

## The Implications of Unforeseen Circumstances and Crises on Tourism Destinations

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### Abstract

*The world is facing more complex and interconnected challenges than ever. Crises, which often stem from unpredictable factors, can have widespread and varied impacts. This is particularly evident in the tourism sector, which is highly vulnerable during times of crisis and natural or anthropogenic disasters. The unpredictability and global reach of crises pose significant challenges for tourist destinations as they rely heavily on people, natural and cultural resources, and financial capital. This study aims to identify the type and characteristics of crises and unpredictable situations and to appreciate their consequences on tourist destinations. By combining quantitative and qualitative research methods, this study provides useful information to those who manage tourist destinations, tourism companies, and all interested parties.*

**Key words:** tourism destinations, crises impact, crisis mitigation

**J.E.L. classification:** D89, Z32, Z39

### 1. Introduction

The world of today is experiencing increasingly complex events and challenges that are interconnected. While globalization has enabled economic development and increased social connections, the resulting global transformations have given rise to new challenges. Risk landscapes are constantly changing with the emergence of new unpredictable situations reshaping the global ecosystem, from climate change and environmental threats to epidemics, geopolitical conflicts, terrorism, and economic tensions. In addition to the complexity of risks, globalization and the rise of the middle class have made international travel more accessible. As a result, the tourism industry has become one of the significant contributors to the global economy. Over time, tourism has led to higher living standards, created more employment opportunities, improved the overall income level of the economy, and established relationships between people from different cultural backgrounds. Despite this, tourism relies more on a stable climate than most other industries because of its sensitivity to economic, environmental, and socio-political events.

The world is currently experiencing a very difficult time. From epidemics and natural disasters to political and economic instability, the various crises, which have simultaneity tendencies to turn into poly-crises, harm tourist destinations at human, infrastructural, and financial levels. Understanding the socio-economic impact of such unpredictable situations, especially on local communities, is essential to manage it effectively. It is essential for economic growth, competitiveness, and sustainable development of destinations and the tourism industry as a whole to be able to respond, recover, and increase resilience in the face of crises. It is nearly impossible to predict when the next crisis will occur or what form it will take. But it is crucial to understand the risks and find the best solutions to manage and recover quickly from a crisis to enhance resilience and eventually safeguard a vital sector of the economy from disruption. And central and local government authorities, the

private sector, and representatives of local communities must work together to build resilience and ensure the safety and security of visitors, the host population, and the destinations themselves.

This paper aims to enhance understanding of unpredictable situations and crises that could impact the tourism industry. It also seeks to offer recommendations on how tourism destinations can bolster their resilience and improve preparedness to address and recover from potential future crises.

## 2. Literature review

Due to the inherent natural hazards in human existence, there is a long-standing tradition of recording and sharing knowledge about disasters. Research suggests that as human interactions with the environment have grown, risks have multiplied in both number and variety (IFRC, 2004; Pelling et al., 2002). Most disaster analysts concur that the complexity and interconnectedness of urbanized and industrialized systems will further increase the quantity, scale, and negative consequences of disasters (McEntire, 2004).

Disasters can be characterized by various factors such as hazard, location, time, or societal constructions. A key aspect in most disaster definitions is the need for substantial assistance. As per the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR, 2009), a disaster is defined as a significant disruption to a community or society's functioning, causing extensive human, material, economic, or environmental losses that exceed the affected community's ability to cope with their own resources. There are two types of disasters: those caused by factors like extreme weather that affect entire industries, and those caused by institutional stress (Faulkner, 2001). The latter are more controllable, but both types share common qualities and are connected when external catastrophes cause a crisis within an industry. Another related concept is risk, which refers to potential states rather than actual conditions. Risk assessment is crucial in crisis planning, as it involves anticipating potential problems.

A crisis is not universally defined, with specialist studies offering varying interpretations. However, they share common elements: a trigger event causing significant change or potential, perceived inability to cope, and a threat to the organization's existence (Keown-McMullan, 1997). The World Tourism Organization has defined a tourism crisis as any unexpected event that affects a traveler's confidence in a destination and interferes with their ability to continue to operate normally (UNWTO, 2003).

The tourism industry faces a higher risk of crises compared to other industries due to its complex structure and the marketing of experiential products involving multiple suppliers. When a crisis occurs, it can affect interconnected components and spread to other areas.

Peace, security, and protection are crucial for normal tourism activities in any country, region, or destination (Cavlek, 2002). However, Breda and Costa (2006) note that the tourism industry has been significantly impacted in recent decades by increasing security concerns related to crime, terrorism, food security, health issues, and natural disasters.

According to Mikulić et al. (2018), forest fires, floods, and earthquakes have the biggest impact on tourism. These natural disasters cannot be predicted accurately. Faulkner (2001) and Faulkner & Vikulov (2001) explain that natural disasters can happen suddenly, without warning, and can have a domino effect on the local industry (Cioccio and Michael, 2007).

Natural disasters cause widespread human suffering and significant physical and economic damage. The impact extends beyond the immediate disaster area to affect other parts of the country, either temporarily or permanently, and overall economic development (Bhati et al., 2016; Loayza et al., 2012). Sanders et al (2015) emphasized the importance of addressing natural disasters for the sustainability of many tourism destinations.

The tourism industry often faces challenges, especially during global market crises, which can have serious economic and reputational effects, putting the industry's survival at risk (Preble, 1997; Wall, 2006). Therefore, the industry needs to plan for crises and take proactive steps to effectively manage and resolve these situations. Strategic management actions can also help reduce the negative impact and play a key role in developing tourist destinations (Mikulić et al., 2018).

Despite studying crises and unpredictable situations that can impact tourist destinations, we have made progress in understanding the types, causes, and consequences of crises. This information helps those responsible for managing them make better decisions and policies. However, there is still a lack of data on the extent of the crises and the effectiveness of their management, despite the extensive literature available.

### **3. Research methodology**

The research was undertaken through secondary means, employing a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, involving a literature review, examination of extant documents, reports from national and international organizations, statistical databases, and media communications. Following data collection, a descriptive analysis was performed.

### **4. Findings and recommendations**

International travel has grown significantly due to globalization and increased accessibility to travel. From 1950 to 2023, international arrivals increased by over 5,500%, creating one in five new jobs worldwide and contributing 10.4% to the global GDP (according to UNWTO and WTTC statistics). The growing popularity of global tourism has expanded the industry's vulnerability to unforeseen events, as its reliance on public perceptions of safety, security, and reputation make it highly susceptible to crises and disasters.

Unforeseen situations and emergencies that significantly impact tourism are typically caused by non-tourism-related incidents, such as terrorism, security concerns, health issues, and natural catastrophes. As these unforeseen situations become more frequent, the tourism industry faces an increased risk of disruptions, crises, and losses.

According to Karagiannis et al. (2006), tourism crises can be categorized into three categories based on the role of human intervention: crises without human intervention, crises with indirect human intervention, and crises with direct human intervention.

Additionally, Peters and Pikkemaat (2006) classified crises into manageable and unmanageable categories. Manageable crises, which can be predicted and planned for in advance, occur due to factors such as financial miscalculations or inadequate safety and security measures. On the other hand, unmanageable crises, which are beyond the control of organizations, can have severe negative effects on the tourism industry. These crises can arise from various causes, such as wars, religious conflicts, terrorism, political instability, pandemics, natural and environmental disasters, recessions, and declining income levels.

#### **4.1. Climate change and natural disasters**

Climate change, a leading challenge for tourism destinations, has significant implications for health and well-being. Additionally, the frequency and severity of natural disasters have increased, exacerbating their socioeconomic impact. The increase in natural disasters and their severe consequences can primarily be attributed to climate change.

Between 2000 and 2019, there was a significant rise in climate-related disasters, averaging 314 per year. This represents a 44% increase from the 1994 - 2000 average and resulted in global economic losses of \$2.97 trillion. These losses can be attributed to the increase in climate-related disasters, such as floods, storms, and droughts. In 2019 alone, there were approximately 396 natural disasters, causing an estimated \$130 billion in economic losses and affecting 95 million people. Asia was the most affected region, accounting for 40% of disasters, followed by Africa with 20%.

Climate change exacerbates disaster risks. Extreme weather events disrupt tourism infrastructure and affect traveler experiences, leading to economic losses for both the destination and host communities. The tourism industry is particularly vulnerable to these impacts. Climate change poses a significant threat to tourism, as it can disrupt supply chains and reduce demand by negatively impacting destinations. The vulnerability of a tourist destination to climate change depends on its location and dependence on nature. Climate change can result in natural disasters such as melting glaciers, lack of snow, and increased intensity of avalanches, as well as rising sea levels, storm

surges, and stronger tropical cyclones.

These can have devastating effects on the tourism industry and the destinations that rely on it, as evidenced by the loss of 826,000 visitors and \$741 million in revenue in the Caribbean during the 2017 hurricane season (WTTC, 2018). Hurricane Irma caused significant damage to Dominica's tourism sector and hospitality industry, resulting in an estimated \$71 million in losses due to reduced cruise and non-cruise visits and visitor spending. The hurricane also destroyed the country's rainforest, its main tourist attraction. In Thailand, flooding in 2011 caused an estimated \$3 billion in damage to the tourism industry and forced the closure of Bangkok's airport for several months. Costa Rica experienced a severe drought, a hurricane in the northern region, and Tropical Storm Nate, which caused damage throughout the country in the past five years. Natural disasters such as fires, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions can have a significant impact on tourism. For instance, the eruption of Hawaii's Kilauea volcano in 2018 led to the closure of Hawaii Volcanoes National Park, causing a 15-50% drop in bookings for hotels and leisure businesses between June and August, with some venues forced to close and refund money to customers (WTTC and GR., 2019). In Dominica, Hurricane Irma caused around \$20 million in damage to the tourism sector, leading to reduced room availability in the hospitality industry. Estimated losses from reduced visits and visitor spending totaled \$71 million. Additionally, Dominica's main tourist attraction, its rainforest, was destroyed (World Bank, 2018). In Thailand, the 2011 widespread flooding led to the closure of Bangkok airport for months, with an estimated \$3 billion impact on tourism (World Bank, 2012). Over the past 5 years, Costa Rica has faced its worst drought in 75 years, a hurricane crossing the northern region, and infrastructure damage from Tropical Storm Nate. Severe wildfires caused widespread damage across Europe in the summer of 2022 and 2023, especially in countries such as Greece, France, Portugal, and Spain. Similar fires also occurred in North America, impacting tourism activities and destroying infrastructure and tourism resources.

Romania is exposed to natural disasters like earthquakes and floods, which have significant social, physical, and financial impacts. The potential effects of these disasters are increasing due to greater exposure of people and economic assets, insufficient funding for risk reduction, and the impact of climate change. Natural tourist sites are also being affected, with coastal areas shrinking and less snow covering the mountains. While no natural disasters have caused tourist crises in this century, it's important to note that Romania is one of the EU countries most at risk of earthquakes (Dinescu et al., 2022). Additionally, Romania is one of the countries in Europe most prone to flooding (World Bank, 2018). But warmer temperatures are expected to change tourism patterns. Some places will become less appealing due to hotter weather and more rain, while others may benefit and attract tourists for a longer time.

#### **4.2. Health crises**

Health is a major public and private concern and a key element in destination choice. Disease outbreaks have increased in number and diversity since the 1980s. Today, health crises and epidemics have become the new normal. The increasing population density in cities and more travel to remote areas have raised the risk of exposure to new diseases and disease transmission. Travelers can spread viruses during their trips, negatively impacting the tourism industry.

Outbreaks of diseases like Ebola, MERS, influenza, Zika, and COVID-19 have shown the dangers to public health and the impact on destinations. In 2002, severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) emerged in mainland China, quickly becoming the first pandemic of the 21st century. It affected over 8,000 people and caused 774 deaths in 26 countries on five continents. This outbreak highlighted the potential of air travel and globalization in spreading infectious diseases. A single traveler turned a local virus into a global outbreak, and the tourism sector became connected to the spread of SARS.

The World Health Organization began issuing travel warnings to limit the spread of SARS through international travel by advising people to postpone non-essential travel to affected areas. This led to a significant drop in air travel to these areas. International tourism arrivals fell by 1.2 percent in 2003, with East Asia experiencing a 41% decrease in tourist arrivals. The economic impact on China, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Canada was estimated to be between \$30 and \$50 billion, with tourism to Singapore falling by 70% (UNWTO). The H1N1 virus, which caused an epidemic in 2009, had a worldwide economic impact estimated between 45 and 55 billion dollars (FAO, 2018). The

Mexican tourism industry suffered an estimated loss of 5 billion dollars as a result of the outbreak (World Economic Forum, 2016). Additionally, the economic impact of the Zika outbreak in 2016 was estimated to be between \$7 billion and \$18 billion (WTTC, 2019). In spring 2000, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. This led to a crisis, impacting the tourism industry and other connected sectors. By April 6, about 96% of tourist destinations worldwide had travel restrictions, and 43% had closed their borders. In 2020, international tourist traffic fell by 73%, reaching a 30-year low.

The tourism industry depends on international travel. Previous crises had less of an impact on tourism. In 2020, global passenger traffic dropped by 50%, with a loss of \$372 billion in revenue (<https://www.icao.int/2022>). The COVID-19 pandemic caused a big drop in international air travel and the hospitality industry suffered huge losses, bringing the industry back to 2006 levels. Health crises in destinations can significantly impact the tourism industry. The effects depend on the severity, global response, and duration of the crisis. The economic impact can extend beyond the crisis, especially for places heavily reliant on tourism.

### **4.3. Political crises and terrorism**

Tourism is sensitive to conflict and responsive to peace. Serious political conflicts and violence impact millions of lives, while corruption, lawlessness, and organized crime deepen poverty in poor countries. Tourist spots are less attractive if they are unsafe or likely to have serious issues like war, political unrest, terrorism, human rights violations, or other major crimes, regardless of the natural or cultural attractions they offer. Peaceful destinations with minimal perceived threats to personal safety and security are preferred by all (visitors, entrepreneurs, investors, etc.). Conflict or terrorism can make a place unattractive for tourists. Foreign governments can intervene by issuing advisories to avoid non-essential travel to that destination to protect their citizens from the dangers associated with political unrest. If a place becomes unsafe, tourists might go somewhere else. This can seriously affect tourist destinations.

There is a spectrum of intensity in terms of political instability, and war is perhaps the most catastrophic for tourism. The 1999 Gulf War caused a significant drop in international tourism around the world. This led to more people choosing to travel domestically or to nearby destinations. A similar effect was seen during the conflict in Kosovo in Central Europe in 1999 (Cavlek, 2002). As a result, the growth rate of European tourism decreased by 50% (UNWTO, 2002). The world is facing two other wars whose impact on the recovery of the tourism industry cannot yet be quantified, but they certainly lead to a slowdown. The war in Ukraine is causing political instability, rising inflation, and economic slowdown. Destinations in Eastern Europe are being more deeply affected due to the war's image as a high-risk area. The most affected destinations so far (apart from Russia and Ukraine) are the Republic of Moldova, which has seen a 69% drop in flights, Slovenia (-42%), Latvia (-38%), and Finland (-36%) (UNWTO). Source markets in the US and Asia could be particularly affected, especially in terms of travel to Europe, as these markets are historically more risk-averse. In the future, disruptions in oil, gas, and food supplies will worsen high inflation rates in Western economies, especially in Europe, putting more pressure on household budgets and slowing the post-pandemic recovery. The conflict between Israel and Hamas has resulted in one of the deadliest wars in Gaza's history. Thousands of tourists were evacuated from the area as soon as the conflict began, and tourism operators canceled trips to Israel.

Terrorism and conflicts in an area can discourage tourism. Even though tourists are not usually targeted, the perception of risk can impact the tourism sector. The economic impact depends on the type of conflict and the destination. For example, a 2019 study found that terrorism-related incidents had the lowest economic impact and fastest recovery time, while civil unrest took the longest to recover (WTTC, 2019). Political and civil unrest can take many forms, such as domestic violence, mass protests, and coups. One significant example of civil unrest is the "Arab Spring", which began with pro-democracy demonstrations in Tunisia in December 2010 and spread to other countries in the Middle East and North Africa stopping the tourism activity in this areas.

Political instability or civil unrest can harm the tourism industry more than individual terrorist attacks. Ongoing disruptions to the economy and a perception of instability at the destination can result from demonstrations, civil unrest, or political instability. For example, the 2014 coup and

subsequent curfew in Thailand lasted just over three weeks but led to a loss of over 790,000 visitors and \$1.2 billion (WTTC, 2019). The political unrest and violence associated with sub-Saharan Africa and Algeria are obstacles to realizing its immense tourism potential (Christie and Crompton, 2001). The Middle East is in the same situation.

Political instability and conflict can create opportunities for the tourism industry. If a destination becomes unsafe due to conflict or terrorism, tourists may choose a different safe destination with similar characteristics. This can benefit nearby destinations. Conflict can provide an opportunity for a destination to rebrand itself and align with current travel trends. A revitalized destination can attract visitors, create jobs, and expedite the recovery process.

#### **4.4. Economic crises**

The economy significantly impacts tourism, shaping tourist flows and spending habits. Changes in economies influence the tourism industry, affecting demand in source markets and destination attractiveness. Economic uncertainty means a high chance of bad events in the financial system, leading to a slow economy and recession.

This can hurt industries in both starting and ending countries. The recession in the US during the 1990s contributed to a decline in Hawaii's tourism from 1990 to 1993, and Japan's economic difficulties had negative consequences for outbound tourism in the same decade, including travel to Hawaii. The late 20th-century global economic decline contributed to a slowdown in worldwide tourism.

Conversely, domestic industries may benefit as tourists choose more affordable options closer to home due to income and job uncertainty. This lack of funds and uncertain investment climate could lead to a crisis for the tourism industry, exacerbated by political and social tensions accompanying economic instability. In general, economic and financial crises have lasting and detrimental effects on the overall economy.

Crises that start in one sector of the economy often spread to other sectors. Tourism is a sector that is frequently negatively impacted by economic and financial crises. The impact of an economic or financial crisis on international tourism will ultimately depend on the nature of the crisis, such as a stock market crash, inflation, debt or banking crisis, or a mix of crises. Based on a study by Khalid et al. (2019), tourism demand and spending decrease during inflationary crises as high inflation erodes consumer purchasing power. During the domestic debt crisis, international tourism arrivals increase in destination countries, while demand for international tourism services decreases in origin countries. The economic crisis of 2007-2009, or "global financial crisis" (GFC), the worst worldwide economic crisis since the Great Depression, resulted in a loss of more than \$2 trillion from the global economy (Merle, 2018). The economic downturn impacted the tourism industry, resulting in a 12% drop in international tourist arrivals and a 6% decline in tourism revenue (UNWTO & ILO, 2013). In Romania, the number of tourists fell by 13.8% in 2009 compared to 2008, and by 14.77% in 2010. Amid the crisis and reduced tourism spending, the tourism-generated GDP decreased to 1.832% in 2009 and 1.819% in 2010 (INS). Recovery only occurred in 2013.

During economic and financial crises, consumers tend to reduce discretionary spending, which can lead to a decrease in demand for both domestic and international tourism services. Additionally, a decline in investor confidence can result in a decrease in tourism investments. These effects can result in stagnation and job losses in the tourism sector. However, the tourism industry can provide opportunities for economies that face certain types of crises. For instance, when a host country experiences a domestic crisis, it may become more attractive to international tourists because of its increased purchasing power, which can help mitigate the negative effects of the crisis on the host economy through tourism receipts and job generation. Furthermore, the tourism sector can contribute to the host economy's quick recovery with minimal government intervention and market distortions if it can take advantage of the opportunities presented by domestic crises.

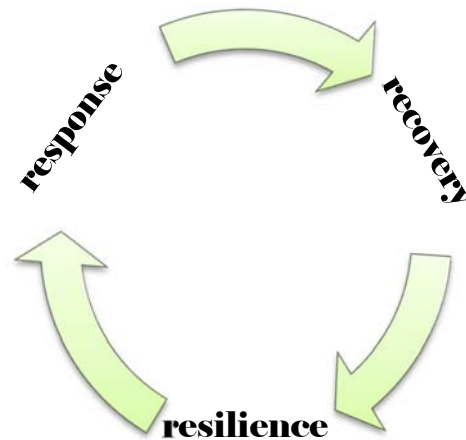
According to "The Global Risks Report 2023", published by the World Economic Forum, there are several major risks for Romania, including those that pose challenges to tourism destinations, such as rising inflation, geoeconomic conflict, interstate conflict, severe commodity price shocks, and a living-cost crisis. They influence both tourism supply and demand.

#### 4.5. Crisis mitigation

The growing intricacy and interdependence of unforeseeable events necessitate cooperation between governments and the private sector to heighten their capacity to deal with crises, effectively manage them, and promptly recover. The tourism industry has demonstrated its capacity to withstand crises. However, it is crucial for destinations and the private sector to learn from past experiences and adopt measures to mitigate the potential effects of future crises, as these are inevitable.

Although there are many other elements that need to be considered depending on the type of crisis, such as infrastructure recovery, travel warnings, and support for tourism businesses, in dealing with any type of crisis, it is recommended to follow a three-step reaction and response (during crisis): recovery: adaptation and recovery (post-crisis) and resilience (post-crisis and before a new one), see Figure no.1. Every step should include a feedback mechanism to capture the interconnectedness of the relevant issues to be addressed. Along with this, cross-cutting dimensions related to continuous communication and public relations should be incorporated. This involves involving relevant stakeholders throughout the process to determine the most effective way of management and preparation.

Figure no. 1. Crisis mitigations steps



Source: the authors

The biggest risk often lies not in the crisis itself, but in how it is managed - including the response, recovery, resilience, and preparation for future crises. It is crucial for the public and private sectors to collaborate in order to establish intelligent policies and effective communication to support the development of sustainable tourism destinations. While implementing strategic recommendations and policies can enhance the resilience of the tourism sector, it is also important for destinations to adopt a comprehensive approach to promote societal resilience more broadly. This approach should encompass core elements such as trust, collaboration, communication, openness, empathy, honesty, and efficiency.

Regarding Romanian destinations, as they strive to recover from the shock of the health crisis and bolster their resilience, they must embrace a comprehensive vision, establish platforms, and devise a diagnostic strategy based on their current context, including strengths, weaknesses, and future aspirations.

Since most crises are unforeseeable and unavoidable, it is vital for destinations to integrate crisis management as a crucial element of their overall tourism strategy.

## 5. Conclusions

Tourism crises are often caused by non-sectoral developments in areas such as the economy, politics, society, and the environment. These developments can affect tourism demand and supply, leading to crises such as economic decline, exchange rate fluctuations, loss of market confidence, political events like war, and natural disasters. As unpredictable situations become more frequent, the risk of disruptions, crises, and losses in the tourism industry also increases.

Identifying and understanding threats is a critical first step, but the tourism destinations must also adopt an all-hazards approach to resilience to navigate and operate in the diverse, dynamic, and distributed global risk landscape. While it is impossible to predict when the next crisis will arise and what form it will take, preparing with an all-hazards approach to managing crises can help build resilience and protect tourism industry from disruption. It is crucial for governments and the private sector to collaborate and plan for the safety and security of travelers, local communities, and destinations. Building the capacity to prepare for, respond to, manage, and recover quickly from crises is essential for economic growth and sustainability, not just for the sector but also for destinations that depend heavily on tourism. Strong collaboration between the public and private sectors, local authorities, and communities is necessary to establish trust with travelers, improve reputation, and enhance societal resilience. Despite the dynamic and complex global risk landscape, international travel continues to thrive, and today's travelers have more resources to prepare for and mitigate risks. Being prepared for crises is essential because stakeholder influence is weakened during a crisis. Tourism destinations must continually develop policies and tools to respond to future crises.

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