

## European Climate Policy Impact on Rural Tourism in Bulgaria

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### Abstract

The tourism sector is of a high significance to the Bulgarian economy, as more than 11% of the country's GDP is generated by the sector. The political and macroeconomic developments in Europe in the last few years had a significant impact on the sector, but the impact of climate change has been a rising concern for many tourism operators in Bulgaria. The European Union is involved in creating overarching solutions, that will work for all member states as part of The European Green Deal. Rural communities in Bulgaria face a demographic crisis alongside the climate one, as young people are leaving. Rural tourism has been a viable solution to keep young entrepreneurs in rural areas and have created opportunities for rural communities in Bulgaria. For rural tourism to keep developing a sustainable solution to climate change must be implemented by ways of European policy, as local resources are inefficient to face these problems. The goal of this study is to analyze the impact of European climate policies on the ongoing development of rural tourism in Bulgaria, in its struggle with the impact of climate change on rural communities.

**Keywords:** European Green Deal, Rural Areas, Sustainability.

**JEL Classification:** Z32, R51

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## **1. Introduction**

European climate policy plays a significant role in shaping the landscape of rural tourism in Bulgaria, presenting both opportunities and challenges. As rural areas increasingly shift their focus toward tourism, European Union (EU) policies aim to promote sustainable practices that align with environmental goals while also benefiting local economies. According to the new national definition (Strategic plan for the development of agriculture and rural areas for the period 2023-2027), a rural area in Bulgaria is defined as a municipality (LAU 1) in which no settlement has a population exceeding 15,000 people. With 215 out of 265 municipalities, or approximately 81%, classified as rural in 2023, this definition highlights the vast geographical spread and economic potential of these regions for tourism-driven growth. The classification of 215 municipalities as rural opens up significant opportunities for the development of sustainable rural tourism in Bulgaria. However, realizing this potential requires a strategic approach that includes investment in infrastructure, protection of local culture and the environment, and effective use of EU resources. If managed well, rural tourism could become a cornerstone of economic resilience and sustainable development in these regions.

## **2. The Literature Review**

Rural tourism in Bulgaria is inherently multifaceted, encompassing a range of activities driven by active local community involvement. It supports sustainable socio-economic development by promoting local traditions, crafts, and agricultural practices, offering financial and social benefits to rural communities.

Rural tourism is the emphasis on community involvement, where local populations actively participate in tourism-related activities, helping to preserve cultural heritage and traditions (Ionuț-Adrian et al., 2024). This form of tourism also plays a crucial role in economic diversification, offering rural communities an opportunity to enhance their agricultural income while creating jobs in related sectors (Evgrafova, 2024; V & M.C., 2023). Moreover, rural tourism showcases the cultural and natural attractions of rural areas, providing visitors with authentic experiences centered on rural life, art, culture, and heritage (Joseph & Varghese, 2023).

Rural tourism in Bulgaria has witnessed a notable increase in popularity since the late 20th century, emerging as a critical driver for the revitalization of rural areas. The sector is considered a key component of the broader rural development strategy, as it contributes to the diversification of economic activities. The European Union (EU) has consistently prioritized the support of rural tourism through various financial instruments, recognizing its potential to foster sustainable economic growth and enhance the socio-economic resilience of rural communities.

Despite the considerable potential of rural tourism to stimulate regional development, its progress has been slower than anticipated. One of the main barriers to its growth is the underdeveloped institutional framework, which limits the ability of local communities to effectively organize, promote, and sustain tourism initiatives (Bozhinova and Georgieva, 2023). Additionally, the financial environment remains suboptimal, with limited access to funding and financial resources for local businesses and entrepreneurs looking to invest in tourism infrastructure and services.

Furthermore, the impact of European climate policies, which increasingly emphasize sustainability and environmental preservation (Houbenova-Delisivkova, 2024), plays a pivotal role in shaping the trajectory of rural tourism in Bulgaria. These policies encourage the adoption of eco-friendly practices and the promotion of climate-resilient tourism models, which can benefit rural areas by enhancing their attractiveness as eco-tourism destinations. However, the implementation of these policies often presents challenges, particularly in regions with limited capacity for adaptation. The aging

population, coupled with insufficient interest from professional tourism organizations, further complicates the situation, hindering the development of the sector.

In addition, the slow pace of regional development (Dicharry, 2023) and the insufficient infrastructure in many rural areas make it difficult to realize the full potential of rural tourism (Atanasov, et.al., 2023). Climate change considerations are becoming increasingly central in EU policy frameworks, requiring rural tourism destinations to adapt to new environmental challenges such as extreme weather events and fluctuating seasonal patterns. These factors, combined with the weak integration of tourism into local economic strategies, underscore the need for comprehensive institutional and financial reforms to fully capitalize on the potential of rural tourism as a tool for sustainable regional development.

While rural tourism in Bulgaria offers significant opportunities for economic diversification and regional revitalization, its development is impeded by various structural and policy-related challenges. The evolving European climate policies, which focus on sustainability, pose both opportunities and challenges for the sector, requiring a more robust institutional framework and financial support mechanisms to facilitate the long-term success of rural tourism in the face of environmental and demographic changes. The lack of business experience and the negative image of rural festivals also contribute to the limited development of this sector (Yarkova & Stoykova, 2008).

Rural tourism contributes significantly to sustainable development by promoting environmental, economic, and social sustainability. It fosters a balance between these aspects, ensuring that rural communities can grow without compromising environmental integrity (Evgrafova, 2024). Another advantage is the improvement of local infrastructure, as tourism often leads to the development of better roads, facilities, and public services that benefit both tourists and residents alike (Joseph & Varghese, 2023). Despite its many advantages, rural tourism in Bulgaria faces challenges, such as inadequate service quality and underdeveloped infrastructure, which hinder its full potential (Cvijanović & Gajić, 2024). Addressing these obstacles, alongside leveraging the opportunities created by EU climate policies, will be key to maximizing the benefits of rural tourism in the country.

Rural tourism, particularly within the framework of the European Green Deal, exemplifies a sustainable model that prioritizes environmental conservation, cultural preservation, and economic development in rural regions. This approach aligns with the Green Deal's goals by promoting eco-friendly practices and enhancing the socio-economic resilience of rural communities. In Bulgaria, rural tourism holds substantial potential within this framework, offering opportunities for sustainable growth through active community involvement. The incorporation of environmentally conscious practices not only supports the Green Deal's objectives but also stimulates economic development while safeguarding cultural heritage and natural resources.

Rural tourism in the European context refers to a strategy for economic and social development in rural areas, aligning with the European Green Deal's focus on sustainable growth and community well-being (Rajović & Bulatović, 2017).

Several key aspects can be identified in rural tourism, which highlight its multifaceted role in sustainable development:

### ***Sustainability and Environmental Impact***

The European Green Deal promotes sustainable tourism practices that can significantly enhance rural tourism in Bulgaria by fostering local entrepreneurship and preserving the authenticity of rural experiences. Rural green tourism focuses on minimizing environmental impact while prioritizing the conservation of natural resources, aligning economic growth with ecological preservation (Cherep et al.,

2023). This focus aligns with the European Green Deal's broader goals of achieving climate neutrality and fostering biodiversity.

### ***Cultural Exchange and Local Engagement***

Rural tourism promotes both cultural exchange and environmental conservation, aligning with the European Green Deal's objectives of reducing the ecological footprint of tourism. A key feature of rural tourism is the interaction between tourists and local communities, which not only fosters cultural exchange but also aids in the preservation of local traditions. Diversifying tourism offerings, particularly through family-run farms and locally-driven initiatives, strengthens community resilience and supports long-term sustainability (Cherep et al., 2023, Bieloborodova et al., 2023, Yarkova & Stoykova, 2008). Such cultural engagement is essential for the sustainable development of tourism in rural areas.

### ***Economic Development***

Rural tourism has the potential to drive economic development in less developed areas by creating jobs and attracting investment in infrastructure, such as accommodations and transportation. It contributes to local economies by providing employment opportunities and offering a diversified, non-agricultural income source for rural communities. This form of tourism addresses socio-economic challenges by stimulating local industries and fostering economic growth. Additionally, the EU's financial instruments can play a crucial role in supporting sustainable tourism initiatives, promoting collaboration between the public and private sectors to ensure long-term success (Makhynia, 2023; Shevchenko & Petrushenko, 2021 & Aleksandrova, 2019).

However, some critiques highlight the risk of over-commercialization in rural tourism, which can threaten the cultural and environmental values it seeks to uphold. Thus, balancing tourism expansion with sustainability remains a critical challenge for the sector.

### **Alternative employment of people in rural areas generates additional income. Creates new opportunities for tourism in Bulgaria.**

The social entrepreneurship in rural areas can boost employment, create new markets like tourism, and enhance quality of life through innovative approaches and local resource utilization. Alternative tourism in Bulgaria's rural areas offers new income sources beyond traditional agriculture, fostering sustainable growth and creating diverse opportunities for economic development through tourism. The innovative organic agriculture model in Bulgaria creates additional income and links to alternative tourism, enhancing rural development and offering new opportunities for sustainable economic growth (Petrova et al., 2023).

A study shows that alternative employment in rural areas, such as rural tourism, which can generate additional income and create new opportunities, potentially applicable to Bulgaria's rural economy (Fedotova et al., 2020).

## **3. Findings**

European green policies have a significant impact on rural tourism, promoting sustainability and environmental preservation while encouraging the development of eco-friendly tourism models. Key policies such as the European Green Deal, EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, and the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) are central to shaping sustainable rural tourism in Europe.

The European Green Deal, aimed at making Europe the first climate-neutral continent by 2050, encourages rural tourism destinations to adopt sustainable practices, reduce carbon emissions, and transition to renewable energy sources. This supports the development of eco-tourism and nature-based tourism experiences, which are increasingly attractive to environmentally conscious travelers.

While these policies offer significant opportunities, they also present challenges, as rural destinations may face difficulties in adapting to the technical and financial requirements for sustainability. Nevertheless, with appropriate support, these policies have the potential to drive the development of resilient, sustainable rural tourism across Europe.

Bulgarian tourism sector has improved since the accession of the country to the European Union in 2007. The number of tourists visiting the country as well as the time spent by them have increased steadily from 2015 up until 2020, as evident in Table 1. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism sector globally have not missed Bulgaria and the total nights spent in accommodations fell by more than 55%.

**Table 1. Nights spent at tourist accommodation establishments by degree of urbanisation and coastal/non-coastal area (million per year)**

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Total	21,7	21,4	25,2	26,1	26,8	27,2	11,97	17,6	24,2	26,9
Rural areas	6,1	5,8	6,9	6,5	7,7	7,9	4,2	5,5	6,9	7,7
Ratio of rural tourism	28%	27%	27%	25%	29%	29%	35%	31%	29%	29%

**Source:** Own calculations based on data from Eurostat (Eurostat, 2024)

The recovery from this rapid decline took three years and in 2023 the number of nights reached the levels of 2018 and is on track to surpass the 2019 levels by the end of 2024. This rapid decline has not been true for the rural tourism subsector, as the decline in it was by 48% and thus the ratio of nights spent in rural tourism accommodations have increased by 6% from 2019 to 2020. This lesser withdraw form rural tourism accommodations is largely due to their distance form urban centers and the easier compliance to distancing regulations during that period. The post-pandemic recovery of the rural tourism kept the pace of the sector and is on track to fully recover by the end of 2024.

When examining the impact of rural tourism on the development of the sector we chose to use the ratio of nights spent in rural establishments. The biggest ratio is evident in 2020 due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the sector. In other periods the ratio has not surpassed 29%, which is still a significant portion of the tourism business in the country. This significant impact requires a further examination of the development of the sector during the studied period. Bulgaria's tourism sector is focused on attracting international tourists, as they build up to 65% of the nights spent at tourist accommodations in some years of the studied period, as evident in Table 2. In 2018 from the 26.8 million nights spent in tourist establishments in Bulgaria, just 9.1 million are accounted towards Bulgarian tourists. This international focus of the tourist sector has led to a higher impact of the pandemic withdraw of travelers.

**Table 2. Nights spent at tourist accommodation establishments by country of origin of the tourist (million per year)**

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Total	21,7	21,4	25,2	26,1	26,8	27,2	11,97	17,6	24,2	26,9
Bulgaria	7,6	8,1	9,0	8,9	9,1	9,7	7,3	9,6	11,3	12,3
Domestic ratio	35%	38%	36%	34%	34%	36%	61%	55%	47%	46%

**Source:** Own calculations based on data from Eurostat (Eurostat, 2024)

Bulgarian tourism sector has suffered the results of its overreliance on foreign participation and in the recovery period the ratio of domestic tourism has increased by 10% in 2023 as compared to 2019. Refocusing tourism offerings in Bulgaria towards domestic clients, is a significant shift in policy, that will impact the sustainability of the sector in the long term. This switch in the focus would have a positive impact on the development of rural tourism, since that part of the sector has been relatively more angled towards the domestic market (Table 3). In 2015 more than 50% of the tourists visiting rural



establishments in the country were Bulgarians and during the pandemic that ratio have risen to 77% (in 2020).

**Table 3. Ratio of nights spent at rural tourist accommodation establishments by origin of tourists (million per year)**

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Domestic country	2,97	3,13	3,50	2,87	3,68	4,09	3,21	4,01	4,65	5,03
Foreign country	3,12	2,71	3,41	3,60	4,03	3,77	0,95	1,48	2,26	2,65
Domestic ratio	49%	54%	51%	44%	48%	52%	77%	73%	67%	65%

Source: Own calculations based on data from Eurostat (Eurostat, 2024)

The decline in nights spent by domestic tourists in rural establishment in 2020 was just 22%, smaller than any other sub-sector. The support that local tourists have given to the rural establishments continued, as the pre-pandemic numbers were recovered by 2022. In 2023 Bulgarians spent more than 5 million nights in rural establishments and formed 65% of the sales in the sector.

**Table 4. Ratio of bed-places in establishments in rural tourist accommodation (thousand)**

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Total	314,2	322,5	328,3	348,7	335,6	341,5	281,7	304,2	354,7	359,8
Rural areas	105,6	105,1	113,6	104,5	115,7	119,9	no data	107,1	128,5	132,7
Ratio of rural establishments	34%	33%	35%	30%	34%	35%		35%	36%	37%

Source: Own calculations based on data from Eurostat

In order to assess the role of rural tourism for the development of the sector as a whole an analysis of its productive capacity must be done. In Table 4 the ratio of available beds in rural establishments is presented. The capacity has been building up to 2017, when the number of available beds in accommodations have increased to over 348 thousand. In the year after the number decreased and then further declined as a result from the pandemic. The quick recovery of the sector is evident in its productive capacity as well, in 2022 there were already more rural accommodations than any previous year, and that number kept increasing in 2023.

In 2023 although the rural accommodations accounted for 37% of the sector's capacity, it was used at a much lower rate, as it represented just 29% of the number of nights spent in tourist accommodations in the country. This significant difference proves that there still is a meaningful opportunity for growth of the economic impact of the sub-sector without further investments in its' productive capacity.

This unfulfillment of the productive capacity of Bulgarian rural tourism accommodations can be explained by the higher average size of the establishments. Presented in Table 5 is the comparison between the average size of rural tourism establishments in Bulgaria and in the European Union.

The average size of the rural tourism establishment in Bulgaria has decreased throughout the studied period, which is evident in Europe as a whole as well. The process of shrinking of rural establishments is more significant in Bulgaria, as the average size have decreased by 12,06 beds from 2014 to 2023, while at the same time the European average has declined by 3,61 beds. This greater size has led to a larger than optimal capacity and thus part of it is yet to be fulfilled. The rural tourism sector needs to focus its efforts on better marketing and promotion of its services to local and international consumers in order to draw more tourists and make use of its full capacity.

The number of rural tourist establishments declined in 2021, due to the closing of some of them during the pandemic. In latter years the numbers have recovered and by 2023 there are nearly 2000 rural

establishments. Some of these have faced sanctions by the EU courts, after an investigation in 2022 by the European Commission on funding allocation as part of the Program for the development of rural areas in Bulgaria. As a result, from that investigation on 377 establishments in rural areas where funds were allocated towards building up tourism capacity, Bulgaria was forced to reimburse 23 million euro, due to lack of adequate monitoring and spending. These issues have created an air of mistrust among the population and have added to the slowing down of the growth of the sector.

**Table 5. Average size of rural tourism establishments in Bulgaria and the European Union**

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Establishments	1,344	1,388	1,480	1,356	1,593	1,716	-	1,583	1,978	1,996
Bedplaces	105,6	105,1	113,6	104,5	115,7	119,9	-	107,1	128,5	132,7
Average size of est. in Bulgaria	78.59	75.69	76.80	77.08	72.64	69.91		67.68	64.97	66.50
Average size of est. in EU	46.81	46.31	45.13	42.39	43.13	43.51		43.94	43.60	43.20

**Source:** Own calculations based on data from Eurostat (Eurostat, 2024)

The Rural pact community has been supported by members of the European Commission, that have reinforced the ten shared goals for European rural areas (Transition pathway for tourism, 2022). As part of these goals rural communities will have support for the development of the infrastructure that is necessary for the development of rural areas and the tourism establishments in them.

As part of the European agenda for tourism 2023 there is a clear focus on digital and green transitions in the tourism ecosystem, though respecting the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality, based on collaboration between stakeholders across sectors and public and private actors at EU, national, regional and local levels (Council conclusions on European Agenda for Tourism 2030, 2022).

The EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 focuses on protecting natural habitats and promoting biodiversity, creating opportunities for rural tourism based on conservation and nature preservation. This policy encourages rural destinations to develop tourism products centered on environmental education, wildlife watching, and hiking, while safeguarding ecosystems. Additionally, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) promotes environmentally sustainable farming practices and offers financial incentives for rural areas to enhance their landscape and cultural heritage, further supporting sustainable tourism initiatives.

The EU has launched key institutional initiatives to protect agricultural production, ensure food security and promote environmental protection and social cohesion in rural areas, recognizing that climate change brings not only economic, but also environmental and social risks. The new Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) for 2023-2027 is designed to meet these challenges by integrating ambitious European environmental and climate goals. This transition to a sustainable, ecological and digital agri-food model is of key importance not only for agriculture, but also for rural tourism. Sustainable agricultural practices will make rural areas more attractive to tourists seeking eco-friendly destinations that offer nature conservation opportunities and authentic experiences. Policies such as the European Green Deal, the Farm to Fork strategy and biodiversity initiatives will support the development of tourism based on the ecological and cultural resources of rural areas. Also, 40% of the CAP budget is earmarked for climate action, which will ensure stable support for green initiatives and stimulate the development of tourism activities in line with sustainable development and environmental protection.

The Farm to Fork strategy included in the European Green Deal contributes to increasing care for the environment and overall climate awareness in the process of the green transformation of agriculture. It covers activities through which rural tourism can be promoted in several ways: support

for local products, sustainable agriculture, education and awareness, support for innovation, creation of networks.

The European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) also plays a crucial role in supporting rural tourism, an essential component of sustainable rural development. By financing initiatives related to the Common Agricultural Policy, the EAFRD contributes to achieving EU objectives, such as enhancing the competitiveness of agriculture, promoting sustainable management of natural resources, and ensuring balanced socio-economic development in rural communities. The Fund provides assistance to farmers and rural residents, with a focus on increasing resilience and competitiveness, particularly in the context of rural tourism. By integrating rural tourism into rural development strategies, the EAFRD not only supports farmers but also creates new opportunities for economic growth, cultural enrichment, and the preservation of natural resources, which are vital for the sustainable future of rural communities (General Directorate Budget, 2021).

In its latest planned period the Program for the development of the Republic of Bulgaria of rural areas have allocated 98 million euro to be spent in 2024 and 2025 for non-agricultural activities with that intervention aiming to cover micro-enterprises, which are the main source of growth and the creation of more jobs, including the diversification of the economic activities of farmers who are predominate in these areas. Economic development in rural areas should facilitate economic activity and stimulate activities to promote local competitiveness, achieve the vitality of rural settlements and the quality and standard of living, as well as improve the level of development of human capital and infrastructure.

The non-agricultural activities measure provides support for investments that are aimed at: other production activities; development of services in all sectors (for example: childcare, elderly, disabled, health services, accounting and auditing services, veterinary activities and IT-based services, etc.) and development of crafts.

A very important point in the program is that tourist activities related to the construction/repair/reconstruction of accommodations are not eligible for support. Measure 6.4 of the Program for the development of rural areas - Investments in support of non-agricultural activities has excluded the support for tourism capacity building due to the forementioned controversies (Program for the development of rural areas of the Republic of Bulgaria 2014-2020). Currently the rural tourism sector is cut from a very important source of funding until at least 2026 and businesses must look elsewhere for support.

The REPowerEU plan proposed by the European Commission aims to rapidly reduce the European Union's dependence on Russian fossil fuels. Renewable energy and energy efficiency measures include: increasing the renewable energy target to 45% in the EU by 2030; accelerated deployment of 320 GW of solar PV by 2025 and 600 GW by 2030; introduction of an EU initiative for solar roofs with legally binding requirements; doubling the deployment of heat pumps to reach 10 million units by 2027; decarbonisation of industry through electrification and renewable hydrogen; optimization of the permitting process for renewable energy projects; increasing the energy savings target to 13% by 2030; €800 million for clean energy infrastructure projects under the REPowerEU plan. The funds will enable Member States to transfer up to 12.5% of the funds allocated under the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development to the Recovery and Resilience Mechanism. This will accelerate the implementation of projects in rural areas by providing farmers with financial support to reduce the use of synthetic fertilizers and increase the production of sustainable biomethane and renewable energy. These measures will not only improve the sustainability of agricultural practices, but also promote rural tourism by making rural areas more attractive to eco-tourists looking for nature-friendly and energy-efficient destinations (Communication From The Commission To The European Parliament, 2022).



At the national level, Bulgaria's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP, 2020) is a key tool for addressing the economic and social challenges associated with the pandemic and climate change, emphasizing the sustainable development of rural areas and rural tourism. Through investment in infrastructure, support for environmental initiatives, promotion of sustainable agriculture and implementation of green technologies, the plan aims to improve living conditions and attract tourists. Education programs and cooperation between local authorities and organizations will help raise awareness of environmental protection, which will ultimately contribute to revitalizing rural communities and building a sustainable future.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Bulgarian rural tourism has shown consistent growth in terms of the number of establishments and overnight stays before the COVID-19 pandemic, with a gradual recovery after 2021. The pandemic's impact was less pronounced in rural areas due to their inherent characteristics and the easier compliance with social distancing regulations. However, the full potential of rural tourist establishments in Bulgaria remains untapped, and further efforts are needed to promote rural tourism activities. A significant proportion of visitors to rural establishments are domestic tourists, creating a solid base for sustainable growth and offering opportunities to improve the social support for the sector, which is currently lacking. Domestic visitors are more familiar with and appreciative of the unique experiences rural tourism offers, making them an essential component of the sector's future development.

Despite these positive developments, past controversies, particularly the exclusion of tourism activities from European funding opportunities under the Program for Rural Development of the Republic of Bulgaria 2014-2020, have negatively affected the size of rural tourism establishments. These establishments have declined faster than their European counterparts, indicating a preference among tourists for smaller, more traditional, and curated experiences, which larger establishments are less likely to provide.

The European Green Deal can play a pivotal role in supporting the development of rural tourism in Bulgaria by promoting sustainability and eco-friendly practices. Through the REPowerEU plan, rural areas can benefit from accelerated projects that aim to reduce dependency on fossil fuels and promote the use of renewable energy. This can directly impact rural tourism by making these areas more sustainable, reducing their carbon footprint, and increasing their appeal to eco-conscious tourists.

Additionally, the Recovery and Resilience Facility can provide much-needed financial support for Bulgarian farmers and rural enterprises to implement sustainable agricultural practices, such as reducing the use of synthetic fertilizers and adopting more environmentally friendly methods. By fostering cleaner environments and more sustainable agricultural practices, Bulgaria can create conditions that make its rural tourism destinations more attractive, aligning with the broader EU objective of preserving rural landscapes and biodiversity.

Moreover, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) provides financial incentives for sustainable rural development and environmental stewardship. This policy can help improve the infrastructure and quality of services in rural areas, making them more appealing to tourists seeking authentic, nature-based experiences. By supporting small-scale, traditional farming and promoting eco-tourism, Bulgaria can enhance its rural tourism offerings and integrate them into the EU's broader goals of environmental conservation and sustainable development.

In conclusion, EU policies like the European Green Deal, REPowerEU, Recovery and Resilience Facility, and CAP have the potential to significantly boost the development of rural tourism in Bulgaria. By promoting sustainability, supporting local farmers, and encouraging eco-friendly



practices, these policies can enhance the attractiveness of rural Bulgaria as a destination while contributing to the sector's long-term resilience and growth.

**Competing Interests**

*The authors declare that they have no competing interests.*

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**Ethical Statement**

*It is declared that scientific and ethical principles have been followed while carrying out and writing this study and that all the sources used have been properly cited.*

**Authors' contributions**

*The authors have contributed equally to the study.*

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