

STUDY REGARDING THE EFFECTS OF THE SARS COV 2 PANDEMIC ON TOURISM IN THE NORTH WEST REGION OF ROMANIA

Chereji Ioan*, Popovici Diana *, Țuțui Daniela** Chereji Aurelia Ioana*

*University of Oradea, Faculty of Environmental Protection, 26 Gen. Magheru St., 410048, Oradea, Romania, e-mail: ichereji83@yahoo.com; pdiana@uoradea.ro, aurelia_brinaru@yahoo.com

** Academy of Economic Studies, 6 Piata Romana., 010374, Bucharest, Romania, e-mail : tutuidaniela@yahoo.com

Abstract

The pandemic has had a lasting and damaging effect on all aspects of the human society and economics. One of the most affected area of the economy was the tourist activity. The travel limitations, the lockdowns, the medical dangers have made travel virtually impossible in the first half of 2020 while the second part of the year was a tumultuous one, with a lot of restrictions put into place that have seriously hinder the tour operators and hotels activities. This global and European situation also affected the national tourism in Romania. Although later one in 2020 the European wide restrictions were more relaxed at the national level we often had some restrictions imposed by the local circumstances. All too often the tourists were affected. Even if the great majority of Romanian tourists preferred visiting the country yet this influx was all too often not enough to ensure a real prosperity of the tourist agencies and hotels. This paper analyses the impact of these restrictions on the North-West Region of Romania, by emphasising the local peculiarities and how the pandemic affected a specific region of Romania in the tourist area.

Key words: pandemic; SARS COV 2; tourism; crisis; recovery; evolution

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a complex ecosystem that includes many actors: offline and online information and service providers (travel agencies, digital platforms, and travel technology providers); travel agencies and tour operators; accommodation service providers; management organizations of destinations; tourist attractions and passenger transport activities (European Commission, 2020). The SARS COV 2 pandemic put tourism in a difficult situation due to the restrictions imposed at European and national level, respectively, it practically completely blocked in the first quarter of 2020, which led to very high losses in the tourism and hospitality industry. Tourism employees were forced to stop working overnight, and the uncertainty about the future of the industry created major problems for all actors involved in its smooth running. The imposed restrictions increased the fear, anxiousness, troubled people behaviour and changed the life style, obliging them to stay home, to work from home or to lose their jobs and

income (Popescu, 2021). Thus, the pandemic had very large effects, both social and psychological, due to the general uncertainty that has spread throughout the world.

In accordance with the *COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS Tourism and transport in 2020 and beyond*, the “revenue losses at European level have reached 50% for hotels and restaurants, 85% for tour operators and travel agencies, 85% for long-distance rail and 90% for cruises and airlines (European Commission, 2020). The SARS COV 2 epidemic puts the EU tourism industry under unprecedented pressure. It has led to the suspension of most domestic and international travel, causing a significant reduction in revenue and creating liquidity problems for all tour operators (Volkman et al., 2021). The virus has not only raised unprecedented challenges for healthcare systems, but has also had a dramatic socio-economic impact worldwide, forcing states to take extreme measures, including lockdown of citizens, prohibition of public gatherings, closing schools, interruption of businesses and introduction of border/ travel restrictions. (European Tour Operators Association, 2020, p. 2 & Harba, 2020).

The tourism industry has always been affected by natural disasters or health crises, but the effects were local and could be dealt with. The global nature of the SARS COV 2 crisis has caused a domino effect that has profoundly affected the entire industry at the systemic level (Vărzaru et al., 2021). The incidence of the new Coronavirus pandemic (SARS-COV 2) on worldwide tourism is interrupting the steady increase in the number of tourists and the number of overnight stays in the last decade, especially in terms of international tourism. The measures taken by most governments in countries around the world on all continents (travel restrictions, closure of borders, isolation of the population or categories of the population at home or their quarantine, etc.) have drastically reduced tourist travel to almost zero, from March until June 2020 (Jugănar, 2020).

Starting with 16 March, 2020, when the State of Emergency was established in Romania, tourism went on vacation, but not one that would bring benefits. Since then, tourism consultants have predicted the collapse of the industry (Crețu et al., 2021). The summer of 2020, brought a timid resumption of tourism at the national level in compliance with the restrictions imposed by the epidemiological situation in each region of the country, but even so, after the period of blockage, there was a great need to spend the summer holidays outside the homes and the holiday vouchers have brought a breath of fresh air to tourism. In 2020 in Romania, all cultural events and tourist trips were cancelled or rescheduled to reduce the

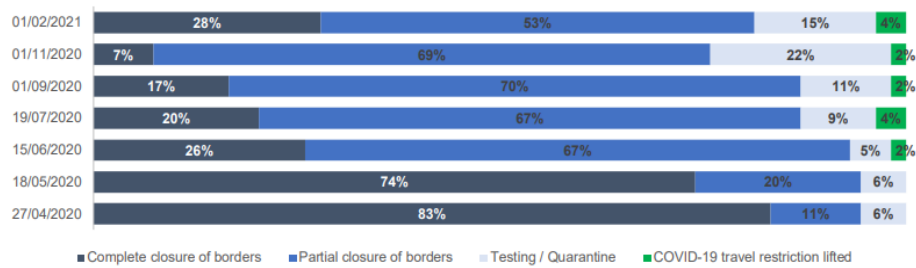
crisis impact on tourist's health (the tourist reception structures left open were those that housed quarantined people or medical staff) (Stoicea et al., 2021). This has also led to huge declines in the hotel industry, with a decrease in the number of tourists who constantly attend such events, so hoteliers have had to reinvent themselves through advantageous offers, free offers just to increase the number of overnight stays of the tourists. The crisis caused by SARS COV 2 pandemic had negative effects that are difficult to compensate for the global, European and national tourism. Thus, the effects were easily highlighted by indicators that are used in tourism to highlight the tourist activity for a country, region, county, accommodation unit. Thus, taking into account the considerations presented regarding the repercussions of the pandemic crisis on tourism, this paper analyses the effects of the pandemic on tourism in the North West Region of Romania.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

For the purposes of this paper was used the method of qualitative analysis of the specialized literature and also were reviewed the pandemic restrictions in the tourism sector in Europe. Also methods of quantitative analysis were used with a focus on the use for analysis of the database of the National Institute of Statistics - online tempo. The indicators used are the following: tourist arrivals in tourist reception structures; detailed Romanian tourists, foreign tourists; the number of total tourists and the number of accommodation units.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Romania has been severely affected by the crisis caused by the SARS COV 2 pandemic in several areas, but especially in the hospitality and hotel industry. The losses were very high and the reopening of tourism after the end of the lock-down period was a difficult one due to the restrictions imposed at national and local level. Although most Romanians have chosen to spend their summer vacation in Romania, this has failed to compensate for the huge losses in the spring of 2020, but also throughout 2020. As can be seen in Figure no. 1, the restrictions applied in April 2020 up till February 2021 in Europe, caused great problems for the hotel industry, so that for a very short period of time it was possible to travel without restrictions in Europe, which also affected our tourism in the country in terms of the number of arrivals



Source: Data compiled by UNWTO as of 1 February 2021.

Figure 1 - Evolution of Travel Restrictions April 2020 to February 2021 in Europe
Source: *** Covid-19 Related Travel restrictions

In terms of hotel performance, hotel occupancy reached its lowest level of 5.1% in May 2020 due to government restrictions on hotels and travel. With the easing of restrictions, employment began to rise in the summer, reaching its highest level (17%) in September 2020, before starting to decline again as a result of the second wave of infections with COVID-19 (Moisoiu, 2021). The study presents the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on tourism in the North West region, the region formed by the counties: Bihor, Bistrița-Năsăud, Cluj, Satu Mare, Sălaj and Maramureș. The analysed region is one with a high tourist potential, so it will be highlighted how high were the losses for accommodation units in the area, losses that are easily observed by the situation of arrivals in 2020, compared to 2018 and 2019, used as a reference for this paper. At national and regional level, there has been an increase in the number of arrivals in the last three years (except for the year of the beginning of pandemic 2 of COVID-19), which is natural in the context of the development of the tourism sector in Romania.

The year 2020 has led to a drastic decrease in the number of tourists worldwide. The pandemic and the restrictions applied all over the world have generated a real crisis in the tourism sector. It is observed that in Romania, the total number of tourists in 2020 is only 47.84% of the total number of tourists in 2019, and the North West region was even more affected. Also, the number of foreign tourists who visited Romania was decreasing very much, due to the uncertain situation of the travel conditions, conditions that changed from one day to the next.

Table 1

Situation of tourist arrivals in tourist reception structures with tourist accommodation functions by types of tourists, North-West Region, comparison of 2019 and 2020

Types of tourists	Total Country/Region	Years			
		Year 2019	Year 2020	Year 2020 - 2019	2020 / 2019
		Number of persons			%
		Number of persons	Number of persons	Number of persons	%
Total	TOTAL	13.374.943	6.398.642	-6.976.301	47,84
-	NORTH WEST Region	1.766.289	791.158	-975.131	44,79
Romanians	TOTAL	10.691.195	5.944.775	-4.746.420	55,60
-	NORTH WEST Region	1.494.798	746.214	-748.584	49,92
Foreigners	TOTAL	2.683.748	453.867	-2.229.881	16,91
-	NORTH WEST Region	271.491	44.944	-226.547	16,55

Source: Own calculus based upon data available at the National Institute of Statistics.

Regarding the situation of the tourist reception structures at the level of the country, respectively of the North-West region, it is observed from table 3 that their number had a slight increase in the pandemic ship 2020, compared to 2019, which underlines the optimism of investors with projects already started to complete them or even start new ones.

Table 2

The situation of the tourist reception structures with tourist accommodation functions at the level of Romania, respectively the North West Region

Total/ Region	Years			
	Year 2018	Year 2019	Year 2020	2020 / 2019
	Number			%
	Number	Number	Number	%
TOTAL	8453	8402	8610	102,48
NORTH WEST Region	1127	1124	1225	108,99

Source: Own calculus based upon data available at the National Institute of Statistics.

CONCLUSIONS

The end conclusion of this paper was that the tourist sector was not prepared to deal with a pandemic. The losses were severe and the human and monetary losses were significant. Yet at the end of the day the tourist sector has just barely managed to survive. Despite all the challenges the tourist operators would restart in the upcoming period as the lessons of the pandemic have been learnt by those interested and involved in the area. We need to use this as an opportunity to reset the tourism and not go on with business as usual. One thing that might make a difference is to improve the tourism infrastructure and service provisions throughout the region and especially in the cities. Secondly improving the access infrastructure is a must. Another priority should be under the general cover of diversifying and extending the tourist experiences. New tourist trails, new types of tourism, new sensations need to be provided. Finally there is a need for a continuous professionalization of all those involved in this sector as well as for a more green and sustainable tourism. The green and digital transition are to be used in this process of making the tourism sector more resilient.

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