

The Influence of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Tourism in Romania

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Abstract

The epidemic diseases frequently experienced in human history have caused both significant loss of human life and many psychological, economic and sociological effects. Covid-19 acts as a sensor of the current situation at national, European and global level; the situation created by the Covid-19 virus is seen by the whole world trying to understand its tendencies, to decipher the causal relations and to anticipate the evolution. There is no doubt that the adage "nothing is more practical than a good theory" attributed to Immanuel Kant mobilizes specialists to expedite the development of specialized works that provide theoretical support in assigning meaning to the current and future situation that is markedly dependent of the evolution of this virus. The transition of the virus has an impact in all areas of activity, bringing with it an imminent wave of changes that are felt socially, personally, financially and extrapolated to the economic, political, diplomatic and international levels.

Being one of the most widespread pandemics in the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused many losses in all areas of activity, but especially in tourism. In order to make inferences about the effects of COVID-19 on the tourism industry, it should be analyzed in comparison with the period before the pandemic. Thus, the role of this paper is to highlight the impact of the pandemic on tourism in Romania compared to the previous one. For this, a comparative assessment will be made in terms of the impact and rates of influence of the disease and its effects on accommodation structures, on tourism as a whole, but implicitly also on tourists.

Key words: COVID-19 pandemic, tourism, Romania

J.E.L. classification: Z32, L83, R11

1. Introduction

By June 2021, COVID-19 had infected more than 173 million people and killed more than 3 million worldwide. In response to the virus, most countries have closed their borders to visitors and tourists in the past period. The UN World Tourism Organization reported in the second quarter of 2020 for the first time that 100% of global destinations have introduced travel restrictions (Volkmann, C., Tokarski, K.O., Dincă, V.M, Bogdan, A., 2021). As a result, international tourism has been almost completely suspended, and domestic tourism has been limited by the blocking conditions imposed in many countries. Today, although some destinations have begun to open slowly, many people are afraid of international travel or not and can no longer afford it due to the economic crisis.

Tourism is a critical sector of the international economy. In 2019, the tourism sector accounted for 29% of global service exports and approximately 300 million jobs globally. It is an important source of income and jobs for developed and developing countries. The global contraction in tourism arrivals has had devastating economic consequences, given that developing countries were dependent on tourism. In some countries, such as several small developing island states (SIDS), tourism accounts for more than half of GDP.

In this context, our country was implicitly affected, which suffered very large economic losses during the pandemic. Tourism in Romania has also experienced a lot of trials and challenges, being on a downward slope during this period, as the statistics show. The decrease in the number of tourists was reflected in the profitability of small, large and medium-sized enterprises in this field, which were particularly affected by the decrease in travel in general. Moreover, all events organized for tourist purposes were canceled or postponed during this period which led to an even greater decrease in the number of tourists in Romania.

2. COVID-19 pandemic

Pandemic diseases are defined as events that cause a high level of costs for individuals and communities, the results of which cannot be predicted, but which can be restored. Pandemic diseases can occur in different forms and can affect different organs of the body. However, respiratory diseases have a higher share among epidemic diseases. It is known that, with regard to this type of respiratory disease, which has been frequently observed throughout history, epidemics and pandemics have a destructive force that severely disrupts the community and the economy and causes a high level of costs on a global scale. All the more so their impact on the health and services sector is huge. (Moran, Del Valle, 2016, p.2).

SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) broke out in China (Foshan, Guangdong) on November 16, 2002, with a large number of SARS-CoV-associated coronaviruses constantly being discovered, and studies have shown that they spread from the natural reservoir, respectively the bats, which generated the reporting and identification of a new coronavirus (Cov-19).

The 2019 CoronaVirus outbreak, known as COVID-19, is a general health crisis that has caused mental resistance and is the largest outbreak of infection globally since the 2003 SARS outbreak. (Wang and all, 2020, p. 19). The epicenter was reported in Wuhan, China. First called "severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2)" because of its genetic similarity to SARS (whose outbreak was observed in 2003). Several groups of patients with pneumonia of unknown cause were reported in late December 2019 in Wuhan, the capital of Hubei Province, China. It was later identified as being caused by a new coronavirus.

The World Health Organization declared a pandemic on March 11, 2020 and framed the evolution of the Covid-19 virus as its trigger. At that time the number of confirmed cases exceeded 118,000 people, being present in 114 countries and to this balance is added 4291 deaths (Europa Libera Romania, 2020).

The first confirmed case of infection in Romania was registered on February 26, 2020, confirming the nature of contacting the virus through the direct contact the patient had with an Italian citizen from Rimini, who came on vacation in the country.

In order to slow down the spread of coronavirus, to protect the health and well-being of all Romanians, it was necessary to impose safety measures, the most important of which was the state of emergency that lasted 30 days and was established by presidential decree on March 16th, 2020, signing the extension of the decree on April 14 by another 30 days.

The constant spread of the pandemic, unfortunately, has negatively affected the areas of economic and social life, especially the health system of all countries. The initial public health guidelines for workers during the COVID-19 2019–2020 pandemic focused on ensuring workers stay home when they are sick, minimizing non-essential travel and practicing good hygiene to slow down the transmission of disease between workers and community members (CDC, 2020).

3. International tourism in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic

The tourism industry is considered to be going through an unprecedented period of crisis, which is already projected in recent trends, with the operation of hotels, resorts, tour operators, airlines and other tourism-related services being blocked. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the tourism sector is facing exceptional challenges. The pandemic triggered both health insecurity and the economic recession. In a few months, the framing of the global tourism system has shifted from super-tourism to non-tourism, vividly illustrated by statistics and newspaper articles.

Determining the relationship between the pandemic and travel is essential in order to better understand health security and global change. Although tourism research has developed at least a brief overview of the potential systemic effects of global climate change, there has been no similar assessment of the systemic effects of the pandemic, with studies tending to focus on the country's individual impacts rather than a challenge directly to the tourism system. Thus, in the current context, travel is incompatible with the pandemic, given that these are the central pillars that must be deactivated to monitor the pandemic and prevent the spread of the virus.

The spread of the Covid-19 virus has affected tourism all around the world, bringing with it drastic travel restrictions both inside and outside the countries. As a result of travel restrictions and roadblocks, global tourism has slowed significantly, with the number of global flights falling by more than half, as the number of cases has increased, and travel bans have limited an increasing number of carriers.

The United Nations Tourism Organization (UNWTO) estimates a loss of 850 million to 1.1 billion international tourist arrivals, 910 million to 1.1 trillion dollars in export earnings and 100-120 million jobs in depending on the opening of the borders in July, September or December. Most destinations were fully closed in April and May 2020, opening only slowly in some northern regions by summer 2020. UN WTO forecasts have shown considerable uncertainty about the duration of the pandemic, in addition to the government's response to economic activity (UNWTO, 2020).

Given that most hotels are closed or facing a sharp decline in the number of tourists, industry revenue forecasts indicate a significant decline. Domestic markets can be expected to recover the first losses, but it is currently unclear how hotel companies will achieve this, especially the large chains that will have to reconsider their global supply sources and the dependency structures they create.

A major problem in the pandemic context is that many workers have direct contact with tourism. There are many employees in travel agencies, airlines, ships, hotels, restaurants, shopping malls and various tourist attractions where COVID 19 can be most easily transmitted.

4. The influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on tourism in Romania

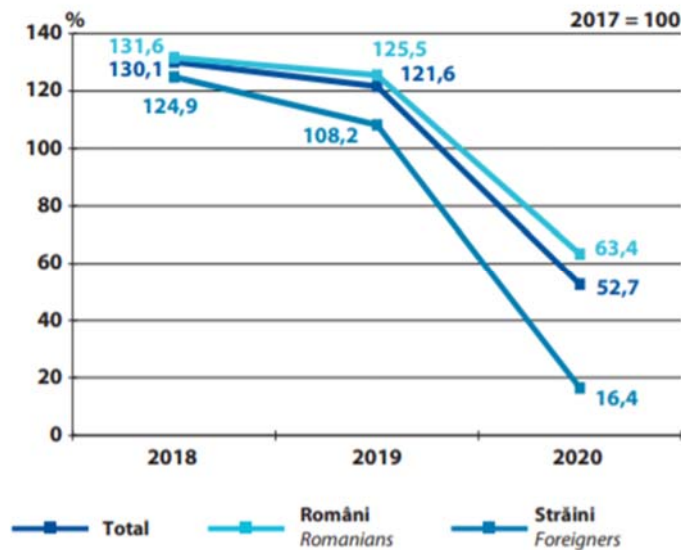
COVID-19 produced dramatic effects for the tourism industry, and Romanian businesses were not bypassed. Romanian travel agencies reported that in 2020 their business decreased by 80-90% compared to previous years (Biz, 2020). Unfortunately, Romania had a deficient strategy of communication and promotion among foreign tourists, and during the pandemic, the number of foreign tourists decreased even more.

Romania, like all other countries affected by the pandemic, has instituted measures to restrict the operation of economic operators in the field of tourism. In this regard, the Government, by Law 55/2020, imposed restrictive measures on accommodation units and restrictive measures or even the closure of food establishments, which had a direct negative impact on enterprises in the food and tourism sector, leading to suspending their activity for reasons not attributable to them. In order to help the economic structures in the field of tourism, the Romanian state offered support measures to help them cover part of the losses caused by the restrictions imposed by the pandemic. The purpose of these measures was to ensure the continuity of tourism.

The measures applied according to Decree no. 195 of March 16th, 2020 on the establishment of the state of emergency on the territory of Romania, were gradually applicable and also aimed at the gradual closure of state border crossing points, the gradual prohibition of road, rail, sea, river or air traffic on certain routes, such as and the temporary closure of restaurants, hotels, cafes, clubs, casinos, association headquarters and other public places. These limitations have implicitly led to a drastic decrease in the number of tourists and to huge losses in the field of tourism in Romania, as in most countries of the world.

In Romania, the number of arrivals in tourist reception units decreased by 50% in 2020 compared to the previous year (Digi24), a decrease that was maintained in January 2021, the indicator losing 40% compared to the same month last year (See graphic 1.)

Graphic no. 1. Tourists accommodated in tourist reception structures with accommodation functions

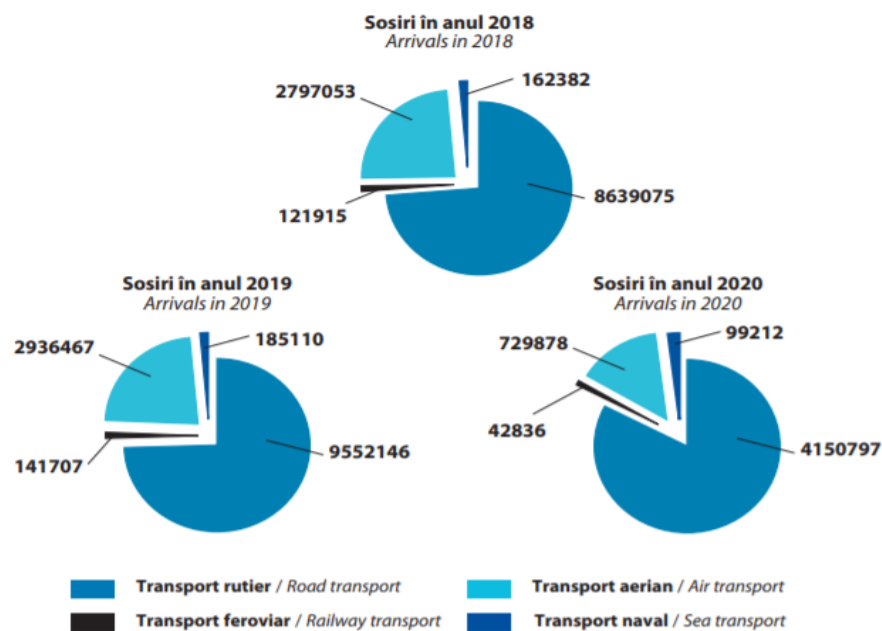


Source: National Institute of Statistics

The tourist accommodation units were extremely affected, being able to carry out their activity only with a very limited capacity. Thus, the most affected were those in the Danube Delta and on the Romanian coast that lost many customers in 2020. Mountain resorts were the most visited by Romanian tourists during the pandemic, but also accommodation structures in mountain areas they lost a lot of tourists and experienced a major economic downturn.

Regarding the number of foreign tourists, which was small anyway, it decreased even more during the pandemic, knowing a downward trend in the period 2018-2020 (See graphic 2). This drastic decrease was primarily caused by restrictions on travel and the use of means of transport of any kind.

Graphic no. 2. Arrivals of foreign visitors in Romania, by means of transport used



Source: National Institute of Statistics

Starting with the year 2021, the Romanian tourism and the one from all over the world started to recover in safe conditions, which allowed the resumption of the activity of the main economic operators in this field. Governments have begun to gradually remove travel restrictions and free movement, but in a coordinated way so that people can travel safely. Moreover, through the *Communication COVID-19: EU Guide for the progressive resumption of tourism services and for health protocols in tourist reception structures* (EURO-Lex, 2020), principles have been established since 2020 according to which European states, including Romania, can resume their activities in the field of tourism based on protocols for tourist reception structures, which have the obligation to reduce the risk of infection to a minimum, both for tourists and for hotel staff.

5. Research methodology

The tourism industry is an inherent dimension of contemporary social life and is one of the most complex industries in the world, involving the whole society. Having as object of study the quality management in the hotel industry in Romania, we chose as barometer the comparative numerical evolution in relation to the influence of the Covid-19 virus on the evolution of the hotel industry.

The clear intention is to express from a numerical point of view the most precise known variables, relevant aspects and the approached discipline that was behind some scientific researches by presenting the evolution at national level, the evolution and impact of the pandemic on the hotel industry in Romania. The data collection was carried out with the help of statistical directories available at national level and the information for 2020 was structured in a limited way in relation to the pandemic situation encountered worldwide.

Indicators chosen to analyze the evolution of tourism during the Covid-19 pandemic in Romania are *the tourist reception structures with the function of tourist accommodation and the overnight stays in the tourist reception structures with the function of tourist accommodation*; data collection was available with the help of official data provided by the National Institute of Statistics of Romania.

6. Findings

The selected indicators are numerical dynamizing elements that are subject to national calculation and follow the accuracy of information simultaneously with the manifestation of conclusions that appear as a result of the application of quality management in the hotel industry in Romania doubled by safety and social measures imposed by the Romanian government.

We analyzed the number of arrivals in the tourist reception structures with accommodation functions in the first quarter of 2019, 2020 and 2021 and thus, compared to the base year, we can highlight the numerical influence of the pandemic on this indicator.

Table no. 1. Number of tourist arrivals in the tourist reception structures with tourist accommodation function in the first quarter in the years 2019-2021

Year	Arrivals of tourists in tourist reception structures		Total of arrivals	Dynamics		Rhythm	
	Romanians	Foreigners		I _{i-1}	I _i	R _{i-1}	R _i
Q1 2019	1,873,767	443859	2,317,626	-	-	-	-
Q1 2020	1,480,163	282,643	1,762,806	76.06%	76.06%	-23.94%	-23.94%
Q1 2021	1,345,966	64,492	1,410,458	80.01%	60.86%	-19.99%	-39.14%

Source: made by the author based on data from statistical yearbooks

According to the previous table the average number of arrivals of 1,830,297 is highlighted, so that the arrivals in the first quarter of 2020 represent 76.06% of the arrivals in the first quarter of 2019, the arrivals in the first quarter of 2021 represent 80.01% of the arrivals in the first quarter of 2020 and 60.76% of the first quarter 2019.

The number of tourist arrivals in the first quarter of 2020 decreased by 23.94% compared to the first quarter of 2019, the number of tourist arrivals in the first quarter of 2021 decreased by 19.99% compared to the first quarter of 2020 and 39.14% compared to the first quarter of 2019.

In the first quarter of 2019, the share of the number of Romanian tourists in the total arrivals was 80.85% and the share of foreign tourists was 19.15. In the first quarter of 2020 the share of the number of Romanian tourists in total arrivals was 83.97% and the share of foreign tourists was 16.06% and in the first quarter of 2021 the much-changed share in terms of the number of foreign tourists who were present in Romania, so that the number of Romanian tourists in total arrivals was 95.43% and the share of foreign tourists was 4.57%.

All these decreases in the number of arrivals indicate the negative numerical impact that the Covid-19 pandemic had on tourism, both in terms of the number of Romanian and foreign tourists.

Table no. 2. Number of overnight stays of tourists in the tourist reception structures with tourist accommodation function in the first quarter in the years 2019-2021

Year	Overnight stays of tourists in the tourist reception structures		Total	Dynamics		Rhythm	
	Romanians	Foreigners		I _{i-1}	I _i	R _{i-1}	R _i
Q1 2019	3,595,596	892,829	4,488,425	-	-	-	-
Q1 2020	2,855,728	608,086	3,463,814	77.17%	77.17%	-22.83%	-22.83%
Q1 2021	2,459,760	149,077	2,608,837	75.32%	58.12%	-24.68%	-41.88%

Source: made by the author based on data from statistical yearbooks

Similar to the previously analyzed indicator, the evolution of the number of overnight stays in the tourist reception structures in Romania can be observed. The number of overnight stays of Romanian tourists in the first quarter of 2019 represents 80.11% of the total number of overnight stays in the first quarter of 2019, and the overnight stays of foreign tourists represent 19.89%.

The total number of overnight stays in the first quarter of 2020 represents 77.17% of the number of overnight stays in the first quarter of 2019, more precisely this indicator decreased in the first quarter of 2020 by 22.83%; the share of overnight stays of Romanian tourists represents 82.44% and the share of overnight stays of foreign tourists represents 17.56% of the total overnight stays in the first quarter of 2020.

The total number of overnight stays in the first quarter of 2021 represents 75.32% of the number of overnight stays in the first quarter of 2020 and 58.12% in the first quarter of 2019, this indicator decreased in the first quarter of 2020 by 24.68% compared to the first quarter of 2020 by 41.88 compared to the first quarter of 2019. The share of overnight stays of Romanian tourists in the first quarter of 2021 represents 94.29% and the share of overnight stays of foreign tourists represents 5.71% of the total overnight stays in the first quarter of 2021.

Table no. 3. Number of overnight stays of tourists in tourist reception structures with tourist accommodation in the period 2019-2020

Tourist reception structures	2019	2020	Rhythm
Hotels	21,989,605	9,357,868	-57.44%
Hostels	847,246	322,033	-61.99%
Motels	440,135	226,224	-48.60%
Inns	3,622	1,697	-53.15%
Touristic villas	1,031,616	588,039	-43.00%
Touristic cabins	263,794	164,753	-37.54%

Touristic pensions	2,275,335	1,123,569	-50.62%
Agro-tourism pensions	2,368,369	1,428,714	-39.68%
Camping	208,515	169,085	-18.91%
Tourist stops	62,278	36,148	-41.96%
Holiday villages	15,874	7,811	-50.79%
Bungalows	122,516	95,672	-21.91%
Student and preschool camps	181,734	4,259	-97.66%
Tourist houses	43,447	49,498	13.93%
Accommodation on ships	16,272	14,380	-11.63%
Total overnight stays	29,870,358	13,589,750	-54.50%

Source: made by the author based on data from statistical yearbooks

For this indicator we analyzed the evolution of the number of overnight stays of tourists in the tourist reception structures in 2019-2020, the absolute difference between the total number of overnight stays was 16,280,608, respectively the total number of overnight stays in 2020 decreased by 54.5%.

The category with the most significant difference is the accommodation in the camps for students and preschoolers which decreased by 97.66% in 2020 compared to 2019, followed by accommodation in hostels and hotels which decreased by 61.99% and 57.44%, respectively.

The only category of accommodation that experienced an increase in 2020 compared to 2019 was accommodation in tourist houses which increased by 13.93%. The category with the lowest decrease was accommodation in places by the sea, which decreased by 11.63% in 2020 compared to 2019.

7. Proposals and recommendations

The measures applied according to Decree no.195 of March 16th, 2020 regarding the establishment of the state of emergency on the Romanian territory had a gradual applicability and targeted the tourism sector through the following measures:

- isolation and quarantine of persons from risk areas, as well as those who come into contact with them; quarantine measures on buildings, localities or geographical areas;
- gradual closure of state border crossing points;
- restricting or prohibiting the movement of vehicles or persons in / towards certain areas or between certain hours, as well as leaving those areas;
- the gradual ban on road, rail, sea, river and air traffic on certain routes and the metro;
- temporary closure of restaurants, hotels, cafes, clubs, casinos, association headquarters and other public places.

In order for the tourism ecosystem to return to the normal path, it is necessary to relax these measures and the coordinated reopening of services and touristic units. Moreover, small and medium-sized enterprises in the field of tourism need financial support through the introduction of EU aid and funding schemes. Thus, the responsible restart of tourism requires that future operations be guided by a science-based approach to support governments, businesses and local communities to understand the trade-offs of decision-making processes aimed at aligning hygiene and health protocols with sustainability criteria.

The most effective recovery strategy for tourism organizations in the post-viral world is to allow people with SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus vaccination to travel freely. Airlines, hotels and spas should be the first to offer them various discounts and packages. A small percentage of cured people may need rehabilitation, which means that there may be some special offers for those groups of travelers.

There is, however, a doubt that the world will fully recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, as it has always done, because it is the first time, we have seen a global pandemic of such magnitude and on an unprecedented scale, broadcasted in real time. The number of infected and dead is reported to us every minute, which makes us feel vulnerable. However, information and communication technologies that help us to be constantly online and track the spread of the pandemic could also help us to effectively stop its progress.

8. Conclusions

The sharp decline in tourist arrivals and demand in the tourism sector caused by COVID-19 has caused millions of job losses and economic difficulties and eliminated many companies, especially micro, small and medium-sized enterprises in the field of tourism or related industries. In all countries of the world and implicitly in Romania, norms have been established that have provided hard traffic restrictions that have greatly affected both international and domestic tourism. As protection measures have been put in place by imposing restrictions, states have been forced to provide support to tourism organizations so that tourism does not collapse. Moreover, in order for tourism to recover, governments need to develop a step-by-step approach. In the early stages of the pandemic, many governments introduced extensive containment measures, such as strict blockades, which made tourism almost impossible. As the level of new infections decreases, governments decide to relax some restrictions, especially with regard to the movement of people on their own territory.

So, although the pandemic has had an extremely large and severe negative effect on global and national tourism, there is hope that, with the help of state governments and promotion, the return of tourism will become a short-term goal.

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