

The Standardization of the Services in Farm-stay Tourism – The *EuroGites* Method as a Possible Solution

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Abstract

This study assessed conceptual terms of farm-stay tourism through connection with the criteria of quality of services. Based on best practices and experiences from the European countries, the European Federation of Rural Tourism (*EuroGites*) has established common quality assessment standards for accommodation units in rural areas. Criteria of established standards are grouped into five clusters: equipment, surroundings, services at the accommodation and its surroundings, non-material aspects and security. This paper aims at a comparative analysis between the minimal conditions for international and domestic markets, through the assessment of the farm-stay tourism quality segments. In this respect, the research has been conducted in the selected villages in Vojvodina Province (Northern Serbia) by using *EuroGites* methodological instrument. The main hypothesis of the paper was based on the estimation that quality of farm-stay tourism in Vojvodina Province is measurable by the extent to which they comply with the *EuroGites* criteria in the domestic and international level. The results showed that the three sub-hypotheses are confirmed, and two of them are disproved. The research findings represent a useful tool for obtaining information about many aspects of quality in farm-stay tourism and, with slight modifications, it can be used in various areas of quality research.

Keywords: *EuroGites*, criteria clusters, quality segments, farm-based accommodation, Vojvodina Province (Northern Serbia)

Rezumat. Standardizarea serviciilor în cadrul turismului la fermă – metoda EuroGites ca o posibilă soluție

Acest studiu evaluează conceptele legate de turismul la fermă în concordanță cu criteriile calității serviciilor. Plecând de la exemple de bune practici și experiențele statelor europene, Federația Europeană a Turismului Rural (*EuroGites*) a stabilit o metodologie comună și standarde de evaluare a calității unităților de cazare din zonele rurale. Criteriile pentru standardele stabilite sunt grupate în cinci clustere: dotare, spațiul înconjurător, servicii oferite în cadrul unităților de cazare și împrejurimile acestora, aspecte non-materiale și securitate. Lucrarea își propune să realizeze o analiză comparativă între condițiile minimale de pe piața internațională și internă, în urma evaluării calității turismului la fermă. În acest sens, au fost analizate anumite sate din provincia Voievodina din nordul Serbiei, folosind metodologia propusă de *EuroGites*. Am plecat de la ipoteza că se poate estima calitatea turismului la fermă în provincia Voievodina în funcție de măsura în care sunt îndeplinite criteriile *EuroGites* la nivel național și internațional. Rezultatele arată că toate cele trei sub-ipoteze sunt confirmate, și două infirmate. Rezultatele acestei cercetări pot fi un instrument util pentru a obține informații despre multe aspecte ale calității turismului la fermă și, în urma unor mici modificări, pot fi folosite ulterior și în cadrul altor analize calitative.

Cuvinte-cheie: *EuroGites*, clustere de criterii, segmente ale calității, cazare la fermă, provincia Voievodina (nordul Serbiei)

Introduction

The Republic of Serbia possesses exceptional resources for the development of numerous aspects of (continental) tourist activities, especially farm-stay tourism (agritourism). Serbia's wealthy, attractive and well-preserved natural resources, many traditional agricultural households, gastronomy and the growing interest of the international market in rural lifestyle and motives point towards great potential for the farm-stay tourism development. This should be an obvious alternative possibility for development in rather large parts spanning over this region. It is a way of utilizing comparative advantages of rural areas too. In Serbia, as well as in many other European countries, farm-stay tourism or agritourism is an

important factor of multifunctional rural development (Knickel and Renting, 2000; Ohe, 2007; Brankov et al., 2015; Petrović et al., 2015; 2016a; 2016b). Together with these, tourism currently has strong advantages on the international economic market, as it has already played a key role in the rural development of some areas that were economically and socially depressed (Sznajder et al., 2009; Todorović and Bjeljic, 2009; Bjeljic et al., 2014; Štastná et al., 2015). Nevertheless, the standardization of services in Serbia in this economic area is still undetermined and unclear. The problems in creation and implementation of the unique quality standards in rural aspects of tourism are obvious in the rest of Europe as well. In this regard, the theorists in this scientific area have been searching for solutions to establish the standardization in this segment of tourist economy. They have been

looking for the ways to assess the quality of accommodation units, which are a part of the offer of rural tourism aspects, such as farm-stay tourism. As Roberts & Hall (2001) stated, it is extremely complicated to compare the quality of products and services in rural settings, with services offered by a city hotel, villa or a seaside resort. If the concept of agritourist product involving only a set of tourist services and activities at agritourist units and self-service beds in rural areas is accepted, then there can be a specific analysis of the quality of such product, which was proven by many earlier researchers (Hall and Richards, 2000; Reichel et al., 2000; Sirgy and Cornwell, 2001; Nickerson et al., 2001; Sirgy, 2001; Hall et al., 2003; Adams, 2008; George et al., 2009; Sznajder et al., 2009).

In connection with previous studies and according to the examples of good practices and experiences from European countries, the European federation of rural tourism (*EuroGites*) has suggested unique *EuroGites Quality Assessment Standards for Rural Accommodation* for all the country members. In 2016, the Federation had 35 professional organizations from 27 European countries (including Serbia), which offered a choice of about 100,000 places for the accommodation in rural areas (<https://www.eurogites.org/>). The established quality standards of this Federation represent the result of the agreement achieved during the General Assembly of the Federation in 2005, and which was supported by all the members at that time (*EuroGites – Version 1.0b, 2005*).

Since then, the *EuroGites* standards have been explained and applied by many authors in their references (Buselić et al., 2008; Spanos & Doman, 2011; Stoian, 2011a; 2011b; Gherasim, 2012; Caprarescu et al., 2013). It has been stated that these standards are efficient tools for analyzing a great number of quality offer' aspects. Together with this, they are, as such, very applicable in the most various rural areas, which has already been done in the examples of Romania, Croatia, Greece, etc. Since the established quality standards are efficiently applied in a great number of European countries, the aim of this study will be application of these standards in Serbia (the case study of selected villages in the Vojvodina Province in Northern Serbia¹). In the discussion, the actual answers will

be presented, i.e. the results of their testing according to the pilot research in the analyzed villages.

Methodology

The established standard clusters (criteria) are grouped into five blocks. The clusters are defined according to the results of the international tourists' attitude research towards the quality of rural aspects of tourism until 2005, in order to discover and define their needs. The research was then repeated during 2009 and 2010 among the examinees from 40 European countries. After the ordinal number and the description, clusters were divided into two columns, more precisely, each item of this document had a criterion concerning the *minimal conditions for domestic market* and the criterion which defines *minimal conditions for the international market*. The examinees answered the questions with "yes" (I fulfill the set conditions) or "no" (I do not fulfill the set conditions) for both criteria. The block segments were divided into two columns, namely, each item of this document has a criterion referring to the domestic or national market and a criterion referring to the international one (<https://www.eurogites.org/documents/>).

Block 1 (Equipment of agritourist accommodation units) comprises 19 criteria and deals with the amenities of agritourist accommodation units, where the main criteria are focused on the inner segments, such as technical-technological, sanitary-hygienic, organizational and spatial aspects of the units. The equipment in this case means the aspects from the building style of the house(s), decoration and preservation of the place, over the size, dimensions and contents of the rooms, to the presence and the equipment of a bathroom, heating and air-conditioning of all the rooms where guests stay.

Block 2 (Surroundings of agritourist accommodation units) involves nine criteria and concerns the closer and further surroundings of an agritourist accommodation unit. The focus is on the exterior impacts (natural and anthropogenic), level of preservation of the surrounding rural environment with the emphasis on cultural heritage and preserved natural potentials in the surrounding. The authors of standards also note that in this block, the important feature is the emphasis on social responsibility and the responsibility for the local surroundings and environment by the hosts, as well as the necessity to advise with interested local participants (other people in the home production of food, drinks and beverages, salespeople, craftsmen, tourist guides etc.) in farm-stay tourism.

Block 3 (Services in agritourist accommodation unit and its surroundings up

¹ The selection of the village settlements has been done according to the recommendations of a National Project "Wealth of Diversity", supported by the Provincial Government of Vojvodina Province. According to their established criteria, the project committee has evaluated and made a list of the 17 most representative villages in Vojvodina, in respect to agritourism development and affirmation. The selected villages are the following: Banoštor, Bački Monoštor, Bezdan, Belo Blato, Donji Tavankut, Golubinci, Gudurica, Kovilj, Krčedin, Ruski Krstur, Selenča, Skorenovac, Stapar, Stari Slankamen, Totovo Selo, Turija and Velebit.

to 15 km) comprises nine criteria, which contain aspects connected with maintenance of the rooms and spaces for providing services of alimentation of the guests, as well as recreational possibilities and the access to the agritourist accommodation unit itself. Within this Block, the emphasis is on the segment of guests' being informed about general information from the closer and further surroundings, as well as the list of information and instructions for the guests inside the accommodation unit.

Block 4 (Personal attention, privacy and ambience in an agritourist accommodation unit) includes seven criteria and concerns the communicative and psychological aspects on the

relation of a host towards guests. In this block of criteria, the emphasis is on the importance of communicative skills of the host, the expression of pleasant welcome, availability of the host during the guests' stay, as well as the knowledge of target foreign languages of the countries, where most of the tourists come from. If not, it is recommended to have a good knowledge of English, as the dominant world language.

Block 5 (Security in agritourist accommodation units) comprises nine criteria, which are based on the secure conditions the tourist place should fulfill. Among those criteria, the most outstanding ones are: technical, health-hygienic, legal, booking etc.

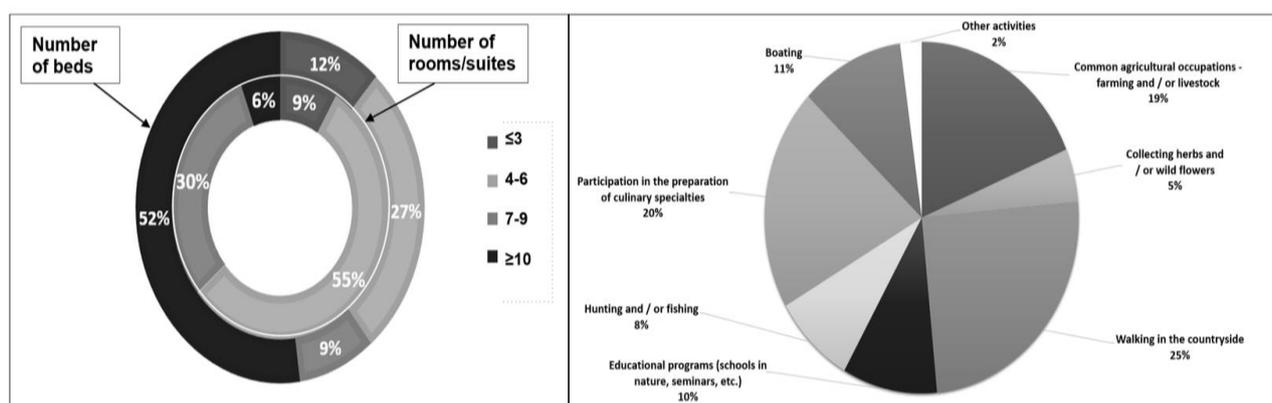


Fig. 1a/b: The structure of service providers' offer

In case of Serbia, the questionnaire was created according to the *EuroGites standards*, with the aim to assess the quality values of agritourist accommodation units. The questionnaire is meant for direct service providers in farm-stay tourism. The structure of their offer is presented in the Figure 1a/b. From the total of 100 sent poll questionnaires, 69 have been returned filled in. It can be easily concluded that, even though they are identical in many ways, the conditions for the international market are significantly more rigorous and demanding when the majority of the mentioned cluster criteria are concerned, which will be presented in more details in the following figure presentations.

According to presented criteria, the main hypothesis (**H1**) of the paper states that quality of farm-stay tourism in Vojvodina Province is measurable by comparing to degree to which conditions on the national and international level are fulfilled (Figure 2). This hypothesis is formed according to the suppositions of the obtained results using *EuroGites* methodology, where the conditions fulfillment will be tested in five assigned criteria, on the international and national level. In the results of the paper, the hypothesis will be proved or refuted

by using *EuroGites* methodological instruments. This hypothesis includes five sub-hypotheses:

H1a: *Equipment of agritourist accommodation units satisfies the criteria to a large extent according to national standards, but to a lesser extent according to international standards.*

H1b: *Surroundings of agritourist accommodation units satisfy the criteria to a large extent according to national, but to a lesser extent according to international standards.*

H1c: *Services in agritourist accommodation units satisfy the criteria to a large extent according to national, but to a lesser extent according to international standards.*

H1d: *Dedication to a guest, privacy and atmosphere in agritourist accommodation units satisfy the criteria to a large extent according to national standards, but to a lesser extent according to international standards.*

H1e: *Security in agritourist accommodation units satisfies the criteria to a large extent according to national standards, but to a lesser extent according to international standards.*

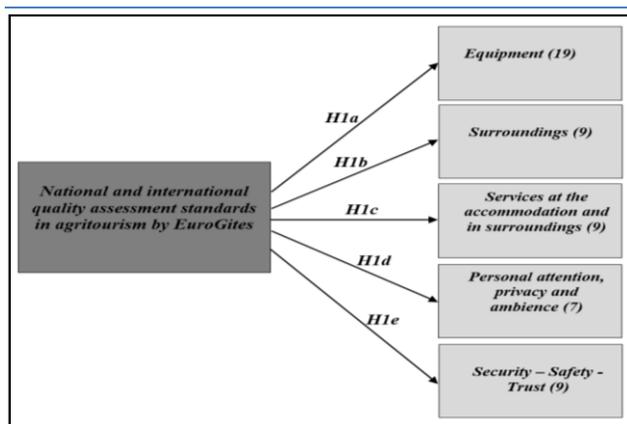


Fig. 2: The theoretical model of the research

Results and discussions

As it has been explained earlier, the segments of EuroGites quality standards refer to five blocks of criteria, i.e. conditions. The number of examinees whose accommodation units meet the criteria on the national and international level will be presented in this chapter. Each category within the five blocks will be valued according to the number of affirmative answers, which have been obtained according to the assigned criterion (domestic or international). The values will be qualitatively interpreted according to the numerical indicators

and will be titled as: *Very high value* ($N \geq 60$), *High value* ($N = 45-59$), *Middle value* ($N = 30-44$), *Low value* ($N = 15-29$) and *Very low value* ($N \leq 14$).

According to the results of the Block 1 (Figure 3), it can be concluded that the largest number of examinees ($N = 67$), according to both criteria (domestic and international), fulfill the conditions in the category "lighting / windows in rooms" and "running water supply". These are also the basic conditions, which are bound to be fulfilled because the criteria on both levels are equal and obligatory. On the other hand, two examinees have given a negative answer, so it is believed that their facilities are still in the process of adaptation (exterior renovation or interior changes). The absolute majority of the examinees satisfy extremely high values ($N \geq 60$), because they fulfill the criteria for the domestic market in categories "equipment in bathrooms" ($N = 65$), "size of a single bedroom" ($N = 62$) and "overall cleanliness" ($N = 61$). Within these categories, there are clear criteria, which are regulated by national or local legal acts. It is interesting to mention that the category "size of beds" ($N = 49$), according to EuroGites standards for international market is absolutely equal to the regulations in the Serbian national legislation.

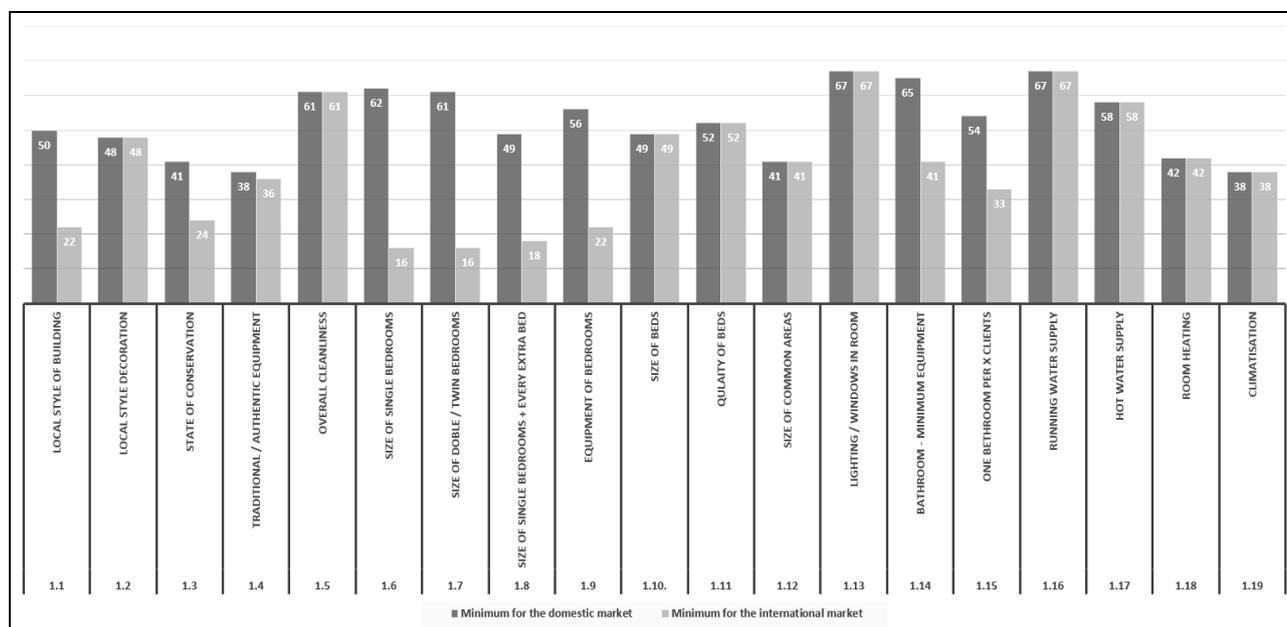


Fig. 3: Overview of the results of achieved standards according to criteria in Block 1 (N=69)

On the other hand, it should be noted that an extremely small share of positive answers according to the international regulated standards show low values ($N \leq 29$). Such values are noticeable in the categories: "local style of building" ($N = 22$), "state of conservation" ($N = 24$), "equipment of bedrooms"

($N = 22$), "size of single bedrooms" ($N = 16$), "size of a double / twin rooms" ($N = 16$), "size of single bedroom + for every extra bed" ($N = 18$). All the other indicators are in the range of middle or high values ($N = 30-59$) so they will not be further discussed. The obtained results prove the sub-

hypothesis *H1a* that the equipment of agritourist accommodation units satisfies the criteria according to domestic standards to a larger extent and to a lesser extent according to the international standards (10 out of 19 cases). When it comes to the observed settlements, farm-based accommodation units in Bački Monoštor, Belo Blato and Skorenovac have recorded the highest values for this indicator.

The presented results of *Block 2* (Figure 4) show that very high values ($N \geq 60$) according to both of the criteria (domestic and international) can be noticed in the categories "contribution to local

development / local production" ($N=67$), "social and cultural responsibility" ($N=66$), "rural surroundings of accommodation" ($N=66$) and potential "impacts or nuisance" ($N=64$), such as noise, visual nuisance, unpleasant smells etc. Such a value level can also be noticed in the category "resources 1: nature, landscape, scenery, etc.", but there is a mild difference between the conditions for the domestic market ($N=68$) and the conditions for the international market ($N=67$). The same and similar values according to both criteria are expectable since similar or identical conditions exist in *EuroGites* standards on both levels.

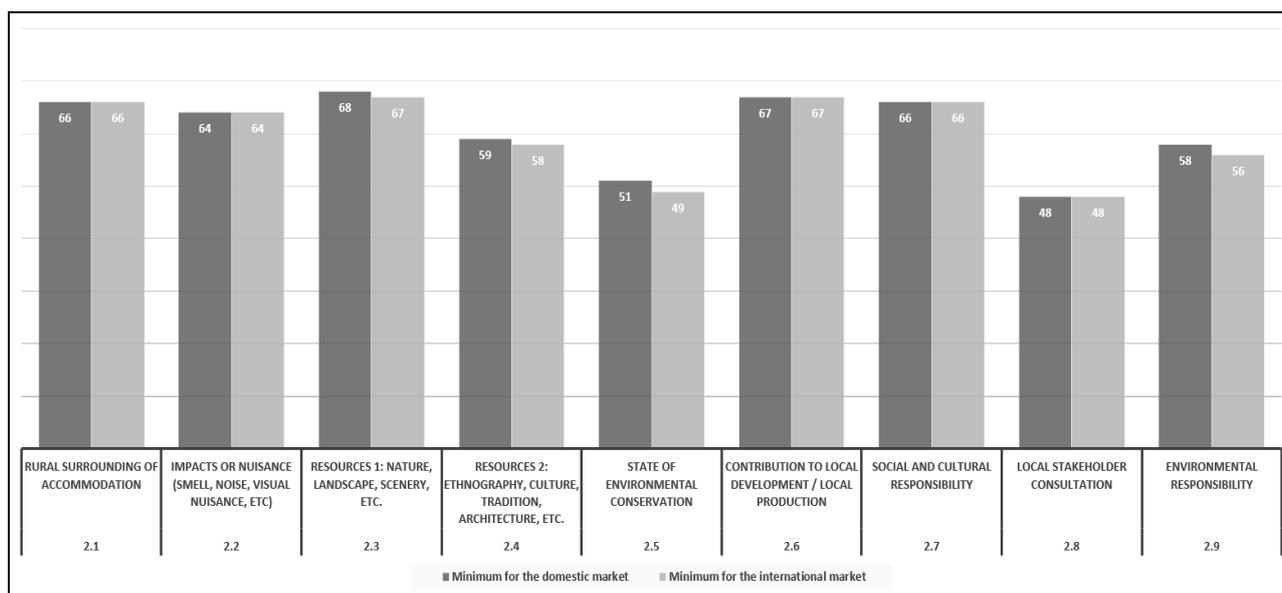


Fig. 4: Overview of the results of achieved standards according to criteria in *Block 2* ($N=69$)

On the other hand, the lowest values in this block are noticed in the categories "state of environmental conservation" ($N=49$), according to the international criteria and according to both criteria in the category "local stakeholder consultation" ($N=48$). Contrary to the previous figure, the lowest values obtained in this block are categorized as high values ($N=45-59$), according to general classification. Such results suggest that the specific feature in the first case ("state of environmental conservation"), where it is expected that the standards which are present in the majority of EU country members (e.g. high ecological awareness, organized management of rubbish, highly efficient public service, recycling centers etc.) are still not present in Vojvodina (Serbia). Also, the supposition is that in the categories "local stakeholder consultation" a bit lower value has been obtained because certain number of examinees might not have understood properly the assigned question, so in the future the meaning of the mentioned statement should be clarified and

explained. The obtained results disprove the sub-hypothesis *H1b* that the surroundings of agritourist accommodation units satisfy the criteria to a higher extent in domestic and a lesser extent in international standards, since that hypothesis has been refuted by half of the number of cases (five out of nine cases). When it comes to the observed settlements, farm-based accommodation units in Bezdan, Stari Slankamen and Turija have recorded the highest values for this indicator.

Figure 5 illustrates the results of *Block 3*, where the largest number of maximum values ($N=69$) can be noticed, compared to the other four blocks. It is necessary to point out that as many as five out of nine offered categories have such values, and those categories are: "cleaning services", "meals provided at accommodation", "choice of leisure activities at accommodation", "choice of leisure activities in the surroundings" and "breakfast facilities provided". In all the categories, except the last one ("breakfast facilities provided"), the values are maximal according to both criteria (domestic and

international). The reason for such a phenomenon is explained by the identical criteria, where domestic conditions are equaled to international ones. A very high value is also noticed in the category “access /

signposting” (N=67), but only according to the conditions for domestic market since the criterion is not especially explicit (e.g. basic, non-standardized access and road signs).

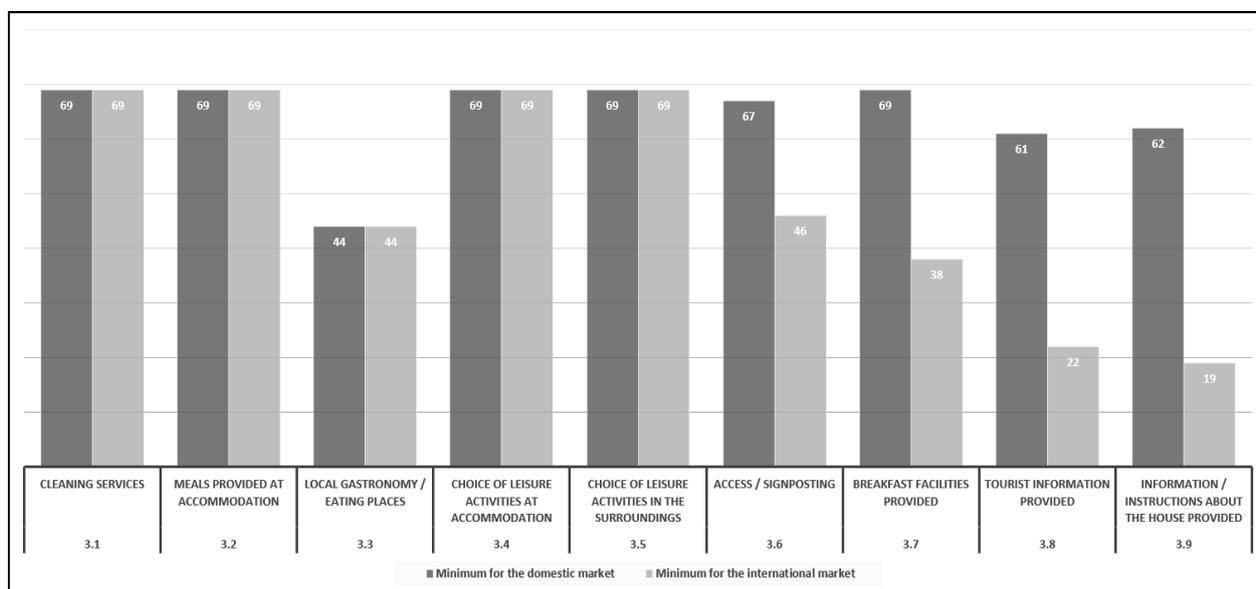


Fig. 5: Overview of the results of achieved standards according to criteria in Block 3 (N=69)

Unlike to these data, in some categories we can notice low values (N=15-29) according to the conditions for the international market and those categories are: “information provided to tourists” (N=22) and “information / instructions provided about the house” (N=19). On the other hand, the values for the conditions for the domestic market are very high in the same categories: “information provided to tourists” (N=61) and “information / instructions about the house provided” (N=62), since in the absolute majority of cases the prevailing information is in Serbian, i.e. the information is meant almost exclusively for domestic guests. This is because a great number of service providers in

farm-stay tourism of Vojvodina have not yet adapted their facilities for the needs and demands of foreign guests, so, in that segment, services should be significantly improved. The obtained results prove the sub-hypothesis *H1c* that the services in agritourist accommodation units meet the criteria according to domestic standards in a great amount, but in a small amount according to international standards, since that hypothesis has been refuted by half of the cases (five out of nine cases). When it comes to the observed settlements, farm-based accommodation units in Donji Tavankut and Totovo Selo have recorded the highest values for this indicator.

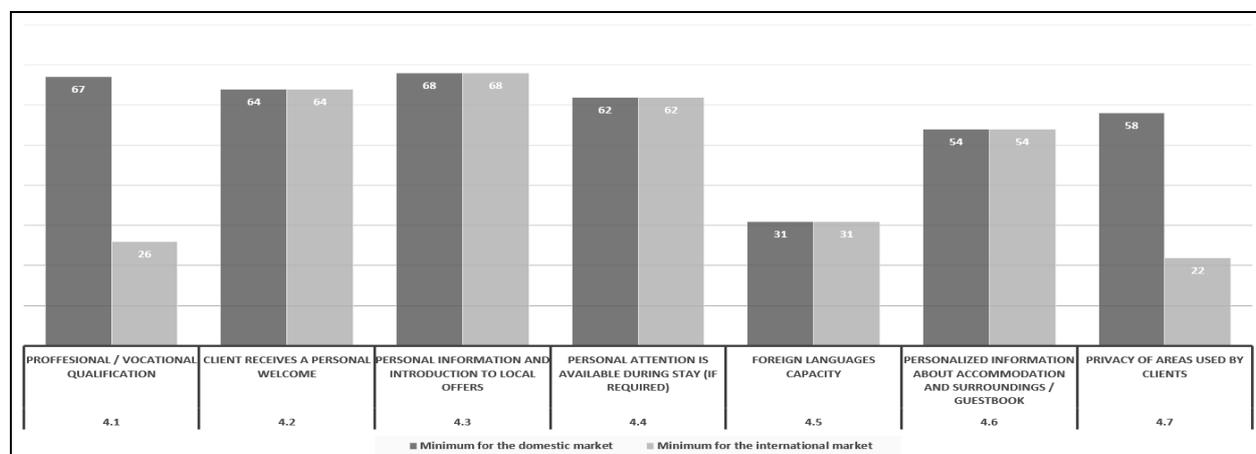


Fig. 6: Overview of the results of achieved standards according to criteria in Block 4 (N=69)

The results of *Block 4* (Figure 6) show very high values ($N \geq 60$) according to both of the criteria in the categories: "client receives a personal welcome" ($N=64$), "personal information and introduction to local offers" ($N=68$) and "personal attention is available during stay (if required)" ($N=62$). The reason for equal answers is, as in previous cases, the identical conditions for domestic and international market assigned by *EuroGites* standards. According to the conditions for the domestic market, a very high value is also recorded in the category "professional / vocational qualification" ($N=67$), since it is not necessary to do additional trainings, as for the international market, where the value in this category is low ($N=26$).

Similar to the previous one, the low value for the international market is also noticeable in the

category "privacy of areas used by clients" ($N=22$), because of much more demanding criteria in comparison with the domestic ones (rooms, bathrooms and other rooms meant exclusively for guests). Since the obtained results show the commitment to a guest, privacy and atmosphere in the agritourist accommodation units largely meet the criteria according to domestic standards, but to a lesser extent in a smaller amount according to the international standard (in two out of seven cases) sub-hypothesis *H1d* is accepted. When it comes to the observed settlements, farm-based accommodation units in Banoștor, Ruski Krstur and Stapar have recorded the highest values for this indicator.

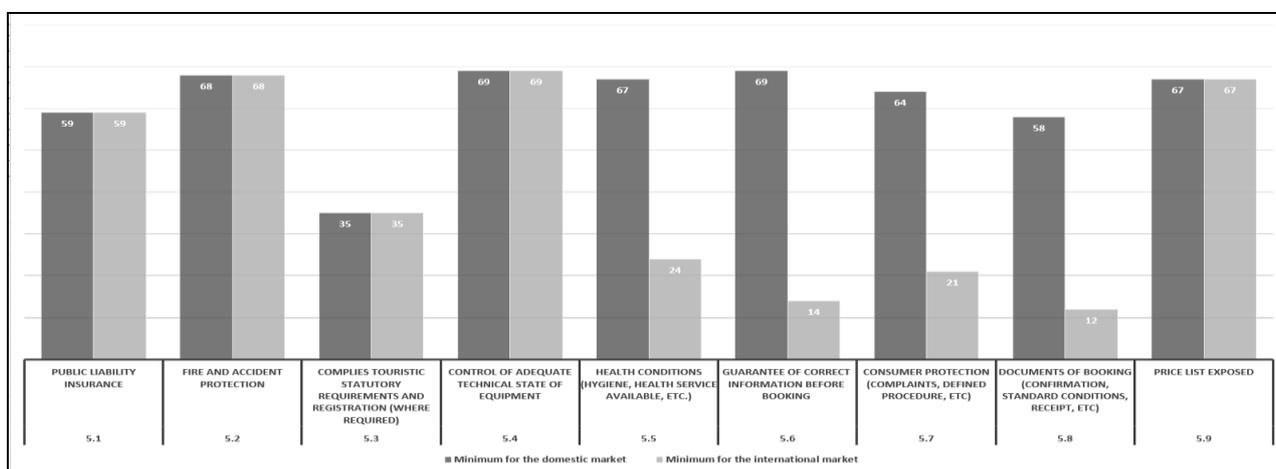


Fig. 7: Overview of the results of achieved standards according to criteria in *Block 5* ($N=69$)

In the Figure 7, it can be noticed that extremely high values, according to both criteria, are noticeable in categories: "control of adequate technical state of equipment" ($N=69$), "fire and accident protection" ($N=68$) and "price list exposed" ($N=67$). Extremely high values according to the conditions for the domestic market are also recorded in the categories: "health conditions (hygiene, health service available, etc.)" ($N=67$), "guarantee of correct information before booking" ($N=69$) and "consumer protection (complaints, defined procedure, etc.)" ($N=64$). It is interesting to mention that precisely in these three categories low indicators appear when the conditions for the international market are concerned. Thus, the categories: "health conditions" ($N=24$) and "consumer protection" ($N=21$) show low values, while the category "guarantee of correct information before booking" ($N=14$) records a very low value. This phenomenon is the result of wider and more rigorous conditions and guarantees that they must comply for this criterion (e.g. detailed information

about health care services in the circle of 15-minute drive, available on demand when making a reservation and absolute availability in the accommodation during a stay, as well as the guarantees from the third person about the accurate information before reservation, an obligatory questionnaire about the consumer's satisfaction along with these categories, the category "documents of booking (confirmation, standard conditions, receipt, etc.)" also shows a very low value ($N=12$) for the international market, which is, at the same time, the lowest value in the observed blocks. Such a result is explained by the fact that besides the standard reservation, an available written confirmation about the reservation is also demanded, as well as about the conditions and details of the contracted service, which is not demanded by the domestic market according to this criterion. The obtained results disprove the sub-hypothesis *H4e*, since the security in agritourist accommodation units partially equally and partially in a higher amount satisfies the criteria according to

the domestic standards than according to the international ones (four out of nine cases). When it comes to the observed settlements, farm-based accommodation units in Velebit and Kovilj have recorded the highest values for this indicator.

Conclusion

The quality of farm-stay tourism is measurable by comparing how well the requirements have been fulfilled on domestic and international levels, which makes the main hypothesis (H1) partially confirmed (+/-). Considering that the sub-hypotheses in all cases have been partially confirmed, a more thorough conclusion is as follows:

Sub-hypothesis *H1a* is confirmed (+), since the equipment in agritourist accommodation units to a certain extent satisfies the domestic requirements more than international ones (nine requirements), and to a certain extent satisfies both requirements (10 requirements).

Sub-hypothesis *H1b* is refuted (-), by concluding that the surroundings of the accommodation units to a certain extent satisfies domestic requirements more than international ones (five requirements), and to a certain extent satisfies both requirements (four requirements).

Sub-hypothesis *H1c* is accepted (+), since service in agritourist accommodation units satisfy domestic requirements more than international ones (four requirements), and to a certain extent satisfies both requirements (five requirements).

Sub-hypothesis *H1d* is confirmed (+), since commitment to each guest, privacy and the atmosphere in the agritourist accommodation units to a certain extent satisfies domestic requirements more than international (two requirements), and to a certain extent satisfies both requirements (five requirements).

Sub-hypothesis *H1e* is disproved (-), since safety in agritourist accommodation units to a certain extent satisfies domestic requirements more than international ones (four requirements), and to a certain extent satisfies both requirements (five requirements).

According to everything stated, it can be concluded that the world trends in quality in farm-stay tourism strive towards the needs and motives of modern population for the standardization and expected level of accommodation offer in rural settings. In such a tendency, farm-stay tourism represents an important travel market segment, and by obeying the rules of sustainable development and by cherishing local tradition and culture, this aspect of tourism is becoming one of the strategic and most efficient ways of future development of rural areas.

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Authors' contribution

Marko D. Petrović – field reseraching, results analysing, final text preparation

Aleksandra Terzić – field researching and methodological instrument researching and writing

Ana Jovičić Vuković – theoretical background

Aleksandra Vujko – results analysing and methodological writing

Jovana Brankov – field reseraching

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