

*Original scientific paper*

## **FAMILY ENTREPRENEURSHIP AS AN INITIATOR OF CHANGE IN CROATIAN TOURISM**

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### **Abstract**

**Purpose** – The aim of this paper is to verify whether the "family entrepreneurship" model is an important development opportunity for Croatian tourism and whether family businesses, with their innovative approach to designing a tourist product, change the trends in the tourist market and whether they promote the differentiation of Croatian tourism on the global tourist market.

**Methodology** – The paper examines the readiness of family businesses to present changing trends on the global tourism market through positive examples of innovative solutions of family businesses that contribute to the new direction of Croatian tourism, towards sustainable development. By comparing the performance of family businesses and tourism results at the national level, knowledge is gained about the contribution of family businesses in Croatian tourism.

**Findings** - The results of the research indicated that family businesses contribute to the recognition of Croatia on the tourist market as a sustainable tourism destination with their innovative tourism products.

**Contribution** - The conducted research can be the basis for further research on family businesses in the Republic of Croatia. Contributes to new knowledge about family entrepreneurship in tourism in the Republic of Croatia.

**Keywords:** family businesses, sustainable development, innovations in tourism, differentiation of the tourist product.

*JEL classification:* M10; M21; L20

### **INTRODUCTION**

Family entrepreneurship is given an important role as the initiator of transformational changes in Croatian tourism. Current trends in Croatian tourism, manifested through small family hotels, family farms, wine roads, olive oil roads, sustainable gastronomy, etc., initiated by family enthusiasm and visions, provide a basis for thinking about the new direction of Croatian tourism. The Croatian legislation does not recognise the concept of family entrepreneurship, but it is mentioned in strategic documents, such as the National Program for the Development of Small Family Hotel Industry, which states that from the point of view of the tourist offer, we are talking about accommodation facilities that differentiate the content and thematise the tourist offer of Croatia (Institute for Tourism, 2013). This also highlights the importance of family entrepreneurship in Croatia's tourist offer.

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The absence of statistical monitoring of family businesses in the Republic of Croatia prevents a quantitative analysis of family businesses in tourism and their contribution to the tourism development of Croatia. But if it is taken into account that family businesses in the field of accommodation and provision of food and beverage services are predominantly small and medium-sized enterprises, their analysis provides a framework for looking at family businesses in tourism and their contribution to the development of Croatian tourism. Looking at the qualitative changes in the offer of small businesses in tourism enables us to gain the necessary knowledge about the innovative approach of family businesses to the design of a tourist product within a wide range of entrepreneurial activities (accommodation services, food, mediation services, excursion organisation services, tourist event organisation services, animation, boat and mooring rentals, sports offer, etc.), which significantly contribute to the diversification of the tourist offer and the development of destination tourism (Čapeta, 2019, 257).

The health crisis caused by the Covid-19 disease has shown that the future of tourism and the tourism of the future will change significantly. On its way to full recovery, international tourism reached 84% of its pre-pandemic level in the first seven months of 2023 (UNWTO, 2023). Croatia took advantage of its accessibility by road transport to the European tourist market and, with the Government's easing of restrictive measures during the summer and incentives for the recovery of tourism, positioned itself as an ideal and safe destination for summer vacations (Čapeta, 2023, 122). This contributed to a much faster recovery of Croatian tourism compared to other competitive Mediterranean countries, and the growth of tourist traffic in the first seven months of 2023 compared to the same period in 2019 (by 7%) (State Statistical Office, 2023). However, the recovery of tourism in all destinations at the global level and the strengthening of their position on the global tourist market leads to stronger competition, and it is necessary to think about changes in the tourism sector in response to new trends at the global level. Family entrepreneurship is seen as a potential that, in a wide range of possibilities, can give a new direction to Croatian tourism. It is the basis of the competitiveness of tourist destinations through its contribution to the preservation of cultural diversity and the sustainability of tourism development. Family businesses, with their heterogeneity (Chua et al.; Bujan, 2020) and specific approach to guests, as well as the diversity of their products, contribute to the differentiation of the destination's tourism product. With an individual and personalised approach to each customer as added value, they ensure a competitive advantage on the tourist market (Miočić, 2019).

The aim of the work is to investigate the place and role of family entrepreneurship in the transformation of the Croatian tourist offer from a zone of adaptability to a zone of promotion of new trends. Analysing the offer of family businesses in Croatian tourism leads to knowledge about their readiness for changes caused by trends in the tourist market, and by comparing family accommodation with the total achieved tourism results at the national level, about their contribution to Croatian tourism.

## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research in the field of family entrepreneurship in the last three decades has resulted in a significant number of theoretical and empirical research in the areas of entrepreneurship, innovation, cooperative economy in tourism, hospitality and family business (Asthana et al., 2022). However, no consensus was reached that would provide a single definition of family entrepreneurship applicable to all areas, public discussions,

political discussions, legal regulations, statistical monitoring and academic research (Astrachan et al., 2002; Kaur and Singh, 2019; Bujan, 2020). In 2007, the European Commission recommended that all member states of the European Union use the definition of family business, according to which "a family business, regardless of size, is one in which a) the majority of decision-making rights are held by the founder(s) or person(s) who bought an ownership share in the company or their spouses, parents, children or direct heirs of children, b) most of the decision-making rights are direct or indirect, c) at least one family representative or relative is formally involved in the management of the company, d) a company whose securities traded on the stock exchange correspond to the definition of a family business if the founder, owner of a part of the company or his family or descendants own at least 25% of the decision-making rights" (Mandl 2008, 98). The definition also applies to family businesses where the generational transfer of ownership has not yet been completed, businesses with one owner and business ventures that were started by self-employment (if there is a legal entity that can be transferred to a new generation). The majority of authors in the Republic of Croatia adhere to the above-mentioned definition (Braut Filipović 2017), and the Center for Small and Medium Enterprises and Entrepreneurship Development Policy (CEPOR) in the Republic of Croatia in a study conducted in 2012 on the development and sustainability of family businesses also supports the adoption of the definition in Republic of Croatia.

The legislation in the Republic of Croatia does not recognise a family business as a legal form. The legal form of a limited liability company is often used, both for small and large family businesses in tourism, and for those that are listed on the capital market, the legal form of a joint-stock company is applied, which allows family members to significantly retain a certain influence in the management companies and at the same time have extra-family influence on investor decision-making (Fleischer, 2017). Furthermore, the legislator enables natural persons to provide catering services in the household and/or family farm (Act on provision of services in tourism, 2017) and by establishing a trade (Act on trades, 2013).

The lack of a definition of family businesses and thus the impossibility of monitoring them makes it impossible to provide data on their exact number. But from the data on 146 hotels and 66 high-quality guesthouses and agro-households gathered in the National Association of Family and Small Hotels (OMH) (National Association of Family and Small Hotels, 2023), more than 760 thousand beds in private rooms (Ministry of Tourism and Sports, 2023) and more than seven thousand trades and freelance professions in the activity of providing accommodation services and preparing and serving food (State Statistical Office, 2023) (hereinafter these legal entities are united under the term 'family business') it is evident that family businesses have potential influencing the development of Croatian tourism. These data, together with the data on the number of small and medium-sized enterprises in the field of providing accommodation services and preparing and serving food and beverages, provide the basis for a relative assessment of the size of family businesses in tourism. This entrepreneurial potential is recognised by the scientific and professional public, and an increasing number of studies focus on acquiring knowledge about the characteristics of family businesses in tourism (Ateljević and Doorne, 2003; Bujan, 2020a) and their impact on business success (Bujan, 2020), the risks of business transfer (Alpeza et al., 2015) and resistance to risks in business (Zehrer et al., 2021) and contribution to the development of tourism (Razović, 2014; Gregorić and Paić, 2016) and others.

According to Puza and Ismail (2017), transgenerational entrepreneurship is potentially a key economic driver in the tourism sector. The influence of three groups of factors: family, ownership and adopted business system (Peters and Buhalis, 2004) make the "family business" model vulnerable. Resistance to various impulses from the environment implies the ability of family businesses to promote the development of sustainable tourism (Baggio and Valeri, 2020). Through innovative changes, family businesses gain resilience and give direction to sustainable business. Kuo et al (2018) point to two elements that lead family entrepreneurs to innovative changes: resources and opportunities. It is very likely that entrepreneurs will show their innovation in the phase of establishing a company and after the period of succession and transfer of ownership between family members. By establishing a company, the entrepreneur has the opportunity to realise his vision, and the presence of heirs in the family business can also represent new opportunities for the company (Salvato, 2004), given that the heirs may have new knowledge and means to implement innovative forms of business.

There are no studies on the innovations of family businesses in Croatian tourism in the literature. Strengthening the quality of Croatian tourism by encouraging the conversion of family accommodation into market-acceptable facilities with higher added value as one of the priority areas for realising the goals of Croatian tourism defined by the Strategy for the Development of Sustainable Tourism until 2030 (2023) indicates the need to deepen knowledge about the model of "family entrepreneurship" as a development opportunities for Croatian tourism and the impact of the innovative approach of designing the tourist product of family businesses on the trends of the Croatian tourist offer and the direction of the sustainable development of Croatian tourism.

## 2. METODOLOGY

The paper examines the readiness of family businesses for the present changing trends in the global tourism market through positive examples of innovative solutions of family businesses that contribute to the new direction of Croatian tourism, towards sustainable development. Analysing secondary data on family accommodation (family hotels, households) and its representation in the total accommodation offer of Croatia enables to find out about the economic contribution of family businesses in Croatian tourism. In the absence of statistical monitoring of family entrepreneurship in tourism in the Republic of Croatia, relevant data on small and medium-sized enterprises and trades and free trades in the activity of providing accommodation and preparing and serving food in the Republic of Croatia are used, data that includes the accommodation offer of small hotels, family camps and households. Data from various studies and reports on the offer of family entrepreneurs from the Croatian Tourist Board and other relevant institutions that monitor innovative projects of family entrepreneurs in tourism are also used. The data are processed with descriptive statistics, and the results are presented in tables and graphics. The goal is to verify whether the "family entrepreneurship" model is an important development opportunity for Croatian tourism and whether family businesses, with their innovative approach to designing a tourist product, are changing trends on the side of the tourist offer and whether they are promoting the differentiation of Croatian tourism on the global tourism market.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Circumstances caused by the Covid-19 pandemic in recent years have stimulated a transformation within tourist travel and the adaptation of the tourism sector to new trends in the tourism market. Many family businesses did not survive, some kept their position on the market by quick adaptation, and some were created on an innovative concept designed for the new 'normal'. The new benchmark for tourist companies is the increased awareness of tourists about sustainability, expediency, and health and well-being. The achieved tourism results in the Republic of Croatia in the first seven months of 2023 with an 8% increase in tourist arrivals compared to the same period in 2019 (State Statistical Office, 2023) highlighted the ability of the Croatian tourism industry to quickly adapt to the new conditions of tourism business. For comparison, at the global level, international tourist arrivals reached 84% of the 2019 level in the first seven months of 2023, and 94% in Europe (UNWTO, 2023). The economic resistance to the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic is also indicated by the realised revenues from tourism, which in 2022 (13.1 billion euros) reached the highest level in the history of Croatian tourism despite all the challenges it faced in order to provide guests with health security as and the present economic and geopolitical challenges in the world that largely dictate the paying power of the population of the emitting tourist market. Current inflation and rising oil prices lead to rising costs of transportation and accommodation, which also affects consumption patterns, and tourists are increasingly looking for 'value for money', traveling to destinations closer to home and using shorter trips (UNWTO, 2023).

The structure of the tourism industry, in which family businesses (family hotels, homestays, restaurants, animation, travel agencies, tour guides) make up the majority, certainly contributes to the resilience of the Croatian tourism industry. Alpeza (2012) estimates that most micro and small businesses in Croatia are family owned and owned by the first generation of entrepreneurs. This particularly applies to the tourism industry, where the majority of companies are micro and small companies (Tables 1), so it can be concluded that family businesses are key in tourism in the Republic of Croatia. The flexibility of family businesses is a characteristic that gives the tourism industry as a whole a competitive advantage.

The data in Table 1 show the growth of the number of micro enterprises (up to 9 employees) in the total number of tourist enterprises in the period from 2012 to 2022 by 19.1%. It is estimated that micro-enterprises are mostly first-generation family businesses that have the potential to develop into next-generation family businesses. Although the Covid-19 pandemic affected the decline in the number of active micro and small businesses in 2020, a recovery of their number can be observed in 2021 and 2022, when micro businesses reach the level of 97% from 2019, and small businesses grow of 3.6%. The reason for this can be found in the increased interest of tourists in Croatia as a tourist destination that provides security in a period of health uncertainty.

**Tables 1.** Structure of companies in the activity of providing accommodation and preparing and serving food in the Republic of Croatia by company size, 2012-2022.

	Total	0-9		10-49		50-249		250 and more	
		Num.	Share in %	Num.	Share in %	Num.	Share in %	Num.	Share in %
2012.	17.545	16.386	93,4	1.020	5,8	117	0,7	22	0,1
2013.	17.862	16.617	93,0	1.100	6,2	122	0,7	23	0,1
2014.	19.532	18.244	93,4	1.148	5,8	118	0,6	22	0,1
2015.	19.790	18.436	93,2	1.217	6,1	115	0,6	22	0,1
2016.	19.913	18.437	92,6	1.333	6,7	119	0,6	24	0,1
2017.	19.911	18.300	91,9	1.456	7,3	126	0,6	29	0,1
2018.	20.592	18.917	91,9	1.517	7,3	130	0,6	28	0,1
2019.	21.888	20.107	91,9	1.628	7,5	129	0,6	24	0,1
2020.	20.772	19.279	92,8	1.383	6,7	94	0,6	16	0,1
2021.	21.101	19.462	92,2	1.517	7,1	104	0,5	18	0,1
2022.	21.353	19.519	91,4	1.687	7,9	127	0,6	20	0,1

Source: Author's calculation according to: Eurostat, 2023.; Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2023.

Small family hotels are a trend in the tourist market. The National Association of Family and Small Hotels brings together 146 hotels, which is about 20% of the total number of Croatian hotels (734 in 2022) (Ministry of Tourism and Sports, 2023). The importance of small family hotels is recognised at the national level in the context of improving the structure and quality of accommodation facilities and the need to encourage investment in the segment of luxury and small family hotels (Croatian Parliament, 2023). Incentives of state institutions to family entrepreneurship encouraged entrepreneurial projects in the segment of small hotels with a high level of service quality (4\* and 5\*). In 2016, the Group of Unique Luxury Hotels was founded as part of the Association of Hoteliers of the Croatian Chamber of Commerce, which brings together high-quality heritage hotels (4\* and 5\*) with up to 60 rooms. The criterion for joining the Group is the provision of a special gourmet experience and a unique sales offer in at least one category (history, culture, nature, conceptual design, experience and innovation) (Croatian Chamber of Commerce, 2023). The group gathers 16 unique Croatian hotels under the Stories brand, which is signed by Croatian Unique Hotels. The group has designed the slogan "You are the Writer", which invites guests to tell the story of their stay at the group's Stories hotel as protagonists. With this brand strategy, Croatia is positioning itself as a destination that provides a luxurious vacation for guests who want a local, authentic experience. Most of them work throughout the year, thus contributing to mitigating the highly pronounced seasonality of Croatian tourism. In addition to the large hotel groups Valamar and Hilton, most of these hotels are part of the portfolio of family businesses. One of them is the Meneghetti Wine Hotel & Winery, a family-owned property that offers a combination of nature, art, gastronomy and hospitality. The hotel, located in the middle of vineyards and olive groves, nurtures a special relationship with art by creating a sculpture garden (Razumović Žmara, 2023).

In addition to hotels, a large hotel group owned by the Lukšić family, consisting of Jadranski luxuries hoteli d.d., operates as part of small family businesses in Croatia. with 12 hotels and villas (with more than 2,100 accommodation units), Plava laguna d.d.

which was joined in 2018 by the company Istraturist d.d. and which manages 20 hotels, 10 apartment complexes and 9 camps (with more than 16 thousand accommodation units) (Plava laguna, 2023) and Hotel "Croatia" d.d. In the total number of hotel capacities in the Republic of Croatia, this group accounts for 14.2%, and only with Blue Lagoon d.d. contributes to the total number of tourist overnight stays in the Republic of Croatia with 8.0% in 2022.

Furthermore, the data of 61% of the total accommodation capacities of the Republic of Croatia in family accommodation indicates that entrepreneurship is counted among the propulsive segments of tourism (Buble, 2018). The rapid growth of family accommodation in the last two decades, which recorded double-digit numbers (from 273,833 in 2000 to 762,063 in 2022), is a reflection of the growth in demand for the so-called the new tourist who is looking for authenticity and an individual approach, which the family business provides. Family entrepreneurship, in the past linked exclusively to coastal destinations and islands, most often in the catering and accommodation segment, is expanding to continental parts of Croatia. In addition to catering and accommodation, various forms of tourism are being developed, for example, excursion, gastronomic, active, agro-tourism, etc. (Buble et al., 2018). With an innovative approach, family entrepreneurs offer various thematic contents that make the guests' stay more meaningful and attractive. A good example is the special activity of riding and swimming with horses in the sea (Ranch Wind near Supetar on the island of Brač), quad safari, paintball, etc. The growing interest in staying in nature among modern tourists as a counterbalance to their urban, fast-paced and often stressful life life, family entrepreneurs use in the design of a tourist product along with wine roads, lavender roads, olive oil roads, etc. on which they offer guests local products from the family farm and the possibility of recreation and entertainment in an authentic environment. On the wine roads in Istria, for example, there are more than 110 winemakers who allow their guests to taste wine in tasting rooms along with other traditional dishes. The olive oil roads represented in Istria also spread in Dalmatia. The Dalmatinska zagora - Adriatic Provence project is also an important segment of the enrichment of Croatia's tourist offer, which aims to stimulate the development of rural tourism in the Adriatic hinterland. Tourism in symbiosis with winegrowers and olive growers who achieve high quality of their products, especially in organic production, gives Croatian added value to the tourist product. The importance of gastronomy and oenology in the Croatian tourist offer is also indicated by the data on 200-300 thousand overnight stays, or about 1% in Istrian tourism (Horwath HTL, 2015) motivated by gastronomy. In 2022, the zero waste coffee bar "Život" was opened in Poreč, in the operation of which five zero waste rules (5Rs) were implemented: refuse (eng. reduce), reduce (eng. reuse), recycle and compost. Family entrepreneurs who do not ignore the new needs of tourists but respond to their demands with new tourist products achieve competitiveness and originality compared to the competition.

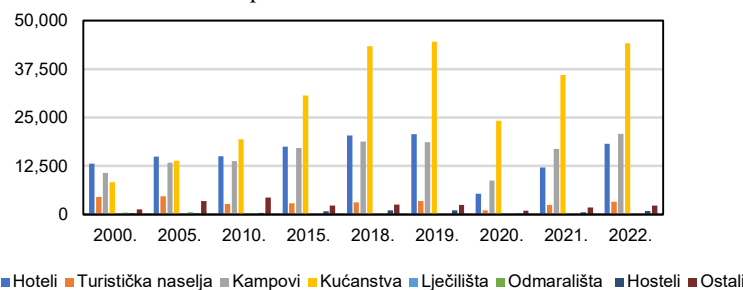
The innovation of the tourist product is also encouraged through the village revitalisation project, which aims to stop the process of depopulation of the Croatian countryside and the departure of young people, the impossibility of employment and other problems that accompany the Croatian countryside, as well as the financing of rural tourism within the framework of the Common Agricultural Policy of the European Union member states and other forms of financing. It should be noted that 61% of the territory of the Republic of Croatia is rural. Local action groups (LAG) operate in the areas of local self-government units and implement Local Development Strategies (LDS) in accordance with the LIDER approach. They promote sustainable rural development and

raise the level of quality of life in the areas where they operate using funds from European funds and other funding sources. The revitalisation of the village also affects the enrichment of Croatia's tourist offer. In cooperation with LAGs, the Smart Villages' concept is being implemented, which is implemented at the level of the European Union and includes, among other things, activities that contribute to innovative and smart solutions in villages. An example of the project are online platforms that allow tourists and local residents to book public transport from one destination to another in the rural area, an interactive map for walking through the village where you can listen to information and stories from the village using a QR code, etc. (Interactive map Brodsko-Posavina County - Garčin (localities, hiking and cycling trails, for example), which helps family entrepreneurs in creating their own tourist offer.

Croatia is rich in diversity, so tourists can have a dynamic tourist experience in an authentic environment of Croatian traditional culture. Rural tourism in Croatia includes various activities, services and additional facilities organised by the rural population on family farms in order to attract tourists to their area and generate additional income (Ružić and Demonja, 2013). The accommodation capacity in family farms in Croatia is 3,506 beds, and a growth of 33.1% was achieved compared to 2019 (Croatian Tourist Board, 2022).

Buble et al. (2018) state that "new customers" are increasingly investing in family accommodation capacities, as indicated by the growth of tourist traffic in family accommodation (Chart 1). In 2022, 44.2 tourist overnight stays were realised in family accommodation, which is a multiple increase compared to the year 2000 (8.3 million tourist overnight stays) (Ministry of Tourism and Sports, 2023).

The data in Chart 1 show that tourist overnight stays in family accommodation in the period from 2000 to 2022 had an average annual growth rate of 26.7%, which is ten times higher than the growth of tourist overnight stays in hotel accommodation. It can also be seen that in 2022, tourist overnight stays in hotels were at the level of 88.0% from 2019, and in family accommodation at the level of 99.2%. Although family entrepreneurship is not officially defined (Buble et al., 2018), projections indicate that projects undertaken by family entrepreneurs contribute to the growth of tourist traffic and, consequently, the tourism income of the Republic of Croatia. By realising their projects, they contribute to the differentiation of the tourist product of the destination.



**Figure 1.** Realized tourist overnight stays in the Republic of Croatia by type of facilities, 2000-2022. In thousands  
 Source: Author's, according to: Ministry of tourism and sport, 2023; Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2023.



## CONCLUSION

The activities of family entrepreneurs and projections of realised tourist traffic in family accommodation indicate that the "family business" model is an important link in Croatian tourism and an important development opportunity for Croatian tourism. The tourism results show the readiness of Croatian tourism for changes, especially in family accommodation. Although family businesses in tourism are not statistically monitored, numerous examples of innovation by family entrepreneurs in tourism indicate the developed awareness of family entrepreneurs in Croatian tourism about the importance of innovation in order to achieve competitiveness on the market. The importance of family entrepreneurship in Croatian tourism is recognised in the strategic determinants of Croatian tourism, as indicated by incentives and support for the development of family entrepreneurship. With their innovative tourism products, family businesses contribute to the recognition of Croatia on the tourist market as a destination for sustainable tourism as a new direction in Croatian tourism.

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