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COMPARING BUSINESS PERFORMANCE IN THE ACCOMMODATION SECTOR: EVIDENCE FROM RİZE AND TRABZON (2014–2024)

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to compare the accommodation sector in Rize and Trabzon between 2014 and 2024 and to show how the relative position of Rize has changed within this pair of neighbouring Eastern Black Sea cities. Using a descriptive and comparative design based on secondary data, it analyses provincial accommodation statistics of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, focusing on arrivals, overnights, average length of stay and occupancy, and separately evaluates the pre- and post-pandemic periods. The findings show that Trabzon is clearly ahead of Rize in total arrivals, overnights and foreign market share, but that Rize experienced noticeable increases in overnights, length of stay and occupancy around the post-pandemic peak, even if this trend weakened later. Overall, the study suggests that while Trabzon keeps its central role in the region, Rize has gained visibility as a complementary destination and that policy efforts for Rize should focus on planned capacity increase, product diversification and reducing seasonality.

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INTRODUCTION

In tourism in Türkiye, a few coastal provinces have long been in the foreground, while others still have limited tourism volume despite clear potential. The Eastern Black Sea Region is a good example (Bekdemir & Özdemir, 2002; Bilici & Işık, 2018; Künü et al., 2015). Trabzon attracted tourism investments earlier and has more settled air transport connections and promotion activities. Rize, known for its natural landscape, tea cultivation and green scenery, has not yet reached a similar tourism volume, and official statistics clearly show this gap (Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2025).

From the accommodation point of view, the two provinces also differ clearly. According to the provincial statistics of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Trabzon has a larger number of licensed accommodation facilities and bed capacity, including many city hotels and resort-type establishments along the coast. In Rize, the formal accommodation sector is smaller and more fragmented. There are fewer medium and large hotels, and a significant part of the capacity is made up of small family-run hotels, pensions and plateau guesthouses that are closely linked to nature and rural tourism (Bilici & Işık, 2018; Çakır & Sandalcılar, 2018; Kaya et al., 2019). These structural differences in supply form the background of the performance comparison in this study.

This situation naturally creates a comparison in terms of regional tourism competitiveness and destination management. The key question is: “Under similar climate, geography and target market conditions, how does the accommodation sector perform in each province?” To answer this, it is necessary to look closely at accommodation statistics. Indicators such as number of visitors staying in facilities, number of overnights, average length of stay and occupancy rate are concrete reflections of a destination’s tourism attractiveness and visitor flow.

The starting point of this study is this comparative perspective. When the accommodation data for Rize and Trabzon for 2014–2024 are put side by side, different stories appear. Trabzon has been a tourism focus for a longer time, which is visible in total arrivals and overnight numbers. Rize has a more limited capacity, but shows remarkable increases in some years, especially in domestic visitors. Fluctuations in average length of stay and occupancy rate also suggest clear divergences between the two provinces.

The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 caused a serious shock in the tourism sector, with sudden drops in accommodation figures and gradual recoveries in the following years. Therefore, it is not possible to examine the period 2014–2024 without taking this break into account. When we separate pre-pandemic and post-pandemic sub-periods for Rize and Trabzon, different dynamics emerge in both demand structure and accommodation indicators.

The main aim of this research is to analyse comparatively the performance of the accommodation sector in Rize and Trabzon during 2014–2024. Similarities and differences between the two provinces are examined through indicators such as numbers of domestic and foreign visitors staying in facilities, total arrivals, number of overnights, average length of stay and occupancy rate. Beyond comparing absolute numbers, the study discusses trends over time, the effects of the pandemic and the competitive position of Rize for the future.

The study has both theoretical and practical goals. From a theoretical side, it brings the discussion on destination competitiveness and tourism performance, usually handled at country level, to a more micro scale by focusing on two neighbour provinces. From a practical side, presenting the accommodation performance of Rize and Trabzon side by side with concrete data offers a comparative

picture that can support the decisions of local authorities, investors and tourism enterprises, and helps to develop policy suggestions on issues such as improving Rize's accommodation capacity, balancing the seasonal distribution of demand and strengthening destination branding.

In this context, the study addresses the following research questions:

- 1- How do the main accommodation indicators of Rize and Trabzon change over time between 2014 and 2024?
- 2- How does the relative position of Rize against Trabzon evolve during the period?
- 3- When the pre-pandemic (2014-2019) and post-pandemic (2020-2024) sub-periods are compared, what differences can be seen in the accommodation performance of the two provinces?
- 4- How can these findings be interpreted in terms of Rize's future competitive position and policy priorities in Eastern Black Sea tourism?

In the rest of the paper, the theoretical framework is briefly summarized, the tourism profiles of Rize and Trabzon, data set and method are presented, the accommodation indicators for 2014–2024 are compared, and finally the theoretical and practical reflections of the findings and possible future scenarios for Rize are discussed.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In tourism, competitiveness has long been central in both policy papers and academic work. As mass tourism expanded and many destinations began to offer similar products, one question was repeatedly asked: "Why does one destination attract more visitors than another?" In response, various destination competitiveness models were developed. Instead of looking only at income or visitor numbers, these models use a wider frame including resources, management, demand conditions and environmental and social sustainability (Buhalis, 2000; Mazanec, Wöber & Zins, 2007; Gomezelj & Mihalič, 2008; Croes, 2011; Navickas & Malakauskaite, 2009; Pike & Page, 2014; Cucculelli & Goffi, 2016). The integrated model of Dwyer and Kim (2003) and the competitive and sustainable destination approach of Ritchie and Crouch (2003) see destination competitiveness as multi-dimensional and treat performance not only as an outcome, but also as a component of competitiveness itself.

Many studies have therefore developed indicators or indexes to measure competitiveness (Gooroochurn & Sugiyarto, 2005; Martínez-González, Díaz-Padilla & Parra-López, 2021; Hanafiah & Zulkifly, 2019; Rodríguez-Díaz & Pulido-Fernández, 2020). The quantitative approach of Enright and Newton (2004) and the work of Crouch (2011) show how such indicators can be used in practice. Although the factors explaining competitiveness differ partly for small islands, coastal regions or cultural cities, performance indicators that show the volume and quality of tourism demand appear as a common element in almost all models.

Visitor numbers, overnights, average length of stay and occupancy rate are the core tourism performance indicators in both statistics and academic research. Together they show how many visitors a destination attracts, how long they stay and how effectively accommodation capacity is used. Other variables such as income, RevPAR or expenditure per visitor are sometimes added, but where official statistics are regularly published at province or region level, long-term trends are usually analysed through the basic indicators of arrivals, overnights, average length of stay and occupancy rate.

With the growing importance of sustainability debates, more attention is paid to how rising visitor numbers over time affect seasonality, carrying capacity and regional imbalance. In European Union

reports and destination carrying capacity studies, tourism performance is followed through combinations of arrivals, overnights, average length of stay and occupancy rate, and policy suggestions are developed by looking at their spatial distribution (Dupeyras & MacCallum, 2013; Dwyer & Kim, 2003). Long-term evaluations for Türkiye also place these indicators at the centre. The data set used for Rize and Trabzon in this article therefore follows an indicator framework consistent with national and international approaches.

Another branch of the competitiveness literature is index-based work, especially the World Economic Forum's Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index (TTCI). This index is widely used to compare the relative position of countries in areas such as tourism-related infrastructure, resources, environmental sustainability and business environment (World Economic Forum, 2019; Esen & Çakır, 2016; Sakal, 2021; Bostan, 2021). At national level, some authors have also designed destination competitiveness indexes for provinces using multi-criteria decision-making methods. These studies produced rankings for all 81 provinces and compared them with realized tourism performance, showing that some provinces perform below their potential while others perform above it.

Türkiye-focused research therefore tends to discuss competitiveness at country level using global indexes, or to work with broad provincial samples and produce rankings (Hassan, 2000; Burnaz & Ayyıldız, 2018; Göral, 2016; Künü et al., 2015; Esen & Çakır, 2016; Sakal, 2021; Bostan, 2021). By contrast, there are fewer studies that make a detailed comparison between two neighbour provinces using long-term accommodation data. In the Eastern Black Sea Region, studies that examine Rize and Trabzon together are especially limited. Existing research often focuses on a single destination's tourism potential, natural resources or alternative tourism opportunities (Bilici & Işık, 2018; Çakır & Sandalcılar, 2018; Somuncu & Yılmaz, 2006; Zaman, 2010; Kaya, 2019; Kaya & Yıldırım, 2020; Mazlum, 2025). Only a small number of works compare accommodation performance indicators systematically for a long period and link this comparison with a competitiveness framework. This gap in the literature can be addressed through a Rize–Trabzon comparison.

Within tourism performance studies, average length of stay and occupancy rate receive special emphasis. Average length of stay shows how much visitors can be “kept” in the destination, while occupancy rate indicates how effectively accommodation supply is used. Research from cultural cities, coastal destinations and rural tourism areas shows that these indicators are related not only to demand-side preferences but also to product design, event calendar and local government strategies (Sharpley, 2002; Lane & Kastenholtz, 2015; An & Alarcón, 2020). When discussing accommodation performance in Rize and Trabzon, it is therefore important to remember that such structural factors stand behind the quantitative indicators.

The post-COVID-19 literature examines in detail the shock effect on tourism performance and the dynamics of recovery (Gössling, Scott & Hall, 2020; Sigala, 2020; Zenker & Kock, 2020; Uğur & Akbıyık, 2020; OECD, 2020; UNWTO, 2020; Baum & Hai, 2020). The dramatic fall in international tourist movements in the first year of the pandemic directly affected the accommodation sector, and many studies reported sharp declines in hotel occupancy rates, overnights and income indicators. Studies on Türkiye discuss both the decrease in tourism income at macro level and the financial and operational problems of hotel businesses at micro level. For this reason, any analysis that covers the period 2014–2024 needs to treat 2020 and the following years as a separate sub-period.

In the light of this theoretical background, the present study contributes in two main ways. First, it uses the performance indicators frequently employed in the destination competitiveness literature (arrivals, overnights, average length of stay, occupancy rate) for Rize and Trabzon in a longitudinal perspective and presents the accommodation performance of these two neighbour provinces side by side. Second, it moves the mainly macro-scale discussion on competitiveness and performance in Türkiye to a more micro level by focusing on two key provinces of the Eastern Black Sea Region. In this way, a regional example is added to international debates, and at the same time the study becomes one of the rare works in the national literature that compares Rize and Trabzon in terms of the accommodation sector.

METHODOLOGY

In this part, the method of the research, the data set and the analysis approach are explained step by step. First the general design of the study is mentioned, then the indicators and the data source are introduced, and finally the analysis process is shortly summarized.

Research Design

The study has a descriptive and comparative design, aiming to compare the development of the accommodation sector in Rize and Trabzon over time. No causal model is built here. Instead, the focus is on how the main accommodation indicators changed between 2014 and 2024 and what kind of differences appear between the two provinces. In this sense, the study is close to a “case comparison” logic. By putting side by side the accommodation performance of two neighbour provinces that have similar geographic and climate conditions, it tries to make a more qualified reading about destination competitiveness.

Rize and Trabzon were selected for several reasons. First, they are adjacent provinces in the Eastern Black Sea Region and share similar natural conditions, which makes the comparison more controlled and meaningful. Second, their tourism structures are clearly different: Trabzon is a more mature tourism centre with a larger and more diversified accommodation capacity, whereas Rize is a smaller but rising destination with strong nature-based potential and a more fragmented supply. Third, consistent official accommodation statistics for 2014–2024 are available for both provinces, which allows a long-term, indicator-based comparison on the same numerical ground.

The research is based on secondary data. So, no new survey or interview was applied in the field. Instead, official tourism statistics of the relevant years were used as the main data source. This choice makes it possible to build a time series that covers a long period and to create comparable indicators between two provinces like Rize and Trabzon. On the other hand, using secondary data also brings some limitations, and this point is briefly mentioned in the following sub-sections.

Data Set and Variables

The data used in the study were requested through the Tourism Statistics System of the Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Culture and Tourism and arranged to cover the years 2014–2024 (Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2025). The data set includes only observations for Rize and Trabzon. In this way, a balanced panel structure is obtained that allows comparison both over time and between the two provinces. All data were taken from the Ministry system during 2025, and later cleaned in Excel and prepared for analysis.

In the Ministry statistics, accommodation facilities are usually followed in two main groups: licensed by the Ministry (tourism operation licence) and licensed by municipalities. For Rize and Trabzon, separate indicators are reported for both “all accommodation facilities” and “municipality-licensed facilities” in the relevant years. In this study, two different approaches are used. First, to see the general accommodation performance of the destination, total facility data are taken; that is, both Ministry-licensed and municipality-licensed facilities are evaluated together. In addition, as far as the data structure allows, indicators for municipality-licensed facilities are checked, but the main focus in the analysis stays on total accommodation capacity.

The data set basically includes the following variables for both provinces:

- Number of domestic visitors staying in facilities (2014–2024, annual total)
- Number of foreign visitors staying in facilities (2014–2024, annual total)
- Total arrivals (domestic + foreign)
- Number of domestic overnights
- Number of foreign overnights
- Total overnights (domestic + foreign)
- Average length of stay (in days)
- Occupancy rate (in percent, annual average)

These variables are in line with the core accommodation indicators that are often used in the literature to evaluate destination performance. The number of visitors staying in facilities shows the attraction power of the destination. The overnights variable reflects the volume of demand. Average length of stay shows how long visitors remain in the destination, and occupancy rate shows how much of the existing accommodation supply is actually used.

The yearly values in the data set were taken directly from the Ministry tables. No re-scaling or transformation was made. Only for some indicators (for example, total arrivals, total overnights), new variables were created by summing domestic and foreign figures.

During the preparation of the data, special attention was given to the values for 2020 and 2021. Because of the pandemic, there were sharp decreases in some indicators, so the consistency of these years with both the previous and the following period was checked. No clear reporting error was found in the data set, so the official values published by the Ministry were kept as they are.

Analysis Method

Because of the structure of the data set, the study mainly uses descriptive statistics. For both provinces, yearly averages, minimum and maximum values of the main variables were calculated and their change ranges were commented. In addition, to make the time trends more visible, line graphs were drawn for each indicator by year. With these graphs, jumps, breaks or drops in certain years can be followed visually, and the differences between Rize and Trabzon appear in a clearer way.

To strengthen the comparison between provinces, simple ratios and differences were also calculated for some indicators. For example, for a given year, the ratio of Rize’s total overnights to Trabzon’s total overnights, the difference between the occupancy rates of the two provinces, or the gap in average length of stay were shown in tables and graphs. In this way, it becomes possible to read not only absolute values but also relative positions. To see the effects of the pandemic period more clearly, two

sub-periods were defined: 2014–2019 and 2020–2024. The averages of the main variables were evaluated separately for these sub-periods.

No advanced econometric model (for example regression or panel data model) was built in the study. There are two main reasons for this. First, because the sample includes only two provinces and 11 years, it is difficult to set up complex models that would produce statistically strong and generalizable results. Second, the main aim of the research is not to test causal relations between certain variables, but to put the accommodation performance of Rize and Trabzon side by side in a clear and understandable way. For this reason, the analysis is based on descriptive statistics, graphical presentations and simple comparisons.

This approach also has some limitations. First, because of the use of secondary data, the researcher cannot directly intervene in the data production process and cannot correct possible measurement errors. Also, many factors that might affect accommodation performance (number of flights, road infrastructure, promotion activities, destination image, etc.) are not included in the data set. Therefore, the findings of the study should be interpreted only within the frame of the examined indicators, and these limitations should be kept in mind when making broader conclusions about the tourism competitiveness of Rize and Trabzon.

Even so, the comparative analysis of official accommodation statistics over a long period offers a picture that was not very visible in the literature so far for both provinces. It also provides a solid base for more detailed future studies.

FINDINGS

In this part, the accommodation indicators of Rize and Trabzon for the period 2014–2024 are presented one by one. After that, the differences between the two provinces and the changes before/after the pandemic are discussed. Detailed numbers are shown in tables and figures. In the text, the focus is more on the general patterns of these trends.

Trends in Total Arrivals and Overnights

When total arrivals are first examined, it is clear that Trabzon has much higher values than Rize during the whole period. Total arrivals and total overnights for 2014–2024 are summarized in Table 1, and yearly trends are shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

Table 1. Total arrivals and total overnights in Rize and Trabzon, 2014–2024

Year	Rize total arrivals	Rize total overnights	Trabzon total arrivals	Trabzon total overnights
2014	185.666	226.225	654.456	942.958
2015	97.790	135.878	1.040.946	1.636.643
2016	100.238	135.790	579.298	1.039.351
2017	126.399	223.094	598.464	1.093.846
2018	162.359	289.839	584.948	1.123.038
2019	183.970	325.870	626.465	1.238.276
2020	89.872	173.102	280.367	513.074

2021	177.855	338.753	607.544	1.221.891
2022	261.600	507.467	968.342	2.031.506
2023	157.156	287.685	709.863	1.497.211
2024	149.847	260.659	882.967	1.777.447

When the 2014–2019 average is taken, the annual total arrivals in Trabzon are around 680 thousand, while in Rize they are around 140 thousand. In other words, in the pre-pandemic period the number of visitors staying in accommodation facilities in Trabzon is roughly five times higher than in Rize.

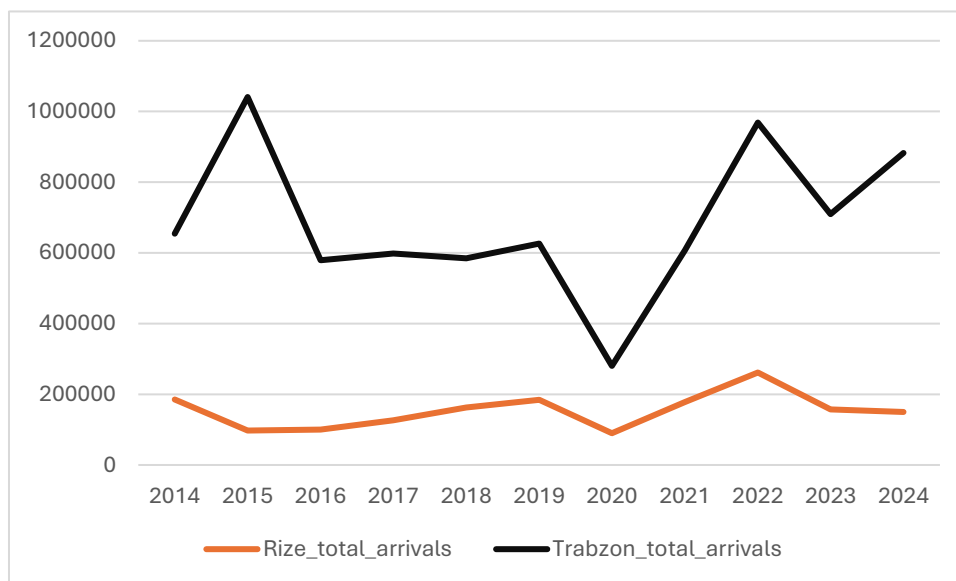


Figure 1. Yearly change in total arrivals in Rize and Trabzon, 2014–2024

A similar picture appears when total overnights are examined. In many years, the annual total overnights in Trabzon are above 500 thousand, and in some years they go up to around 1–1.5 million. In Rize, total overnights are mostly between about 135 and 325 thousand in the period 2014–2019. In 2019 they reach a little above 325 thousand, which is the highest level within that sub-period. So, for the first six years under review, Trabzon is clearly far ahead of Rize in terms of both arrivals and overnights.

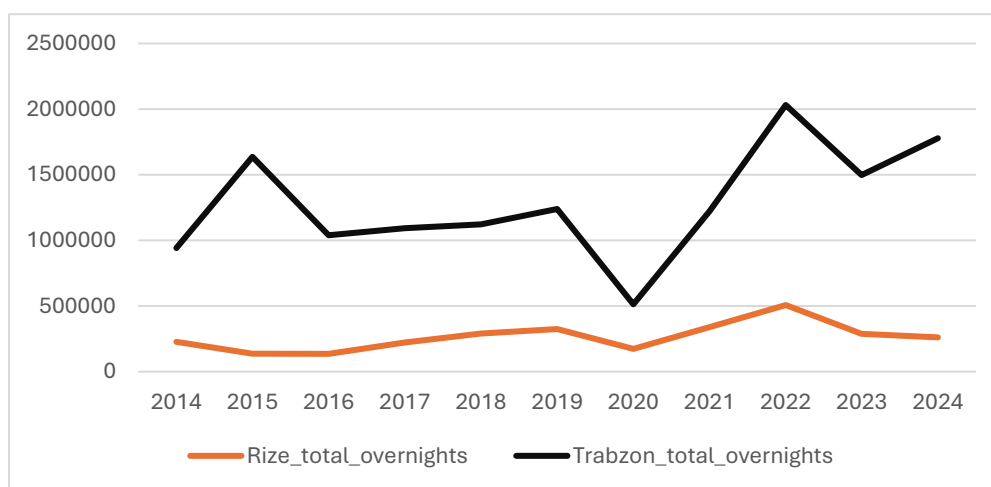


Figure 2. Yearly change in total overnights in Rize and Trabzon, 2014–2024

With the pandemic, there is a strong fall in both provinces in 2020. In Rize, total arrivals drop to just below 90 thousand and total overnights to around 170 thousand. In Trabzon, arrivals fall to about 280 thousand and overnights to just above 510 thousand. From 2021 onwards, a fast recovery can be seen. In Rize, total arrivals climb again to around 180 thousand in 2021 and then to around 260 thousand in 2022, before stabilising at around 150–160 thousand in 2023 and 2024. In Trabzon, similarly, there is a strong increase again from 2021, with total arrivals exceeding 600 thousand in 2021, approaching 1 million in 2022 and staying in the 700–900 thousand band in 2023 and 2024.

For total overnights, in the post-pandemic period both Rize and Trabzon clearly pass above their 2014–2019 average. Compared with the pre-pandemic period, total overnights in Rize increase by around 40%, while in Trabzon they rise by around 20%.

These results show that Trabzon keeps its dominant position in the region in terms of volume. Rize grows faster in relative terms when pre- and post-pandemic averages are compared, but this growth is not linear: total overnights peak sharply in 2022 and then fall back in 2023 and 2024, which raises questions about the sustainability of this new level. When both provinces are considered together, the share of Rize within this pair in the Eastern Black Sea Region is roughly around 17% of total arrivals in the pre-pandemic period. After 2020, this share goes up to nearly 20%. In total overnights, Rize's share rises from around 16% to about 18%. This points to a relative strengthening in the accommodation performance of the province.

Composition of Domestic and Foreign Markets

When arrivals and overnights are examined separately for domestic and foreign visitors, a clearer difference appears between the two provinces. Summary indicators for the composition of the domestic and foreign market are given in Table 2, and the yearly change in the share of foreign visitors is presented in Figure 3.

Table 2. Average domestic and foreign arrivals/overnights in Rize and Trabzon in the sub-periods 2014–2019 and 2020–2024

Period	Rize domestic arrivals	Trabzon domestic arrivals	Rize foreign arrivals	Trabzon foreign arrivals	Rize domestic overnights	Trabzon domestic overnights	Rize foreign overnights	Trabzon foreign overnights
2014–2019	123.486	508.942	19.251	171.821	191.816	754.301	30.966	424.717
2020–2024	145.555	400.195	21.711	289.622	270.272	700.205	43.261	708.020

In Rize, in the period 2014–2019, the great majority of visitors staying in facilities are domestic tourists. In most of these years, the share of foreign visitors in total arrivals is between 6% and 15%, with an average of around 10%. In Trabzon, the situation is quite different. In the same period, the share of foreign visitors is much higher and about one-third of total arrivals come from foreign markets. In some years this rate even passes 30%, which, together with strong demand from Gulf countries, makes Trabzon look like an international attraction point.

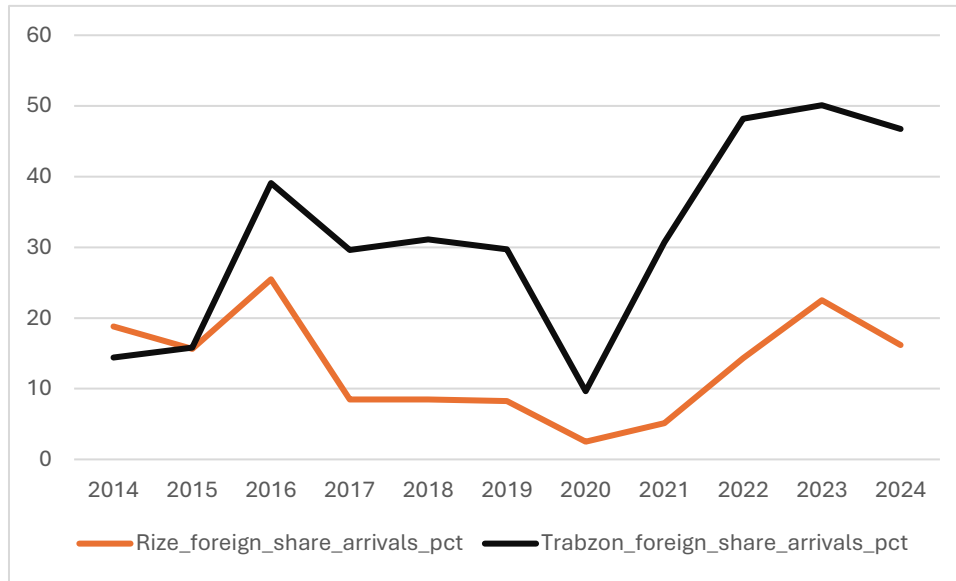


Figure 3. Yearly change in the share of foreign visitors in Rize and Trabzon, 2014–2024

In the post-pandemic period, the composition of the foreign market changes in both provinces. In 2020, because international travel almost came to a stop, the share of foreign visitors drops sharply in both Rize and Trabzon. But from 2021 and especially from 2022, the foreign market starts to recover again, and this recovery looks stronger in Trabzon. In Rize, the share of foreign visitors in total arrivals goes above 20% in 2022 and 2023, and then stands around 15% in 2024. In Trabzon, in the same years, the foreign share reaches up to almost half of total arrivals in some points and on average comes close to 40%.

The overnight data confirm the same separation. In Trabzon, the share of foreign overnights in total overnights is very high especially after 2015, and in some years it almost reaches the level of domestic overnights. In Rize, foreign overnights remain more limited in size, but show a clear upward trend after 2022. This picture tells us that Rize has caught a relative momentum in foreign markets in recent years, but Trabzon still has a more international visitor profile in terms of both volume and diversity.

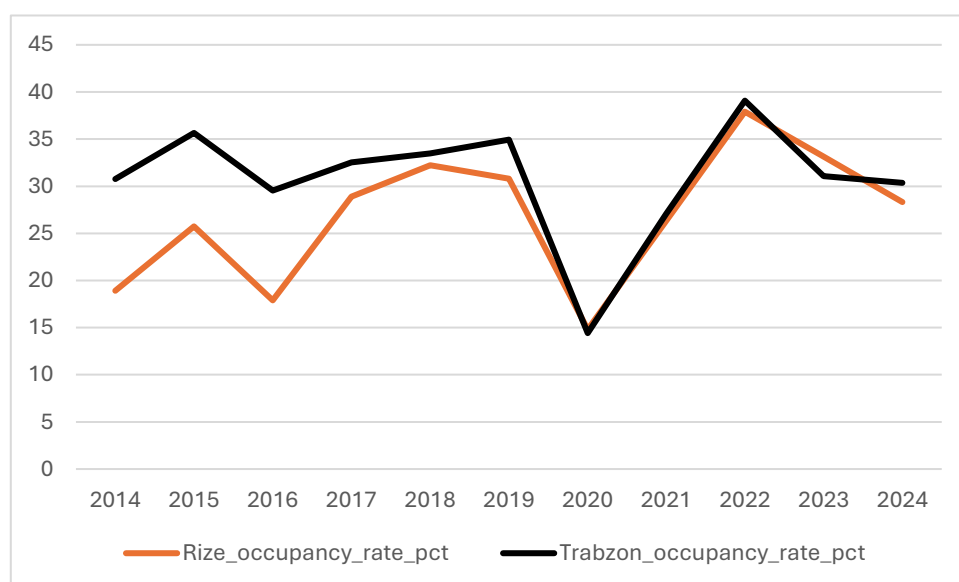
Average Length of Stay and Occupancy Rates

To understand better the qualitative side of accommodation performance, average length of stay and occupancy rate are evaluated separately. Yearly values for these indicators are given in Table 3, and their time trends are visualized in Figure 4. Average length of stay gives an idea about how much visitors can be kept in the destination, while occupancy rate shows how effectively the accommodation supply is used.

Table 3. Average length of stay and occupancy rate in Rize and Trabzon in the sub-periods 2014–2019 and 2020–2024

Period	Rize length of stay	Trabzon length of stay	Rize occupancy rate	Trabzon occupancy rate
2014-2019	1,55	1,76	25,75	32,82
2020-2024	1,87	2,01	28,10	28,40

Looking at the averages for 2014–2019, the average length of stay in Rize is close to 1.5 days, while in Trabzon it is around 1.8–1.9 days. So, in Trabzon guests stay clearly longer than in Rize. This can be related to Trabzon's larger product diversity and its role as a gateway to surrounding provinces and inner regions. But this study does not directly test these reasons. In the post-pandemic period, the average length of stay increases slightly in both provinces. In Rize it goes up to around 1.9 days, and in Trabzon it is just above 2 days. Especially in 2022–2023, the average length of stay is relatively high in both provinces compared with other years in the period.

**Figure 4. Yearly change in occupancy rates in Rize and Trabzon, 2014–2024**

For occupancy rates, Trabzon is usually a few points above Rize. In the pre-pandemic period, annual average occupancy in Trabzon is mostly between 33% and 40%, while in Rize it fluctuates between 25% and 33%. In other words, in 2014–2019 Trabzon's occupancy is on average about 6–7 percentage points higher than Rize's. In 2020, occupancy rates drop sharply in both provinces, going down to around 15% in Trabzon and to around 20% in Rize.

In the post-pandemic period, occupancy rates rise again but do not fully return to their earlier levels. When the 2020–2024 average is taken, occupancy is around 28% in Rize and about 28–29% in Trabzon. This means that the gap between the two provinces is clearly smaller than before. One striking point is that in 2022 the occupancy rate in Rize rises above 37%, which shows that in that year the province used its accommodation capacity much more intensively than in previous years. In Trabzon, occupancy goes back again to around 38% in 2022, but shows a small decline afterwards and settles at around 30–31% in 2023 and 2024.

Rize's Relative Position and Overall Assessment

When the findings are evaluated together (see Tables 1–3 and Figures 1–4), two main observations stand out. First, during the whole period under review, Trabzon is clearly ahead of Rize in terms of total arrivals, total overnights and foreign market volume. This fits with the idea that Trabzon has long been positioned as a regional tourism centre in the Eastern Black Sea. Second, Rize, although smaller in size, shows a faster increase after the pandemic in total volume, foreign market share and occupancy, and in this way strengthens its relative place within this pair.

In 2014–2019, Rize's share within the combined total of the two provinces is around 17% in arrivals and around 16% in overnights. After 2020, these ratios move up to roughly 20% and 18%, respectively. So, even though Trabzon is still the dominant destination, Rize is slowly moving from a kind of "secondary" position to a more visible one in Eastern Black Sea tourism. The increase in average length of stay and the high occupancy rates reached in 2022 give important signals that Rize's accommodation capacity is being used more efficiently.

For Rize, these results carry a message in two directions. On one side, the province still has a smaller accommodation volume and a more limited international market weight compared with Trabzon. On the other side, the recent growth momentum and the increase in foreign market share show that, with the right investment and marketing strategies, Rize has the potential to move its accommodation performance to a higher level.

DISCUSSION

This study compared the development of the accommodation sector in Rize and Trabzon over the 2014–2024 period. The results show that Trabzon still keeps its long-standing central role in Eastern Black Sea tourism. It has higher values in total arrivals, total overnights and foreign market share in almost every year. This picture is in line with destination competitiveness models that underline the role of performance indicators and regional "hub" cities in tourism systems (Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003; Sakal, 2021).

Rize, however, shows a different but important story. Even if its total volume is smaller, the city has gained strong momentum, especially after the pandemic and around 2022. Average length of stay and occupancy rates increased, and the foreign market became more visible. This means that Rize is not only receiving more guests, but is also starting to use its existing capacity in a more effective way. Earlier studies already described Rize and similar destinations in the region as places with high but not fully used potential in nature and plateau tourism (Zaman, 2010; Somuncu & Yılmaz, 2006; Künu et al., 2015; Bilici & Işık, 2018; Çakır & Sandalcılar, 2018). The present findings suggest that this potential is now turning more clearly into measurable performance.

The COVID-19 shock did not affect the two provinces in the same way. Both Rize and Trabzon experienced serious drops in 2020, but Rize's recovery in overnights and occupancy was faster after 2021. Trabzon, which depended more on international demand before the pandemic, seems to have needed more time to rebuild its foreign markets. This pattern is consistent with studies showing that domestic and nature-based destinations often recover more quickly in crisis periods, while strongly international and urban destinations face a slower return of demand (Gössling et al., 2020; Sigala, 2020; Uğur & Akbıyık, 2020; Zenker & Kock, 2020).

In short, the picture that appears is a region where Trabzon continues to act as the main gateway, while Rize is becoming a rising secondary destination with growing weight in both domestic and (to a lesser degree) international markets. This type of relationship, where one city plays a central role and nearby destinations grow as complementary options, is also discussed in the literature on regional and rural tourism development (Bornhorst et al., 2010; Lane & Kastenholtz, 2015; Sharpley, 2002).

Suggestions for Practitioners

Working together instead of pure competition

- Rize and Trabzon should not be seen as cities in a zero-sum game. They can support each other if regional planning is done well.
- Joint tour packages can be designed. For example, visitors who enter the region via Trabzon Airport can be encouraged to spend at least one night in Rize.
- Common branding and promotion (for example “Eastern Black Sea routes including Rize and Trabzon together”) can help both destinations.

For Rize;

- The rise in demand and occupancy should be supported with planned capacity growth. New investments are needed, but quality in small family hotels and guesthouses should also be improved.
- Training and support programmes can be organised on service quality, online reputation management and digital visibility.
- To reduce seasonality, products for low season can be developed, such as tea harvest experiences, short gastronomy breaks, nature photography events and small-scale festivals.

For Trabzon;

- The city should manage strong foreign demand in a sustainable way. Very high concentration in a few months can damage local quality of life.
- Urban cultural routes, gastronomy and shopping experiences can be combined with nature and plateau products, so that visitors are encouraged to stay longer, not only one or two nights.
- Accommodation capacity and infrastructure should be renewed in a way that protects local residents and the urban environment.

For both provinces and the region;

- Regional decision makers should move towards data-driven destination management. Accommodation statistics should be monitored regularly and combined with studies on visitor profiles and spending patterns.
- Provincial and regional tourism boards can work with universities to produce regular situation reports on tourism performance, seasonality and carrying capacity.
- Environmental limits, especially in plateau areas and sensitive valleys, should be taken into account when planning new accommodation projects.

Suggestions for Future Research

- Future studies can add more indicators to the analysis, such as tourism income, average spending per visitor or participation in daily tours and activities.

- Qualitative methods can be used to support the numbers. Interviews with hotel managers, local authorities and tourism entrepreneurs in Rize and Trabzon could help to understand the reasons behind the trends found in this study.
- The comparison can be extended to other Eastern Black Sea provinces. This would make it possible to see where Rize and Trabzon stand inside the wider regional system.
- Panel data or time-series methods can be used to test how changes in accommodation performance are related to specific investments (for example the opening of Rize–Artvin Airport) or policy decisions.
- Finally, official statistics can be combined with online data such as booking platforms, social media and user reviews. This would give a richer view of the image and destination identity of Rize and Trabzon and would support more detailed, evidence-based destination management.

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