owners and locals appreciate tourists, they are at their service, smiling all the time, making jokes at their own expense, trying to offer all their traditional products, point us out to cultural objects, talk about the customs of the area that we remember fondly. For a moment I think, I wander off with my thoughts and it seems to me that time has stopped and that I am back in my youth here with my parents, my friends as I used to be, even though my parents are gone.

We, *gasterbeiters*, mostly buy local produce, homemade food, we invested in real estate here at home to enjoy retirement here. We, the elderly, come for the holidays, and our children and our neighbours’ grandchildren visit summer festivals that take place during the school holidays...

Both we and our children hang out with neighbours, friends, relatives and are always happy to come to Međimurje County again. Every year when we come we ask what we can see new, if there is a new attraction where you can go out into nature, we want to spend quality time outdoors, I am especially glad to go from winery to winery and buy myself wine for Germany.

We want to relax in nature, we have our partners and I have a few permanent places that we go back to every year. A lot of us work in Germany in service industries for another two or three years and we plan to come home and start a business in my village, we will do this both my wife and I. The idea for the job is a lot, I have acquired money, I have invested and it will certainly be a service business with a different range of offers in rural tourism...”.

A.H.” ... I built a house and I bought a very conveniently larger property in Međimurje County, I organised it, so now I am here more often because I plan to do services and tourism and I would like to expand my business even more in the future so that my children stay here tomorrow and work on the estate, it is not the Germany that it used to be. I have many colleagues in Germany who are already vacationing at the sea in Croatia and have never been to the northern part of Croatia, they have tried

wines from Međimurje and I managed to interest them to come and see the wine road and try Međimurje cuisine ...”.

M.M. “... I am a returnee to Međimurje County and I invested in crafts and I am engaged in tourism in the rural area of Gornje Međimurje, I lead a better life compared to life in Austria... I'm my own boss here and I'm much more pleased here... I would like to emphasize that it is very important to promote Međimurje by word of mouth, through social networks, Facebook, Instagram, but through the tourist board of each municipality and in the end, the county.

The same guests always come back to me, I always have two married couples from Austria. There are some new ones because they heard verbally from my guests that everything is very good at my place. I will try to make one walking route for all those who want to walk in the still untouched nature with a starting point in front of the church, and it would end in my tourist facility where we would welcome tourists with wine, indigenous food and music, only for the weekend. My guests are our Croats, Slovenians and Austrians who come for weekends, it is close to them and everyone returns again...”.

We talked to three respondents and singled out only a part of existing experiences, impressions, experiences, but also reflections on rural tourism opportunities in the area of Međimurje County. All three examples have recorded testimonies showing how they reflect and conclude according to experiences and experiences from life and practice, expressing their independence in thinking and entrepreneurialism.

They used the acquired capital outside the borders of the Republic of Croatia and their attitude towards work and entrepreneurship was to start their own businesses and achieve their desired goals, thus responding to the context of the change of society and the community to which they returned or to which they plan to return soon. The emphasis and importance of maintaining strong ties with the country of origin through regular visits to Međimurje County as well as uninterrupted and continuous communication with family and friends, as agreed by all three, had a great impact on the realization of investments. By assessing the possibilities in Međimurje County and thanks to perseverance, everyone gradually achieves purchasing both houses and/or estates for business where they want to achieve business success in tourism and service activities, thus achieving status in society by establishing themselves as businessmen in the business world from where they were born. Returning to Međimurje County, returning investors enter the world of entrepreneurship and professional affirmation in providing quality of supply of all forms of products they launch on the market. The desire to achieve a positive economic and social impact at the local and national level of the return country is a windfall for Međimurje County as a destination for rural tourism.

In conclusion, we believe that with the efforts of the local community and returnees from abroad, Međimurje County has been made a more attractive and accessible destination for all other investors who want to invest in rural tourism. Among other things, we believe that the development potential of Croatia's northernmost rural destination is enormous and that synergy between the diaspora, local community and economy will realize the long-standing desired strategic partnership that will be able to respond to the required demand with a high-quality supply of all its resources to increasingly demanding tourists who want to gain an unforgettable holiday.

CONCLUSION

Today's tourists no longer have the main question of where to spend their vacation, but how they will experience it, which implies rich content in their selected destinations where experiences will be created, experiences will be gained and emotions aroused. Standards in terms of accommodation, transportation and food are easily met in every destination, and what is increasingly claimed by tourist consumers are elements of the offerings that will provide them with special impressions. Whether the holiday is active or passive, consumers must be provided with comfort, positive emotions and a certain degree of experience. We can conclude that the service providers aim to create entertainment and experience and meet the achievement of the desired expectations among consumers, providing a lasting memory of the destination. On this track, rural tourism includes consumers, culture and agriculture,

economy, Eno gastronomy, experiences, emotions, festivals, promotions of different types and tasting rooms.

The returnees, who had previously emigrated abroad, recognized the development possibilities of rural tourism in the area of Međimurje County, so along with the local population and the community, these individuals decided to invest, which helped the overall development of the economy of Međimurje County as one of the other attractive tourist destinations in the Republic of Croatia, and according to the prestigious FDI magazine, one of the ten small regions of Europe attractive for foreign investment, which imposes even greater impetus and responsibility for further development. The authors acknowledge a need for additional research as well as for a more detailed analysis of all social factors and the measurability of their impacts on rural tourism in Međimurje County. We conclude with the expectation that further research based on the new insights presented in this discussion, would ensure a deeper understanding and give even more concrete guidelines for the further development of rural tourism in the area of Međimurje County.

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SAŽETAK

Ruralni turizam podrazumijeva sve aktivnosti koje se odvijaju u ruralnom području. Posljednjih desetljeća taj se oblik turizma javlja i na sjeveru Republike Hrvatske, u Međimurskoj županiji. Slijedom tog promišljanja ruralni zavičaj je od iznimne važnosti za razvoj hrvatskog društva kroz različite sektore gospodarstva u obliku ulaganja u to područje kao i za iseljene Hrvate i povratnike.

Kroz ruralni turizam Međimurske županije promiče se i turizam dijaspore u Hrvatskoj, a ulaskom Hrvatske u Europsku uniju otvaraju se velike mogućnosti razvoja. Iseljenici iz Međimurske županije, koji održavaju bliske veze sa zavičajem, pojavljuju se u ulozi investitora ili potrošača ruralnog turizma kroz objektivne i subjektivne elemente, koji su produkti tradicije, te kroz kulturne usluge koje nude pojedinci ili zajednice. Jedna od temeljnih veza hrvatskog iseljništva s domovinom je između ostalog

baština koja pridonosi razvoju ruralnog prostora sa sadržajima koje to područje nudi u sklopu turizma lokalne zajednice.

Ovaj istraživački rad nudi pilot-program koji bi se mogao primijeniti i na druge dijelove Hrvatske s velikim razvojnim potencijalom ruralnog turizma u suradnji s iseljeništvom. Dijaspore s kulturnom i gospodarskom snagom treba postati čimbenik daljnjeg razvoja i promotor svoje domovine u svijetu. Slijedom toga, ruralni turizam predstavlja velik potencijal u razvoju hrvatskog društva kroz tercijarni sektor. Analizom postojećeg stanja i ponude ruralnog turizma u Međimurskoj županiji pokazat će se kako su pojedina gospodarstva nastojala očuvati postojeću ruralnu tradiciju u svrhu sinergije partnerstva dijaspore, gospodarstva i lokalne zajednice. Očekivani rezultati i doprinos znanstvenog rada mogu se razlikovati kao akademski (diseminacija rezultata istraživanja, promicanje nove metodologije) i praktični doprinos (zaključci koji mogu poslužiti u pripremi posebnih programa i programskih sadržaja koji će biti prilagođeni ciljanim lokalnim skupinama i skupinama dijaspore: mladima, studentima i umirovljenicima).