

## THE ROLE OF KNOWLEDGE STRUCTURES IN RECONFIGURING RURAL TOURISM IN RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF RURAL TOURISM IN ITALY AND KAZAKHSTAN

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**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to analyze changes in the notion and role of rural tourism provoked by the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper examines how rural tourism in the pandemic year 2020 has accommodated human needs for well-being: which touristic resources have been mobilized and what knowledge structures have contributed to mobilization of touristic resources. The authors use a qualitative multimethod approach to develop insights about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on changing roles played by rural tourism in Italy and Kazakhstan. The theoretical novelty of the research is that it conceptualizes tourism resource mobilization strategies as a result of the historical and emerging knowledge structures. It was found that while both geographical and ethno-cultural resources form the basis for rural tourism development, knowledge structures play a critical role in setting both the interpretative and institutional frames defining rural tourism forms and directions of development.

**Key words:** rural tourism, pandemic, resilience, sustainable tourism, Italy, Kazakhstan

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### INTRODUCTION

Rural tourism has been more resilient than other tourism sectors in the COVID-19 pandemic. In general, rural tourism showed both areas of vulnerability and resilience. However the precise assessment of its effects and outcomes are yet to be understood. The aim of this paper is to analyze changes in the notion and role of rural tourism provoked by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has been transformational to both tourism practice and the research agenda calling for better understanding of ‘fundamental values, institutional logics and pre-assumptions’ (Sigala, 2020:311) on which tourism, including rural tourism can and should be reset (Rosalina et al., 2021; Sharma et al., 2021). The economic downfall caused by the pandemic on tourism is well-evidenced. According to UNWTO (2021) as of 2021 the loss of pandemic has made up to US\$ 1.3 trillion in total export international tourism revenues. The international and domestic tourism employment has lost from 100 to 120 million jobs. The paper argues that for optimum tourism sector recovery, the consolidation of existing and emerging knowledge would have to be realized in three types of knowledge structures: tacit, codified, and institutionalized:

*Tacit knowledge structures* refer to beliefs and assumptions about the value of tourism - these are rationales and objectives about the forms and benefits of tourism collectively shared among the members of the society. Having similar tourism resources bases, societies can develop different interpretations to the best uses and value of those resources (Rose, 2020). While physical-geographical bases such as natural landscape, climate, indigenous flora and fauna form strong pre-conditions for privileging one type of human activity over the others, tourism as a leisure-oriented and recreational type of activity incorporating a visiting component has developed on more complex bases (Wu, 2018; Cawley and Gillmor, 2008). The beliefs about the value and role of a certain type of tourism are defined by a mixture of subjective and objective factors stemming from individual and collective understandings of the destination potential and reflections on their touristic experience in those destinations (López-Sanz et al., 2021; Dredge and Jenkins, 2003). The meaning-making is a central component in destination branding and there is a multitude of literature attesting to the complexity of meaning-making in tourism (Pike, 2005; Zenker et al., 2017). Destination promotion efforts rely on different extents of meaning-making: ranging from a deliberate story-telling enabled through comprehensive promotion campaigns to the small talks happening among tourists themselves. In any case, a full understanding about the tourism forms and their touristic value is not possible without understanding of the tacit knowledge structures.

*Codified knowledge structures* are formal systems of data and information relevant to the tourist sector. The most common representation of codified structures are administrative data and systems of statistical accounts. The importance of

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statistical systems is strongly recognized by the tourism policy-makers and destination development managers. The review of national statistics in this paper suggests that countries aim to measure the demand and supply side of tourism and its socio-economic impact. While acknowledging the overall complexity of conceptualizing tourism statistical accounts, there is a consensus that conceptualization is especially difficult at the supply side (Frentt and Frechtling, 2015; Dmitrović and Žabkar, 2010). In other words, it is difficult to capture what kind of services or goods are offered but are not consumed by tourists. When assessing value-added of accommodation supply, for example, the room reserved as compared to rooms available but not reserved will illustrate idle supply capacity. However, with many other tourism supply categories, identifying value-added components in the structure of tourism supply is more difficult.

Finally, *institutionalized knowledge structures* are a mechanism of knowledge generation and exchange among the institutional actors. Their role in the formation and development of the tourism sector is defined by the knowledge inventory (for example skills, data, information, competences, technology,) they have and incidentally their knowledge is shared with other actors in the industry. Marzo-Navarro et al., (2017) identified two crucial dimensions on which actors have to cooperate for sustainable development of the tourism sector. First, on developing a tourism product and second, on exchanging adequate information about the tourism activities. Whereas the latter reflects the negotiated agreement on services, goods, standards of behavior and limits of use of a certain tourism resource, the former ensures that all actors have access and can utilize information critical for their activities in a sustainable manner. In the study of Jesus and Franco (2016), the relations between actors varied from within urban networks and rural networks, thus drawing attention to exploration of rural tourism specifics. Hylinder and Hall (2005) pointed out that the effectiveness of rural tourism development is defined by the level of integration of stakeholders, their effective communication, scale of implementation and allocation of each policy measure to relevant stakeholders. At the same time Hylinder and Hall (2005), Char-Lee et al., (2014), Komppula (2014) attest that there is no uniform institutional set up for rural tourism development, and that in each case it is important to understand the stakeholder's roles, facilities, areas of influence and responsibilities within the sector. Finally, sustainability itself, recalling the 2030 Agenda and the sustainable development goals (UN General Assembly, 2015), can be considered within the institutionalized knowledge providing the a structured framework of aims and actions to ensure a prosper and a resilient growth considering people and ecosystems as fundamental in the rural areas, thus in tourism sector.

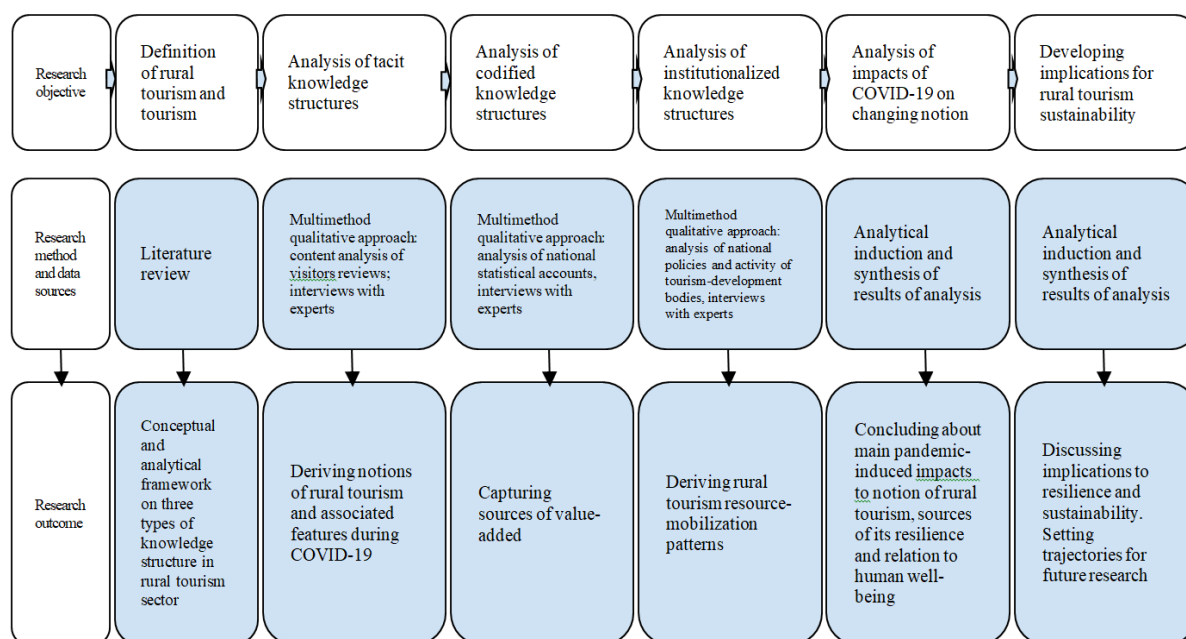


Figure 1. Methodological Framework for multimethod qualitative approach (Rishi and Gaur, 2012; Mik-Meyer, 2020; figure compiled by authors)

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The authors adopted a multimethod qualitative approach for data collection and analysis. This methodology applies a combination of several qualitative methods within one study and is particularly useful for studies with several types of data sources (Mik-Meyer, 2020). The methodology and consequently the research design is based on the premises of pragmatic philosophical and methodological paradigm in research (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004) that underscores the reality of multiple stage of a research study, multiplicity of data sources and consequentiality of data collection (Datta, 1997). Literature displayed the appropriateness of a multimethod qualitative approach for, especially, exploratory studies like this one ((Rishi and Gaur, 2012; Pansiri, 2006). The research design of the current study involved work with several types of data collection and data sources conditioned by the particular research objectives. The conceptual framework on rural tourism and tourism resources was derived from reviewing the literature. The tacit knowledge structures were analyzed based on results of interviews with (3 from Kazakhstan and 1 from Italy) experts undertaken in the period of January - May 2021 and content analysis of visitors' reviews for 2019-2020 from platforms Trip-Advisor (Italy, Kazakhstan) and IndyGuide (Kazakhstan). For analysis of codified knowledge structures, pre-existing data from national statistics on Italy

was examined and used to reflect on what has emerged from the Kazakh experience so far. Databases for Italy were differentiated across 21 regions over a period from 1999 to 2019 (ISTAT, 2020). For Kazakhstan, 14 regions' data from the National Bureau of Statistics over the period 2009 to 2019 were analyzed. The results of this analysis were supplemented by data received from interviews with experts and an open-ended survey with owners of tourist sites. The survey of rural tourism sites in Kazakhstan and Italy was conducted in February-April 2021, when tourism was still in limited mode of operations and tourist sites had been at the stage of probing and adjusting to the conditions during the pandemic. The final stage of data collection was conducted using analysis of institutionalized knowledge structures and tourism resource mobilization - interviews with experts and analysis of national strategies and policies in rural tourism sectors as main data sources. The results of analysis were synthesized via analytical induction and 'thick descriptions' were constructed featuring core impacts of COVID-19 to the changing notion of rural tourism in both countries.

## FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Adopting the three-dimensional knowledge framework for comparing rural tourism development returned insightful results. The framework presents a novel approach to understanding the touristic resource mobilization: By exploring the functioning of tacit, codified and institutionalized knowledge in the formation of rural tourism, the authors identified the sector's resilience and sustainability mechanisms. It was found that during the pandemic the main rationale for resource mobilization was ensuring the resilience of rural tourism. Resilience of a sector should be understood as a sector's ability to withstand and recover quickly from shocks, while sustainability refers to a balanced functioning of a sector where meeting its needs does not compromise on socio-economic equity and preserve integrity and richness of environmental ecosystems (Brundtland and Khalid, 1987). The following sections contain a detailed analysis of the contributions of tacit, codified and institutionalized knowledge structures in formation of the rural sector transformations as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The discussion section presents analysis of intersections of resilience with sustainability. The paper concludes with an outline of the implications for the future sustainability of rural tourism.

### Rural Tourism Bases

Geographical bases for rural tourism are seen via the meanings that societies attach to the notion of rurality. Both historical and contemporary beliefs about rural life and its resources define interpretations of the geographical features, both physical and cultural. In Italy, modern rural tourism developed in the late 19th century, despite the fact that back in Roman times the Mediterranean countryside was used as an exclusive place of leisure and relaxation time as an escape from the chaotic urban life (Battilani, 2001). In 1991, Bernardi observed that, despite the hospitality culture being seen as part of the tradition of farmers' families in most of the Italian regions (hence a *tacit knowledge*), agritourism as *codified and institutionalized* structure was still developed only in a few places (Alto Adige and Tuscany). However, this perspective has changed significantly since the 90s when joint efforts of agrifirms and governments have made agritourism visible. In the first decade of the 20th century: agritourism was one of the highest growing tourism sectors in Italy. According to ISTAT (2008; 2020), from 1998 to 2007 the number of agritourism firm raised from 9 718 to 14 822 (+52.5%), beds from 93 824 to 179 985 (+91.8%), agri-restaurants from 4 724 to 8 516 (+80.3%). In the last decade, growth, despite being less rapid, has been still significant moving from 14 822 to 19 354 (+30.6%) firms showing that it is a lively and attractive sector. It is interesting to note that, in Italy, agritourism, "agriturismo" in Italian, is specifically legally defined as activities of hospitality performed by agricultural entrepreneurs and their family members that must remain connected and complementary to farming activities. This is to make it possible for tourists to enjoy the atmosphere of the countryside by staying at 'real' working farms. In exchange, farmers are given the opportunity to supplement their income through room rent and, occasionally, direct sales and meal provision. Therefore, in the last 40 years, rural tourism in Italy moved from a tacit to a codified and institutionalized knowledge, and the spatial distribution can be considered quite even in the whole nation. In Kazakhstan, rural tourism as a codified and institutionalized structure is a nascent but multifaceted phenomenon. Historically, people in Kazakhstan lived in nomadic ways where rurality was a natural medium for their work and leisure, thus rooting tacit knowledge. Urban-rural differentiation was established in Kazakhstan in the beginning of 20th century fostered by rapid industrialization and transfer to the farmed agriculture (Erdavletov, 2015). This intensive industrialization was accompanied by organized leisure in mass recreational facilities in remote nature-based settings and resort-type facilities blending tacit and codified knowledge, but depending on the region of Kazakhstan, the countryside has been mainly associated with various types of agricultural production and less with tourism. Northern and eastern areas in Kazakhstan are characterized by large-to-medium scale crop production, while in remaining areas crop and vegetable farming, gardening, cattle-breeding including pasture grazing and bee-keeping are prevalent (Iskakova et al., 2021). Until the mid-2010s these activities were mainly seen as part of the agricultural economy, without strong association to rural tourism whilst the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-2021 has turned the attention of both tourists and tourism entrepreneurs to the touristic value of such activities.

As a form of tacit knowledge, rural tourism, however, is not a completely new phenomenon in Kazakhstan. In the nomadic lifestyle, where families migrating over long distances could meet occasionally, a guest-honoring culture became a prominent cultural norm. Thus, not having been labelled as tourism, visiting practices have been maintained through family urban-rural travel and rural-rural travel. Emergence of rural stays as a tourist product with an explicit price can be observed in mid-2010 when tourism, including rural tourism, received increasing policy attention and inflow of knowledge on tourism technologies and standards (Erdavletov, 2015). For example, the number of accommodation units in rural areas has increased from 483 in 2010 to 1 468 in 2020, showing about 204% growth. Although the share of rural tourism is

smaller compared to urban tourism, it has a more intensive growth rate as compared to about 107% growth in urban accommodation units from 975 in 2010 to 2 016 in 2020 (Bureau of National Statistics, RK, 2021). Finally, nature was found to be a necessary medium for rural life: both in Italy and Kazakhstan rural settings are appreciated for their nature-related characteristics. In Italy, the natural features created bases for tourism associated with agricultural products, which have developed into agricultural cultural heritage (Piñeiro et al., 2019; Sidali et al., 2011). Italian delicacies are known internationally, with the regional specialities offering each peculiar gastronomic experience: offering more than 300 agrofood and 500 wine typologies with an institutionally recognized geographical protection indication.

In Kazakhstan nature is linked with rural settings as a manifestation of ancestral (nomadic) roots. Rurality, in this context, is seen as an ancestral space and place, to where many families in Kazakhstan link their sense of origins. Interest in some traditional sports, craft-making, pastime and traditional family events maintain links to rural settings as cultural space (Tleubayeva, 2019). However, rural tourism based on farm's products in Kazakhstan is also growing in popularity.

### **Tacit Dimension: Effects of COVID-19 on the notion and role of rural tourism**

This exploration of the developments in rural tourism in two countries, as well as review of available research, suggests that it is premature to make a conclusive statement about the COVID-19 pandemic and the long-term impact on societal conception of rural tourism. Nonetheless, certain changes in the collective notion of rural tourism are observed. Literature worldwide attests that rural tourism has become more associated with human well-being. Along with conventional associations of rurality with quietness, gastronomic specialities and natural sceneries, tourists perceive lower health risks (Wojcieszak-Zbierska et al., 2020; Silva, 2021; Vaishar and Šťastná, 2020; Duro et al., 2021) away from the inconveniences related to overtourism. There are considerations and some evidence in the literature that rurality has become more associated with human wellbeing overall: tourists focus more on emotional, mental and physical wellness and retreat (Avram, 2020; Cooper and Buckley, 2021; Qiu et al., 2021). Brouder et al. (2020), Lapointe (2020) question whether the COVID-19 effects on tourism will change tourism to 'new normal' or will return tourism developments 'back to normal', while Stankov et al. (2020) and Ateljevic's (2020) assert that it is the right time to set the trajectories for mindful tourism development, focusing comprehensively on human well-being. Tourism, including rural tourism, recovery in a sustainable way is already established as a cornerstone of national and international economic recovery strategies (OECD, 2020).

The findings of current study revealed some recurring themes in societal perceptions about the value of rural tourism in both countries. In line with the global trends, rural tourism in both Italy and Kazakhstan is seen as a *safe option healthwise*. An increase in *vacational* interest is observed from tourists who would choose to spend their vacations in other ways but due to travel restrictions decide to stay in rural settings within allowable travel zones. In both countries, the narrative about the link between *rurality and nature* has had a resurgence and the sense of undertourism became an asset in this period. In addition, in Kazakhstan the rural settings have received a renewed and somewhat reconfigured notion about cultural heritage: rural tourism is interlinked with *traditional and contemporary* crafts, meals, sports, spiritual and wellness practices.

The results of the analysis indicate that features of resilience inherent in the notion of rural tourism, when put in operationalization, can confront a number of sustainability challenges. There are risks stemming directly from the functioning of rural tourism facilities, as well as risks from contingent sectors. For instance, Bonaccorsi et al. (2020), Galeazzi et al. (2020) found that human mobility during the COVID-19 restrictions had been characterized by relocation of city population to more rural (low density) areas but not remote. Most relocation happened in urbanized rural areas in proximity to large cities. With reference to tourism, people would like to travel to less dense areas to avoid risk of infection and to refresh themselves from staying locked in their homes. Often in Italy people moved to second homes inherited from their parents or grandparents representing the sense of rural heritage of urbanized families. At the same time, the concern for availability of health care and preference for amenities does not make remote rural areas attractive. A similar pattern is observed in Kazakhstan, where tourists to nature-based sites showed preferences for either short-term (one-two day stay) or stays in modernized sites. Agricultural farms with tourism offerings are mainly located within close proximity to main cities and very few offer staying options. This concentration of visitors might increase the impact on carrying capacity of some sites, and redefine the type of rural experiences of those areas.

### **Codified Dimension: Identifying sources of rural-tourism value-added**

In Kazakhstan, the increased interest in rural tourism has triggered the emergence of new forms of rural tourism. For instance, farm and hive visits, staying in glamping, provision of photo-tours and holding corporate business events in rural settings. The drivers of new forms of tourism appeared to be entrepreneurs mainly from the non-tourism sector, while rural residents showed moderate interest in development of conventional forms of nature-based rural tourism, enhanced by either gastronomic or accommodation offerings or a combination of the two. ADB (2019) suggested that entrepreneurs in rural tourism rely on their own interpretations of resources in locality where a particular rural tourism site operates. Farm owners may not always have access to the best practices in tourism business and management. Another reason for moderate engagement of farm owners into rural tourism can be explained by their reluctance to invest time and capital in investing in new forms until there is clarity about their business model and reception with customers. In this light, the Italian system of national agritourism accounts can be useful. As previously mentioned, Italy had a specific National Framework Law on Agritourism n. 730/1985 since 1985. Later, in 2006, a new one, more in line with the current trend of a mature form of tourism, was issued. The specificity of the legal definition helps to understand the difference between rural tourism and agritourism. The first is intended as a general term describing all the forms of tourism held in rural areas, whilst agritourism has the specific implication that this is to be supplied by a registered farmer. Other forms of rural tourism are also developing in Italy, however, agritourism has a

thoroughly codified system of knowledge, which makes an insightful case for analysis. The system of codified knowledge about agritourism in Italy is particularly suited for understanding and assessing the value-added in operation of agrifarms.

In the light of the emergence of new forms of tourism induced by the pandemic, this example can be useful for other types of tourism, when insights in generation of tourism value-added is needed. In Italy's case, the agritourism indicators provide data on both 1) each type of accommodations and 2) each type of available tourist activities in the rural farms. For instance, there is a track on farms with agri-restaurant, agri-campsite, horse-riding activities, as well as statistics on visitors by tourist activity: food and wine tasting, sports, educational tours, etc. This breakdown can also be used as the basis for an analytical framework for capturing the effects of each activity and form of agritourism on various kinds of sustainability.

In Kazakhstan, national statistical accounts on tourism are run by the National Bureau on Statistics with the Ministry of National Economy ([www.stat.gov.kz](http://www.stat.gov.kz)). The Bureau issues monthly, quarterly, semi-annual and annual sets of data related to the development of the tourism industry. The data is available from the early 1990s when Kazakhstan became an independent state. Generic accounts for the tourism sector on flow of inbound and outbound tourists, tourist spendings, types of transport, occupancy rate of various forms of accommodation and other sectoral indicators provide useful data for understanding performance of the tourism sector in general. The niche indicators mainly relate to the tourism flows and services consumed at the nature-based tourism clusters. This breakdown makes sense as rural tourism in Kazakhstan has been mainly associated with nature-sightseeing, camping and hiking. As of May 2020, the most elaborate and diversified category of accounts to capture the performance of rural areas is based on numbers on types of accommodations and correspondingly number of tourists served and amount of sales in those accommodation units. The State Program of Tourism Sector development for 2019 -2025 (<https://adilet.zan.kz>), however, clearly outlines the trajectories for diversification of the tourism sector. The priority areas, among others, are indicated as agrotourism, eco-tourism and ethnographic tourism, including development of crafts. Furthermore, the Strategy sets the following objectives in regard to rural tourism: 1) developing and introducing the concepts of "agritourism activity" and "rural tourism"; 2) popularization and promotion of agritourism (rural tourism); 3) development by local executive authorities of agritourist facilities in rural areas: guest houses, specialized private hotels in the form of stylized "agritourist villages", "fishing and hunting villages", etc. The increased interest in domestic tourism invigorated tourist and business activity in regard to rural tourism. The proposed dimensions of codification of knowledge for rural tourism development appear timely and relevant.

It can be suggested that for short-term and for long-term, COVID-19 pandemic has changed the structure of demand and supply in rural tourism. The survey undertaken by this study aimed to explore whether tourism sites have perceived changes in the touristic value of rural tourism and if they undertaken any response to adjust to those changes. Shown in table 1 and table 2, the results revealed the variety of adjustments that sites have realized to generate touristic value in the restrained conditions. In the overall picture, it can be concluded that the changes have been implemented at each chain of value creation: starting from targeting and reaching the customer to product innovation. This finding underscores the importance of systematic codifying value-generating activities as this knowledge enables tourist sites to act with competence and creativity.

Table 1. Italy- responses to Agritourism survey

Italy	Agritourism with international targets (Reviews in Tripadvisor)	Agritourism with domestic targets (Reviews in Tripadvisor)	Agritourism close to urban area (max 1,5 hr drive from a major city - Rome)	Agritourism in remote area (More 1,5 hr drive from a major city –Milan/Rome)
Was your agritourist affected by Covid-19 (more than other tourism business, less than other tourism business)?	Base for day trips or rural life less than other tourism business In Summer (when open) even more request but 95% domestic, vs 50% of previous years	Base for day trips or rural life I cannot evaluate, definitely no foreign tourists	Horse riding and rural life less than other tourism business In summer even more request, all very concentrated in July and august (Foreign only in case of returning customer)	Rural life and food/wine  less than other tourism business In summer even more request, all very concentrated and domestic
What was the most difficult situation that you had to face?	In general, only 35% of room occupancy compared to before (due to strong lockdown)	but was significantly hit a part from august 2020 that had the full room occupancy Having the swimming-pool made a difference	Continuous change in regulations; Volatility in reservation, booking platforms cancellations management; Request of powerful wifi for teleworking	Continuous change in regulations  Volatility in reservation, booking platforms cancellations management
Have you made Changes to your business since COVID 19? If so, what are they?	Adopted sanitisation guidelines; Enjoyed public support (compensations, zero-cost loans) thanks to Business Association admin support; Some updates on tourism IT platforms	Adopted sanitisation guidelines  Enjoyed minima l public support	Stopped restaurant moved to B&B only for the time being Enjoyed “bonus holiday” state programme Stopped to use booking platform, only for last minute	New personnel hired to satisfy the need to serve instead of using a self service buffet Increasing sanitisation procedures
Do you think that there are changes that will be permanent in the way you run the business?	No, just some updates on tourism booking platforms	No	No significant  The need of a powerful wifi	No significant in long term
Have customer demands changed? How?	Domestic vs International, but seems only temporary	Domestic some more from big city but generally for fewer time	Domestic even from close by city for long period The need of a powerful wifi	Last minute confirmation, reluctancy in booking and downpayment in advance

Table 2 Kazakhstan- responses to agritourism survey

Kazakhstan	Agritourism with international targets	Agritourism with domestic targets	Agritourism close to urban area (max 1,5 hr drive from a major city)	Agritourism in remote area
Was your agritourist affected by Covid-19 (more than other tourism business, less than other tourism business)? (in case more positive: Do you think you had even better performance on average compared to previous years?)	Horse riding no, the pandemic has not affected horse riding tourism.	Apiary (bee-garden) Pandemic has not been negatively affected. The interest has increased. When the mobility restrictions were lifted the visitors inflow increased. Honey has also become of interest as a form of healthy food.	Ethno-village the pandemic has created restrictions on how many people can be accepted but general demand has risen; domestic visitors increased, while international decreased	Ethno-village in remote area The demand has risen significantly -at multiple times; domestic tourists increased, while international decreased
What was the most difficult situation that you had to face?	increased demand and not sufficient capacities; also in general there need to be investment to construct a warm shelter for horses during winter time	When mobility was restricted it was difficult to deliver the honey products to their vending stands in cities	compliance with sanitary requirements and absence of visitors at time of strict mobility restrictions	Managing large flows of visitors
Have you made changes to your business since COVID 19? If so, what are they?	reorient to horse riding teaching instead of racing competition	At some times vendings stands were closed and we had to fond options for delivery online. s	focus on health safety	No, but if there is a possibility internet and mobile connections would be strengthen, better roads and more accomodation places with amenities are needed
Do you think that there are changes that will be permanent in the way you run the business?	there will be return of national and international competitions, and international tourists	yes, the interest seem to be quite stable	after the pandemic international visitors will return	In case the infrastructure is constructed the demand will increase as compared to pre-pandemic. If the infrastructure will remain like this - the demand will increase as well, but to a lesser degree
Have customer demands changed? How?	yes, more families with kids	We also adjusted some products to reflect more interest in health-related product	yes, more families with kids; more demands for varied services	Yes, more people come with expectations of comfort and come for longer stay.

Two specific contingent effects are identified in the extant literature, and have received some support in the current study. First, farms contributed to the resilience of food supply chains. In Italy, where the links between rural tourism and agriculture are strong, farms mitigated loss of agritourism income with satisfying demands of neighbouring settlements. Although farmers themselves positively evaluate increased demand for food supplies, and the possibility of local production and consumption circuits can make localities more resilient, the trade-off between rurality as a place for recreation for production sites can entail questions of sustainability (Cavallo et al., 2020; Mastronardi et al., 2020). In Kazakhstan, agritourism is in its nascent stage, however, the implications can be relevant for setting the future of agritourism. Second, the results of the survey showed that Covid-19 impacted significantly on the domestic/foreign ratio arrivals in agritourism, shifting to domestic almost all arrivals, but in general those interviewed recognized that they were less affected than other business in absolute terms, showing a stronger resilience versus that found in urban tourism. The length of stay shifted too, and significantly the health and safety concerns of customers had raised as had the requests for powerful wifi to ensure homeworking, significantly used during the pandemic period by employers.

Furthermore, as can be seen from the tables, Kazakhstan tourism appears to have been less affected than that in Italy by the pandemic, at least at this particular point in time and based on the limited data provided by this survey. However, rural tourism sites in both countries perceived that they are in a better condition as compared to other types of tourism. Literature identifies this rural tourism position as a global trend (Bratić et al., 2021; Campisi et al., 2021). The literature points out possible sustainability implications of such a trend - whereas low-density areas are perceived more positively, travel anxiety induces visitors to avoid public transport (Bratić et al., 2021). Moreover, often private cars are used as the main transport option to reach remote rural areas (Campisi et al., 2021). For rural tourism, therefore, sustainable transport is one of most crucial post-pandemic goals. Finally, both countries reported more domestic business, and tourism providers from both countries were optimistic about a return by international tourists in the future. This optimism is contingent on some changes being made and providers in Kazakhstan were more likely to report needing to adjust their product to meet the new market that seemed to be emerging. This market included more families, longer stays and more health-related offerings to tourists. In Italy changes were not seen to be affecting the product itself but more related to domestic vs. international tourists and issues around uncertainty, making booking in advance problematic. This diversification of rural tourism site activities during the pandemic makes an apparent argument for the importance of maintaining a dynamic and up-to-date system of accounts capturing the value-generating activities of rural tourism sites. It is crucial for both the mature rural tourism sector like in Italy and a sector at an early stage of development like in Kazakhstan. Studying data at farm level allows a convenient interface for entrepreneurs to explore and analyse the performance of various tourism forms and activities, which is also essential for SME support in both mature and nascent contexts.

### **Institutionalized Dimension: enabling sustainability amidst complexity of rural tourism**

Italy and Kazakhstan are at different stages of institutionalization of the rural tourism sector. The difference is also observed in the degree of institutionalization of knowledge structures. Italy's rural tourism has developed a complex framework for support of rural tourism and agritourism. There are similarities in the strategic normative frameworks - both countries have guiding master-plans and a number of regional and local plans for development of tourism. Moreover, in Italy, rural tourism is influenced by the EU-wide Common Agriculture Policy (CAP), Regional Rural Development Plans and other development policies of the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Forestry Policy regarding *agritourism*. In the Alps and Appennini, programs for mountain area development are often tackling and supporting rural tourism. Moreover, the role of agribusiness association has been also very relevant in the governance and promotion of agri tourism since the early birth of the phenomena. Kazakhstan has adopted a State Strategy for Tourism Development for 2019-2025 as a main comprehensive plan for tourism sector development, as well as regional, sub-regional and local initiatives. These frameworks, in Italy and Kazakhstan, envision tourism development as collaborative effort and include provisions for integration of a wide array of industry actors: rural residents, professional associations aimed at rural tourism development, destination development organizations, specialized governmental agencies, municipal structures, business structures, Universities and associations of independent experts. The difference is observed in the numbers, diversity of specializations and degree of integration among the rural tourism actors. Tiberghien et al. (2018) suggest that rural tourism in Kazakhstan is still in search of its forms and at the stage of early experimentation: there are possibilities for agritourism based on a variety of orchards, vegetables, berries, honey, meat and dairy products. In addition, the experts noted the links of diverse nature and geographical bases of rural sites in Kazakhstan with its historical heritage: for example, a species of apples *Malus Sieversii* the ancestor variety of all modern apples is native to the Almaty region (Omasheva et al., 2017), as well as there still about 40 varieties of combined wild tulips species and species that have been cultivated for more than five hundred years that can be observed in the steppes of Kazakhstan (Tolenova et al., 2021; Ivachenko et al., 2006) pointed out the task of finding balance between modernization and authenticity of rural tourism products and understanding how international tourism will perceive rural tourism in Kazakhstan. In light of these multiple tasks and objectives, the knowledge structures are being formed. There is a national JSC Kazakh Tourism established in 2017, which aims to promote all kinds of tourism in Kazakhstan. The Kazakh Tourism Association, Kazakhstan Association of Hotels and Restaurants and Kazakhstan Association of Agri and Rural tourism are independent professional associations, who serve as integrators, promoters and knowledge facilitators within the industry and with other sectors. Informational and expert circles appear in social media and gather around tourism-related events, which have not yet developed clear functionality and serve as networking and information exchange.

The survey results confirm that there are differences in how rural tourism sites in two countries perceive the knowledge infrastructure and financial support during the pandemic (Table 1 and 2). Rural tourism sites in Italy commented on the availability of financial support that was made to them, while no mentions of such were expressed by sites in sample from Kazakhstan. Such differences are important to understand and delineate in the drive towards sustainability and resilience of rural tourism in each country and for devising conceptual insights about rural tourism development. Despite different stages of rural tourism institutionalization in two countries, there is much similarity in regard to how rural tourism has faced the COVID-19 pandemic. Italy has been severely affected in terms of spread and intensity of infection, which entailed more strict mobility restrictions. Nonetheless, the authors found that the rural tourism sector referred to similar sources of resilience. According to rural tourism providers interviewed in this research in both countries, Government support was one of the core sources of resilience. Understanding the tourist concerns and having more effective lines of communication with tourists were other important factors of resilience. Both in Italy and Kazakhstan, farms who could diversify their offering and adjust for domestic demands showed more resilience (Mastronardi et al., 2020). The author's interview with the rural tourism providers suggest that the pandemic brought new perspectives on the importance of private investment, as for novel and risky solutions rural tourism entities could only refocus or reorient their activity when supported by private investments. The main lesson from the pandemic has come to light from the complexity of rural tourism. Italy and Kazakhstan have similar strategic orientations for rural tourism as a complex of sustainability objectives: social and economic development of rural areas, preservation of cultural and natural heritage, ensuring human wellbeing, promotion of richness and authenticity of rural experiences and enhancement of relations between the urban and rural areas. The experience of the pandemic clearly illustrated that rural tourism is a dynamic phenomena with its own specifics.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

Although at different stages of rural tourism development, in both cases the significance that societies attach to rural tourism implies inherent features fostering both resilience and sustainability. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic rural tourism resources have been mobilized to continue to generate tourism value of rural sites, while accommodating increased demand for human well-being and health safety. While the pandemic has highlighted the sustainability facets in rural tourism, the effects of intensification of tourism in the sector are yet to be understood. In this paper the authors analyzed the knowledge structures that have been effective in mobilizing rural tourism resources during the pandemic and how they can facilitate sustainable transformations of the sector. In Italy the notion of rural tourism as a socio-economic sector has long been established (ISTAT, 2020). Kazakhstan has just started exploration of the potential of rural tourism in the last decade (Shaken et al., 2019). Nonetheless, for both cases, the momentum points to the importance of varied knowledge and skills to ensure balanced effects to the socio-environmental sustainability of rural areas. The changes in the notion of rural tourism have real effects in terms of increased interest among domestic tourists. Analysis of codified and institutional knowledge structures suggests that rural tourism entrepreneurs became more resilient during the pandemic in cases where



knowledge is available about sources of value-added in rural tourism sectors and when rural tourism providers are more qualitatively integrated with various institutional actors. The two countries have different stages and forms of rural tourism, however they have similar strategic orientations for sustainable rural tourism development. The complexity and specifics of rural tourism can be sustainably managed when institutional knowledge structures consistently perform two functions:

1) capturing interdependencies of resilient and sustainable developments within the sector and with other sectors and

2) integrating various actors to help make informed decisions. The COVID-19 pandemic has clearly impacted on tourism and there are implications here for existing knowledge gaps about the functioning of rural tourism and sources of its resilience as well as for sustainability. Application of the three-dimensional knowledge framework to compare rural tourism development in pandemic times in Italy and Kazakhstan has been useful in developing a nuanced and insightful understanding of the issues. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that the way societies look at rural tourism has itself diversified. Rural tourism has become more linked to human health and safety, and its potential for human well-being has become of interest to destination developers. It is also clear that further research is needed to analyze if these changes are structural or conjunctural, and how, given an amplified interest, rural tourism can be developed in a sustainable way.

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