

The Recovery of Tourism and Travel After the COVID-19 Pandemic: Romania's Case. Recent Favorable Developments, but also Certain Concerns over the Perspectives

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Abstract

The negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourist traffic and the tourism sector have been felt globally, but to different extents, depending on the tourism regions and countries.

In Romania, the decrease recorded in tourist traffic during the pandemic period has been severe, but within the limits of the average recorded in European Union Member States and with considerably different values, depending on the categories of tourist destinations in the country.

The main challenge for Romania remains carrying out a large-scale promotion campaign on the foreign markets related to its tourist offer, given the modest results obtained so far in attracting foreign tourists, despite the tourism potential that it has. The post-COVID-19 period could represent a reset of tourism in Romania.

Key words: Tourism in Romania, COVID-19 pandemic, tourism recovery, evolution trends, concerns

J.E.L. classification: E 32, I 15, L 83, Z 31, Z32, Z39

1. Introduction

Tourism and travel have been affected, after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, more than other economic activities, in many countries of the world, including Romania, due to the travel restrictions imposed by the authorities and the fact that, in certain periods, tourist reception structures with accommodation and food facilities for tourists were closed or could only operate within a limited capacity.

The aim of this paper is to perform a comparative analysis of the evolution of the tourism sector in Romania, after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, compared to the other European Union countries and to the global developments, in order to identify some particularities of the situation in Romania. We believe that some conclusions of the performed analysis may be useful for tourism stakeholders, in the coming period, but also represent a basis for further research on some aspects related to the tourism sector and some categories of tourist destinations in Romania.

2. Literature review

Numerous works appeared in the specialized literature regarding the various crises that have affected the tourism sector over the years, whether health crises (epidemics), natural disasters or terrorist attacks. However, none of these previous crises has had such a significant impact on the tourism industry as the pandemic generated by the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

Soon after the onset of the COVID-19 epidemic, the first studies and analyses were carried out, not only on the evolution of the epidemic, but also on the restrictions and other measures taken by the public authorities in the countries of the world in order to fight the pandemic, including those regarding the quarantine of the population and the travel restrictions imposed. Furthermore, international organizations published the first statistics on the evolution of tourist traffic at global, regional, national, and local levels.

In this paper, we have used and processed mainly data published by international tourism organizations (UNWTO, WTTC), Eurostat, the Romanian National Institute of Statistics and other official, public and private, organizations.

3. Research methodology

This paper is based on a longitudinal, quantitative, desk research, using mainly online data sources, but also in the classic format (Jupp 2010; Jugănarul 1998).

In this article we have used, analyzed and interpreted some available statistical data on the evolution of the main indicators of tourist traffic at global, European and Romanian level, in the period after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, in an attempt to identify some causes of and explanations for the different evolution of these indicators, depending on the country, area or tourist region.

We have analyzed and compared a series of studies, statistical databases and reports of specialized or relevant organizations in the field of tourism, such as UNWTO, WTTC, but also Eurostat, etc., which presented the evolution of the tourism sector or that of some aspects related to it.

4. Findings

4.1. The evolution of international tourism during the COVID-19 pandemic

The number of international tourist arrivals globally plummeted by 72% in 2020 compared to 2019, from 1.466 billion to 405 million, and the value of receipts by 62%, from USD 1.483 billion to USD 546 billion.

Analyzing the evolution of the 5 major tourist regions of the world, as they have been designated by the UNWTO, we observe the decrease in the number of international tourist arrivals, globally, by 72% in 2020 compared to the previous year, and by 61% in 2021 compared to 2019. The most affected region was Asia-Pacific, with decreases of 84% in 2020 and 94% in 2021, followed by the Middle East (-73% and -75%, respectively) and Africa (-74% and -78%, respectively). The most moderate decreases were recorded in the Americas and Europe regions, with identical percentage values (-60% in 2020 and -62% in 2021).

The evolution of international tourist arrivals, by months, according to UNWTO data, shows that, worldwide, in the month of January of the year 2020, there was an increase of 2%, followed by a decrease of 14% in February, and then a real collapse (65% decrease) in March, 97% in April, 96% in May and 91% in June 2020, compared to the corresponding period in 2019. A slight increase followed in July and August, then the situation started to worsen again. The best situation was recorded in August 2020, -75% of the August 2019 level.

In the first months of 2021, the situation remained serious, with declines between 87% in February, 81% in May and 91% in June 2021, compared to the levels recorded in the corresponding periods of 2019. In the warm season, the results were better (-63% in July and -53% in August and September), followed by slight decreases in arrivals in the following months.

In the first 3 months of 2022 the evolution was slightly better, from -66% in January to -60% in February and -56% in March, compared to the corresponding period of the year 2019.

In terms of international tourism receipts, the worst situation was recorded in the Asia-Pacific Region (-79% in 2021, compared to 2019), followed by the Americas and Africa (both with -61%), and the smallest decreases were recorded in Europe (-50%) and the Middle East (-52%).

For the first 3 months of 2022, compared to a 61% decrease globally, the number of international tourist arrivals recorded the smallest decreases, compared to the same period of the year 2019, in Europe (-43%) and the Americas (-46%), and the most severe decrease in Asia-Pacific (-93%), with the slowest recovery (UNWTO, 2020 a).

4.2. The evolution of tourism in the European Union Member States during the pandemic

In EU Member States, the Eurostat statistics show a particularly severe impact on international tourism of the measures taken by the authorities to combat the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and to protect the population, while internal tourism was less affected. After the first lockdown,

introduced in the spring of 2020, there was a real collapse recorded in tourist traffic, in some countries to almost zero. The partial recovery of the number of arrivals in accommodation units in the summer of 2020 was largely due to domestic tourist demand, when many people decided for "*staycation*" in their own country.

At the peak of the summer tourism season, i.e., in July and August 2020, compared to the same period of the year 2019, the number of arrivals in accommodation units in EU countries decreased by only 9% for internal (domestic) tourism, while the decrease in the number of arrivals for international (inbound) was up to 65%. The most affected category of accommodation units, during the respective period, was hotels and similar establishments (-39%), followed by holiday and other short-stay accommodation (-31%). The smallest impact was felt by the category of units such as camping grounds, recreational vehicle parks and trailer parks (-13%) (Eurostat, 2022a).

The cumulative results obtained in July and August of the year 2021 were 55% higher for international tourist arrivals and 15% higher for internal tourist arrivals, compared to the same period of the year 2020. Compared to 2019, the results in July and August 2021 were 45% lower for international tourist arrivals, while internal tourist arrivals were 4% higher.

For the first quarter of the year 2022, the cumulative results obtained indicate significant increases compared to the first quarter of 2021, with the number of arrivals more than doubling for internal tourism and the number of international tourist arrivals was 6 times higher; however, in absolute terms, the increase is not so great compared to the previous decreases. The results recorded in this period of the year 2022 remain below those of the year 2019, the number of internal tourist arrivals falling by 21% and that of international tourist arrivals by 42% (Eurostat, 2022a).

According to EUROSTAT, the evolution of the number of overnight stays in tourism accommodation in EU countries has been increasing at an average rate of 3.1% per year, from 2011 until 2019, from 2.2 billion to 2.9 billion, followed by a real collapse, in 2020, when the number of overnight stays dropped by 50.5% to 1.4 billion, due to the restrictions imposed after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021 there was a 27.8% recovery to 1.8 billion overnight stays in the 27 EU Member States, including the overnight stays related to the internal tourism of each country and inbound international tourist overnight stays. In terms of structure, more than two thirds of these were overnight stays registered in the accommodation units by the domestic tourists (71.8%), while overnight stays by tourists from other EU Member States accounted for 20.4% and those from tourists from non-EU countries, only 7.7% (Eurostat 2022c, pp. 78-79).

The largest decrease in international tourism receipts was recorded in Southern Europe (Mediterranean), -68% in 2020 compared to 2019, and -48% in 2021 compared to 2019, followed by Northern Europe (-64% and -61%, respectively), and the smallest decreases were in Central and Eastern Europe (-59% and -54%, respectively).

Comparing the results obtained in 2021 with those obtained in 2020, disregarding what happened in the two pre-pandemic months (January and February), we can see that more arrivals were recorded in each month of 2021 compared to the equivalent period of the previous year, and this recovery continued in the first 3 months of 2022, when more arrivals were recorded than in the same period of 2021 (Eurostat, 2022c, p. 82).

4.3. The evolution of tourism in Romania in the 2019-2021 period

The privatization process in the field of tourism, which followed the change of the political regime at the end of the year 1989, in Romania, started slowly and lasted longer than in other activity sectors, which made the performances obtained to be relatively modest, compared to those of neighboring countries, such as Bulgaria and Hungary.

Romania's tourist accommodation capacity experienced a significant decrease after 1990, from 353,236 places in 1990 to 282,806 places in 1999 (mainly due to the removal from the tourist circuit of some old accommodation units, in which no investments were made for repairs and modernization), followed by a slight increase, so that in 2009 there were 303,486 places, and in 2019 there were 356,562 places. In 2020 and 2021, the accommodation capacity continued to increase, reaching 358,119 places, respectively 364,507. As for the number of tourist reception structures, it has grown significantly, from 3,213 in 1990, to 3,250 in 1999, 5,095 in 2009, and 8,402 in 2019. Even after the onset of the pandemic, the number of accommodation units continued

to grow significantly, reaching 8,610 in 2020 and 9,146 in 2021, as many investments in building new units were underway. This increase in the capacity of tourist reception is primarily explained by the fact that many new, privately owned, mostly small-sized units, predominantly tourist villas and boardinghouses (guest houses/pensions), but also hotels, were built in the last two decades. At the same time, the level of comfort of classified tourist reception structures increased. Thus, the share of only 2.7% of the number of places within tourist accommodation structures classified into the 3-star category in the year 1991 reached 39.6% in 2019, the share of those classified into the 4-star category rose from 0.26% to 17.6%, and those classified into the 5-star category from 0.3% to 2.5% (NIS, 2022).

However, Accommodation Capacity Net Utilization Index has seen significant decreases, from 46.7% in 1992 to 34.5% in 1999 and 28.4% in 2009. Ten years later, in 2019, the value of this indicator improved to 33.9%, yet it was still well below the level reached in 1992. Following the Covid-19 pandemic, this indicator fell dramatically to 22.8% in 2020, then rose slightly to 26.3% in 2021 (NIS, 2022).

The number of tourist arrivals in tourist reception structures with accommodation functions has experienced a sinuous evolution after 1990, in Romania, in terms of internal tourism, and especially in terms of international inbound tourism. Thus, compared to a total number of arrivals of 12,296,552 tourists in 1990, their number decreased by 58.45% until 1999, reaching 5,109,44, increasing then to 6,141,135 in 2009 and reaching a maximum of 13,374,943 tourists in 2019.

Regarding the total number of overnight stays (of Romanian and foreign tourists), the evolution was largely similar to that of the number of arrivals, with a spectacular decrease in the first decade, from 44,551,804 overnight stays in 1990, to 17,669,777 in 1999 and to 17,325,410 in 2009, followed by a considerable increase to 30,086,091 in 2019, which is still 32.5% lower than the one recorded in 1990 (NIS, 2022).

Due to the restrictions introduced during the pandemic period, the number of tourist arrivals in Romania decreased to 48% in 2020 compared to the 2019 level, the decrease being more severe in terms of foreign tourist arrivals (down to 17% of the 2019 level), and the number of total overnight stays also decreased to 48% compared to 2019. Moreover, the number of overnight stays by foreign tourists in Romania decreased even more compared to the Romanian tourists (down to 19%, compared to 2019).

According to the WTTC, the total contribution of travel and tourism to GDP formation in Romania has known a decrease by 44% in 2020 compared to 2019 and recorded an increase by 14.9% in 2021 compared to 2020; however, the decrease in 2021 was of 36.4% compared to 2019. While in 2019 tourism and travel had a 6.0% contribution to GDP, in Romania, in 2020 the contribution dropped to only 3.5%, and in 2021 it slightly increased to 3.8%.

Regarding the contribution of this sector to job creation, whereas in 2019 the number of jobs in this sector was 568,3 thousand, in 2020 it decreased by 11.5%, reaching 503 thousand, and in 2021 it increased by 5.6% compared to 2020, up to 531 thousand, representing 93.4% of the 2019 level. This loss of skilled workers is at least as serious as the financial losses of tourism operators in Romania, given that even before the pandemic it was very difficult to cover the shortage of staff especially because of the phenomenon of emigration of workers from Romania to other Western countries.

International visitor spending in Romania decreased from a level of USD 4,692.5 million in 2019 to USD 1,725.4 million in 2020 (- 63.2%), followed by a 9% increase in 2021 compared to 2020, reaching USD 1,882.6 million in 2021.

Internal (domestic) tourism spending in Romania decreased from USD 5,337.3 million in 2019 to USD 3,110.5 million in 2020 (-41.7%) and it increased by 39.8% in 2021, compared to 2020, reaching USD 4,348.2 million.

While in 2019 the ratio between domestic spending and international spending in Romania was 53% to 47%, the share of domestic spending rose to 70% in 2021, due to the travel restrictions imposed internationally during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In terms of the structure, the share of Leisure spending was, in 2019, 71%, compared to 29% - Business spending, reaching, in 2021, a share of 77%, compared to 23%.

The most important markets supplying international tourists for Romania in 2019 were Germany (11%), followed by Israel (9%), Italy (8%), US and Hungary (with 6% each). In 2021 Germany remained first (with 13%), but the order of the other countries changed, with France (10%) in second place, followed by Italy (8%), Israel (6%) and Hungary (5%).

As for outbound departures of Romanian visitors, while in 2019, as country of destination, Hungary was first (14%), followed by Greece and Italy (12% each), Bulgaria (10%) and Spain (8%), in 2021 Bulgaria (22%) was first, followed by Hungary (15%), Greece (12%), Italy (9%) and Turkey (8%), the first two being Romania's neighbors (WTTC, 2022).

4.4. The evolution of the main indicators of Romania's internal tourism, in the 2019-2021 period, by categories of tourist destinations and types of tourists

We have analyzed the evolution of the number of tourist arrivals in Romania, both Romanian and foreign tourists, in the tourist reception structures with classified accommodation functions, as well as the number of overnight stays, per total and by main destination categories, using statistical data published by the National Institute of Statistics of Romania (NIS, 2022). Thus, regarding the number of arrivals indicator, we can observe (Table no. 1) a decrease in the total number of arrivals (of Romanian and foreign tourists) in 2020, down to the level of 48%, compared to the level of the year 2019 and to 70% in 2021, compared to 2019. The main explanation for this negative evolution lies in the travel restrictions imposed after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The decrease was much more severe for foreign tourists (inbound tourism) than for Romanian tourists (domestic tourism), down to a level of only 17% in 2020 and 31% in 2021, compared to 2019.

Regarding the main categories of internal tourist destinations, the evolution was quite different compared to the national average. Thus, the weakest results were recorded in Bucharest (the country's capital) and in the county seat towns/cities (excluding the city of Tulcea in the Danube Delta), with a level of only 38% per total arrivals in 2020 and 58% in 2021, compared to 2019, followed by the category "Other localities and tourist routes", where the decrease reached 48% in 2020 and 70% in 2021, compared to 2019, and the balneary resorts, with a decrease reaching 53%, respectively 82%, compared to 2019.

The smallest decreases were recorded in the tourist resorts on the Romanian Black Sea coast, where the decrease was 78% in 2020 and it reached, in 2021, almost the same level as in 2019 (more precisely, 99%), followed by the Danube Delta area, including the city of Tulcea, where a level of 71% was reached in 2020 and 82% in 2021, compared to 2019. But in this tourist area the most severe decrease in foreign tourist arrivals was recorded, down to only 7% in 2020 and to 29% in 2021 compared to 2019. The main explanation for this evolution could lie in the fact that in the countries of origin of the foreign tourists who used to come to the Danube Delta the travel restrictions imposed were more severe.

In the balneary resorts, the main cause for the large decline in tourist flows to these destinations was the fact that the Romanian authorities imposed very severe restrictions, going as far as banning certain categories of therapeutic procedures within the treatment centers.

In the resorts of the Romanian Black Sea coast, the better results obtained compared to other tourist areas of the country can be explained by the fact that other tourist destinations with coastal offers in countries where the Romanian tourists used to go in the previous years (especially Bulgaria, Turkey and Greece) were more difficult to access, due to the travel restrictions imposed by the authorities of each country, depending on the evolution of the number of COVID-19 infections.

As regards the evolution of the number of overnight stays (Table 2), the evolution was somewhat similar to that of the number of tourist arrivals. Thus, per total (Romanian tourists, plus foreigners), the number of overnight stays in 2020 reached 48% of the level recorded in 2019, and in 2021 it reached 69% compared to 2019.

By main destinations, the most important decreases were recorded in Bucharest and the county seat towns/cities, reaching 37% in 2020 and 57% in 2021 compared to 2019, followed by "other localities and tourist routes", with decreases up to 47% in 2020 and 67% in 2021 compared to 2019, and by the balneary resorts, where the values were at the level of 46% in 2020 and 70% in 2021 compared to 2019.

Table no. 1 The evolution of the number of tourist arrivals in tourist reception structures with tourist accommodation functions, according to tourist destinations, by type of tourists, in Romania, in the 2019-2021 period

Tourist destinations	Types of de tourists	Years				
		2019	2020	Evolution 2020/2019	2021	Evolution 2021/2019
		Number of arrivals	Number of arrivals	Change (%)	Number of arrivals	Change (%)
Total	Total	13374943	6398642	48%	9370232	70%
-	Romanians	10691195	5944775	56%	8527409	80%
-	Foreigners	2683748	453867	17%	842823	31%
Balneary resorts	Total	1133359	601326	53%	924400	82%
-	Romani	1098706	595762	54%	911438	83%
-	Foreigners	34653	5564	16%	12962	37%
Coastal resorts, excluding the city of Constanta	Total	1153682	905266	78%	1142271	99%
-	Romanians	1119401	899104	80%	1115593	100%
-	Foreigners	34281	6162	18%	26678	78%
Mountain resorts	Total	2305517	1295105	56%	1866402	81%
-	Romanians	2109378	1269109	60%	1816197	86%
-	Foreigners	196139	25996	13%	50205	26%
Danube Delta area, including the city of Tulcea	Total	166411	118325	71%	137182	82%
-	Romanians	146006	116797	80%	131224	90%
-	Foreigners	20405	1528	7%	5958	29%
Bucuresti and county seat cities, excluding Tulcea	Total	6275835	2359090	38%	3660935	58%
-	Romanians	4209530	1994058	47%	3017694	72%
-	Foreigners	2066305	365032	18%	643241	31%
Other localities and tourist routes	Total	2340139	1119530	48%	1639042	70%
-	Romanians	2008174	1069945	53%	1535263	76%
-	Foreigners	331965	49585	15%	103779	31%

Source: Author's own processing of INS Romania, Tempo-online data

The smallest decreases were recorded in the coastal resorts, up to 70% in 2020 and 91% in 2021, compared to the 2019 levels, and in the Danube Delta, up to 79%, respectively 74%.

In the mountain resorts, the results recorded were slightly above the national average (decreases to levels of 54% in 2020 and 77% in 2021, compared to 2019), with the observation that here the most significant decrease in the number of overnight stays of foreign tourists was recorded in 2020, reaching only 16%, and in 2021 it rose slightly to 24%, compared to the level reached in 2019.

Table no.2. The evolution of the number of overnight stays in tourist accommodation units, by tourist destinations and type of tourists, in Romania, in the 2019-2021 period

Tourist destinations	Types of tourists	Years				
		2019	2020	Evolution 2020/2019	2021	Evolution 2021/2019
		Number	Number	Change (%)	Number	Change (%)
Total	Total	30086091	14579140	48%	20835314	69%
-	Romanians	24795253	13581775	55%	19002611	77%
-	Foreigners	5290838	997365	19%	1832703	35%
Balneary resorts	Total	4805188	2208832	46%	3361147	70%
-	Romanians	4688161	2187634	47%	3314599	71%
-	Foreigners	117027	21198	18%	46548	40%
Coastal resorts, excluding the city of Constanta	Total	4657955	3267464	70%	4218916	91%
-	Romanians	4534514	3246820	72%	4134964	91%
-	Foreigners	123441	20644	17%	83952	68%
Mountain resorts	Total	4810148	2613246	54%	3707917	77%
-	Romanians	4421424	2552251	58%	3613572	82%
-	Foreigners	388724	60995	16%	94345	24%
Danube Delta area, including the city of Tulcea	Total	380375	299766	79%	281078	74%
-	Romanians	333885	295084	88%	269974	81%
-	Foreigners	46490	4682	10%	11104	24%
Bucuresti and county seat cities, excluding Tulcea	Total	11055160	4119604	37%	6313310	57%
-	Romanians	7028229	3334463	47%	4911497	70%
-	Foreigners	4026931	785141	19%	1401813	35%
Other localities and tourist routes	Total	4377265	2070228	47%	2952946	67%
-	Romanians	3789040	1965523	52%	2758005	73%
-	Foreigners	588225	104705	18%	194941	33%

Source: Author's own processing of INS Romania, Tempo-online data

4.5. The experts' expectations for the evolution of international tourism in 2022

The tourism experts' expectations regarding the destinations they come from, worldwide, in 2022 are relatively optimistic, according to the UNWTO Panel of Experts Survey in May 2022, with 32% of the respondents expecting the situation to be "Much better" and 51% - "Better" and only 9% - "Worse", and according to the world's 5 major tourist regions, the most optimistic expectations wererecorded in the Middle East (with 50% expecting "much better", plus 50% - "Better"), followed by the Americas (89%) and Europe (88%), and the lowestvalue was recorded in Asia-Pacific.

In response to the question "When do you expect international tourism to return to 2019 levels in your country?", worldwide, the response was that this level has already been reached (5% of responses) or that it will be reached during 2022 (3%), another 40% of the responses were that it will be reached in 2023, and 44% that it will be reached in 2024 or later. The most optimistic responses were received for the Middle East and Europe regions, and the most pessimistic expectations were for Africa (UNWTO, 2022a).

4.6. Some concerns about the evolution of tourism in Romania in the coming period

While the results recorded by the tourist traffic in Romania have been encouraging in the first months of 2022, as we are moving towards the second semester of the year, we can observe a series of worrying developments. Thus, after the two years of the pandemic, when the Romanians had to submit to travel restrictions, being forced to discover or re-discover internal tourist destinations, in 2022 the "great liberation" has come and they want to make up for what they lost, travelling more to foreign destinations, to the detriment of the internal ones, which are recording declines.

Already, at the beginning of July 2022, lower occupancy rates could be observed in the tourist accommodation units on the Romanian coast, compared to the same period of the previous year. Moreover, in the Danube Delta, as well as in the Maramureş area, in the North-West of Romania and in the Bucovina area, in the North-East of Romania, the occupancy rate is very low, due to the fact that these are border areas with Ukraine, a country at war, and the potential tourists, although there are no real, justified reasons for this, consider these to be dangerous areas, perhaps out of excessive caution, therefore preferring to avoid these destinations.

In a recent report, the National Bank of Romania (NBR) pointed out that, even before the pandemic, Romania's international tourism receipts and payments balance was consistently in deficit. The causes for this deficit are mainly related to the tourist offer, being both quantitative causes (the fact that the number of tourist accommodation places has stagnated, or even decreased or it slightly increased in recent years), but mainly qualitative causes, related to the quality of the tourist offer. We could also add the weak, sometimes almost non-existent promotion of Romania's tourist offer abroad in recent years, which has led to a modest occupancy rate of less than 40% of tourist accommodation structures, a much weaker result than that of other countries in the region. In NBR's Annual Report for 2021, the current situation of tourism in Romania is briefly presented, where the domestic tourist demand is partially subsidized by the government, by granting holiday vouchers in the amount of 1,450 RON (a little over 290 EUR) per year for each budget sector employee and with the legal possibility for private sector employees to also receive such vouchers from their employers. Moreover, the report states, the profitability of tourism companies is based on the low level of the salaries paid and on the "approximate" taxation, and the transport infrastructure in the country (road and rail) is still relatively poor, which demotivates and discourages the expansion of tourism activities into their potential level (NBR, 2022, p. 40).

In 2020, the receipts and payments balance of international tourism of Romania recorded a negative balance of EUR 446 million, and in 2021, the negative balance worsened, reaching EUR -1,638 million, while receipts from incoming tourism amounted to EUR 2,782 million, and expenditures of Romanian tourists abroad rose to EUR 4,420 million (NBR, 2022b, p. 74). During the first 5 months of 2022 (January-May), the negative balance of this indicator was already 1,157 million EUR, 78% higher than the one recorded in the similar period of the previous year. This is a worrying trend, with the prospects that the balance will reach, at the end of 2022, the biggest value ever recorded in Romania (NBR, 2022, c).

Starting from the autumn of this year, new restrictions on the movement of people are likely to be introduced, due to the increasing number of infections with new strains of the virus in different areas and countries of the world. In Romania, the sixth wave of the COVID-19 pandemic is underway, in July 2022, with more and more cases of infections and hospital admissions, and the daily and weekly increase in the number of confirmed cases is causing serious concern, as travel restrictions may be imposed very soon.

On the other hand, there is an increasing number of flight cancellations or long flight delays, losses of tourist luggage, due to lack of flight crew and handling crew at airports. Such developments, which are becoming more and more numerous, may cause an increasing number of travelers to cancel or postpone their trips for tourism purposes.

The galloping inflation, from one day to the next, at values not reached for many years, with increases in prices and fees in any area or sector, but especially fuels, natural gas and energy, in general, but also food, have already made the cost of living increase dramatically, so that many people will have to give up tourist trips or reduce the duration of their trips, possibly choosing closer destinations, in their own country or in countries as close as possible to the tourists' place of residence.

After the breakout of the war in Ukraine, not only the very high energy prices are worrying in Romania, but also the fact that in the cold season there are fears that there will not be enough natural gas sources to heat the homes and the tourist reception units, since the European Union is trying to completely eliminate imports of gas, oil and other energy sources from the Russian Federation. It cannot be excluded that some hotels and other accommodation and food facilities may not be heated during winter in different countries and areas of the world.

As far as the tourist offer is concerned, not only the increase in the prices of utilities, food and other goods is leading to the increase in the price of tourist products and services, but also the recent changes in the tax legislation in Romania will have a significant contribution to the increase of prices and fees to be charged, because the VAT on tourism services will increase from 5% to 9%, the tax on dividends from 5% to 8%, and many of the micro-enterprises (companies with up to 9 employees) operating in tourism will change their tax regime from 1% turnover tax to 16% tax on profits (Government of Romania, 2022 b).

The good news for tourism entrepreneurs is the adoption of changes to the legislation on the establishment, with government support, of Destination Management Organizations in Romania at local, county, regional and national level. These would primarily boost the promotion activity of tourism destinations in Romania. The expectations of tourism entrepreneurs from these DMOs are very high, in particular regarding the drawing up, adoption and implementation of tourism promotion strategies at destination level (Government of Romania, 2022 a).

5. Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a severe crisis in the tourism sector in Romania, due to the restrictions imposed by the authorities. Internal tourism, although considerably reduced, has recorded slightly better results than the inbound sector, which has been affected the most.

In Romania, as in other countries, some of the measures taken by the authorities seemed to have been sometimes unfounded, illogical, and especially unpredictable, seriously affecting the majority of the businesses in the hospitality sector. Furthermore, the losses suffered by them were not only financial, but also in terms of human resources, as a result of the departure of a significant number of qualified workers to other sectors, where there were no restrictions, or these restrictions were less severe. Tourism proved to be one of the less secure sectors of employment during the pandemic, as restrictions imposed by the authorities led to the closure of establishments or the drastic reduction of some activities. Nowadays, considerable efforts are being made to bring in workers from other countries, especially from Asia, to compensate, at least partially, for the shortage of skilled workers in the Romanian hospitality sector.

Studying the effects of these measures taken by the authorities during the pandemic on tourist traffic can be the basis for more detailed analyses of the causes and especially of the mistakes made during the pandemic, so that, if similar situations occur in the future, their repetition can be avoided. The analysis carried out in this paper can and needs to be deepened, especially regarding tourist destinations.

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