

FaR 2021**International Forum “Freedom and responsibility in pivotal times”****PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS OF RUSSIAN RURAL AREAS IN
THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

Irina V. Baranova (a)*, Marina N. Gapon (b), Elena E. Golova (c)

*Corresponding author

- (a) Omsk State Agrarian University named after P.A. Stolypin, Institutskaya Ploshchad 1, Omsk, Russia,
iv.baranova@omgau.org
- (b) Omsk State Agrarian University named after P.A. Stolypin, Institutskaya Ploshchad 1, Omsk, Russia,
mn.gapon@omgau.org
- (c) Omsk State Agrarian University named after P.A. Stolypin, Institutskaya Ploshchad 1, Omsk, Russia,
ee.golova@omgau.org

Abstract

According to the authors, the issues of rural development in the context of the spread of a new coronavirus infection deserve special attention, since the solution to the global problem of food security largely depends on the level and quality of life in rural areas, which undoubtedly emphasizes the relevance of the study in this field. Based on the study of state programs, official statistics, opinions of foreign and domestic scientists, the authors formulate the main problems of the development of Russian rural settlements in the context of the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, it was decided to distinguish the problems that had previously formed in the conditions of the traditional environment and the problems that were formed under the influence of the pandemic in the conditions of a unique environment. The identified difficulties served as the basis for determining the positive and negative consequences of the new coronavirus infection on the functioning of the study object. The final stage of the study outlines the main prospects for the development of rural territories of the Russian Federation in a new external environment. The authors believe that the topic under consideration requires continued experience in this field, since the situation develops, conditions become more complicated, problems, and hence the consequences and prospects are constantly transformed.

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1. Introduction

One of the distinctive features of the national economy throughout history is its regional disproportionality of development at the “city-village” level. Many attempts on the part of the state, characterized by some positive results, are devoted to reducing the uneven conditions. Currently, two program documents for the development of rural territories are being implemented in the Russian Federation: the State Program “Complex Development of Rural Territories” (Decree of the Government of the Russian Federation of May 31, 2019 No. 696, 2019) and the “Strategy for the Sustainable Development of Rural Territories of the Russian Federation for the Period until 2030” (Decree of the Government of the Russian Federation of February 2, 2015 No. 151-r, 2015). Besides, the work continues in this area at the regional and sector wide levels due to the uniqueness of their functioning.

Moreover, it should be noted that changes in the external environment under the influence of global challenges make significant adjustments both in the process of rural development per se and in the possibility of introducing measures proposed by the state. Thus, since 2020, the reality of all Russians (and not only) and villagers has changed under the influence of the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, the quality of life of rural residents was influenced by conflicting trends: both positive (development of agrotourism, increased demand for eco-products, deurbanization, etc.) and negative (reduced incomes of the population, lack of sufficient information infrastructure, underdeveloped diversification, etc.). Earlier problems have undergone significant transformation, which led, on the one hand, to the aggravation of the existing drawbacks, and, on the other hand, to the stimulation and acceleration of the resolution of a number of problems. At the same time, some domestic researchers believe that it was the pandemic that allowed a more radical rethinking of the priorities of the agri-food system of the Russian Federation emphasizing the development of rural areas (social, economic, environmental development) (Derunova et al., 2021).

The above circumstances became the basis for increasing the interest of domestic and foreign scientists in studying the development of rural areas in the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic, as evidenced by a large number of publications on this issue, the main of which include articles by Zakshevsky and Gavrilova (2020), Smyslova (2021), Mardenskaya (2020), Petrov and Sergienko (2021), Ribeiro et al. (2021), Esteban-Navarro et al., (2020), etc.

Some authors (Shumakova et al., 2018) propose to create mobile facilities (hairdressers, repair shops, etc.) to solve some socio-economic problems of rural development. We believe that to date, with the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, the creation of mobile medical stations, in the absence of hospitals, polyclinics in rural areas, is an urgently needed task.

The problem of access of rural residents to health care during the pandemic exists not only in the Russian Federation. Ribeiro et al. (2021) in their article conducted studies that analyzed the availability of medical services and systemic care in rural areas during the spread of the pandemic in Brazil, and made some conclusions on the historical unreliability of medical care for rural residents. European researchers Esteban-Navarro et al. (2020) highlight the problem of digital vulnerability of rural citizens during the pandemic, which is characterized by the restriction of access and connection to the Internet, low software skills. This problem became especially noticeable during the remote work of rural schools, where the degree of digitalization remains unsatisfactory (Rundel & Salemink, 2021).

In some countries the COVID-19 pandemic provoked the development of tourism in certain rural areas (Vaishar & Štátná, 2020). This is also true for Russia (Polukhina et al., 2021). Rural territories attract tourists due to natural, gastronomic and local landmarks.

According to many authors, further development of rural territories needs state support, especially in crisis situations, as both Russian and foreign experts state arguing the importance of such support with insufficient independent capabilities of rural settlements in force majeure situations (Gupta et al., 2021; Zakshevsky & Gavrilova, 2020).

As rural development has continued to be the focus of scholars and public administration for many years and has been influenced by the effects of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus infection over the past two years, it is undeniable that there is a need to identify a list of transformed problems and prospects for rural development. The authors believe that the use of a scientific approach to formulate the above categories is an important step in the management decision-making for all actors interested in improving the quality of life of rural residents.

2. Problem Statement

Today, in the context of the deepening global pandemic of the COVID 19/20A.EU1 coronavirus infection and the transition of the Russian Federation to a digital economy, rural areas in each constituent entity of the Russian Federation can become the most important resource and the determining factor in the sustainable development of the region, even if there are such problems as:

- quality of life of the rural population as a whole significantly lags behind the quality of life in cities;
- reduced access of the rural population to social services;
- low transfer of innovative technologies in areas ensuring the livelihood of rural areas, including in small business entities;
- high income gap between urban and rural areas, high unemployment;
- poor infrastructure facilities that create a comfortable environment for rural residents;
- low access of the rural population to financial resources, increased migration of the rural population to large cities;
- loss of rural development (Petrov & Sergienko, 2021).

The coronavirus pandemic has significantly changed the structure of Russia's rural economy showing its negative features (monospecialization, lack of developed diversification and sufficient social infrastructure). But it is also possible to see the positive effects of the coronavirus pandemic on the rural economy and the quality of life of rural residents. First of all, this can be expressed in the development of domestic Russian tourism (agrarian, ethnocultural, religious, historical and local history, recreational), in the short and long-term migration growth of the population from cities to the countryside, in increased targeted protection of the most socially vulnerable groups of the rural population, in solving environmental issues. As a result, local trade, including online, the production of local goods in small batches under local brands, the restoration of rural small schools, medical institutions (rural health centers), social infrastructure may begin to develop more actively in rural areas (Zakshevsky & Gavrilova, 2020).

Thus, the ambiguity of the impact of the pandemic on the development of rural areas could be argued, in connection with which the authors believe that the main problem of the study is the need to identify new problems and prospects for the development of rural areas of the Russian Federation taking into account the impact of the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. Research Questions

The study focuses on the problems and prospects of rural development in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The object of the study is the rural territories of the Russian Federation. The study will address the following issues:

- 3.1. Prevailing problems of rural development
- 3.2. Formulation of new challenges to rural development under the pandemic
- 3.3. Impact of the pandemic on rural development
- 3.4. Prospects for rural development taking into account the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this paper is to study the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on new problems and prospects for the development of rural territories of the Russian Federation.

5. Research Methods

The study utilized such general scientific methods as observation, analysis and synthesis, induction and deduction, comparison and others.

The information base for the study included the program documents of the Government of the Russian Federation: the State program “Complex Development of Rural Territories” (Decree of the Government of the Russian Federation of May 31, 2019 No. 696, 2019) and the “Strategy for the Sustainable Development of Rural Territories of the Russian Federation for the Period until 2030” (Decree of the Government of the Russian Federation of February 2, 2015 No. 151-r, 2015), as well as official data of the Federal State Statistics Service (RosStat) (2021). Besides, the works of various domestic and foreign scientists published in periodicals, conference materials and scientific journals were studied.

6. Findings

Rural territories of the Russian Federation are a key resource of the country, the importance of which is growing rapidly in the context of increasing globalization processes while increasing the importance of natural and territorial resources for the development of the country (Decree of the Government of the Russian Federation of May 31, 2019 No. 696, 2019).

According to the RosStat (2021), at the end of 2020 the following results were achieved in the implementation of the Strategy for the Sustainable Development of Rural Territories of the Russian Federation for the Period until 2030 (Decree of the Government of the Russian Federation of February 2, 2015 No. 151-r, 2015):

- the rural population at the beginning of 2021 was 36.9 million exceeding the target of 36.2 million by 671 thousand;
- the total area of residential premises on average per 1 resident in rural settlements is close to the target of 28 square meters per person and amounted to 27.5 square meters per person;
- the share of the total area of residential premises in rural settlements with all types of services and utilities was 37.5% exceeding the target of 32.6% by 4.9 percentage points;
- the outward migration flow of the rural population amounted to minus 3 thousand people with a target of minus 95.4 thousand people (RosStat, 2021).

These data show the divergent trends in the dynamics of statistical indicators of rural development in Russia, in connection with which the authors decided to identify a list of the main problems that negatively affect the processes under consideration both previously developed and formed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Table 1).

The list of presented problems is grouped by economic, social, infrastructure and environmental factors. Particular attention should be paid to the problems that were formed for the first time under the influence of the pandemic. The main ones include the threat of disruption of the production cycle up to its interruption due to the mass illness of workers, restriction of the access to traditional places of sale of farm products, restriction of education, mass suspension of many enterprises, etc.

Table 1. Modern problems of rural development of the Russian Federation

Pre-pandemic problems	Problems caused by the spread of the pandemic
<i>Economic problems</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - low income; - monospecialization of the rural economy; - cutbacks to funding of the state program “Complex Development of Rural Territories”; - balanced creeping inflation; - low transfer of innovative technologies in rural areas; - low access of rural people to financial resources; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - reduction in incomes of the population with the introduction of restrictive measures; - threat of disruption of the production cycle up to its interruption due to mass illness of workers; - interruptions in the supply of raw materials, goods, finished products with the introduction of restrictive measures; - spike in prices for certain product groups; - additional costs for preventive measures (disinfection, purchase of personal protective equipment, etc.); - limited access to traditional marketing sites for farm products; - mass suspension of many enterprises;
<i>Social problems</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - urbanization of the population; - low access to medical services (lack of paramedic stations and lack of doctors); - standard and quality of life of the rural population lags behind that of the urban population; - limited access to education caused by the territorial factor (including the absence of schools in remote villages); 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - rise in unemployment; - exacerbation of the public health problem; - limited access to distance education due to lack of access to the Internet;
<i>Infrastructure problems</i>	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - underdevelopment of engineering infrastructure; <li style="padding-left: 20px;">- lack of transport infrastructure; - underdevelopment of information infrastructure; <li style="padding-left: 20px;">- underdevelopment of social infrastructure; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - lack of transport infrastructure hinders the development of rural tourism; - impossibility of remote work in the absence of the Internet; - reduced demand for social infrastructure services;
<i>Environmental problems</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li style="padding-left: 40px;">- climate change; - reduction of biodiversity, soil fertility, deforestation and desertification, freshwater scarcity and pollution. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - pollution of natural recreation areas due to the increase in the number of vacationers; - increased water consumption due to hygiene standards related to the prevention of infection.

Currently, rural development is influenced by the factors of a transformed external environment resulting from the merger of traditional (previously formed) and unique (formed under the influence of the pandemic) factors (Figure 1).

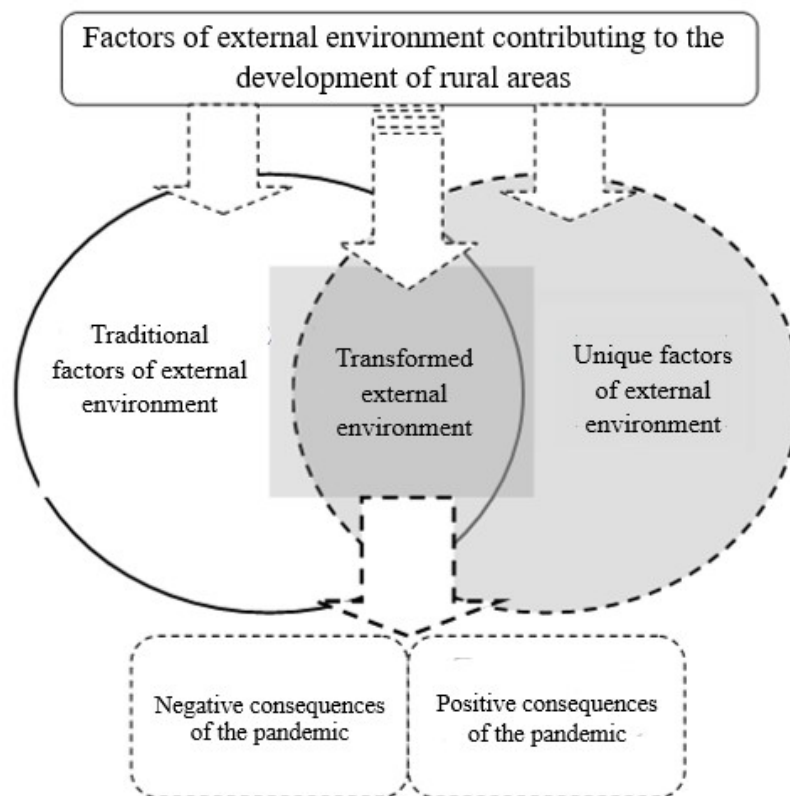


Figure 1. External environment in which rural areas are developing

The new external environment has had a controversial impact on rural areas. On the one hand, existing problems have worsened and new ones have emerged, and on the other hand, the pandemic has given rise to many challenges (Table 2).

Table 2. Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on rural development in the Russian Federation

Consequences of COVID-19	
<i>Negative consequences</i>	<i>Positive consequences</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - reduction of incomes of the population due to restrictive measures; - rise in unemployment due to restrictive measures; - underdevelopment of engineering infrastructure; - reduction of social infrastructure incomes due to restrictive measures; - increased environmental pollution due to the influx of population into the village; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - diversification of the rural economy (development of the service economy, Internet trade); - deurbanization of the population (short-term and long-term); - reopening of existing and opening of new paramedic stations; - development of infrastructure improved the quality of life of the rural population; - development of transport infrastructure (due to the development of rural tourism and the deurbanization of the population); - motivation of young professionals to attract them to work in rural areas; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - development of information infrastructure; - development of rural tourism; - development of small and medium-sized businesses (craft production, eco-production, etc.); <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - accelerated transformation of agriculture through the introduction of digital technologies and platform solutions; - increased government support to address the negative impact of the pandemic; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - increased consumption of eco-products; - improved ecological situation in cities during the period of self-isolation;

It is noteworthy that the authors revealed many positive consequences, which is explained by the peculiarities of rural settlements, including low population density, maximum approximation of natural recreation areas, eco-friendly environment, access to eco-products, etc. These features meet the requirements of self-isolation during the pandemic, which led to a massive outflow of Russians from city to village, which was an objective prerequisite for improving living conditions in rural settlements. Besides, we should not forget about the many years of work on the implementation of state programs aimed at the development of rural areas, the measures of which to some extent helped to improve the quality of life of rural residents.

7. Conclusion

The consequences of the coronavirus infection indicated the main prospects for the development of rural areas, including the following:

- further development of rural tourism as an alternative to recreation for people with reduced income and due to the restriction of external tourism;
- increased number of rural residents by outflowing the urban population, which will improve the living conditions in rural settlements;
- development and use of financial instruments in rural areas, including further improvement of the state program “Rural Mortgage”, improvement of financial literacy of the rural population, ensuring accessibility of financial transactions in rural areas through digitalization, etc.;

- expansion of the eco-products market;
- rehabilitation of engineering, transport, social, commercial and information infrastructure of rural settlements.

Thus, despite all negative effects the spread of a new coronavirus infection brought some prospects to the processes of changing life in the countryside. In general, the study is characterized by the use of scientific approaches, includes the systematization and synthesis of the studied authoritative opinions on the problems of rural development. The authors believe that the materials of the article are of considerable practical importance and can be useful both to business representatives and state representatives, both for adjusting the state policy and for making sound management decisions.

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