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The Concept of Sustainable Rural Tourism Development in the Face of COVID-19 Crisis: Evidence from Russia

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Abstract: In the context of globalized processes, the importance of the sustainable development concept in solving the problems of local tourism systems development is growing. Unprecedented challenges caused by the COVID-19 crisis in the tourism sector, on the one hand, questioned the possibility of fulfilling the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the goals of sustainable tourism. On the other hand, they emphasized the need for balance between three pillars of sustainability, both as an urgency tool to cope with the pandemic crisis and as a solid basis for long-term development in the post-pandemic period. The study presented in the paper discusses sustainability issues in rural tourism as one of the most promising sectors for the development of domestic tourism on the example of the Russian tourism industry. The overall goal of the study initiated in the pre-pandemic period is to find ways to support sustainable rural tourism in Russian regions and to develop indicators for monitoring the effectiveness of local strategic development programs, taking into account national and regional specifics. This paper discusses intermediate results obtained with the adjustment for pandemic challenges. The authors combined a number of methods and techniques, namely desk research, statistical analysis, and analysis of empirical data obtained by means of in-depth interviews, as well as a survey using a formal questionnaire. The results confirm that Russian enterprises and local communities considered the three pillars of sustainability as important to develop tourism in rural destinations both in the pre-pandemic period and in times of challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, the findings show weaknesses in the federal and local policy, including the lack of systemic measures to improve the sustainable management of Russian tourism destinations. From the authors' point of view, it makes sense to adapt the European tourism indicator system for sustainable destinations (ETIS) for local peculiarities. ETIS is a useful tool to boost the sustainable development of rural destinations by encouraging stakeholder engagement and monitoring processes. In the case of Russia, one needs to add indicators for monitoring the effectiveness of the implementation of strategic development programs in the field of tourism.

Keywords: rural tourism; sustainable development; three pillars of sustainability; COVID-19; Russia



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1. Introduction

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic became “the Black Swan of Black Swans” (Cavanagh et al. 2020). It has already had a significant impact on many sectors of the global economy (Amankwah-Amoah et al. 2020; Bartik et al. 2020), as well as on the lifestyle and quality of

life (Laato et al. 2020; Sheth 2020). As Bobylev and Grigoryev (2020, p. 4) formulate, “the international community is now in the “acute” stage of reconsidering its problems and risks, capabilities and coordination in the face of COVID-19 and the Global Recession of 2020”. Each country is trying to justify its own ways of overcoming the crisis, relying on government support and deferred demand. Responses from different governments include not only strict quarantine and isolation measures, closures of schools and businesses, travel controls, but also a wide range of support measures with sectoral and local specifics.

In the context of the rapid spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, the world tourism sector has faced the deepest crisis in history (UNWTO 2020). The current economic situation in the world is unprecedented and devastating for the tourism industry (Hall et al. 2020; Sheresheva 2020; Gössling et al. 2021). The urgent anti-pandemic measures, including the closure of borders and contact restrictions all over the world, the cancellation of flights and additional travel bans, the formally introduced suspension of accommodation facilities, as well as reduced incomes of people due to a temporary or permanent closure of enterprises and organizations has led to great trouble for many sectors of the industry. Hotels, airlines, cruise ships and tourist operators have suffered an unprecedented number of cancellations and a large volume of economic losses (Alonso et al. 2020).

Today, it is impossible to predict the overall losses incurred by the global tourism and hospitality industry due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The sphere of tourism and hospitality is aimed at meeting the secondary needs; in the case of declined income, people tend to minimize or fully eliminated spending on tourism. In pandemic time, this became “a norm” not only for poor or needy persons but for most clients in all segments of world tourism who found themselves in a crisis situation. At the same time, industry actors struggling to survive not only to optimize their operations and look for loans but are in search of innovative decisions and models of further development, taking into account the new conditions and changed consumer behavior (Laato et al. 2020; Sheth 2020).

Concerning Russian tourism, little research has been undertaken on this topic. In the pre-pandemic decade, there was a growing body of literature on tourism in emerging markets, including different aspects of the Russian tourism market development (Dimanche and Andrades 2015; Andrades and Dimanche 2017; Sheresheva and Kopiski 2016; Andrades and Dimanche 2019; Chkalova et al. 2019; Sheresheva et al. 2020). The results of studies confirm that tourism is growing in importance as a strategic sector of the Russian economy, as a way to boost the development of rural regions and small settlements by embedding them into tourism routes and clusters (Mingaleva et al. 2017; Berezka et al. 2018). There is obvious interest in tourism industry support in Russia, based on the understanding that such a multi-layered and complex industry as tourism may not be a burden but a locomotive of the post-pandemic economic recovery (Sheresheva et al. 2020). At the same time, there is no clear understanding in Russia that sustainability concept adoption is crucial and unavoidable if the ambitious goals are set for future tourism development. In other words, both governments and business people must understand that a commitment to sustainability is always imperative.

While most published research typically focuses on the sustainable tourism issues in developed countries and in some most important emerging economies, the relevant literature on Russia is scarce and focused mostly on general discussion concerning the Russian tourism market. The issues of sustainability applied to rural tourism in Russia has not been investigated so far. The study aims to fill this gap by systematically analyzing the state of the art in the Russian rural tourism market, the intentions of Russian authorities to support sustainable tourism, the understanding of sustainable tourism among Russian rural tourism destinations’ stakeholders. The overall goal is to find ways to support sustainable rural tourism in Russian regions and to develop indicators for monitoring the effectiveness of local strategic development programs, taking into account national and regional specifics.

In this paper, we focus on the sustainable development concept in relation to Russian rural tourism. Approximately 10% of all agricultural grounds on the planet are concentrated

in Russia. Rural territories occupy two-thirds of the country. A quarter of the Russian population lives in the countryside as citizens of about 150 thousand rural settlements (Gaisin 2006). Nevertheless, there are only a few papers exploring the prospects of rural tourism in Russia (Ivolga and Erokhin 2013; Trukhachev 2015; Kask et al. 2016; Kirillov et al. 2020). The potential of rural tourism remains largely untapped (Wegren 2016), in spite of the availability of unique natural and cultural heritage in many Russian rural regions, as well as a growing number of local business actors providing farmer-tourism services.

In 2020, new factors became important for sustainable tourism development in rural areas, while “old” issues like the availability of the necessary infrastructure, the attitude of the local community and local authorities are still influential ones and should be investigated in the Russian context. We analyzed both secondary data sourced from government documents and officially published reports, and primary data collected through interviews and survey, to have a more voluminous picture.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 presents the theoretical background of the present research and comprises the literature review on the issues of sustainability issues, with a focus on rural tourism, as well as on the COVID-19 pandemic challenges for sustainable tourism. In Section 3, we clarify the methods implemented in the study presented in the paper and briefly describe the process of data collection and analysis. In Section 4, the emerging trends in the Russian tourism market in the pre-pandemic period are discussed, as well as the results of the qualitative and quantitative study on sustainable tourism approach acceptance in Russia conducted in pre-pandemic and pandemic time. Section 5 contains conclusions, research limitations, recommendations, and directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *The Three Dimensions of Sustainability and SDGs*

In the last decades of the 20th century, an understanding began to take shape that the adherence to the economic mainstream within the framework of the traditional paradigm of economic growth, poor consideration of environmental and social factors become an important reason for increasingly severe crises. The intensive search for new approaches that ensure far-reaching changes at the global level, though not exempt from hollow rhetoric and deliberate ambiguity, led to the arising of the sustainable development concept that became a common platform for many theoretical and practical research.

The term “sustainable development” was introduced in 1987 in the Brundtland Report, “Our Common Future” (WCED 1987). It is widely accepted that this document was the first to underline the unprecedented complexity of the relationship between economy, society and environment, though we can trace the initial idea to the First Report to the Club of Rome, “The Limits to Growth” (Meadows et al. 1972). In the resolution of the UN conference held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the postulate fixed that the achievement of sustainable development should be the goal of the world community in the twenty-first century. In the next decades, the international community has generated numerous proposals and instruments that have brought out various facets linked to sustainability.

A fundamentally important moment in the evolution of sustainable development was its transformation from the broad humanitarian concept of the 1990s to a structured strategy of the 2010s, which has its own clearly defined socio-ecological and economic goals, objectives, and indicators.

Agreed by world leaders at the UN in September 2015, the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted that succeed the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). It is an ambitious agenda with the goal to end poverty, fight inequality and stop climate change (UN 2015). The SDGs propose systemic responses to a global vision of sustainable development that address from renewed methodological perspectives such important issues as inequality and extreme poverty, unsustainable consumption patterns and environmental degradation, institutional capacity building, as well as novel global solidarity processes neglected by the MDGs. They underline the crucial importance of the trade-offs between

the three pillars of sustainability, namely economic, environmental and social, in all parts of human life (Bramwell and Lane 2011; Hansmann et al. 2012).

Since the adoption of the SDGs, many countries and institutions have been carrying out studies in which they have explored the capacities and challenges of each country, analyzing the necessary institutional strategies, together with analytical mapping and projection of results (ISCU/CISS 2015; SEI 2019; UK 2019). They explored the capacities they bring to specific development strategies, as well as the political, social, and institutional changes needed to move towards more sustainable societies. At the same time, they shed light on the shortcomings and limitations of the SDGs. Good examples are the reports produced by the UK Parliament (UK 2019) and by the Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI 2019) that criticized the SDGs for idealism, ambiguity, and lack of direction. An independent academic review of the SDGs carried out by 40 researchers from 21 different countries confirmed this by concluding that of the 169 targets beneath the 17 draft goals, just 29% are well defined and based on the latest scientific evidence, while 54% need more work and 17% are weak or non-essential. A critical problem is that the SDGs “suffer from a lack of integration, some repetition and rely too much on vague, qualitative language rather than hard, measurable, time-bound, quantitative targets” (ISCU/CISS 2015). Despite the international consensus that “sustainable development” is the desired goal of all policies and human society, it is still unclear how to translate general definitions can be into concrete and measurable policy goals (Bobylev and Sofia 2017; Karampela et al. 2017). Thus, “sustainable development and its derivative, sustainable tourism, have both conceptual and practical deficiencies that have frustrated their application” (Tao and Wall 2009, p. 90).

The world recession and COVID-19 place a new emphasis on the concept of sustainable development. The current situation requires a certain reconsideration of the SDG system, its goals and indicators (Bobylev and Grigoryev 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic consequences may lead to new approaches towards implementing and evaluating economic policies aimed at achieving the SDGs. Especially in times of COVID-19 crisis, there is a need for an “end-goal” to provide a big picture vision for the SDGs, and in precise metrics, standardizing and verifying the available data, both on developed and emerging economies.

2.2. Sustainable Tourism Concept

The sustainable tourism concept introduced in 1983 by Ceballos Lascurain of the International Union for Conservation of Nature has grown in importance after the 1995 World Conference on Sustainable Tourism in Lanzarote. Since that, the concept has been studied, discussed, and promoted by the international scientific community, as well as by practitioners from the institutional sphere. A number of declarations, conventions, pronouncements, codes and agreements aimed to inspire the global movement towards sustainable tourism.

The concept of sustainable tourism adopted in 1995 by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) defined in the Agenda 21 for the Travel and Tourism Industry as meeting the needs of contemporary tourists and host regions in such a way as to ensure protection and empowerment in the future (WTTC 1995; UNEP 2003). In 1998, Guide for Local Authorities on Sustainable Tourism Development presented concepts, principles and techniques for planning and developing tourism, including guidelines on managing environmental and socio-economic impacts at the local level (WTO 1998).

In 2005, the World Tourism Organization approved 12 goals (directions) for sustainable tourism (UNWTO 2005). Among them are the effective use of territories’ tourist potential (correctly identified and evaluated); the effectiveness of tourism and hospitality enterprises functioning, including jobs preservation despite the seasonality and crises; understanding between industry entrepreneurs and local communities; thoughtful strategies for tourism development in regions, in order to achieve a fair principle of tourism economic and social benefits distribution.

In 2008, the Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria for Hotels and Tour Operators defined. In 2009, a set of 15 recommendations based on three interrelated areas of activity: flexibility of public policy in terms of resilience, stimulus, and the green economy (UNWTO 2009). In 2012, *The Future We Want* highlighted the contribution of tourism to sustainable development through its close linkages with other sectors. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development stated the need by 2030 to ensure the development and implementation of strategies to promote sustainable tourism as a way to job creation, development of local culture and production of local products, as well as maintaining the state of ecosystems and increasing the quality of ecosystem services (UN 2015).

Especially after the adoption of the SDGs, sustainable tourism development has taken an increasingly prominent position in the twenty-first century. In pre-pandemic years, the sustainable tourism development was seen as a successful example of the implementation of the overall sustainability concept, sustainable tourism “being consolidated at an international level as an approach that should be used to make all types of tourism more environmentally, socially and economically beneficial” (Lozano-Oyola et al. 2012, p. 659). Moreover, the United Nations declared 2017 the Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development.

These developments boosted the economic research on sustainable tourism, which was previously not in the focus of academic interest (Xiao and Smith 2006; Stabler et al. 2009). A large body of literature on sustainable tourism issues has become available in recent years due to its growing importance. The research on the subject has largely focused on clarifying the evolving meaning of sustainability in the context of tourism; identifying the methods and tools deemed valid for measuring sustainability; verifying the models proposed; and scrutinizing the indicators whose implementation has progressively advanced at international, national, regional, and local levels (Modica et al. 2018).

The studies of the Global Council for Sustainable Tourism focus on forecasting the risks of international travel; conditions for ensuring the safety and health of tourists; ensuring environmental protection, and protecting it from excessive human factors that especially concerns unique natural objects, such as cave complexes (Polukhina et al. 2019). Some researchers conducted an analysis of local tourism and hospitality actors in developed and developing economies in terms of overall sustainability performance (Cvelbar and Dwyer 2013; Goffi et al. 2019). Tourism sustainability is discussed in connection with ensuring a stable income of tourism activity, innovative development and investment inflow (Nordin 2003; Novelli et al. 2006; Weidenfeld 2013), employment in the tourism sector supporting a reliable level of social development (MacFeeley and Dunne 2014), the regulatory framework development, and control over spending funds, especially state funds allocated for tourism infrastructure projects (Goffi et al. 2019; Liu et al. 2020).

Australia’s Sustainable Tourism Cooperative Research Center (STCRC 2020) continuously monitors more than 90 national and regional strategies for sustainable tourism development providing data on the institutional environment, as well as the results of cost–benefit analysis (CBA) that compare net costs and benefits of strategic development programs in different countries (Dwyer et al. 2016). Another example is the UNWTO International Network of Sustainable Tourism Observatories (INSTO), established in 2004 is a network of research centers monitoring the economic, environmental, and social impact of tourism at the destination level. Each of the 31 observatories is different in its structure and focus. As UNWTO underlines, “due to the context-sensitiveness of sustainability in general and the structures and characteristics of the destinations in specific, INSTO does not require members to specifically monitor pre-defined indicators, leaving enough flexibility in terms of the content and focusing more on the processes and innovative tools and techniques used by the destinations” (INSTO UNWTO 2020).

There is no universally accepted definition of sustainable tourism, and the imprecision of the term “sustainable tourism” has been noted in the literature (Sharpley 2000; Pfueller et al. 2011). From our point of view, there are two major points that should be in focus. First, there is the underlying principle of the three pillars of sustainability, namely

economic, environmental, and social. Second, in a growing layer of studies, there is a special focus on the role of stakeholders' networking (Nordin 2003; Novelli et al. 2006; Timur and Getz 2008; Weidenfeld 2013; Sheresheva et al. 2018; Perkins et al. 2020), and on increased tourism business actors' relationships with the local community (Jamal and Stronza 2009; Stone and Nyaupane 2018; Chilufya et al. 2019). Therefore, we can define sustainable tourism as a balanced triangular relationship between "host areas and their habitats and peoples, holidaymakers, and the tourism industry" where stakeholders support trade-offs between the three pillars of sustainability, and no one upsets the equilibrium (Lane 1994; Sharpley 2000). This is not easy, taking into account both the above-mentioned shortcomings and limitations of the SDGs and the evidence that different interest groups expect different types of community participation to achieve their own goals that may conflict with each other (Tosun 2006).

Our analysis of relevant literature shows that there are various approaches to the analysis of sustainable tourism development factors. Thus, Cernat and Gourdon (2012) proposed to take into account such factors as the tourism potential of a region, economic ties (networks, clusters), the role of tourism in the local economy, development sustainability, tourism infrastructure, and attractiveness. Despite the wide range of proposed sustainable tourism indicators (STI) (Tanguay et al. 2013; Torres-Delgado and Saarinen 2014), there are some indicators missing that are important for domestic tourism development in emerging markets.

For example, in the case of Russian regions, one needs indicators for monitoring the effectiveness of the implementation of strategic development programs in the field of tourism, taking into account national specifics. In this regard, it is worth to pay attention to the European tourism indicator system for sustainable destinations (ETIS) (European Commission 2020).

The ETIS provides a holistic approach to improve the sustainable management of European tourism destinations by encouraging stakeholder engagement and monitoring processes (Cannas 2018). We count useful adapting the ETIS as a tool to improve the sustainable management of Russian tourism destinations, but one should have in mind that "any destination seeking to implement the ETIS toolkit or a similar methodology should be cognizant of the associated challenges" (Modica et al. 2018, p. 16).

2.3. COVID-19 Pandemic Challenges for Sustainable Tourism

In 2020, the breakdown of international economic activity in the fields of recreation, transportation, and services had put at risk hundreds of millions of people (Bobylyev and Grigoryev 2020). Since the dynamics of tourist flows are greatly influenced by the demand-side factors (Song et al. 2012; Morley et al. 2014), this sector suffered immediately; there were mass closures and layoffs in this sector all over the world. The highly recognized importance in terms of survival and sustainability in the face of huge challenges conditioned a large body of literature on the impacts of COVID-19 on tourism and hospitality (Assaf and Scuderi 2020; Baum and Hai 2020; Chen et al. 2020; Efremova et al. 2020; Gursoy and Chi 2020; Kaushal and Srivastava 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has dealt a hard blow to the global tourism industry. Not only did it not remove sustainable tourism development from the agenda, but it also made them more significant. Published in 2020, the One Planet Vision for the Responsible Recovery of the Tourism Sector, based on the UNWTO Global Guidelines to Restart Tourism, aims to "become stronger and more resilient after the COVID-19 crisis" (UNWTO 2020).

In the context of the crisis, the UNWTO goals for sustainable tourism need some corrections. The UN Secretary-General Antonio Gutierrez expressed the following opinion on this matter: "While this crisis is imperiling progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals, it also makes their achievement all the more urgent and necessary. Moving forward, it is essential that recent gains are protected as much as possible, and a truly transformative recovery from COVID-19 is pursued, one that reduces risk to future crises and brings much closer the inclusive and sustainable development" (UN Economic and Social Council 2020).

Nevertheless, as the world grapples with the realities of the global pandemic, there is an opportunity to rethink exactly what tourism will look like for the decades ahead (Brouder 2020; Zenker and Kock 2020) and to find new opportunities for sustainable tourism (Niewiadomski 2020; Romagosa 2020).

Taking into account that tourism is a part of the service sector where consumers are in the focus of business activity, it is crucial for tourism and hospitality market actors to adjust to the obvious shift in consumer behavior, especially to travel safety considerations and increased interest to domestic destinations (Han et al. 2020; Sheresheva 2020). As Sheth (2020) predicts, it is likely that consumers will go back to old habits, but their behavior will stay modified by new regulations and procedures in the way they shop and buy products and services. “New habits will also emerge by technology advances, changing demographics and innovative ways consumers have learned to cope with blurring the work, leisure, and education boundaries” (Sheth 2020, p. 280). This often requires substantial changes in business strategy and business models.

2.4. Rural Tourism for Sustainability

There is no consensus on the definition of rural tourism (Wegren 2016) since it is quite heterogeneous in terms of its characteristics. As a result, a sole tourism model does not exist (Sharpley and Roberts 2004). At the same time, most researchers agree that the concept of sustainable rural tourism is in line with SDGs, especially with SDG 12 (“sustainable consumption and production”) and SDG 16 (“sustainable societies”).

The benefits of rural tourism as an engine for economic development and a contributor to rural resident quality of life have been often highlighted (Andereck and Nyaupane 2011; Petrović et al. 2018; Su et al. 2018; Martínez 2019). The balance of rural tourism destination stakeholders underlined, with special attention to local community attachment and involvement, influenced by their perceived benefits to local residents. Understanding the residents’ perceptions of tourism is important in order to shape future policies that minimize the potential negative impact of tourism and maximize its benefits.

From the rural visitors’ side, there are also benefits in the form of improved mental and physical well-being due to the restorative and curative powers of nature (Sharpley and Roberts 2004; Sims 2009; Kumar 2020). As Liu et al. (2020) point out, tourism development in rural areas is highly prospective due to the fact that an increasing number of people “seek out the natural scenery and authentic folk customs in the quiet and peaceful countryside to escape from industrialization and urbanization” (Liu et al. 2020, p. 177).

In other words, before the pandemic, rural tourism played a key role in removing stress often experienced by urban residents. In the face of anti-pandemic measures, it became much more important since the prospect to be isolated in a relatively small apartment in a big city, with no opportunity to go for a walk, added to the value of living in the countryside. As an example, Zhu and Deng (2020) revealed that pneumonia risk knowledge could influence behavioral willingness to accept rural tourism. Based on the analysis of 412 valid samples, they confirmed that in 2020 Chinese people showed a preference for rural tourism as a way to relax over the weekend.

In Russia, taking into account the long-lasting trend for rural depopulation and the disappearance of rural settlements, the issues of sustainable rural tourism development in the pre-pandemic period were addressed in the framework of the “Concept of Sustainable Development of Rural Territories for the Period up to 2020”. Along with food security issues, the concept outlined the socio-economic, demographic, and environmental aspects of sustainable development in rural territories.

Public policy objectives in the field of sustainable rural development for the period up to 2020 were as follows:

1. Create favorable conditions for rural territories to fulfill their own and national functions of territorial development;
2. Ensure steady growth of the rural economy, improve agricultural productivity and increase the share of rural areas in the economy;

3. Increase employment and improve the quality of life in rural areas;
4. Slow down the process of depopulation of rural territories and increase life expectancy;
5. Reduce intra-and inter-regional differentiation of the rural population;
6. Optimize the use of natural resources and preservation of the environment;
7. Preserve and enhance the cultural potential in rural areas.

Favorable factors to help achieve sustainable development in rural settlements are state assistance programs, engage the market with state assistance, namely opening market opportunities from support for small enterprises, and engagement for the market with individual enterprises that not solely deliver agricultural products but also carry out an economic activity other than food production and thus secure non-farm employment (Wegren 2016). This last (but not least) factor builds on the change of mindset in the post-soviet period and adds to the prospects of rural settlements' development.

One must admit that agricultural development in Russia in recent years was highly impressive. Russia's food embargo, import-substitution, and export promotion policy have led to visible positive results, both in terms of agricultural production and in terms of small and medium agricultural enterprises' success. It is also worth mentioning that many small and medium agricultural enterprises added tourism services to their business plans and started to develop value propositions for tourists, mostly on the local level (Voinova et al. 2019).

In Spring 2020, along with protective measures, the federal and local authorities in Russia started intensively elaborating new local tourist routes. There is a broad discussion now among practitioners and academics that there could be new opportunities to boost tourism development in the new challenging conditions and to exceed pre-pandemic indicators of local destinations development in Russia.

For the rural tourism sector, a large amount of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), with a fragmented chain of suppliers and intermediaries, is even more specific than for other sectors of the tourism market. The results gained by Petrović et al. (2018) indicated that not only the quality of infrastructure and health facilities but also the friendliness of residents towards visitors, easy communication between them are the foundations of sustainable rural tourism development. Therefore, there is a need to balance the interests of businesses, local communities, and local authorities as critical stakeholders in rural tourism. In this regard, it makes sense to adapt the European tourism indicator system for sustainable destinations (ETIS), which is a useful tool to boost sustainable development of rural destinations by encouraging stakeholder engagement and monitoring processes.

3. Materials and Methods

The overall goal of the study is to find better ways to support sustainable rural tourism in Russian regions and to develop indicators for monitoring the effectiveness of local strategic development programs, taking into account national and regional specifics. In order to meet the research goal, we combined a number of methods and techniques. We used systematic literature analysis to get theoretical background, desk research and statistical analysis to assess the Russian tourism industry dynamics and highlight main trends and problems, and analysis of empirical data obtained by means of in-depth interviews and survey to get insights on the attitude of developing tourist destinations stakeholders in Russia to the issues of sustainable development.

Andreck and Nyaupane (2011) found that perceived personal benefit derived from tourism mediated the effect of the economic aspects of Quality of Life, contact with tourists, and employment in tourism on the perceptions of the role of tourism in the local economy. Based on these considerations, in the empirical part of the research, we aimed to identify and analyze the views of rural residents about the development of local tourism and other tourism-related types of entrepreneurship in the countryside that contribute to diversification and help to increased quality of life.

The main tool to unveil public opinion and institutional problems associated with various aspects of the development of rural tourism is the interviewing method. To obtain

empirical data, we used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. The information collected by means of in-depth semi-structured interviews and individual structured interviews was essential for the assessment of stakeholders' attitudes to different aspects of sustainability in rural tourism.

The choice of in-depth interviews as a method of obtaining empirical data preceding quantitative research was due to the fact that this method allows gaining access to insights into respondents' opinions, emotions, and experiences (Legard et al. 2003). In such an interview, it is allowed to deviate from the order of questions established in the guide to deeper understand their attitudes to the studied issues. Lax adherence to the order of the questions allows making the conversation more natural without losing the quality of the results. The criterion for the selection of respondents was the type of activity. Nine in-depth semi-structured interviews of approximately 1 h duration were gathered, namely four rural tourism entrepreneurs, three rural tourism market actors, and two representatives of local authorities. The transcribed narratives were subjected to thematic analysis.

The survey research design was as follows: determination of the survey goals and objectives based on the relevant literature, clarification and interpretation of basic concepts; selection and preliminary system analysis of the research object; determination of the survey type; survey sampling (sample size, structure, forming method); survey tools creation (questionnaire, interview questions, observation protocols tested on three respondents and then corrected); field research; processing and structuring of primary data; results analysis; preparation of the report.

The empirical base of the initial study was the results of a survey of entrepreneurs engaged in rural tourism (the nested sample, $N = 225$) and a survey of the adult population of rural settlements in the Volga region, Mari El Republic. A written survey type (an individual filling with an assistant) was implemented. The advantages of this type are a high return percentage, the ability to control the correct understanding of all survey questions and fill out the questionnaire, as well as a fairly wide range of questions to cover in the survey. All interviews were realized face-to-face: the interviewers visited the rural areas selected for the survey and personally interviewed each respondent. The data were checked for inconsistencies in the answers to related questions in the SPSS Statistics software. As a result, no respondents were excluded, which means that they took the survey thoughtfully.

The study started in the pre-pandemic period and thus had to be partly redesigned in the face of new conditions implied by COVID-19. Namely, we added the analysis of relevant literature on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism and hospitality industry, as well as the analysis of official documents issued in Russia during the pandemics to assess changes in approaches to industry regulation. We also conducted six expert interviews, four with market actors (tourist operators) and two with representatives of federal authorities, and a pilot study of Russian tourism SMEs' response to the new challenges. At the first stage of the pilot study, we used an online questionnaire. Then 43 questionnaires were sent by e-mail to the websites of enterprises in the Volga region, Nizhny Novgorod. The final sample size was 28 tourism businesses.

This additional study helped to highlight what principles and approaches of the sustainable development concept are important in the context of big challenges caused by the COVID-19 crisis in the rural tourism sector. At the same time, it changed research timing and milestones. Therefore, the results discussed in the paper are intermediate and will serve as a basis for the development of indicators to monitor the effectiveness of local strategic development programs is still on the way.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Emerging Trends in the Russian Tourism Market in the Pre-Pandemic Period

Over the pre-pandemic years, the Russian tourism market demonstrated steady development, though the dynamics were not stable (Sheresheva et al. 2020).

By the end of 2019, a number of new trends were well traced that were close to the overall trends in the world market, among them:

- The growing role of digital technologies in tourism, transforming the logic of travel and the way experiences are generated. The Russian tourism market actors increased the use of computer reservation systems and global distribution systems, sharing platforms, geographic information system (GIS) technologies, virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) technologies;
- Changes in the structure of supply and demand, including the emergence and development of new tourism types and the corresponding niche market segments;
- An increased share of independent travelers and a corresponding decrease in the share of organized group tours offered by tour operators and travel agents.

The demand for group mass tours within this segment decreased in favor of individual tours or small groups with more diverse interests and greater immersion in the life of local communities, nature, activities of interest to tourists. Development of initiatives to transform the tourism industry in the direction towards achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs), as well as a shift in emphasis on networking and value co-creation, was also perceptible though not yet broadly spread.

For Russia, rural tourism development was among the niche market segments, driven primarily by the desire for a more personal experience and a relaxing pastime. For small and medium enterprises engaged in rural tourism, the emerging trend to individual travel was important since they were able to serve mostly small groups or individuals.

According to a study conducted in 2019 by the NAFI Analytical Center (NAFI 2019) on a sample of 1600 respondents in 140 settlements of 42 Russian regions, every third traveler applied to a travel agency to organize the upcoming vacations. At the same time, as compared with the previous year, the share of those has grown who preferred to independently organize their vacation (Figures 1–3), namely, to book tickets (from 28% to 34%) and rent housing (from 26% to 32%). The number of Russians planning to rent a car on vacation has also grown (12%, an increase of 8 pp). This service is most in demand among residents of Moscow and St. Petersburg going on vacation (17%), as well as young and middle-aged people (20%). These customer segments often use cars to travel to the countryside.

Figures 1–3 show the distribution of respondents' answers to the question, "If we talk about your upcoming vacation, how likely is it that you...". Shown is the percentage of respondents who answered "Surely" or "Most likely".

As a result of intensive anti-coronavirus measures, Russia has successfully "flattened the curve" on the COVID-19 pandemic in Spring–Summer 2020, but at the time of writing, the second wave was in a place like in other European countries. On 16 November 2020, Russia has had almost two million (1,948,603) confirmed cases, 33,489 deaths and 1,453,849 recoveries (Stop Coronavirus 2020). Most of the restrictions introduced to control the pandemic are still in place, and discussion has now moved to how the state returns to a new normal.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the activity on the Russian tourism market almost stopped in 2020, like in the world tourism market as a whole. Oil prices shock added to the pandemic, and a sharp rise in the exchange rate against the ruble aggravated the situation in the Russian tourism industry. In accordance with Rosstat data on the volume of services provided by the hospitality industries (hotel services, collective accommodation facilities, travel agencies and tour operators), in spring 2020 Russian tourism market suffered a significant decrease in the output of services in tourism (in May to almost zero), then a recovery in demand for services since June (Figure 4).

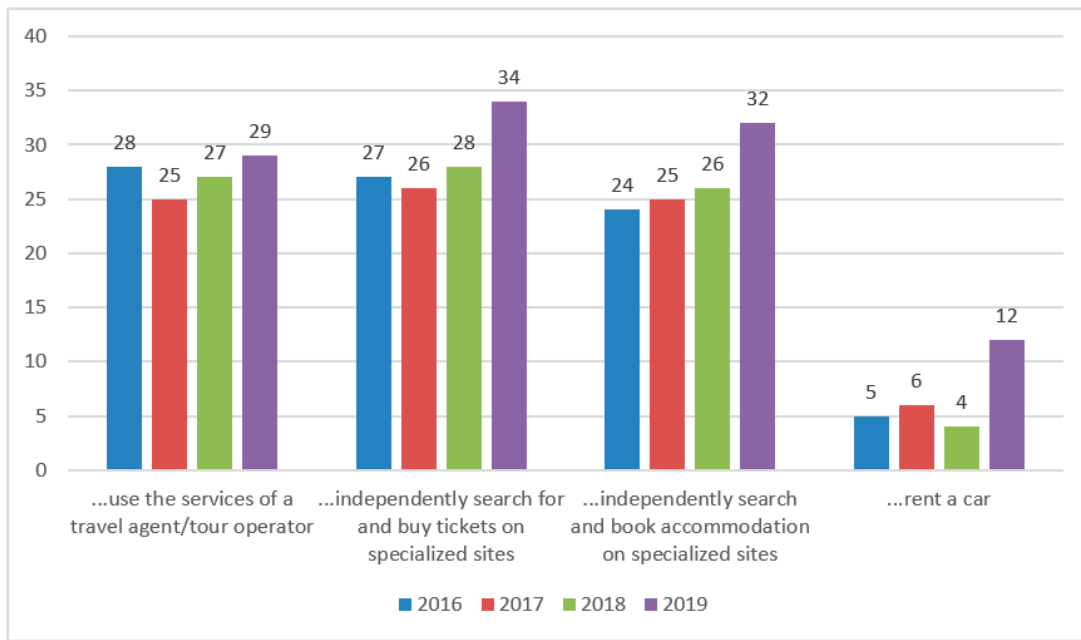


Figure 1. Respondent answers to the question, “If we talk about your upcoming vacation, how likely is it that you...”, by years (NAFI 2019).

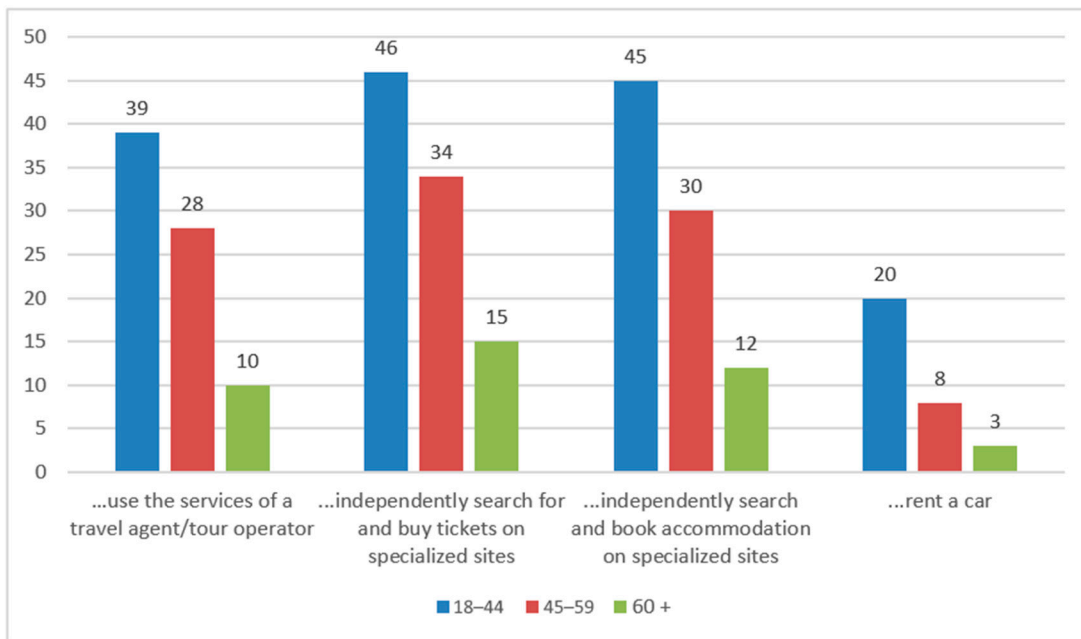


Figure 2. Respondent answers to the question, “If we talk about your upcoming vacation, how likely is it that you...”, by age (NAFI 2019).

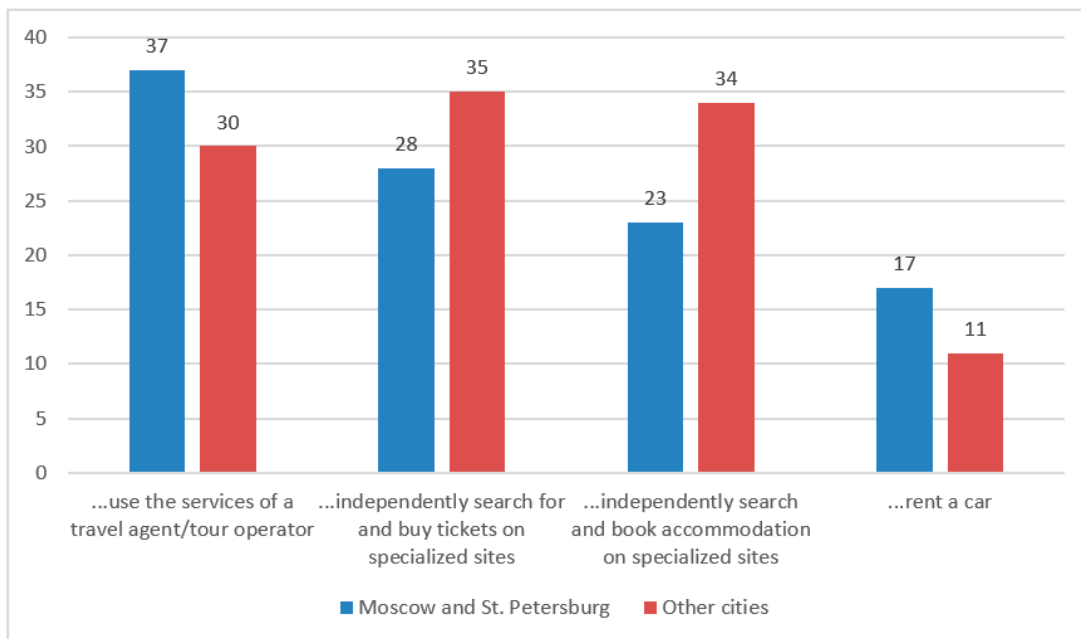


Figure 3. Respondent answers to the question, “If we talk about your upcoming vacation, how likely is it that you...”, by place (NAFI 2019).

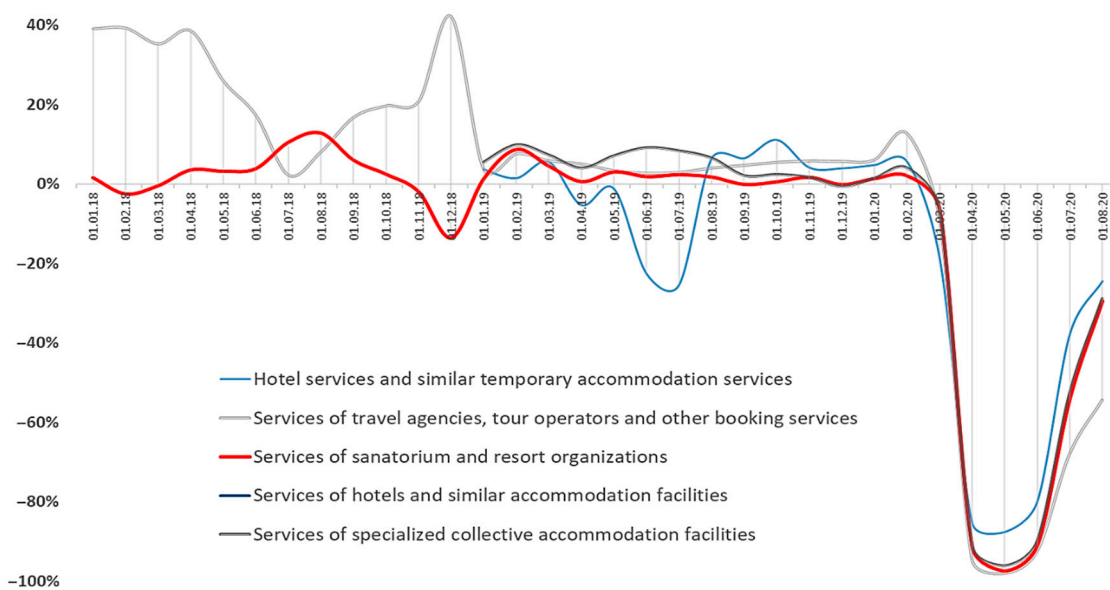


Figure 4. The growth rate of services provided by the Russian tourism and hospitality industry, 2020 compared to the same period of the 2019 year (Rosstat 2020).

In the face of a significant decrease in international outbound tourism, the prospects of domestic tourism in 2020 that initially seemed to be also quite vague appeared to be better due to the opening of most local destinations in July–August. Assuming that this situation could serve as a convincing growth factor, the federal authorities counted it necessary to pay attention to the tourist potential of Russian regions, to re-evaluate the unused reserves in the field of domestic tourism and possibilities of fast involvement of regional competitive advantages in the sphere of domestic tourism.

Russian tourism experienced the effects of several crises throughout the last decades: the severe economic crisis in 1998, the fall in demand for tourism services against the backdrop of the global financial crisis in 2008–2009 and the crisis phenomena in 2014 due to

geopolitical changes and sanctions (Sheresheva et al. 2020). The experience has shown that every crisis led to a deepening imbalance in the economic condition of the Russian regions. Hence, the issues of finding ways and methods to increase the development sustainability of all regions became especially urgent as a way to soften the current crisis in the industry and even to determine innovative growth models.

Now there is an understanding of federal and local levels that tourism, like many other human activities, will have to be redefined in a post-pandemic scenario. Traditional mass tourism, which prevailed before unforeseen circumstances, will have to give way to more alternative forms of tourism operated by agents, for which the interests of local communities are not outsiders and whose interests, in turn, are not limited to making a profit at any cost. This implies new strategic decisions and focuses on such types of tourism as rural tourism, ecotourism and ethnotourism.

If previous economic crises have already indicated the need for the Russian tourism industry modernization, the current crisis necessitated a combination of “rapid response” measures with systematic activities to identify threats and opportunities in terms of medium and long-term development.

In this regard, the following goals are set in 2020 by the government:

- Inventory of resources (federal, regional, municipal) and identification of profitable areas of their combination for the mutual benefit of regions and settlements;
- Balanced development of infrastructure on a national scale (in this case, basic infrastructure, which is often not considered as directly related to tourism development, is a determining factor in competitiveness for tourism destinations and market actors);
- Support and development of small and medium-sized businesses; development of state-public partnerships, increasing social activity through attention to local initiatives, especially aimed at inter-organizational, inter-municipal and inter-regional cooperation;
- Branding of territories in its modern sense: increasing destination attractiveness by the building of its positive image as a place to live and visit, the increased trust of authorities, citizens, and business;
- Determination of the most promising development areas and types of tourism, eco- and rural tourism among them, stimulate innovations and new perspective practices;
- A unified system of indicators that helps to balance the benefits and costs of different stakeholders, with a clear priority of the long-term strategic goals, aimed at stimulating interregional and inter-municipal cooperation.

4.2. Discussion: Pandemic Effects and Sustainability Issues in Russian Rural Tourism

The results gained in 2020 by means of interviews suggest that the rural population adapted to the new socio-economic reality. Critically assessing many aspects of life (employment opportunities, medical care, transport infrastructure), respondents do not show much stress or migration intentions. Locals recognize the advantages of a rural lifestyle are good ecology, the nature-like rhythm of life, the stability of social ties, and now the possibility to self-isolate much more comfortably than in big cities.

The entrepreneurial potential of the rural population remains low and limited by both a lack of money for initial investments and a lack of motivation. It is due to socio-psychological adaptation to the contemporary conditions and living standards, the prevailing wish to have stable incomes. At the same time, the respondents noted positive results of entrepreneurs' activity for the local population and reported their neutral or positive attitude to the rural tourism development in their locations.

Informal interviews with entrepreneurs engaged in rural tourism revealed characteristic features of their motivation and interaction with the locals. Most rural entrepreneurs have significant experience in other business areas and/or commercial structures. Among the motives was the desire to “get away from the bustle and unhealthy environment in the city”, but at the same time to maintain an active lifestyle and “to be useful to people

and society”, “to support the revival of the Russian villages”, “to develop and support the national culture”.

As we can see from the expert interviews with market actors, companies have found ways to survive and change their business practices. Some did it on their own with the help of government (proactive strategy), while others found new opportunities in collaboration with partners (partnership strategy).

In a pilot study of rural tourism SMEs’ response to the new challenges, the respondents assessed the scale of their business fall in the pandemic, the resources needed to survive and further develop their business, the effectiveness of the state anti-crisis measures, and factors that hinder the sustainable development of tourism sector SMEs. Digitalization appeared to be still at the initial stages of development. Some rural tourism enterprises were present on the Internet, often with their own sites, but mostly far from effective use of new information technologies. The information presented on the sites is scarce and rarely updated; there is often no option to make reservations and online payments.

Despite the difficulties that hinder business development, among which are lack of funds, insufficient government support, and uncertainty associated with the epidemiological situation, most respondents do not feel disappointed in their business and agree with the statement that they “donate short-term results for the long-term survival of the business”. Moreover, in the difficult conditions of the pandemic, the rural tourism actors consider additional opportunities and paid special attention to staff development and team consolidation. This is due to the fact that in pre-pandemic years, as some respondents reported, they had to make serious efforts to recruit personnel with the necessary skills. This was especially difficult given the narrow market for tourism and hospitality specialists and the need for most skilled specialists to leave a big city for the countryside. Therefore, the team is one of the key values for Russian SMEs in the rural tourism sector.

Interviews with representatives of local authorities show a very uneven level of understanding in the field of sustainable development. Some respondents do not consider rural tourism as a multifaceted complex that can serve to increase the quality of life in many aspects. Some others confirm their confidence that rural tourism implies not only an orientation towards obtaining some economic benefit but an approach from the point of view of social, economic, and ecological indicators that help to weigh and further balance the risks and benefits of all three dimensions in terms of long-term goals facing their regions and settlements.

5. Conclusions

Based on the results of the conducted study, we can make some concluding remarks.

The research contributes to the academic literature on tourism development in transition economies by exploring rural tourism sustainability issues in the context of emerging markets. The results confirm that Russian enterprises and local communities considered the three sustainability dimensions as important to develop tourism in rural destinations both in the pre-pandemic period and in times of challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The result of the crisis will be another chance in the list of Russian tour operators, travel agents, hotels, restaurants and other actors engaged in the tourism and hospitality service business. At the same time, one should admit that the Russian tourism sector has found itself in crises over the past 20 years, gradually overcoming each crisis. As to the current crisis, everything depends on the timing of the pandemic and the self-isolation regime in Russia. The longer anti-coronavirus measures continue that are now hardening again in many countries, the more uncertain is the future of tourism and hospitality businesses, and the more resilient will be the changes in business models that initially were perceived as temporary.

The findings suggest that not only there are ways to survive in the pandemic crisis for tourism and hospitality market actors. Actually, it is possible that this crisis will promote the development of domestic tourism and improve the quality of tourist services in rural destinations.

There is clear potential for growth in this market, especially since the demand for rural tourism is growing in areas of heavy urbanization. Besides, now many more Russians travel domestically, visiting close neighborhoods or other Russian regions instead of going abroad. Rural tourism can become one of the ways to stop the depopulation of many rural territories, to keep and develop rural settlements and thus to strengthen territorial integrity.

At the same time, the findings show clear weaknesses in the federal and local policy: the lack of systemic measures to improve the sustainable management of Russian tourism destinations. It is important to find a profitable combination of available resources and competencies within a single system of STI for rural territories of the Russian Federation, taking into account national and regional specifics. When formulating a set of indicators to serve as a base for decision-making, it is important to understand that Russian Federation has a huge territory with more than 80 regions, dozens of peoples and languages, a huge difference in mindsets, and a very diverse climate, ranging from subtropical at the Black Sea to extremely continental in Siberia. Therefore, a system of unified indicators should be able to take into consideration this diversity, from one hand, and the peculiarities of public administration that combines a strong vertical of power and local self-government, implying the independent solution by the population of issues of local importance. In the case of Russia, one needs to add indicators for monitoring the effectiveness of the implementation of strategic development programs in the field of tourism elaborated at different levels. From our point of view, it makes sense to adapt the European tourism indicator system for sustainable destinations (ETIS), which is a useful tool to boost sustainable development of rural destinations by encouraging stakeholder engagement and monitoring processes.

The results can be useful for state policy decision-makers in tourism. The successful revival of the tourism industry in the post-pandemic period will depend on the balanced, practical measures based on the right understanding and taking into account new environmental challenges, a shift in customer behavior, and the interests of rural destination stakeholders. The development of an STI indicators system is crucial that comprehensively describe the three pillars of sustainability at the local level and serves as a solid base for decision-making.

The results confirm that Russian enterprises and local communities considered the three pillars of sustainability as important to develop tourism in rural destinations both in the pre-pandemic period and in times of challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Based both on the literature review on STIs and on our own in-field research, we can make some considerations concerning help stakeholders of rural tourism destinations in Russia to reach the goal of sustainable destination development. Since from the literature on ETIS, we know that any destination seeking to implement the ETIS toolkit or a similar methodology faces challenges caused by the complexity of the indicator system, we count necessary simplifying the ETIS in consideration of the organizational characteristics of local stakeholders. Further, we recommend local authorities to have in mind the crucial importance of the trade-offs between the three pillars of sustainability but focus on social aspects while communicating with local communities and on economic benefits while communicating with business actors. As to the environmental pillar, now actively pushed by federal authorities together with the social pillar, it is worth to use the federal programs in this field as an important additional source of financial and information support.

There are a number of limitations to this study. The quantitative empirical data collected before the COVID-19 pandemic do not give us a picture of the contemporary shift in the tourism market, while the present investigation on the pandemic period is scarce, being based on secondary data and interview research. From our point of view, the lack of empirical data obtained on a broader representative sample is the biggest limitation. Therefore, as a promising avenue for future research, we consider the collection of micro-economic data from a sample of Russian small and medium farms engaged in rural tourism activity in different Russian regions. The sample can be formed based on the lists of agribusiness enterprises that are now formed by regional authorities and local farmer associations. The information collected from each enterprise should include both

quantitative and qualitative data that is essential for sustainability performance assessment. Future studies with access to longitudinal data will be able to address questions that aim to unveil temporal and long-term changes in rural tourism and thus to increase the generalizability of the research.

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