



Tourism Recovery after COVID-19 Pandemic in Typical Rural Areas in Bulgaria

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Abstract: Rural areas in Bulgaria are strategically important for the national well-being in every country and Bulgaria is not an exception. After the COVID-19 pandemic, the tourism sector was on hold with a devastating impact on the Accommodation establishments' number and Nights spent. The main goal of this research is to review current data on the tourism sector in typical rural areas in Bulgaria and suggest possible measures to increase vital indicators. The study is based on three approaches to classify urban and rural areas according to NUTS 3 regions. A multi-component methodology has been applied to ensure the correct treatment of the information on a regional basis. The results presented show that there has been a decline in overnight stays and accommodation in Bulgaria. There is a recovery trend after the COVID-19 pandemic and a slight increase in both indicators. Revenue from overnight stays increases after 2020. There is a promising trend related to the development of the tourism sector.

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is vital on the national level for generating well-being status. The whole world was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and Bulgaria is not an exception. However, the strategic location and different types of tourism could play a key role in the sector recovery process.

Bulgaria, as part of the EU, accepted the NUTS in 2000 and it is divided into 28 regions from type NUTS 3. For the purpose of this study, there are three types of approaches to classify urban and rural areas according to NUTS 3 regions.

The typology „urban-rural territories“ is presented by Eurostat in the Guide to Typologies of Regions (European Commission, 2020).

The first step is to identify the population in Rural areas: „Rural areas“ are all areas outside urban clusters. „Urban clusters“ are groups of contiguous grid cells of 1 km² with a density of at least 300 inhabitants per km² and a minimum population of 5,000.

Secondly, NUTS 3 regions are classified based on the proportion of their population in rural areas:

- „Predominantly rural“ if the share of the population living in rural areas is higher than 50%
- „Intermediate areas“ if the share of the population living in rural areas is between 20% and 50%
- „Predominantly urban“ if the proportion of the population living in rural areas is less than 20.

In the third step, the size of urban centers in the region is taken into account.

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A predominantly rural region that contains an urban center of more than 200,000 inhabitants, constituting at least 25% of the region's population, becomes intermediate.

An intermediate region that contains an urban center of more than 500,000 inhabitants, constituting at least 25% of the regional population, becomes predominantly urban.

The OECD produced a new typology complementing the previous typologies by introducing the concept of *functional urban areas* to better reflect the link between rural and urban areas (Féret et al., 2020).

The image of the urban-rural regions in the EU is shown in Figure 1.

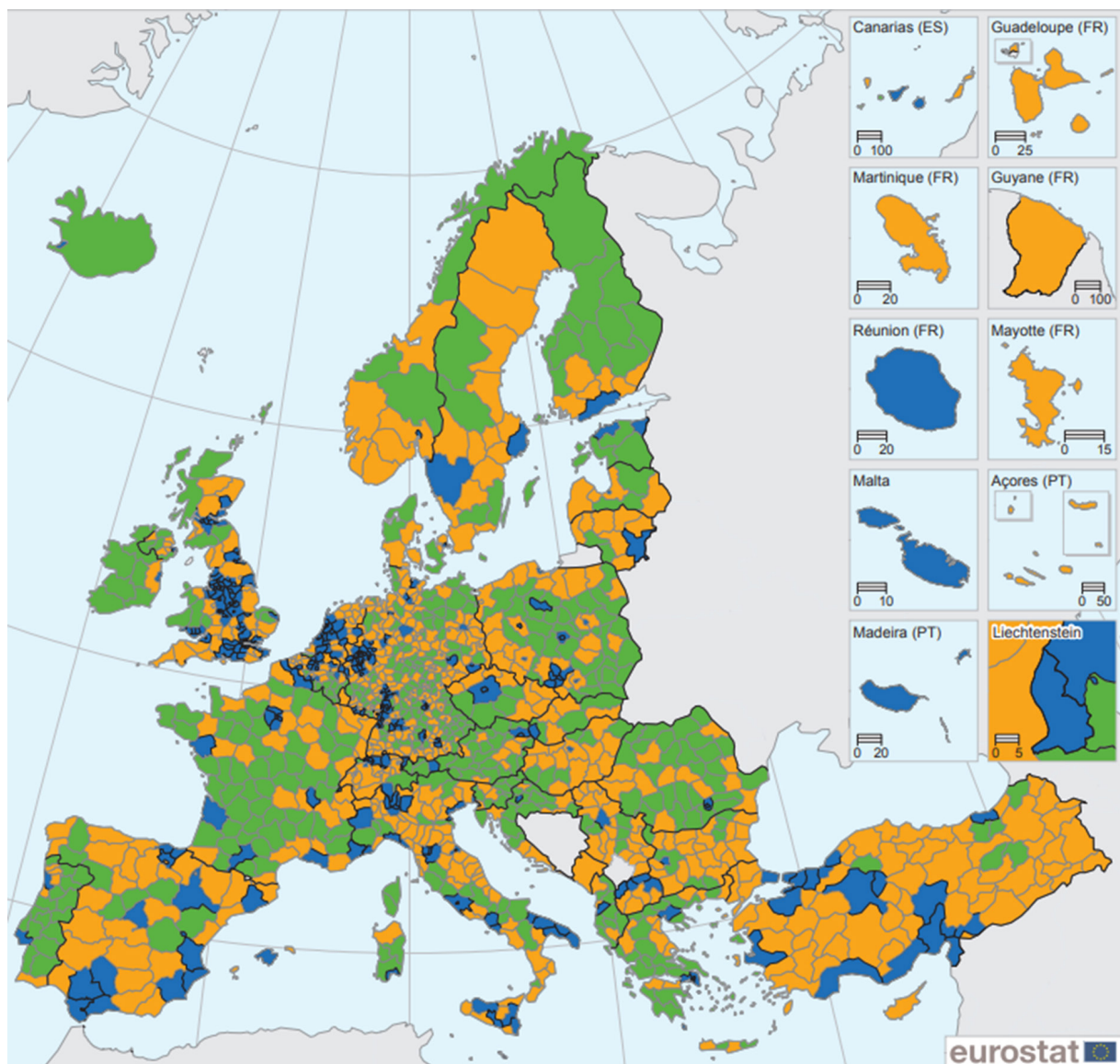


Figure 1. Urban-rural typology regions in the EU in 2022

Source: Eurostat, 2023

It is important to define that all regions in Bulgaria according to NUTS 3 level are 28 and they match with the districts of the national regions division.

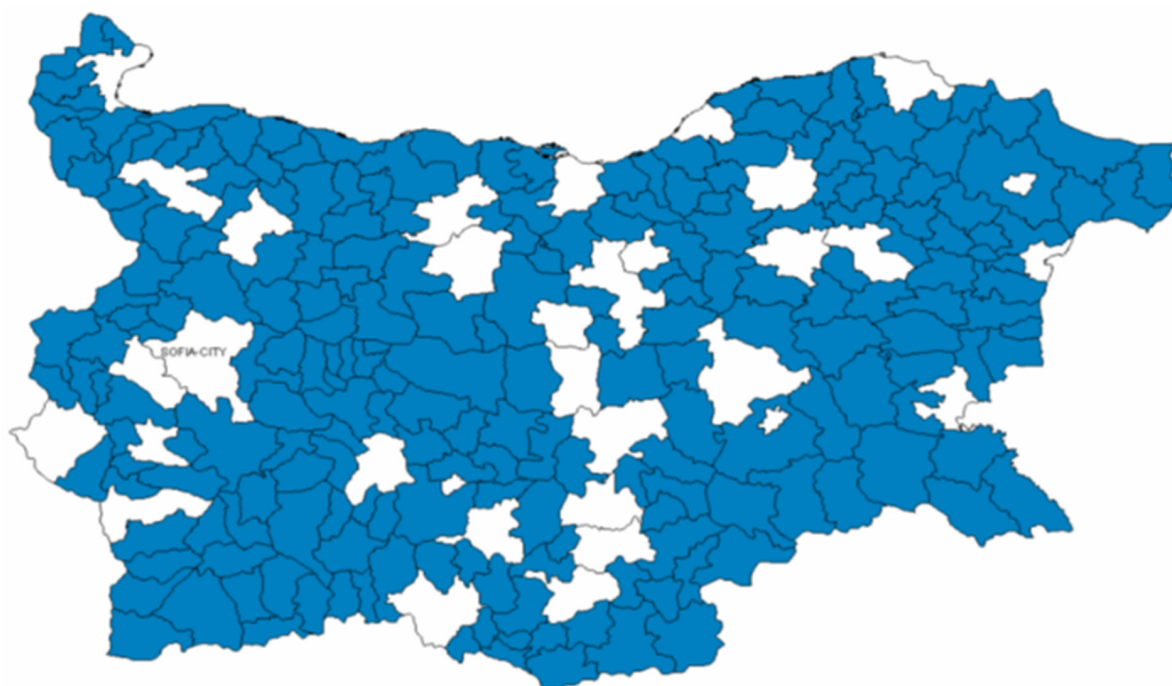


Figure 2. Rural-urban territories, LAU 1, Bulgaria

Source: *Spatial Concept of Development in Bulgaria 2013-2025*, 2013

More than 80% of the territory of the country is rural and you can see the exact distribution in Figure 2 (NSRD, 2019).

According to the Concept of Tourism Regionalization (Concept of Tourism Regionalization, 2015), one of the common forms of alternative tourism practiced in Bulgaria is rural tourism. In recent years, there has been a growing interest in rural areas by Bulgarian and foreign tourists, who recognize them as an interesting destination for their holidays. In its essence, this type of tourism is a set of activities that satisfy their interests, as well as experiences focused on rural life and culture, traditions and customs, and traditional industries. The search for tranquillity, solitude, and a growing interest in outdoor activities are an important part of the driving motives for traveling to destinations characteristic of this type of tourism. Thus, nostalgia for the rural way of life, the appeal of basic aspects of life, and the need to reconnect with nature in rural areas are proving most attractive, especially to those who lead an urban lifestyle.

Various terms and concepts referring to this type of tourism are used in scientific literature, the most common being „rural tourism“ and „agrotourism“. Concepts of ‘rural’ vary from country to country and from time to time. The term ‘rural tourism’ is a widely used concept and, although it is highly debated, there is still no single universally accepted definition. Rural tourism is very often defined as ‘local’, ‘alternative’, ‘agro’, ‘green’, and anything but mainstream.

Conceptually, rural tourism can be seen as tourism in the countryside. A form that encompasses the rural environment as the core of the product offered. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development defines rural tourism as any “tourism taking place in the countryside”. In this context, rural areas are the „central and unique selling point in the rural tourism package“. Lane (2014) suggests that, ideally, rural tourism should, in addition to being located in rural areas, be functionally small in scale, traditional in nature, organic and slow-growing, and also controlled by local people (Lane, 2014).

According to EU data, a quarter of the population in the union makes a mechanical movement to the countryside. The results of a nationally representative survey conducted in 2021 on the attitudes of the population in the country towards tourism show a high percentage (74%) of respondents who consider „the development of rural and ecological tourism as a priority“ and say that „over the past more than 25 years rural and ecotourism have significantly increased their attractiveness and are present among the public expectations for the future development of the tourism industry in Bulgaria“ (National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria National Centre for Parliamentary Research (NCPR), 2021).

In a study, Yarkova and Stoykova consider a set of indicators of sustainability in rural tourism: „tourism planning, number of visitors (tourists) in a destination, natural and cultural attractions, participation of the local population, number of jobs created by rural tourism, the contribution of rural tourism to the local economy, environmental factors, training and qualification of the workforce, satisfaction with the development of rural tourism, security of tourists“ (Thus the following indicators of sustainability in rural tourism are: tourist planning, number of visitors (tourists) in a given destination, natural and cultural attractions, involvement of local population, number of jobs opened by rural tourism, the contribution of rural tourism to the local economy, environmental factors, training and qualification of labor force, satisfaction from the development of rural tourism, security for tourists.) (Yarkova & Stoykova, 2008). Based on this, it could be concluded that for Bulgaria, tourism developed in rural areas is extremely important in many aspects, including improving regional sustainability.

The social and economic status of each region, its development programs, as well as national strategies and plans must be taken into account when planning the goals and objectives for sustainable development (Marinov, 2021).

2. METHODS

Since the main goal of the paper is to analyze the tourism sector before and after the COVID-19 pandemic in typical rural areas in Bulgaria, there is a need to define the exact territories for this analysis.

According to the NUTS 3 classification and the urbanization typology of Eurostat, there are 7 regions covering the requirements to be called „Typical rural areas“. These are Vidin, Razgrad, Silistra, Targovishte, Sofia district, Kurdzhali, and Smolyan.

The period of the research is 4 years and data is provided by the National Statistical Institute, Bulgaria for both indicators: Accommodation establishments and Nights spent, both for all targeted 7 regions and also on a national level.

The regional cut in the research methodology is based on the data from the tourism sector in Bulgaria. In order to guarantee proper information processing, the following methods are used: analysis and synthesis; inductive, deductive, and translational methods; grouping, systematization, classification, structural analysis; econometric methods; cluster analysis.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In Table 1, we can preview the available accommodation establishments and the nights spent for the period of 4 years (2018-2021) for the typical rural areas. Strangely in half of the typical rural

areas we are monitoring a trend of decrease in the realized nights for the second half of the period, which is exactly covering the COVID-19 pandemic beginning. These are the areas of Vidin, Targovishte, Sofia district, and Somlyan. The other three areas mark an increase in the accommodations and nights spent in the second half of the period compared to the first 2 years.

Table 1. Accommodation establishments and Nights spent, in typical rural areas, 2018-2021

			2018	2019	2020	2021
Vidin	Accommodation establishments	Number	30	30	26	24
	Nights spent - total	Number	55168	67568	87614	50050
Razgrad	Accommodation establishments	Number	16	18	19	19
	Nights spent - total	Number	48029	60416	63807	50962
Silistra	Accommodation establishments	Number	16	28	25	25
	Nights spent - total	Number	31418	44536	26115	31436
Targovishte	Accommodation establishments	Number	19	17	14	13
	Nights spent - total	Number	41101	45740	39724	28371
Sofia district	Accommodation establishments	Number	118	116	117	111
	Nights spent - total	Number	806898	798416	515648	544325
Kardzhali	Accommodation establishments	Number	38	39	52	68
	Nights spent - total	Number	76478	71183	72726	134749
Smolyan	Accommodation establishments	Number	330	339	324	311
	Nights spent - total	Number	724056	802026	627142	608175

Source: NSI, 2023

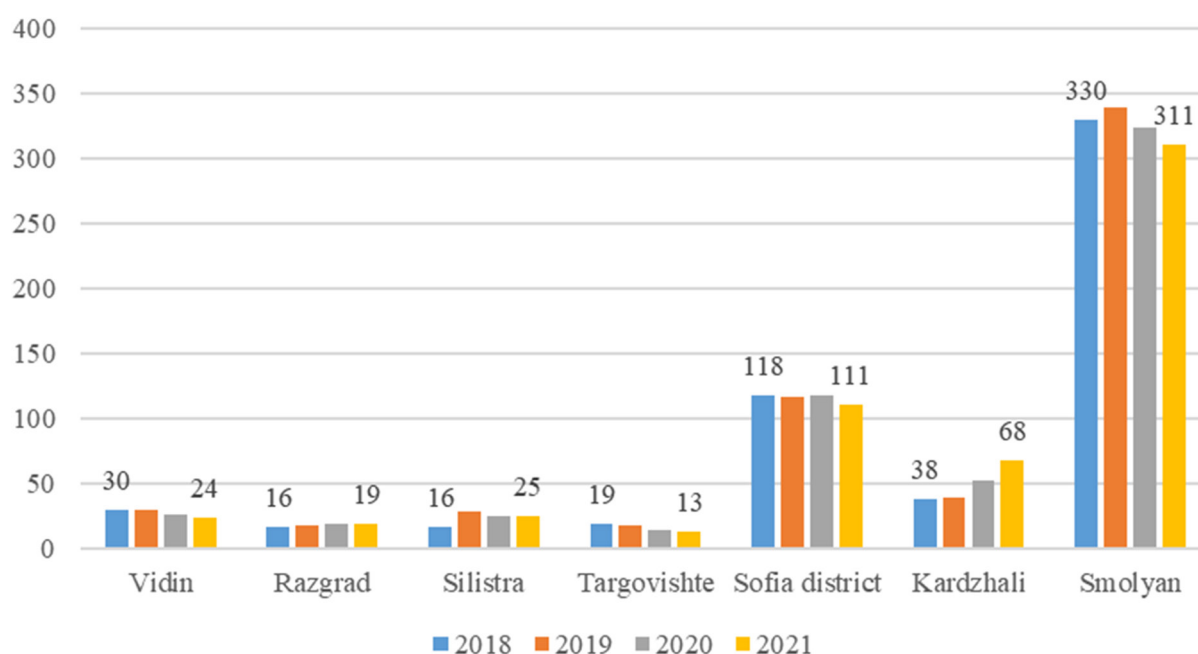


Figure 3. Accommodation establishments, number, 7 typical rural areas

Source: NSI, 2023

From the data in Figure 3, it can be seen that accommodation establishments in the typically rural areas decreased at the end of the considered period compared to its beginning. A steady downward trend is observed for this indicator in 2020 and 2021. In Silistra and Razgrad, according to the data, a slight increase in accommodation establishments is visible, but nevertheless, the values are close to the maximum reported during the considered period. Only one region is out of that trend and it is Kardzhali, where we can monitor an increase of about 80% in the number of accommodation places, and even in the worst year of COVID-19, growth is observed.

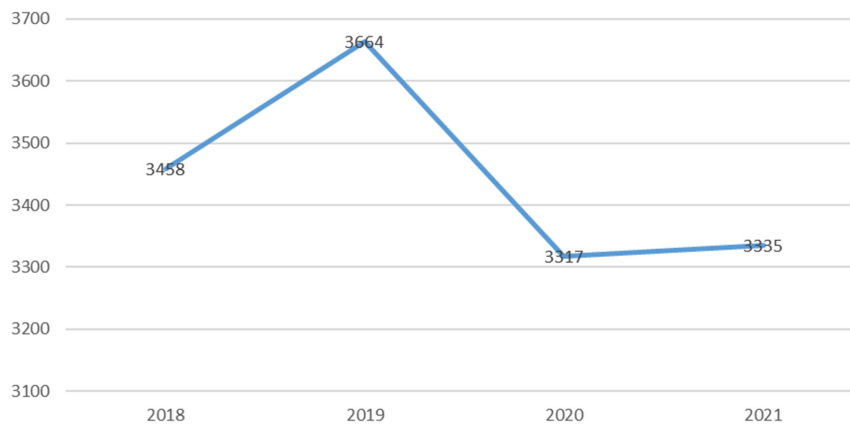


Figure 4. Accommodation establishments for Bulgaria, total, number

Source: NSI, 2023

At the national level, the trend of an overall reduction in accommodation establishments is confirmed the same as in the typically rural areas. Those who failed to recover from the crisis in 2020 and then decided not to risk and continue their business in this area are about 10%. However, after the biggest drop in 2020, there is a recovery trend in accommodation of around 1% and growing.

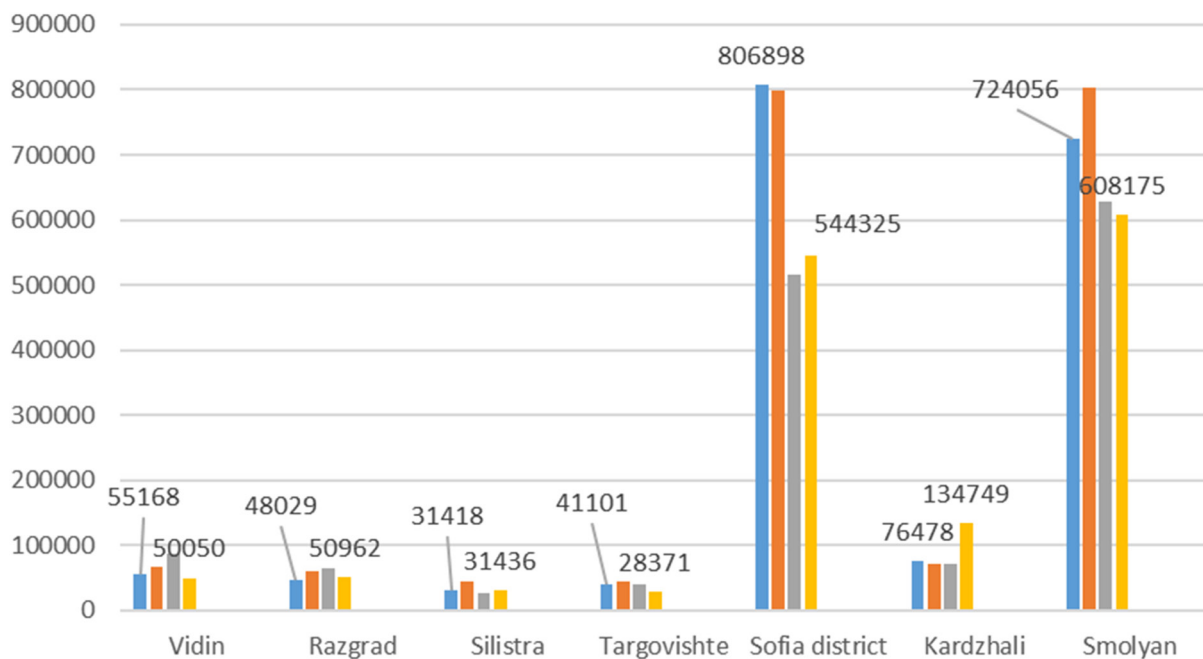


Figure 5. Overnight stays, number

Source: NSI, 2023

The data show a decrease in overnight stays in typically rural areas at the end of the considered period compared to its beginning. Two types of trends are observed, namely in the regions of Vidin, Razgrad, Targovishte, and Smolyan, the lowest values were measured in the last year (2021), while in Silistra, Sofia region, and Kardzhali, we have a partial increase and recovery of realized overnight stays in 2021 compared to the previous year.

At the national level, there was an increase in overnight stays at the end of the period compared to the previous year, but even so, the pre-pandemic levels cannot be reached.

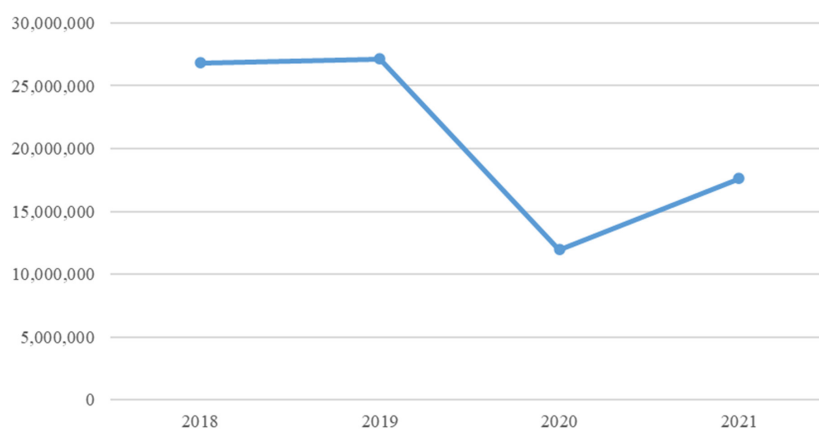


Figure 6. Overnight stays total for Bulgaria, number

Source: NSI, 2023

It is possible to take many measures to restore the trend in tourism, such as:

- Attractiveness with various activities and visits to attractions during the tourists' stay
- Increasing hygiene habits and establishing safety protocols after the COVID-19 pandemic
- Modernization of the bed base and improvement of the conditions for tourism in typically rural areas
- Investments in new accommodation, according to the demand in the sector.

4. CONCLUSION

The following conclusions can be drawn from this analysis:

- Without making an exception, in Bulgaria, there is a decrease in overnight stays and a decrease in accommodation establishments
- There is a trend of recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic and a slight increase in both indicators. The income from overnight stays increases after 2020.

The movement of the population to the countryside is a factor in the development of tourism, improving and balancing the economic and social development of rural areas, or put another way, promoting rural sustainability.

Rural and agrarian tourism in Bulgaria is a relatively fast-growing and well-established alternative form of tourism. In recent years, there has been a positive trend of increasing interest in this type of tourism, an increase in the number of tourists visiting rural regions and using its services, and a diversification of the elements of the tourism product offered.

The development and consolidation of tourism in the country has led to many positive effects on the way of life in rural regions/villages and is of particular importance for improving the economic situation of underdeveloped and lagging regions and for preserving Bulgarian traditions and lifestyles.

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