

Mass Tourism during the Coexistence with the New Coronavirus. The Predictable Evolution of the Seaside Tourism in Romania

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Abstract

International tourism, worldwide, is in an unprecedented situation, the current crisis - the SARS CoV-2 pandemic being estimated to have a much stronger impact on the arrival of international tourists worldwide than the effects of the previous 3 crises which affected tourism (the SARS pandemic, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and the global economic crisis.

Most countries have taken measures to restrict traffic, close borders, isolate their population, quarantine the infected people, and equip hospitals to fight this "invisible enemy". However, economic activities, including tourism, must be resumed.

People are tired of restrictions, they want to travel, even if they have to follow new rules so as to coexist with the new virus.

Depending on the epidemiological evolution and the measures taken, Romania can attract more tourists, Romanian and foreigners, especially to the seaside. However, the absence of adequate measures, can lead to severe restrictions upon tourism activities.

Key words: mass tourism, seaside tourism, the new Coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2), impact, predictable evolution

J.E.L. classification: Z31, Z33, Z38, Z39

1. Introduction

Since the late 1950s, numerous tourist areas in Europe and other parts of the world, especially coastal areas, have begun to develop their tourist reception infrastructure for a growing and accelerated unprecedented tourist demand. After the recovery of the economies affected by the Second World War, large groups of people, from various social categories, beneficiaries of better wages and longer paid vacation leave, "invaded" holiday destinations.

As Professor Bill Bramwell pointed out, this development has also been possible due to innovations in transport technologies, especially in commercial jet airlines. Another key element was the widespread sale in the tourism industry of standardized tourist packages, which combine accommodation with transportation, marketed by the new types of tour operators (Bramwell, 2004, p. 1).

In the late 1950s, when air travel had become increasingly accessible, few destinations were developed enough to accommodate the large number of tourists eager to travel. In the rush to build as many hotels by the seaside as possible, as close as possible to the beaches, many mistakes were made in arranging the tourist resorts. At the same time, however, tourism had become a real catalyst for the economic development and of the regions in many countries around the world.

Towards the end of the 1980s and in the 1990s, many experienced tourists had begun to reject the idea of mass tourism, in favor of more individualized tourist trips. On the other hand, the negative impact of tourism in some places, through its uncontrolled development, generated negative reactions from local communities and government authorities. Many considered then that the end of mass tourism had come. In reality, mass tourism continued to develop, in parallel with individual and alternative tourism, various authors using new categories of terms, such as *sustainable mass tourism* and even *enlightened mass tourism* (Weaver, 2014).

According to World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC), globally, unprecedented economic and social losses are forecast due to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. The anticipated impact could be 5 times higher than that of the Global Financial Crisis of 2009, and the growth rate of global unemployment, directly resulting from the loss of jobs in the Travel & Tourism sector would be 2.9% of jobs, at global level (loss of 100.8 million jobs in the Travel and Tourism sector, i.e. a 30% decrease), and in terms of the contribution of this sector to the global GDP, the decrease would be 30%, amounting to 2.7 trillion USD (WTTC, 2020b).

Mass tourism is the most affected, since it can no longer be carried out under the old conditions, in order for the tourists to be able to apply the physical distancing and health protection new rules during transportation, within the tourist reception units with functions of accommodation, food service (restaurants), leisure, etc. and during trips.

2. Literature review

According to Burkart and Medlik, *mass tourism* is essentially a quantitative notion, based on the proportion of the population participating in tourism or the volume of tourist activity (Burkart, A.J., Medlik, S., 1974, p.42).

Over the years, various authors have tried to define mass tourism. Many times, they have provided a description of the evolution of this form of tourism or have tried to prove the role of mass tourism, rather than reach its proper definition, as Vainikka observed (Vainikka, 2013, p.270).

Mass tourism is seen as a distinct form of tourism, based on its connection to mass production, mass consumption and mass tourist destinations.

Auliana Poon considers that mass tourism exists only if the following 4 conditions are met: the holidays are standardized and rigidly packaged, they are mass products, it is mass marketed to an undifferentiated clientele and it is consumed en masse by tourists who do not show consideration to local norms and culture. We can observe, in this definition, not only the quantitative aspect, but also different qualitative dimensions of the concept (Poon, 1993, p.32).

We also distinguish between *organized mass tourism* when it comes to organized groups, which have the same holiday itinerary, and *individual mass tourism*, which refers to tourists who have some control over the time spent on vacation (Cohen, 1972, pp. 167-168).

The importance of travel and tourism in the global economy is well-known. Thus, in 2019, this sector contributed 10.3% to the formation of global GDP, and one in ten jobs, worldwide, was in this sector (330 million jobs). Only in the last 5 years, ¼ of the newly created jobs have come from this sector (WTTC, 2020a).

The incidence of the new Coronavirus pandemic (SARS-CoV2) 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.

3. Research methodology

In this paper we have used, analyzed and interpreted the results of several studies and statistical surveys on the evolution and forecast of tourist demand and supply, in Europe, and especially in Romania, as an effect of the restrictive measures, reduction in economic activities and even the closure / interruption of some activities (businesses), caused by the measures to protect the population against the COVID-19 disease. We have also analyzed the evolution, in recent years, of the indicators regarding tourist traffic in tourist resorts at the Romanian seaside, using the statistical data provided by the National Institute of Statistics in Romania.

Thus, we have analyzed the results of an ad-hoc statistical research, conducted by the Romanian Academy, within the National Institute for Economic Research-Department of Complex Research, between March 16-17, 2020, assessing the impact of the crisis on the volume of activity in the economy in the months March and April. Within it, two categories of information and statistical data were used, namely statistical data on turnover and the average number of employees from

January 2019 to January 2020, the collection of ad-hoc statistical data from economic agents directly involved in the economy, using a questionnaire, in which their representatives expressed their views on the impact of the crisis and on the volume of activity, and the number of employees in the company (Andrei, T. and Dinu, S., 2020, pp. 4-50).

We have also analyzed the results of an opinion poll conducted by IRES - the Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy, entitled "Romanians on alert" in May 2020, in which Romanians were asked about their holiday intentions (IRES, 2020).

The results of another specialized survey, which we have analyzed, conducted by the luggage storage company LuggageHero, together with the Romanian travel blog All4Travel have shown that, in general, 70% of the Europeans will continue to travel, in the year 2020, and Romanians were even more optimistic in their answers than the European average. The respective survey was conducted between 10-14 May 2020, through online forms, on a sample of 1600 people from around the world, ensuring the balance of age, gender and geographical representation (Badea, 2020).

4. Findings

The current international tourism situation was characterized by UNWTO Secretary-General Zurab Pololikashvili as follows: "This world is facing an unprecedented health and economic crisis. Tourism has been hit hard, with millions of jobs at risk in one of the most labor-intensive sectors of the economy" (UNWTO, 2020 a).

4.1. The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on international tourism

The COVID-19 pandemic caused a 22% drop in the number of international tourist arrivals in the first quarter of 2020, according to the information published by UNWTO in a May 7 report. Thus, according to the World Tourism Organization, the crisis could lead to an annual decline between 60 and 80%, compared to 2019. This puts millions of jobs at risk.

The 22% decline in the number of international tourist arrivals in the first quarter of 2020 is caused by the sharp drop, by 57%, in the number of arrivals in March, following the beginning of the lockdown in many countries, and the spread of the introduction of restrictions on traffic and the closure of airports and national borders. This has led to the loss of 67 million international tourist arrivals and the loss of revenue (tourism exports) of about 80 million USD (UNWTO, 2020b).

4.2. UNWTO scenarios for international tourism in 2020

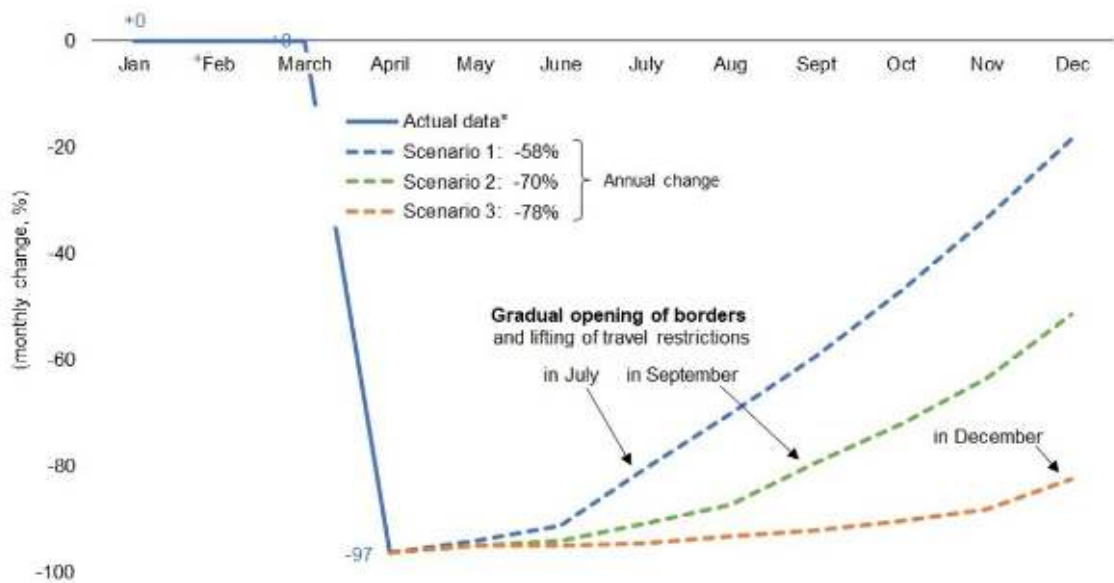
Although uncertainties persist, the current UNWTO scenarios for 2020 indicate possible declines in international tourist arrivals between 58% and 78% this year, depending on the rate of contamination and the duration of travel restrictions, as well as on the period of borders' closure.

The following *scenarios*, for 2020, according to UNWTO (Figure no. 1), are based on 3 possible data for the gradual opening of borders for international travel:

- *Scenario 1* (-58%), based on the gradual opening of borders and the relaxation of travel restrictions at the beginning of June (this scenario is already proving to be outdated, as travel restrictions are still maintained at present, in several countries);
- *Scenario 2* (-70%), based on the gradual opening of borders and the relaxation of travel restrictions since the beginning of September;
- *Scenario 3* (-78%), based on the gradual opening of borders and the relaxation of travel restrictions since the beginning of December.

UNWTO states that these scenarios do not represent forecasts, but they present alternative monthly changes of arrivals, based on the gradual opening of national borders and the lifting of travel restrictions on various dates, without any certainty regarding them.

Figure no. 1. International tourist arrivals in 2020: three scenarios (YoY monthly change, %)



Source: UNWTO, June 2020

At the same time, domestic tourism demand is expected to recover faster than international tourism demand, according to UNWTO Panel and Experts Survey members. Most of them expect to see signs of recovery starting with the last quarter of 2020, but rather in 2021 (UNWTO, 2020 b).

Not only the date of the reopening of the borders will be important, but also the measures that will be taken by each country's authorities, regarding the way the tourists will be treated, respectively if they will have to prove or not, with a document, that they are not sick of Covid-19, if they will be tested, if all the sanitary measures will be taken, so that tourists would feel safe, how long the border crossing formalities would take, the other formalities at airports, ports, railway stations, etc., and upon returning to their own country, whether or not they will have to be placed into isolation or quarantine, etc.

Based on these scenarios, the impact of the drop in international travel demand can be as follows: a loss between 850 million and 1.1 billion international tourists; a loss between 910 and 1,200 billion USD in export earnings from tourism; the loss of 100 to 200 million directly at risk jobs. This is by far the worst crisis that the international tourism is facing since statistical records began to be made (since 1950). The impact will be felt to varying degrees in global tourist regions and at different intervals.

4.3. Romania's short-term economic losses, as a result of the health crisis

After the two months in which it was in a state of emergency declared by the authorities (March 16 - May 16), continuing with the state of alert, due to the crisis of the COVID-19 infections, in Romania, by May 31, 19,257 confirmed cases of infection with the new coronavirus and 1,262 deaths were registered. About 80% of the recorded deaths were people who had one or more comorbidities, so it is very difficult to assess what the real cause of those deaths was (National Institute of Public Health in Romania, 2020).

From this point of view, until the beginning of June, Romania positioned itself among the countries less affected by the pandemic within the EU. But the losses suffered by the Romanian economy are enormous and difficult to estimate.

According to OECD, in Romania, GDP is projected to decrease by 8.6%, if there is to be a second wave of COVID-19 infections this year, and by 6.5% if the second pandemic wave can be avoided. Unemployment rate is estimated to increase in Romania, from 3.9% in 2019 to 10.2% in 2020 and to 9.1% in 2021, if, in the autumn of 2020, there is to be a second wave of contagion with the new Coronavirus (OECD, 2020b, p. 291).

At the end of May 2020, the Romanian Academy published a Report in which an analysis was conducted on the assessment of the impact of the health crisis on economic activity, which ends with some evaluations of the impact of COVID-19 on the economic environment internationally and with a forecast about the economic activity in May-June 2020. The estimated results of data processing show a contraction in turnover in the sectors of activity over the two months, and the most significant reduction was recorded by the Hotel and Restaurant sector, by 84% (Andrei, T. and Dinu, S., 2020, p. 35).

Regarding tourism, the drastic decrease in the number of non-resident tourists who will come to Romania this season could be largely offset by the increase in inbound tourism. But this could only be achieved if the epidemiological situation is kept under control, through firm measures, controls and sanctions applied to those who do not respect the rules, so that Romania could be one of the safest European countries, from an epidemiological point of view, and European tourists would want to come to Romania.

A number of 18 employers and professional associations representative of tourism in Romania have settled the Alliance for Tourism (APT) and have collaborated, in working groups, on various topics, to devise common positions and document proposals, which were submitted to the government, the ministry responsible for tourism, so as to take measures to protect employees and tourism entrepreneurs in Romania from the effects of the restriction, respectively the prohibition of certain activities, during the state of emergency and alert. A first document, elaborated by APT, entitled *SOS Romanian Tourism*, includes 60 measures necessary for Romanian tourism to restart. But beyond implementing the proposed 60 measures, the Alliance representatives stressed the urgent need to draft and implement a well-developed and committed strategy to reopen the hospitality industry sector, which authorities and industry representatives should draft and put it into practice. They believe that the lack of this strategy will lead to irrecoverable economic losses, which are difficult to estimate. In order to be successful, such a strategy should contain measures to rescue economic operators in tourism and hospitality sectors (from travel agencies, to tourist reception facilities with functions of accommodation, food service, transportation, etc.). For the time being, the government has only made some promises, which have not materialized by early June.

4.4. Tourism in the COVID-19 era - the predictable evolution of the demand for tourism in the European Union and in Romania in the summer of 2020

The European Commission has recommended that Member States receive tourists this summer from countries where the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has been kept under control and where there have been fewer COVID-19 infections and deaths. At the same time, EC has recommended that European countries maintain travel restrictions until 15 June. But each country has made its own decisions in this regard.

The survey conducted by the luggage storage company LuggageHero, together with the Romanian travel blog All4Travel, in May 2020, showed that, in general, 70% of Europeans will continue to travel in 2020, but 20% of the respondents intend to travel abroad only starting from 2021, and another 6% said they expected to first have access to a Covid-19 vaccine and only then they would travel abroad. More than half of the European respondents claimed that they would travel in the summer months of 2020. According to this survey, 75% of the respondents say they want to travel in their own country (domestic tourism).

Regarding the respondents from Romania, *their answers exceeded the European average*, the share of those who want to travel, both inside and outside the country, being 87%. The expectations of Romanians regarding the holiday budget they will allocate this year are similar to those of other Europeans, 56% of them estimating decreases of up to 20% for travel in 2020, compared to the European average of 60% (Badea, 2020).

IRES – The Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy conducted, in May 2020, an opinion poll entitled *Romanians on alert*. Of those surveyed, 27% said that *they plan to go on vacation this summer*, 30% of them answered that they would not go, but they would not have gone anyway, and 41% would not go, although, normally, they would have gone! Regarding *the holiday destination*, out of the total of those who intend to go on vacation, 74% answered that they would go inside the country, 12% abroad, and 10% both inside the country and abroad (IRES, 2020).

Many Romanians consider that, in 2020, they will prefer their own country as a holiday destination, fearing the potential risks of traveling by plane, but also out of the desire to be as close to home as possible, in case of danger.

The opinions of several tour operators in Romania converge on the idea that, in 2020, a year strongly affected by the pandemic, Romanian tourists will prefer destinations closer to their home, mainly in their own country, but also in other geographically close countries. During their vacation, they will be more concerned about their own safety, focusing on criteria such as the quality of services and physical distancing on the beach, within accommodation units, etc. Unlike in previous years, when tourists put more emphasis on the size of the travel budget, now they are much more concerned with the safety measures during the trip and at the destination.

Even if the air traffic will reopen, it is anticipated that Romanians will avoid, as much as possible, air travel, preferring the flexibility and safety of their own car.

For Romanian tourists who will not choose the Romanian seaside, the most sought after tourist destinations in the vicinity will be the Bulgarian seaside and the seaside resorts in Northern Greece.

4.5. Tourist supply and demand in Romania's seaside resorts

The total (installed) tourist accommodation capacity existing in Romania, in 2019, according to the data published by the National Institute of Statistics was 356,562 places (beds), of which, in Constanța county (the only county in Romania where the seaside resorts are located) was 89,902 places (beds), i.e. over 25.2% of the total in the country (INS, Tempo online Database).

Regarding *tourist demand*, out of the total of 13,268,756 tourists accommodated in Romania, in the classified tourist reception resorts, 1,380,607 tourists stayed at the seaside (10.4% of the total in the country), most of them being Romanian (95.25%), foreign tourists being only 65,622, i.e. only 4.75% of the total number of tourists staying at the Romanian seaside. Tourists staying at the seaside recorded a total of 5,196,530 overnight stays (representing 17.4% of the total number of overnight stays registered in Romania), of which 4,986,937 are overnight stays of Romanian tourists (20.26% of the total overnight stays registered in Romania) and only 209,594 overnight stays of foreign tourists (3.98% of the number of overnight stays of non-residents in Romania) (DJS Constanta, 2020).

4.6. The latest evolutions of tourist demand at the Romanian seaside

In the last two years (2018 and 2019), there have been annual increases of over 5% in the number of tourists hosted on the Romanian coast, especially due to the increase in the number of Romanian tourists. Thus, the increase in the total number of tourists in 2018, compared to 2017, was 6.22%, and in 2019 it was 5.22%, compared to 2019 (National Institute of Statistics, TEMPO online).

Table no. 1 The evolution of some tourist indicators regarding the Romanian seaside during April-May 2020, compared to April-May 2019

Period	April 2019	April 2020	April 2020/ April 2019	May 2019	May 2020	May 2020/ May 2019
Indicator						
No. of tourists	28,526	827	-97%	48,277	1,679	-97%
No. of overnight stays	69,052	3,936	-94.3%	107,497	3,202	-97%

Source: processing of data published by the National Institute of Statistics

As a result of the measures to restrict tourist activities in the fight against the COVID-19 disease, one could observe (Table no. 1) a dramatic drop, by 97%, in the number of tourists, in April and May, i.e. 20,120, compared to the similar period of 2019 and a decrease by 94.3% in April, respectively by 97% in May 2020, compared to 20,189, the number of overnight stays of tourists, on the Romanian coast (INS, Tempo online).

Even if the accommodation units are open, in the absence of measures to relax the restrictions, by the authorities, in the sense of allowing the operation of restaurants, even at half the maximum capacity previously authorized, there will still be drops in tourist flows, starting from June 2020, compared to the previous years.

The measures taken by the Romanian authorities to ban the activity in restaurants, during the state of emergency (March 15-May 15) and then during the state of alert (May 15-June 15) seriously affected the units in this category. Very few of them managed to reinvent themselves quickly and offer delivery or take away services, which were allowed by the regulations in force, but, even so, the revenues from these activities were modest, many units risking bankruptcy.

Although APT representatives requested the gradual start of the reopening of tourism units on May 15, after the abolition of the state of emergency, the Romanian authorities postponed until June 1 this second stage of relaxation of the restrictions, and did not allow the opening of restaurants from June 1, except for the outdoor spaces of restaurants, which consumers simply call terraces, their opening not being sure even from June 15 or July 1! But not all hotel restaurants have such terraces, and if they do, their capacity is insufficient to ensure catering for all the tourists who could be accommodated in hotels. There are hundreds of thousands of tickets bought by Romanian tourists during the early -booking offers, even before the outbreak of the pandemic, for stays at the seaside during the summer. These also include meals services, but restaurants are not allowed to operate.

By a joint Order, issued by the Ministers of Health and Economy and by the President of the National Sanitary Veterinary Authority of Romania, the *Rules on establishing specific measures to prevent the spread of Sars-Cov-2 virus for activities of preparation, serving and consumption of food stuffs, alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages in the spaces arranged outside the buildings of public food service units* were approved, which established all the measures and conditions which must be observed for the operation of these units (Order no. 966/809/105/2020).

Seaside tourism in Romania can record good results this season, even over those of previous years, although the opening of the tourist season was delayed. The results will depend less on what the companies involved in the hospitality industry will do and more on the measures that the authorities will take, as well as on the epidemiological evolution. We will have fewer foreign tourists at the Romanian seaside, but we can have more Romanian tourists in general.

5. Conclusions

After overcoming the effects of the 2008-2009 economic and financial crisis, after a decade of uninterrupted growth, tourism, internationally, suddenly has stopped growing, registering spectacular drops due to the measures taken to protect the population against the effects of the new SARS-CoV-2 Coronavirus pandemic.

Even after the removal of travel restrictions, in most countries of the world, tourists have become much more cautious about the type of travel they practice, avoiding congestion, especially within public transportation (air and land), preferring transportation by their own cars and choosing especially domestic tourist destinations or countries geographically close to the usual residence of the tourists.

Romania could have taken advantage of this situation, capitalizing on the opportunities to develop its domestic tourism, attracting a larger number of Romanians who, under normal conditions, would have preferred to go on tourist trips abroad, on the one hand, and on the other hand, to try to attract more foreign tourists into the country (inbound tourism). But this can only be achieved if it manages to maintain an attractive tourist destination, especially in terms of health (epidemiological) safety.

In order to do this, a concrete plan of measures would have been necessary, with well-established stages, for the relaunch of tourism activities, so that Romania would be part of the first wave or "platoon" of European countries to reopen tourism units. This is possible, on the one hand because in Romania there has been a relatively low number of deaths due to Covid-19, until the beginning of June, but also because Romania's tourist offer includes many areas where one can practice individual, isolated tourism, with increased possibilities to ensure the conditions of physical isolation. In order to attract foreign tourists, especially from the category of services from Western European countries, however, an urgent promotion campaign in those countries, emphasizing the fact that Romania is a safe tourist destination would have been necessary.

Unfortunately, the Romanian government proved to be too slow in its reactions, the measures were taken late, they were unclear, offering no predictability for the business environment. Good economic measures were taken, although insufficient and sometimes incoherent, and the long-awaited economic recovery plan has not been launched by the beginning of June 2020.

We should also be concerned, however, that more and more Romanians have begun to believe in various conspiracy theories, widespread in the media and on social networks. According to them, the Coronavirus simply does not exist or is just a more severe flu, with better marketing, and all the measures taken by the authorities are wrong and only restrict the freedom of movement of the population. At the same time, comments and recommendations are made against vaccination, when there will be a vaccine available against COVID-19. Unfortunately, even some high-ranking Romanian politicians, including members of Parliament, adopted a stance in which they expressed distrust in the need for measures to protect the population in the fight against the new virus, negatively influencing the population's perception and thwarting, thus, the efforts of government authorities.

If the authorities fail to successfully tackle these views, Romania will face serious difficulties in keeping the pandemic under control and we will all lose, both us, as people, and the economy, the businesses, because we risk facing the blockage of the sanitary system and, inevitably, very strict isolation measures, respectively quarantine, together with the blockage of activities.

The most important loss that the Romanian seaside tourism registered, at the beginning of the summer tourism season 2020, was not the reduction of the activity, of the number of clients and of the obtained income, but the loss of a part of the staff, especially the qualified one. Since the previous years, the main problem faced by employers in the hospitality and restaurant industry on the seaside has been the difficulty in finding skilled seasonal labor during the summer. Many skilled Romanian workers, especially young people, have left to work for better wages in Western European countries and on cruise ships. In the spring of 2020, many of them returned into the country, due to the closure of the units in which they worked in those countries. It would have been an excellent moment for some of them to be employed in tourism units in Romania, especially at the seaside. But the uncertainty, the lack of predictability regarding the date when the units in the restaurant sector would be opened at full capacity has prevented employers from recruiting and hiring the respective staff. Most of the employees of these units were sent into technical unemployment, receiving 75% of the employment salary (without bonuses), but not more than 75% of the national average wage. Unfortunately, for the accommodation and food units at the seaside, the restrictions imposed by the authorities since March 15 have intervened before the period in which, under normal conditions, most of the seasonal employees in tourism are recruited and hired for the summer season. Thus, not yet employed, these people could not be included in the category of employees who could have benefited from technical unemployment benefits paid by the government. So many employees who could have worked in tourism, at the seaside, have been lost, and in the meantime they have found other jobs. Also, the number of graduates from schools in the field of tourism and restaurants is much too small compared to the needs of the labor market.

In conclusion, mass tourism in the *Covid era* can no longer operate according to the previous rules, but must comply with the new rules: physical distancing of tourists from each other, wearing a face mask in enclosed spaces and in means of transportation, etc. Non-compliance with these rules can lead to a dramatic increase in COVID-19 infections, blockage of the health system and more illnesses and deaths, and the authorities will have to take unpopular but necessary measures to limit or even ban tourist activities.

On the other hand, there is a strong demand for tourism, people want to be allowed to travel, they want to travel for tourist reasons and they want to create the necessary conditions to benefit from tourist services right now, immediately, in this tourist season. The decisions and measures that the governments will take during this period will decisively influence the immediate future of tourism.

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