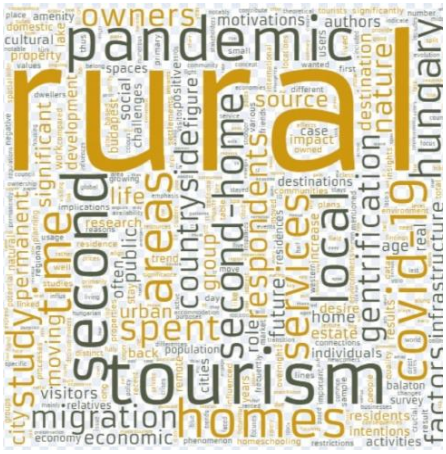
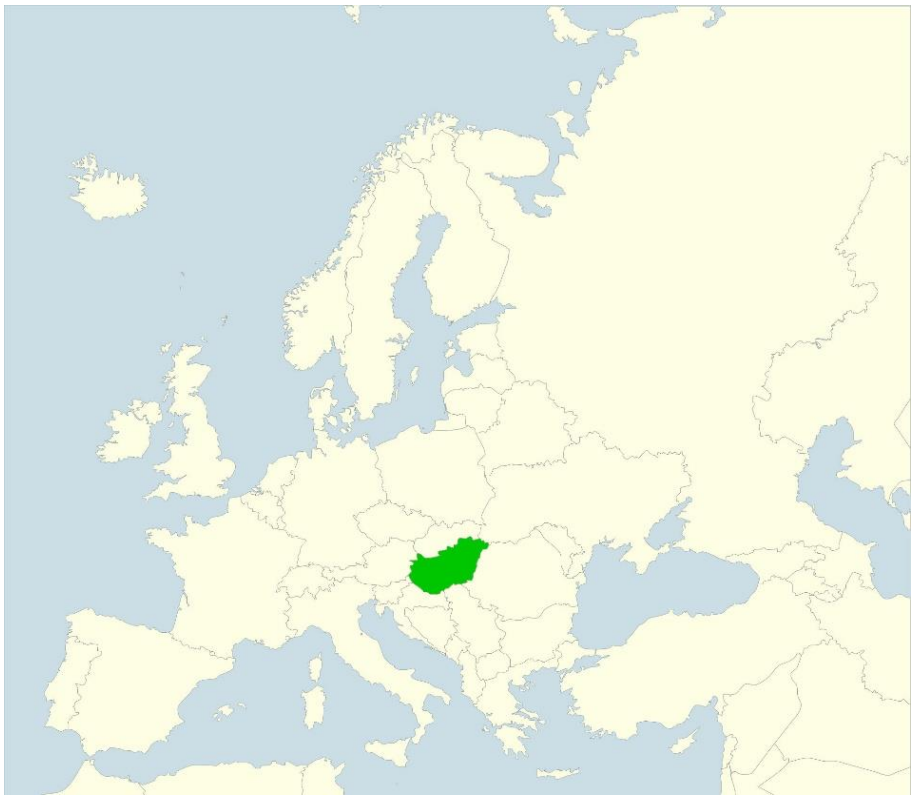
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'IS SECOND THE NEW FIRST?' – THE CONVERSION OF SECOND HOMES INTO PRIMARY ONES DURING AND AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic has brought profound changes to the realm of second-home tourism, with far-reaching consequences for rural areas. Our quantitative survey of Hungary explores the multifaceted implications of this transformation along three axes: motivations, usage patterns, and future intentions. The results show that the COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced the trend of rural gentrification, turning many second-homes into permanent residences. Two locations play a crucial role in this phenomenon: Budapest as a source on the one hand, and traditional destinations, primarily Lake Balaton, on the other. The sudden increase of users posed challenges for the local infrastructure and public services, and the differences in values, preferences, and behaviour between new and old residents, may also create tensions and problems. Policymakers face the delicate task of balancing local needs with those of the burgeoning second-home population. Shaping a sustainable future for rural areas therefore requires strategic planning in order to amplify the positive impact and mitigate potential drawbacks.

Keywords: second-home tourism, rural gentrification, rural tourism, COVID-19, amenity migration

Highlights

- COVID-19-fuelled gentrification turns second-home owners into rural dwellers and transforms tourism dynamics.
- Crucial role of the Budapest-Balaton nexus; traditional rural destinations gain significance.
- Nature and remote work drive the move to rural areas, strengthening the local service economy.
- Balancing local needs and managing infrastructure stress are crucial for policymakers.
- Strategic planning and policies are required to mitigate the negative effects and enhance the positive ones.

1. Introduction

Second-home tourism, deeply rooted in various cultural traditions (Back & Marjavaara, 2017), has undergone significant changes in recent decades, further accelerated by the global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (Pitkänen, Lehtimäki & Puhakka, 2020; Inanir, 2021; Zoğal, Domènech, Emekli, 2022; Colomb & Gallent, 2022). Evolving economic and social trends, coupled with an increased emphasis on nature in contemporary life (Louv, 2010), have drawn urban visitors to rural areas boasting picturesque landscapes and untouched natural environments. Simultaneously, the evolution of tourism towards a visitor-centric economy has heightened the role of specific stakeholders, among them second-home owners. The ownership of a rural second home has been linked to positive impacts on the health and well-being of urban dwellers (Pitkänen et al., 2020), transforming rural spaces into sought-after living alternatives for the urban middle class. The COVID-19 pandemic has further emphasised the importance of local communities, domestic visitors, and nearby source markets. During the pandemic, there was a notable surge in the demand for green spaces and private environments, leading urban dwellers to seek refuge in rural areas (Pitkänen et al., 2020; Smith, Phillips, Culora & Kinton, 2021; Åberg & Tondelli, 2021). This surge in second-home development not only shapes the landscape of tourism destinations, but also significantly influences the (re)development of rural areas. Social distancing measures, including remote work and distance learning, facilitated this migration to safer rural environments. However, the influx of second-home owners posed challenges to local infrastructures and public services for rural communities, underscoring the delicate balance between rural development and the preservation of local resources.

The main objective of this study is to assess the COVID-19-induced transformation of rural second-home tourism and gentrification (Phillips, 1993) in Hungary. The dynamic boom in rural and second-home tourism in numerous Hungarian destinations has triggered substantial economic, social, and cultural

changes, both positive and negative. The increase in tourism services, the growing number of day visitors and overnight tourists, and the acquisition of rural properties by the urban middle class have been trends in Hungary for some time. While the new owners of rural homes have traditionally leaned towards refurbishing their properties, they rarely relocated there. Instead, these properties were predominantly used as second homes and/or rented out to tourists. The COVID-19 crisis has significantly altered this picture, and there has been a discernible shift towards the conversion of second homes into permanent residences.

This research focuses on three key areas: 1) ***motivation*** – exploring the reasons that prompted individuals to spend more time in rural areas during the COVID-19 pandemic; 2) ***usage*** – examining how urban individuals utilised rural spaces, services, and activities during the pandemic; and 3) ***future intentions*** – investigating plans for settling down and transforming second homes into primary residences.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Rural and second-home tourism

In the Western world, tourism became a global phenomenon after WWII (Cohen, 1984), resulting in the establishment of a fast-growing tourism industry (Urry & Larsen, 2011). While the early stages of the mass-tourism era focused on waterside destinations, historical cities, and locations specially developed for this purpose, today's global tourism mobility enables any remote or untouched place to join this business. As a consequence of industrialisation and urbanisation, agriculture is becoming less important, which is why revitalisation and (re)development through tourism is an appealing prospect for numerous rural destinations. This study relies on the UNWTO's (2010)[5] definition of rural tourism[6]. Thus, rural tourism is understood in a wider sense and also includes day trippers, tourists, and second-home owners. When studying the second-home phenomenon, the broader concept of the 'visitor economy' also has to be mentioned as a relevant theoretical framework. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), the term describes any direct, indirect, and induced economic activity, resulting from visitors' interaction with a destination outside their usual environment[7]. Compared to previous understandings of tourism, the visitor economy focuses on the impact on the respective destination of a wide array of visitors, including also locals, as well as the much more varied supply of leisure-oriented products and services. In the case of Hungary, second-home owners are not monitored by official tourism statistics, but their consumption patterns have a significant impact on the local economy, especially on leisure-oriented services.

Recent years have witnessed a growing scholarly interest in second-home tourism (Müller, 2021). Some places (Scandinavia, for example) have a long tradition of second-home ownership, with other (mainly Western) countries rapidly catching up in recent decades (Mowl, Barke & King, 2020). Although there is no internationally accepted definition, there is a consensus that second homes are primarily used for shorter stays, and for leisure and recreational purposes (Hall, 2014; Zoğal, et al., 2022). However, second homes can contribute not only to the short-term tourism performance of a destination, but also to retirement, lifestyle, and amenity migration in the longer term, which can have significant economic and social effects on the communities affected (Hall, 2014).

Second homes are not only diverse in nature and location (Müller, 2021; Roca, 2016), but have also been studied through the lenses of many different fields (e.g., geography, hospitality, regional planning, environmental studies, sociology), notably as regards the underlying consumption patterns (Larsson

[5] https://www.unwto.org/rural-tourism#:~:text=UNWTO%20understands%20Rural%20Tourism%20as%20%22a%20type%20of,agriculture%2C%20rural%20lifestyle%20%2F%20culture%2C%20angling%20and%20sightseeing

[6] 'A type of tourism activity in which the visitor's experience is related to a wide range of products generally related to nature-based activities, agriculture, rural lifestyle/culture, angling and sightseeing. Rural tourism activities take place in non-urban (rural) areas with the following characteristics: i) low population density, ii) landscape and land use dominated by agriculture and forestry and iii) traditional social structure and lifestyle'. (UNWTO, 2010)

[7] https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/tourism-visitor-economy-question-andrew-hiebl/

& Müller, 2019), their sustainability and impact (Back, 2020; Guimond & Simard, 2010), the link between second homes and quality of life (Pitkanen et al., 2020), and their role in rural development (Wu & Gallent, 2021).

Among the motivations for having a second home, the desire to be close to nature and in a quiet environment plays a predominant role, especially in rural areas (Pitkanen et al., 2020). Second homes are perceived as providing an alternative living space and a better quality of life (Guimond & Simard, 2010). Some studies also point out the role of second homes as investments (Zoğal, et al., 2022; Wu & Gallent 2021). Research on future intentions related to settling down highlights an important issue, namely that a lack (or insufficient availability) of public services may prevent second-home owners from moving to a specific destination (Back, 2020; Sulak & Türk, 2022). However, second-home owners often evaluate the quality of life of rural locations more positively than the permanent population (Lőrincz, Grósz & Csapó, 2021). Regarding rural migration preferences, Rye (2015) argues that these are related more to everyday life challenges than to motivations linked to local amenities and quality of life. Second-home users are thus positioned between tourists and locals/permanent residents (Volo, 2014). In the case of second-home tourism, the activities, characteristics, and behaviour of users are similar to those of tourists (Volo, 2014), giving rise to an increase in demand for leisure, cultural, and catering services (Larsson & Müller, 2019). As second-home owners are characterised by higher social status and more abundant financial resources (Guimond & Simard, 2010; Wu & Gallent, 2021, Larsson & Müller, 2019), their properties are typically in a better condition compared to houses owned by the locals (Mowl et al., 2020).

While second homes can have positive impacts on a destination, such as driving increased spending, bringing in external knowledge and skills, promoting the establishment of new businesses, and fostering cultural and economic vibrancy (Brandão, Costa & Buhalis, 2018), academic attention often tends to focus on the negative aspects. These include challenges associated with newcomers not integrating into local communities, environmental pressures due to second homes (Hiltunen, Pitkänen & Halseth, 2016), and local economies shifting towards service-oriented models, sometimes overshadowing traditional sectors like agriculture. The abandonment of agricultural activities can create opportunities for touristification and rural gentrification (Lorenzen, 2021), which poses challenges for various services vital to the local population. The temporal imbalance in the use of second homes, particularly during peak holiday seasons, exerts greater pressure on the infrastructure (Back, 2020; Pitkanen et al., 2020; Sulak & Türk, 2022). Another negative factor is the surge in real estate prices (Guimond & Simard, 2010), often displacing the original population/full-time residents who could otherwise provide footfall for local services all year round (Gallent, 2020). Despite some means of influence available to local decision-makers through spatial planning or the provision of public services (Larsson & Müller, 2019), local communities are frequently excluded from the development processes related to second homes (Alipour, Olya, Hassanzadeh & Rezapouraghdam, 2017).

2.2 Amenity migration and rural gentrification

Whereas amenity migration has a long-studied history in the United Kingdom (UK), other scholars did not systematically address this issue until the 1970s (Moss, 2006). A general working definition characterises it as "the movement of people based on the draw of natural and/or cultural amenities" (Gosnell & Abrams, 2009:303). The amenity migration literature predominantly addresses the 'pull factors' of rural areas, emphasising the significance of natural and cultural environments in driving migration (Marcoullier, Clendenning & Kedzior, 2002; Hansen et al., 2002). Economic motivations, while important for a minority, often take a back seat to values associated with quality of life, proximity to nature, and recreational opportunities (Kendra & Hull, 2005). Second-home ownership and permanent amenity migration often coexist spatially, influencing housing markets and service facilities. The distinction between cyclical and permanent occupation of second homes can blur over a lifetime, with second homeownership frequently transforming into retirement migration. Similar to permanent amenity migrants, second-home owners are drawn to specific amenities and a distinctive 'rural idyll'. This idyllic concept, shaped by cultural influences, varies across contexts, with an emphasis on the experiential qualities of the environment (Kocabıyık & Loopmans, 2021).

This study applies the concept of rural gentrification as a critical lens to scrutinise the migration of relatively affluent individuals from metropolitan to rural areas, placing particular emphasis on social inequality and unbalanced power relations (Phillips, 2010). While the influx of urban upper- and middle-class groups into attractive rural settlements is often propelled by the natural and social assets of these areas (Phillips, 1993), it frequently results in the transformation of local conditions, including the built and natural environment, according to the newcomers' values and visions of an idealised rurality. One of the most striking signs of rural gentrification is that members of the established population, especially local youth, are pushed out of the real estate market as a result of rising prices (Phillips, Smith, Brooking & Duer, 2020; 2021).

Although traditionally perceived as a form of permanent migration (Phillips, 1993), the concept of rural gentrification is intricately linked to tourism. Authors focusing on the Mediterranean region have described the gentrification effect of tourism in urban (Cocola-Gant, 2018; Cocola-Gant, Gago & Jover et al., 2020) and rural contexts (Nelson, 2018; Carrosio, Magnani & Osti, 2019; Kocabıyık & Loopmans, 2021). In the former case, tourism consumes the same upscale and gentrified spaces, and – especially through Airbnb-type services (Yrigoy, 2016) – drives real estate prices upwards, thus displacing the native population and giving rise to the phenomenon of tourism gentrification. The same effects can also be observed in rural tourism: for instance, Kocabıyık & Loopmans (2021) have recently analysed the temporality of gentrification in the case of seasonal (partly second-home) tourism in a small Turkish town, while Carrosio et al. claim, based on three Italian case studies, that "if we look at the trend of price of real estate values, we see the tangible effect of gentrification" (2019:42). In addition, in the case of depopulated rural areas, the process is often supported by policies aimed at curbing depopulation (Carrosio et al., 2019).

As a result of the general trend towards remote work, transitional forms are now emerging, halfway between visiting rural locations and permanently moving to the countryside. Several authors (Janoschka & Haas, 2014; Hines, 2010; Huete & Mantecón, 2012) have tried to conceptualise the transition from casual visitor to permanent rural resident. Observing processes over the last decade reveals that, in the case of rural areas, the categories of visitor, tourist, second-home owner, and permanent occupant are not rigidly distinct; rather, they exhibit a degree of fluidity and overlap (Solana-Solana, 2010).

2.3 The impact of COVID-19 on second-home tourism and rural gentrification

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered an increase in the desire for green and private spaces. In the course of the pandemic, the European press was full of articles noting that urban dwellers were 'escaping' to the countryside (Pitkänen et al., 2020; Inanir, 2021; Smith et al., 2021; Åberg & Tondelli, 2021; Zoğal, et al. 2022). However, this exodus was largely directed at pre-existing second homes, and research shows that the temporary experience of the pandemic and the desire for rural space may have reinforced pre-existing trends that date back to the 2008 crisis. The dynamic growth in the number of second homes – caused by the increasing popularity of property as an investment – widens social inequalities in rural areas and increases the exclusivity of rural gentrification (Alexandri & Janoschka, 2020; Smith et al., 2021; Åberg & Tondelli, 2021). International research also suggests that the COVID-19 epidemic has accelerated gentrification in many Western welfare states. In the UK, interest in buying a house in small rural towns increased by 126% in 2020, while in Sweden, 5% of the population reported wanting to move to the countryside for good (Åberg & Tondelli, 2021). On the other hand, the intensification of the phenomenon of second-home recreation can sustain the future of small settlements and the development of rural tourism (Golubchikov, 2021). If well-planned and managed, it could provide an opportunity for the repopulation and regeneration of small settlements (Åberg & Tondelli, 2021), and create employment and economic benefits for their residents (Lorenzen, 2021). Regarding the post-COVID-19 situation, certain studies, such as that by Colomb & Gallent (2022), also point out that some people are again heading back to the cities for practical reasons.

3. Destination in focus: Hungary

Hungary can be regarded as a mature second-home destination, attracting both domestic and international visitors, with a notable concentration of second-home owners (Sulyok & Madarász, 2019). In Hungary, the tradition of owning a second home dates back to the nineteenth century, with pivotal moments shaping its second-home tourism evolution (Wettstein, 2020). These include the mass tourism boom in the 1960s and 1970s, the political transition post-1989 leading to increased foreign ownership, and recent real estate developments, such as the construction of apartment houses and villas. Consequently, many second-home owners in Hungary utilise these properties as genuine alternative living spaces, contributing to an enhanced quality of life (Sulyok, 2012). In the case of Hungary, the spatial patterns of second homes are strongly linked to suburbanisation; according to population census data, there is a trend of second homes becoming primary ones, especially in tourism destinations and in the surroundings of big cities (Csordás, 2022).

According to the 2022 Lake Balaton Development Council Monitoring Report,[8] the construction of new real estate (both residence and second homes) saw a significant boom in 2020, followed by moderate growth in 2021. At the same time, real estate prices continued to increase in 2021 and 2022, and the region is among the most expensive areas in the country. Collecting data about second homes is subject to some limitations. According to data from the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (HCSO), 12% of the housing market (more than 550,000 housing units) was non-permanently used real estate in 2016. At the national level, 83% of uninhabited units were not used at all, while another 12% were used temporarily/as second homes, and 5% for 'other' purposes (e.g., as offices). Notably, in the three counties bordering Lake Balaton, Hungary's primary tourism destination, the percentage of dwellings used as second homes surpasses the national average (35% in Somogy county, 26% in Zala county, and 23% in Veszprém county).

In recent years, there has been growing interest in tourism mobility beyond registered overnight stays at commercial establishments. This includes day trippers, local or regional visitors, as well as visitors opting for non-commercial types of accommodation (e.g., staying at second homes or with friends and relatives). According to HCSO data, 14.2 million people participated in overnight domestic trips in Hungary in 2019 (the last year before COVID-19), of whom 7% stayed at a second home and 44% with friends or relatives. The average length of stay was 5.3 nights for second-home owners, and significantly shorter for those staying with friends or relatives (2.6 nights). In 2019, domestic overnight trips generated HUF 393 billion (more than EUR 1 billion) in revenue for all destinations combined. Some 4% of this was income generated by overnight stays in second homes, and 16% by accommodation provided by friends or relatives. COVID-19 (2020 and 2021) resulted in an increase in the use of second homes and a decrease in the use of accommodation provided by friends and relatives. In 2020 and 2021, 14% of domestic travellers stayed at their own second homes (7% of all expenditure).

COVID-19 further intensified migration from urban to rural areas, particularly evident around Lake Balaton and Lake Velence, with Budapest being the primary source market for domestic migration in 2020, and Lake Balaton the most significant destination (HCSO). According to the Lake Balaton Development Council's annual Monitoring Report (based on analysis of statistical data and surveys of local stakeholders), the region's permanent population increased in 2019 and 2020, which indicates its growing popularity as a place of residence in the wake of COVID-19. Although the region is still characterised by an ageing population, the pandemic affected the age structure in a positive way, causing the active (younger, employed) population group to grow. The pandemic also triggered a restructuring of tourism flows, shifting the role of second-home owners as a prominent tourist segment in 2020 and 2021, a departure from the pre-COVID-19 emphasis on overnight international and domestic visitors (Madarász & Raffai, 2020).

[8] Balaton Monitoring Report 2022: www.balatonregion.hu/msite/190/bku_2022_monitoring_jelentes_0511..pdf

4. Methodology

Previous studies on second-home tourism have employed diverse methods, including both qualitative (e.g., Alipour et al., 2017) and quantitative (e.g., Tangeland, Vennesland & Nybakk, 2013) approaches. This study is based on an online questionnaire, containing 25 mainly closed, multiple-choice questions. The survey was conducted in September 2021, during the third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, targeting second-home owners and/or users from urban areas who significantly increased their time spent in rural areas during the pandemic. Second-home owners over the age of 60 (mostly inactive, retired) were not included in the sample, as the COVID-19 restrictions affected them less than the active population of workers and parents with school-age children, due to the introduction of teleworking and homeschooling.

Sampling was done through targeted Facebook groups and advertising. Alongside ads, a post about the survey was shared in 45 Facebook groups related to country life and cities with over 20,000 inhabitants. The target population comprised Hungarian residents aged 18–60 who lived in a city before the COVID-19 epidemic. A total of 258 responses were received, including 142 individuals who spent more time in rural areas during the pandemic, 48 who were already frequent rural visitors before the pandemic, and 68 respondents who desired to move to the countryside during the epidemic but faced obstacles in doing so. In the present paper, we will analyse the responses of the first two groups, i.e., those who spent significant time in rural areas during the pandemic (Table 1).

In our questionnaire, we covered three main topics: (1) reasons for spending (more) time in the countryside during COVID-19; (2) activities and services used during the stay in the countryside; and (3) future intentions on spending time in the countryside and purchasing real estate there. The quantitative survey results were analysed using SPSS version 25. In addition to the descriptive statistics, we also explored the relationship between these aspects and the impact of the respondents' socio-demographic background. The subsequent chapter presents only the statistically significant results, where Pearson's chi-squared test was ($P \leq 0.05$).

Acknowledging the absence of precise statistical data on second homes owned by the Hungarian population, this survey is exploratory in nature and reflects the participants' preferences. While the sample is not representative, it provides valuable insights into the topic.

Tab 1. Main demographic characteristics of analysed respondents (N=190). Source: authors' own research

Gender	%	Age	%	Educational level	%	Source location	%
Male	27	18–35 years	20	Elementary	5	Capital city	44
Female	73	36–45 years	29	High school	33	Regional city (≥100,000)	23
		46–55 years	31	University degree	62	Other cities (<100,000)	33

In order to understand the context and the results of the study, the following timeline gives an overview of the main periods of restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic in Hungary. The figure provides information about different regulations in Budapest, the capital city, and in the countryside.

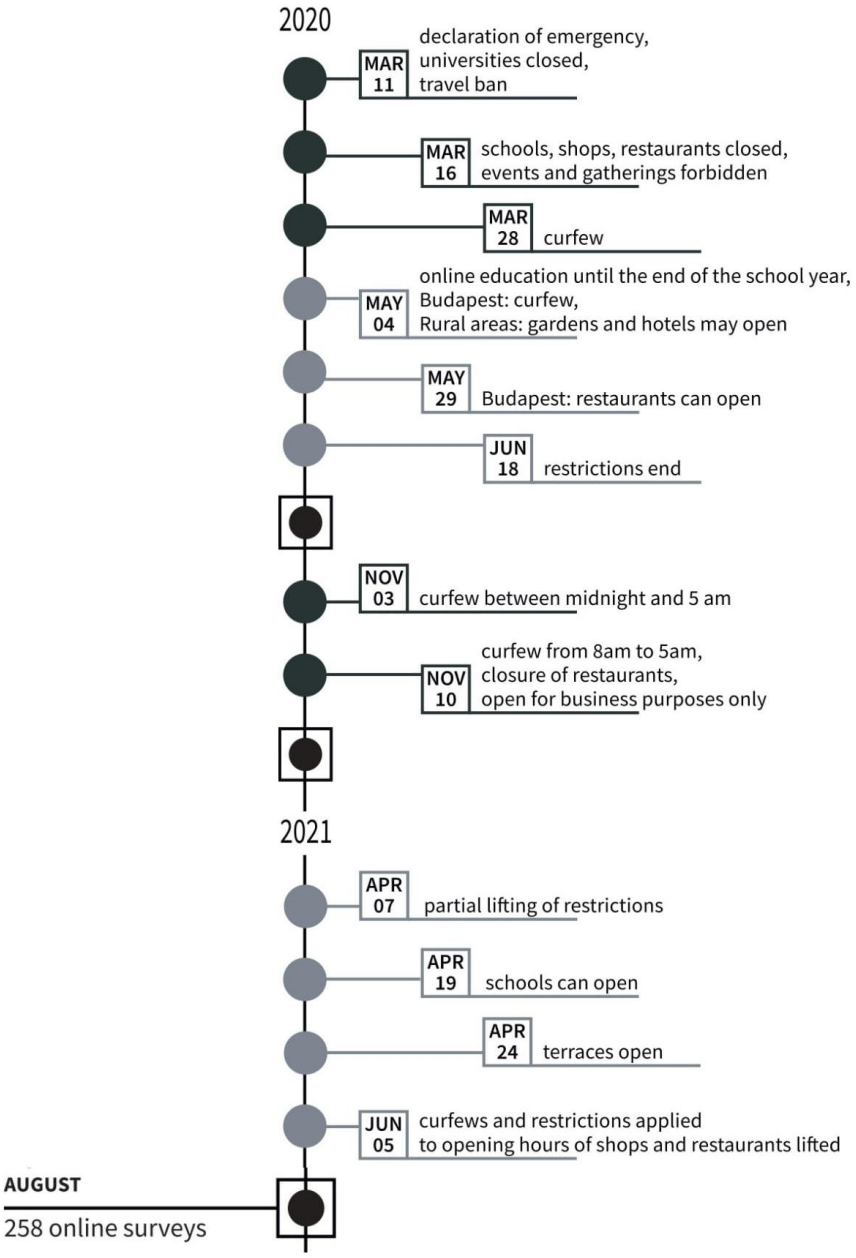


Fig 1. Timeline of the regulations and lockdowns related to COVID-19. Source: own illustration

5. Results

5.1 Source and destination settlements

Figure 1 (below) shows the connections between the geographic location of the respondents' permanent residence and the rural property where they spent most of their time during the COVID-19 pandemic. The colours of the dots (using community detection analysis – see, for example, Fan, Jiang & Mostafavi, 2020; Thomas, Adam & Verhetsel, 2017) indicate the clusters that formed, i.e., the connections between dots of the same colour are stronger than the connections between dots of different colours. The grey lines do not belong to any group (they do not indicate a separate group).

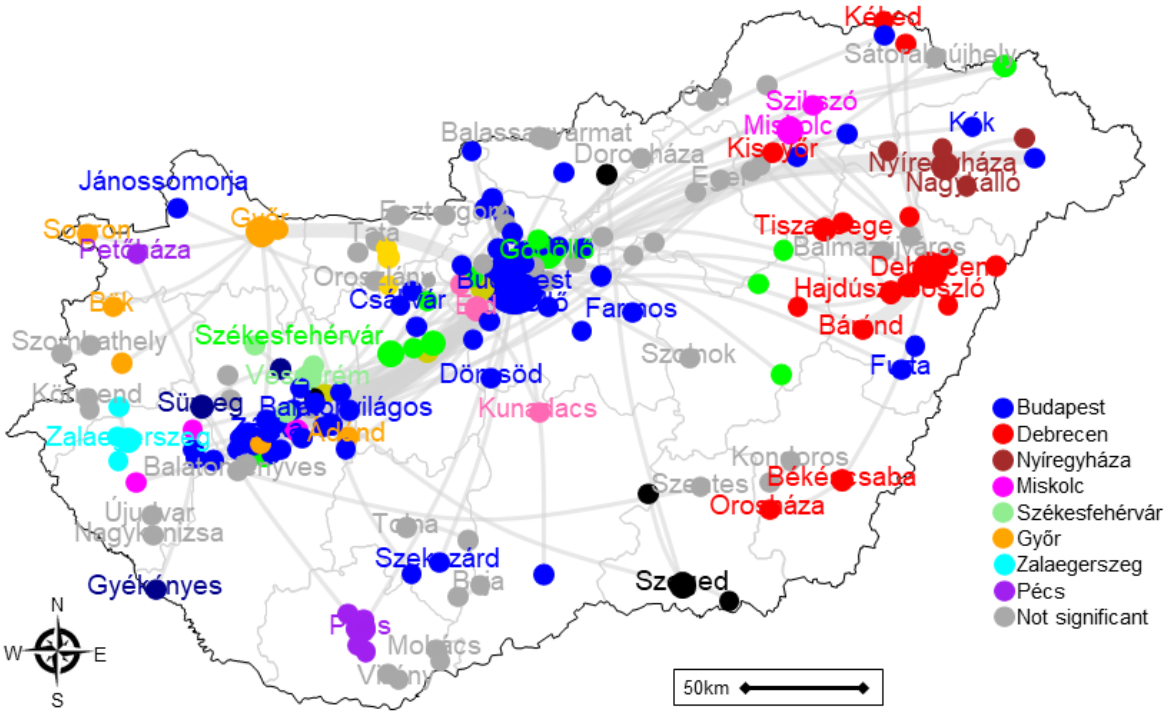


Fig 2. Spatial patterns of urban-to-rural movement (design by A. Katona). Source: authors' own research

Note: the dots show the settlements of origin and destination. The lines show the relationship between respondents' urban place of residence and time spent in the countryside. Connections between dots of the same colour are stronger than connections between dots of different colours. The grey lines do not belong to any group (they do not indicate a separate group).

This comprehensive map covers the entire country, incorporating respondents from 55 different cities and 164 rural destinations, where they spent a significant portion of their time during the COVID-19 pandemic. Notably, the results highlight a distinct dominance of the Budapest-Balaton axis, primarily along the M7 motorway. This observation is indicative of increasing pressure on the infrastructure in these areas and a tourism economy that primarily caters to residents of Budapest seeking rural experiences.

Furthermore, a clear regional division is evident between the eastern and western parts of the country. Similar to Budapest, there is a strong link between larger rural towns and nearby second homes, offering the experience of natural, liveable environments within easy reach. These clusters are differentiated using various colours, with each colour denoting a distinct group or cluster. For instance, Zalaegerszeg and the villages and settlements of Göcsej are represented in light blue.

Similar clusters also emerged around other major cities such as Pécs, Debrecen, Szeged, and Győr. In western Hungary, the significance of spa towns, exemplified by Bük, is notable.

5.2 Time spent in the countryside

Regarding the time spent in rural areas, the sample was categorized into three distinct groups (P≤0.001):

- **Complete relocation to the countryside (40%):** individuals who had not experienced rural life before but moved to the countryside entirely or spent most of their time there during the COVID-19 epidemic.
- **Commuting between urban and rural residences (35%):** those who were commuting between their urban and rural residences during the pandemic but still spent most of their time in the city.
- **Stable urban-rural split (20%):** individuals who split their lives between urban and rural locations before the pandemic, with the COVID-19 restrictions merely stabilising this existing pattern.

Tab 2. Time spent in the countryside, divided according to pre-pandemic habits (N=190). Source: authors' own research

	I practically lived in the countryside	I spent more time in the countryside than in the city	I went to the countryside, but I spent more time in the city	Total
Spent more time in the countryside during COVID-19 than before	28.2%	25.4%	46.5%	100%
Already spent much time in the countryside before COVID-19; the pandemic merely stabilised this pattern	10.4%	10.4%	79.2%	100%
Total	**23.7%**	**21.6%**	**54.7%**	**100%**

The analysis of socio-demographic factors revealed notable trends:

- **Gender differences (P≤0.05):** women were more likely to spend more time in or even permanently move to rural areas, while men were more inclined to stay in their urban homes.
- **No significant differences by age or economic activity:** there were no significant differences observed based on age or the field of economic activity.

Additionally, the time spent in the countryside during the COVID-19 pandemic showed a correlation (P=0.003) with the type of source settlement. Figure 2 (below) illustrates the relationship between respondents' urban place of residence and the time spent in the countryside. The majority (43%) of true 'rural movers' – those who lived in the countryside full-time or most of the time during the pandemic – came from Budapest. Respondents from the five regional cities were more likely to express a desire to move to the countryside, but, for various reasons, did not manage to do so.

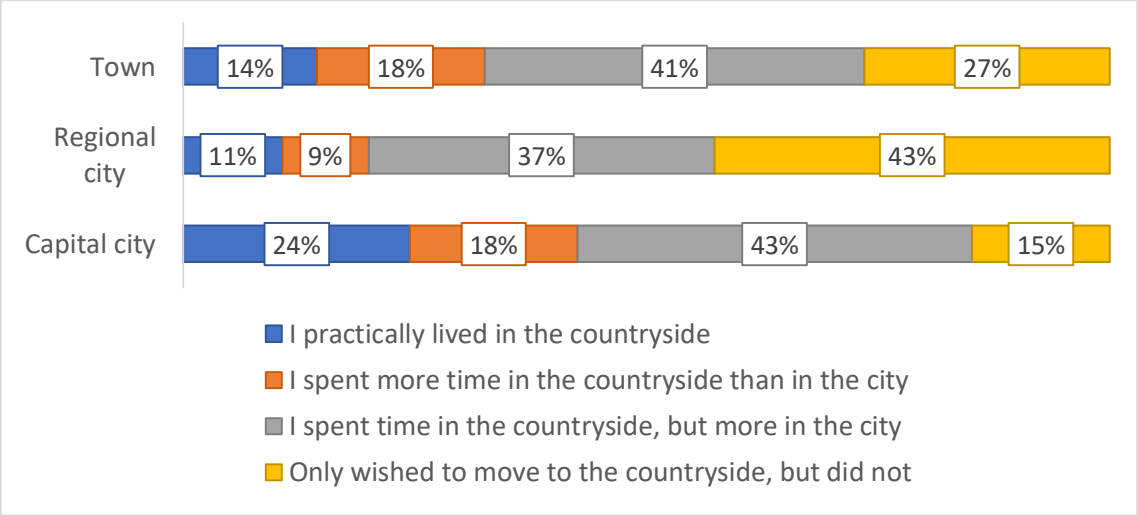


Fig 3. Time spent in the countryside according to respondents' urban place of residence (N=190). Source: authors' own research

Respondents who spent more time in rural areas than before the pandemic were provided with multiple options to express their motivations. While the majority (61.1%) selected only one option, the mean number of answers given was 1.7. Various push-and-pull factors were identified, with the most common motivations for moving to the countryside being a desire for nature (41%) and the fear of isolation (34%). The primary facilitator of such a move was the opportunity for remote work (33%).

Among those who relocated to the countryside, there was an over-representation of Budapest residents, particularly women with higher-level education, and white-collar employees (P≤0.05). This group, with the ability to work remotely, spent more time in the countryside or moved completely to rural areas. Another segment within this category included individuals who lost or temporarily paused their urban

jobs (9%). For them, financial considerations could also have been a significant motivation for the rural move. The introduction of digital distance learning played a crucial role for families, particularly impacting those under 35 years of age compared to older cohorts or those who completely moved to the countryside.

A distinct group of respondents expressed the desire to move to the countryside during the COVID-19 pandemic but faced obstacles in doing so. The major hindrances for this group were financial constraints (28%) and a lack of teleworking opportunities (28%), effectively preventing them from leaving their urban residences.

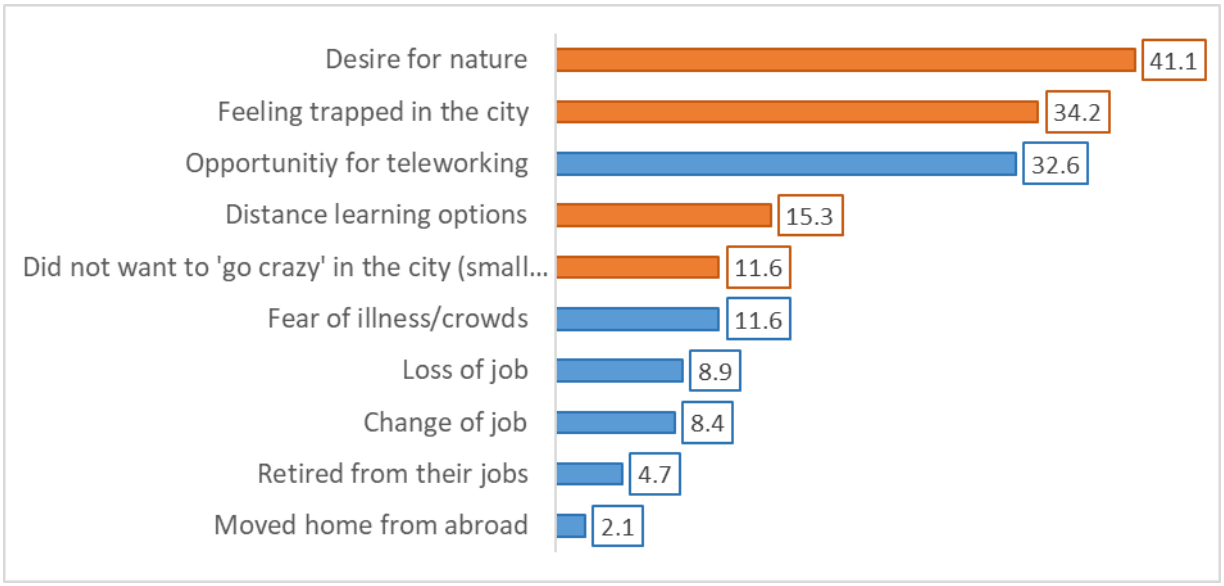


Fig 4. Reasons why respondents spent more time in the countryside during the COVID-19 pandemic (N=190, max. three answers, %). Source: authors' own research. Note: factors facilitating a move to the countryside are highlighted in blue, motivating factors in orange

5.3 Activities pursued and services used during the stay in the countryside

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the choice of accommodation for those seeking refuge in the countryside varied, with 51.6% staying in a property belonging to family or relatives, 34.7% in their own home, and only 8% opting to rent. Notably, age played a role in this, as older individuals were more likely to own a rural second home, while younger individuals tended to stay in properties owned by relatives or family. Renting was more prevalent among members of the 30–50 age group with significant disposable income.

The use of local services had a strong and positive correlation with the time spent in the countryside ($P \leq 0.05$). Reflecting the service-oriented economy of second-home destinations, the study explored the leisure and public services used by people during their rural stays. As for the first group, almost every respondent attended at least one gastronomic/wine event, and a similar number (80%) visited a pub or other event (such as a festival) during their rural stay[9]. Local restaurants were visited much less frequently: some 30% of our respondents reported visiting a restaurant at least once, while only 13% did so regularly. However, there was a strong correlation with age: within the 36–45 age group, 42% reported at least one visit, whereas 20% were eating out regularly. While this is not a very high proportion, it suggests that the ability to enjoy the local wine and gastronomy also attracts second-home owners, prompting them to spend longer periods of time in the countryside. In comparison, only half of the respondents mentioned participated in culture and active tourism activities, and even then, usually only on occasion. Cultural attractions were cited by a higher-than-average proportion of men, as well as younger and less educated

[9] Since the survey was conducted in September 2021, during the third wave of COVID-19, there had been two periods (mostly in the summer) since the beginning of the epidemic in spring 2020, when restrictions were relaxed, and it was possible to participate in smaller – and especially open-air – festivals and events. A detailed timeline of the regulations and lockdowns related to COVID-19 in Hungary can be found in Figure 1.

people, while active tourism (hiking, cycling, etc.) was mentioned by a greater share of 36–45-year-olds than the sample as a whole (60% compared to 50%).

It is noteworthy that the respondents satisfied their desire for nature largely within their private spaces, as most did not frequently engage in outdoor activities like hiking and cycling. The closure of leisure options during the pandemic also influenced the reported activities. For instance, spa tourism was rarely mentioned, as spas and health resorts were often closed during this period.

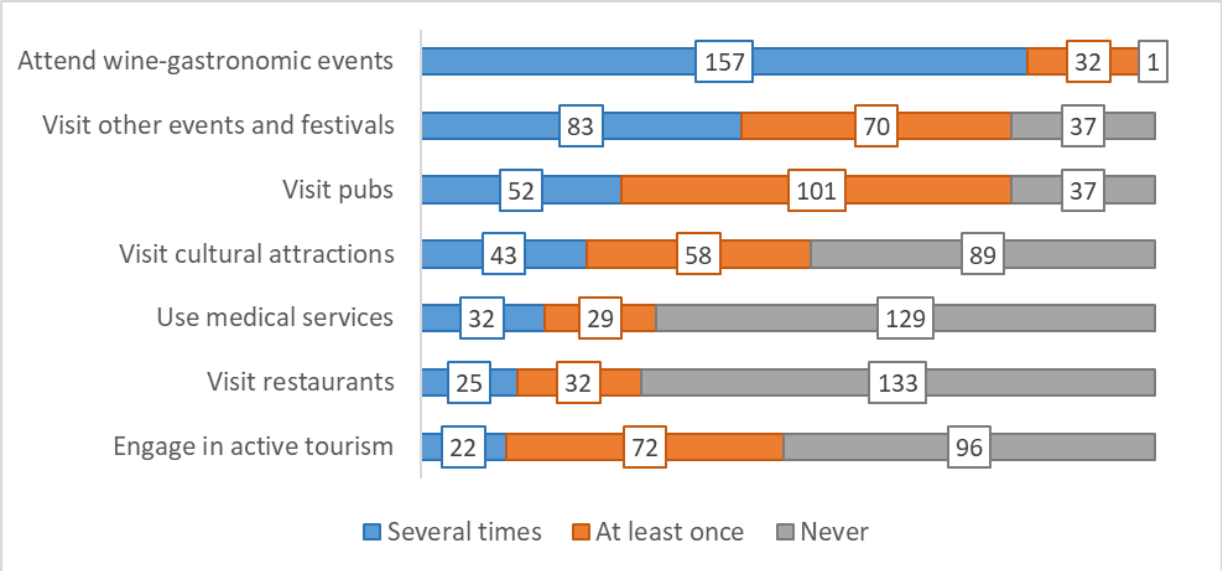


Fig 5. In your rural life, how often did you… (N=190). Source: authors' own research

Concerning public services, visiting the local family doctor was the most commonly used type (with 92.1% visiting a general practitioner at least once), but local schools, grocery stores, and local or nearby healthcare specialists were also widely cited (92–96% of respondents mentioned that they used these services at least once). However, the time spent in the countryside during the pandemic only explains a small part of the variance in the usage of services.

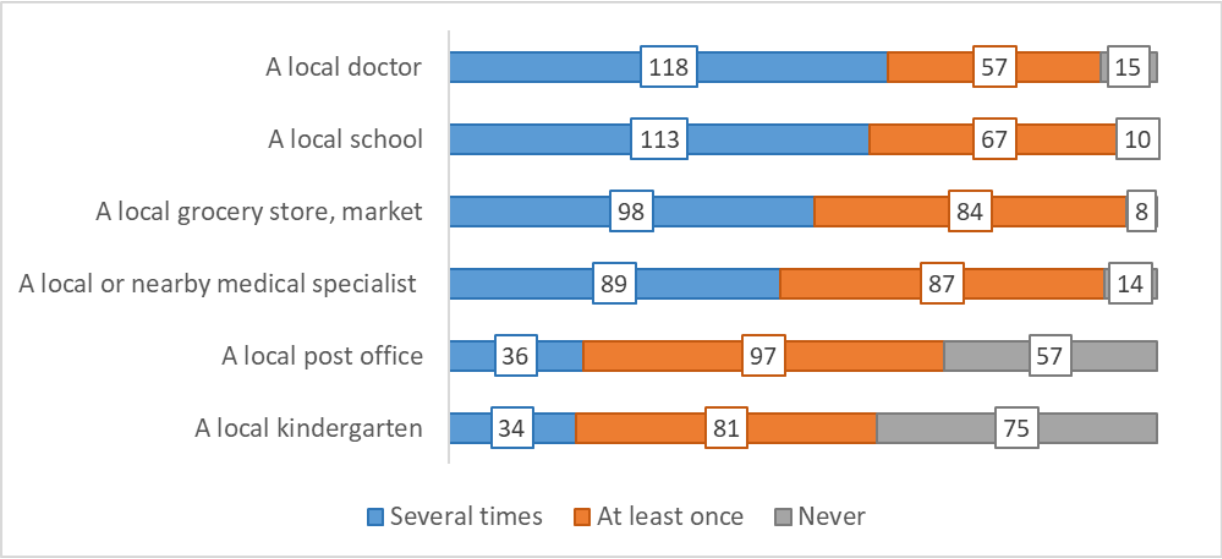


Fig 6. In your rural life, how often did you use the services of… (N=190, mentions). Source: authors' own research

5.4 Future intentions

A quarter of respondents expressed the intention to move permanently to the countryside, abandoning their urban residence entirely. Another 32% planned to retain their urban base but live permanently in the countryside. 83% of those who moved to the countryside during the pandemic experienced rural life as a novelty and wanted to stay there. Meanwhile, 71% of those who had already spent considerable time in the countryside before the pandemic but maintained a dual pattern (rural/urban) in their lives, were planning to return to their old habits.

Respondents who already owned a rural second home showed a stronger inclination for complete relocation (32%) compared to those who stayed at a property owned by family/relatives (18%). Among owners, 9% expected to fully return to their urban lives, whereas this figure stood at 32% for those who stayed at the property of a relative/family member.

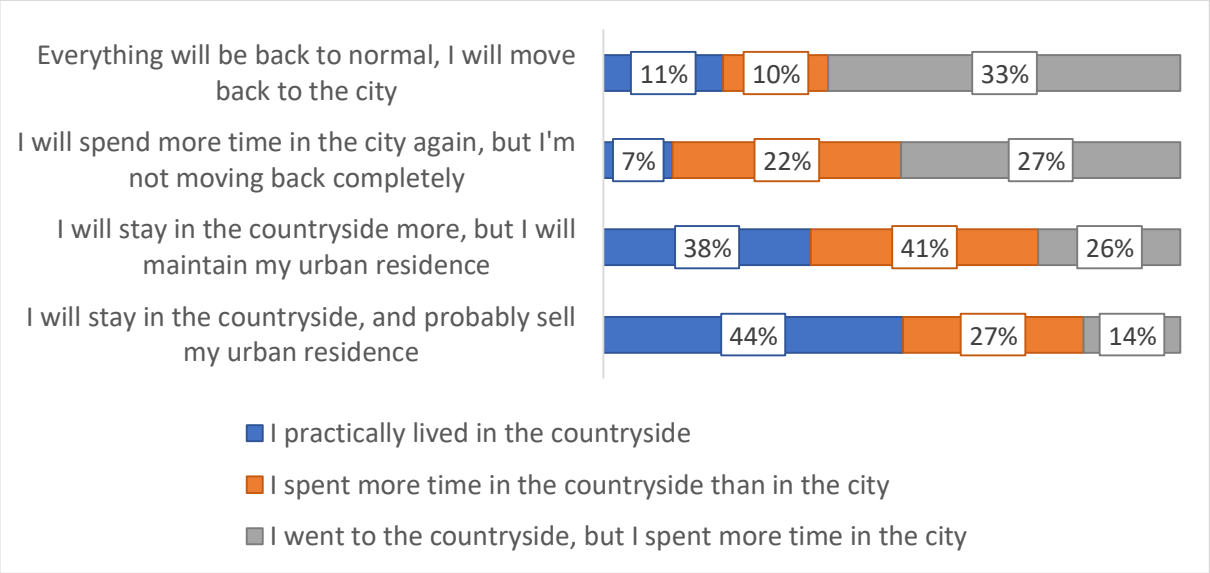


Fig 7. Post-COVID-19 plans according to the time spent in the countryside during the pandemic (N=190). Source: authors' own research

55% of people who moved to the countryside during the pandemic expressed a desire to buy a home there within five years. Plans to buy a home were significantly influenced by current property arrangements. Among those who rented a second home during the epidemic, 44% definitely wanted to buy, with an additional 31% considering it. The rate was lowest among those who already owned rural property, but even in this group, 20% wanted to buy, and another 15% were thinking about it.

These findings indicate a substantial strengthening of the rural gentrification trend, with a significant proportion of respondents expressing a desire for permanent relocation to the countryside. The intention to purchase a home in rural areas is influenced by various factors, including current property arrangements and experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

6. Discussion and conclusions

The findings of our study have important theoretical and practical implications. The COVID-19 pandemic transformed the behaviour, motivations, and future plans of second-home owners and users. The spatial concentration of these changes emphasises the pivotal role of Budapest as a source market, while traditional rural tourism hotspots, such as Lake Balaton and destinations near metropolitan agglomerations, have strengthened their position.

This study contributes to the growing body of research (e.g., Pitkanen et al. 2020), underscoring that proximity to nature and a tranquil environment remains paramount for second-home owners, especially among those who can afford to maintain additional living space. The drivers for relocating to rural areas include systemic factors, like the feasibility of remote work and homeschooling, alongside personal motivations. Despite service disruptions during lockdowns, our findings align with prior studies (e.g., Guimond & Simard, 2010), highlighting that second-home users have bolstered the service-oriented economies of rural destinations.

Our respondents also reported considerable interest in the option of settling down in rural areas. The majority wanted to become permanent or temporary rural dwellers, and almost half of this group wanted to sell their urban homes. Although these are remarkable results, the realisation of such moving plans may be influenced by the availability of affordable housing or public services (e.g., healthcare, shops, culture, social life) at the desired rural destination. Furthermore, the re-opening of urban facilities and the return 'back to normal' after the removal of all COVID-19-related restrictions might deter second-home users from actually moving to the countryside.

We can conclude that in rural Hungary – in line with the international literature – the pandemic has reinforced a trend that has been observed since the 2008 economic crisis: the increase in the number of second homes and the expansion of rural gentrification (Smith et al., 2021), converting many second homes into permanent residences. Paradoxically, this trend is likely to enhance rather than diminish the tourism potential of these areas in the long run. Nonetheless, the values and behaviours of new residents may strain the local infrastructure and services, generating tensions between established and incoming populations. Achieving a delicate balance between community needs and visitor demands poses a formidable challenge for local stakeholders.

The study underscores the significance of national and local policies in shaping the consequences of increased second-home usage. Insights from the international literature (Larsson & Müller, 2019; Åberg & Tondelli, 2021) highlight the need for decision-makers to view second-home owners as potential future residents. Striking a harmonious balance requires thoughtful regulations, restrictions, and improvements, especially in terms of public services and infrastructure. Reflecting on the lessons from suburban developments in Hungary during the 1990s, it becomes evident that individual municipal strategies must align with the common good to prevent overdevelopment and jeopardising the natural and cultural appeal of rural spaces. Sustainable use of existing capacities emerges as a crucial consideration.

The main implications of the study are summarised in the following table (*Table 3*).

Tab 3. Summary of the main implications of this study. Source: authors' own research

	Theoretical implications	Practical implications
Destinations	Rural places in the surrounding area of big cities were attractive targets for migration during COVID-19. /Tourism destinations play a significant role, in line with the availability of second-home units.	The emergence of regional clusters requires a regional/micro-level infrastructure. In metropolitan agglomerations, stronger cooperation and harmonised regulations are needed to achieve a more geographically balanced distribution of the positive and negative impacts of second-home tourism. Decision-makers in tourist destinations should better manage and regulate second-home tourism.
Motivation	The COVID-19 pandemic strengthened the attractiveness of rural life and second homes as an 'escape'. Factors enabling temporary migration (teleworking and homeschooling) emerged as systemic motivators for moving to rural areas.	Employers' support for widening access to remote work may induce migration to rural areas. Better cooperation among local stakeholders and companies on infrastructural and workplace development might result in an increase in residential migration to rural areas.
Usage	Migration to second homes strengthens the use of services in the local area. Leisure-oriented services dominate.	Temporary/second-home migration can help tourism/leisure businesses during crises when there are no visitors.
Future intentions	Pre-COVID-19 behaviour had an impact on future intentions. Intentions are influenced by real estate market processes. The availability of public services affects the realisation of moving plans in the long term.	In rural areas, the development of public services faces challenges linked to their efficient functioning. During capacity-planning of public services, there is a risk that the facilities being developed will be underused. There is a need for resilient business models, not only in the private sector but also regarding public services.

7. Limitations

Given the exploratory nature of our study, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations regarding the generalisability of our findings. The use of a quantitative online survey resulted in a sample size that is relatively small and non-representative, limiting the extent to which broad conclusions can be drawn. The inherent challenge of obtaining a fully representative sample of the entire second-home population led us to employ a filter question, strategically directing the survey towards respondents with direct relevance to our research objectives. While the study's reach may be constrained by these factors, this tailored approach allowed us to delve deeply into the experiences and perspectives of a specific subset within the broader second-home community. These considerations provide a nuanced understanding, offering valuable insights that contribute to the ongoing discourse on second-home tourism and rural gentrification.

Potential for future research: Adapting to post-COVID realities

Despite the study's constraints, it opens avenues for future research into second-home tourism and rural gentrification. Expanding the research scope to encompass diverse second-home destinations (rural, urban, mountain, coastal) could offer insights into local economic and social contexts. Additionally, exploring perspectives unaddressed in this study, such as those of the local community, service providers, and public decision-makers, could contribute valuable insights on the long-term shifts induced by COVID- 19. Examining the evolving dynamics in the aftermath of the pandemic, particularly considering the impacts of the war in Ukraine and the ensuing economic challenges, could shed light on the resilience and adaptability of second-home tourism. Understanding how these external factors have influenced motivations, migration patterns, and the sustainability of rural gentrification processes would contribute significantly to the field. Exploring the interplay between economic crises, geopolitical events, and rural development could uncover novel facets of decision-making processes among second-home owners. Additionally, investigating the role of policy responses in mitigating or exacerbating these effects would provide critical insights for policymakers and local communities. As we navigate the complex interconnections between global events and local phenomena, future research has the potential to unravel people's nuanced responses within the context of second-home tourism and rural gentrification.

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Annex 1. Questionnaire

1. How old are you? Answer:_____

2. What is your gender?

- Male
- Female

3. What is your highest level of education?

- Less than 8 years of school
- Elementary school
- High school
- University degree

4. What is your profession?

- Employee
- Public employee
- Self-employed (entrepreneur, farmer, etc.)
- Full-time student
- On childcare or maternity leave
- Pensioner
- Receiving rehabilitation or disability benefits, receiving an invalidity pension
- Home-maker
- Registered unemployed
- Inactive
- Other

5. Did you live and work in a city before the COVID-19 outbreak?

- Yes (survey continues)
- No (survey ends)

6. In which city did you live and work before the COVID-19 pandemic? (In the case of Budapest, please also include the district. In the case of a foreign city, please enter the country as well.) Answer:_____

7. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, have you been to the countryside more often than before?

- Yes, I have been in the countryside more than before COVID-19 (=> Continue)
- No, I was already in the countryside a lot before COVID-19, the pandemic just stabilised this pattern
- No, although I would have wanted to spend more time in the countryside
- No, and I did not want to (survey ends)
- Other:

8. Typically, how much time did you spend in the countryside, away from your urban residence, during the COVID-19 pandemic?

- I practically lived in the countryside
- I spent more time in the countryside than in the city
- I went to the countryside, but I spent more time in the city

9. In which municipality is the rural property located that you travelled to during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Answer:_____

10. The rural property where I spend a lot of time...

- …is my own
- …is used by me as a paying tenant (skip to question 12)
- …belongs to my family, relatives, friends; I do not pay for it (skip to question 12)
- Other, namely: _____ (skip to question 12)

11. How long have you owned the property?

- Up to 1 year
- 1–2 years
- 3–5 years
- More than 5 years

12. Who uses the rural property? *(More than one answer possible)*

- My immediate family
- My extended family
- Friends
- Other

13. Does the rural property have any green space, a garden?

- Yes
- No

14. How many people typically live in your rural property, including you and your family? Answer:_____

15. Why did you spend more time in the countryside during the COVID-19 pandemic than before? *(More than one answer possible)*

- I lost my job
- I changed workplace/position
- Teleworking has become possible at my current workplace
- We were not stuck in the city thanks to the introduction of digital education
- I was afraid of the disease, afraid of crowds
- I didn't like confinement
- I wanted a bigger, greener space, be closer to nature
- I have a small child and I didn't want to 'go crazy' in the city
- I retired
- I moved home from abroad
- Other, namely: _____

16. In your rural life, how often did you:

	Several times	At least once	Never
Attend wine/gastronomic events			
Visit cultural attractions			
Engage in active tourism (hiking, cycling, rock climbing, etc.)			
Visit other events and festivals			
Use medical services			
Visit restaurants			
Visit pubs			

17. In your rural life, how often did you use the services of …

	Several times	At least once	Never
A local grocery store, market			
A local doctor			
A local or nearby medical specialist			
A local post office			
A local school			
A local kindergarten			

18. Once the COVID-19 pandemic is completely over, where will you live?

Everything will be back to normal; I'm going back to the city

I'll spend more time in the city again, but I'm not moving back completely

I'll spend more time in the countryside, but I'll maintain my urban residence

I'll stay in the countryside; I plan to move out of my urban home

19. Do you plan to buy your own property in the countryside in the near future (within 5 years)?

Yes, I definitely have this idea

Yes, I'm thinking about it

No (skip to question 20)

20. Does the availability of state aid for the purchase and renovation of a home affect your intention to buy a property in the countryside?

Yes

No

21. What makes it better for you to live in the countryside than in the city? Answer:_____

22. Our previous research shows that this summer, people have different entertainment, consumption, and leisure habits than in previous summers. Is this also true for you?

- Yes
- No (skip to next question)

23. Please describe how your summertime entertainment, consumption, and leisure habits have changed, and why: Answer:_____