

The Evolution of Seaside Tourism in the First Tourist Season of the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Situation of the Romanian Black Sea Resorts

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Abstract

Tourism and travel were among the most affected sectors of the economy in 2020, due to the measures taken to prevent the spread of COVID-19, including the restriction of movement of people.

Tourism in Romania was also severely affected by this crisis, especially the inbound tourism, but the tourism in the coastal area had, in the first 9 months of 2020, a better evolution than in other tourist areas of the country and compared to other EU countries, based on domestic tourism, since inbound tourism collapsed.

The main objectives and goals of the research are the analysis of the evolution of the tourist season in the seaside resorts, in 2020, and to highlight some mistakes that, if avoided in the future, there is a great chance for much better results in the summer tourist season of 2021. The mistakes were made by the state authorities rather than the tour operators.

Key words: coastal tourism Romania, COVID-19 impact, extension of the beaches, unjustified restrictions, adaptation of the tourist offer

J.E.L. classification: Z31, Z33, Z38, Z39, Q58, R11

1. Introduction

The lives of billions of people on the entire planet Earth were endangered in 2020 by the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. The governments of the world's states were taken by surprise, unable to promptly and adequately respond to this threat from an "invisible enemy" for which there was no vaccine or treatment known to be effective against the disease. Romania was even less prepared than other European countries, in terms of its health system, which was chronically underfunded for long periods of time, without the necessary equipment to treat the infected patients (especially in terms of the very small number of beds in the Intensive Care Units) and with a significant shortage of medical staff.

The first case of COVID-19 infection in Romania was recorded on February 26, 2020. Then, the pandemic spread rapidly throughout the country, with about a third of the cases detected in the cities of Suceava and Bucharest (OECD, 2020, p.291). Inevitably, traffic restrictions and the quarantine followed.

Since the spread of the cases reached alarming levels, worldwide, measures to quarantine the population at home or in specialized units, to restrict the movement of the people, even an almost complete closure of the borders were needed, and many economic activities were either restricted or a total closure of their activity was ordered.

Romania has also been severely affected by this serious health crisis, especially with regard to receiver (inbound) tourism, while decreases in tourism flows were more moderate, so that, in total, the decreases in the total number of tourist arrivals were smaller than in other European countries.

Tourism in Romania recorded significant losses, but, in the coastal area, the evolutions were better than those recorded at the level of the entire country, for the first 3 quarters of 2020, based on internal (domestic) tourism, while receiver (inbound tourism) collapsed.

2. Literature review

As expected, given the unprecedented scale of the global hospitality crisis, a large number of authors researched this phenomenon and published papers on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on economies, at global, regional, national or zonal level, and in particular on travel and tourism.

Numerous papers analyze the evolution of the main indicators which measure tourist traffic, globally or nationally, due to the impact of the pandemic, tackling issues such as the evolution of tourism demand, how the tourist offer has had to adapt, in the hotel industry, restaurants, passenger air transport, the cruise industry, but also in terms of the employment in the hospitality industry.

Another category of papers compares the COVID-19 pandemic with other previous health crises (such as those related to: malaria, yellow fever, Ebola, Zika, MERS-CoV, SARS, bird flu-H5N1, swine flu, etc.) (Menegaki, 2020).

A particularly interesting and useful paper displays the analysis of 175 published articles, with a relevant content, identified using Google Scholar, Web of Science and Science Direct Databases and which were classified into 6 groups: (1) articles which performed simulations and scenario modeling (2) those on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, (3) those comparing the COVID-19 pandemic with other previous health crises, (4) those measuring the impact of COVID-19 in economic terms, 5) those regarding the resumption of activities in the post-pandemic period and (6) those related to conducting surveys (Davahli *et al.*, 2020).

In the absence of a vaccine to prevent getting the disease and in the context of a limited capacity of the medical system to treat this disease, the various forms of nonpharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) are particularly important, including lockdown measures (home isolation, voluntary or imposed quarantine), maintaining the physical distancing between people and limiting the number of persons who are together, in the same place, the closure of schools and / or universities and non-essential economic activities, the cancellation or postponement of events (cultural, sports) and of public meetings with a certain number of people (Gösling *et al.*, 2020, p.2). However, such measures, along with closing the borders or limiting the right to travel, drastically restrict tourist traffic.

The main barrier against the rebound of international tourism, according to UNWTO experts, continues to be the travel restrictions, along with a slow virus containment and low consumer confidence. Other obstacles identified by experts were the lack of a coordinated response from the world's states so as to ensure harmonized protocols and coordinated restrictions, as well as the deterioration of the economic environment (UNWTO, 2020b).

3. Research methodology

In this paper we have conducted a descriptive research on the evolution of the tourism activity on the Romanian coast during the coronavirus pandemic. For a part of the research we have used secondary, quantitative information, using a longitudinal profile (Jugănaru, 1998, p.25), represented by the values of the main indicators of the tourist circulation in the coastal area of Romania. Thus, we have performed a comparative analysis of the evolution of the selected indicators (number of arrivals and number of overnight stays of residents and non-residents) during the first 9 months of 2020 and the similar period in 2019, by resorts and tourist localities. Furthermore, we have compared these developments with those recorded, in the same period, at the level of the entire country (Romania), but also at the level of the 27 EU countries.

Another part of the research has been conducted using the “focus group” method (Jupp, 2010, pp. 207-208) and is based on qualitative, direct information obtained from the discussions we had, during this analyzed period, with over 20 managers and entrepreneurs of tourist reception structures with accommodation, food and leisure functions, from the tourist resorts on the Romanian coast.

4. Findings

The travel restrictions imposed in response to the evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic hit world tourism hard in 2020.

4.1. Evolutions of international tourism in 2020

International tourism fell by 70% due to the impact of travel restrictions in all the regions, according to the World Tourism Organization's press release of October 27, 2020, analyzing the developments of the first 8 months of the year (UNWTO, October 27, 2020). At the end of October 2020, UNWTO's expectations were that, for the entire 2020, there would be a 70% decrease in the number of international tourist arrivals compared to 2019 (UNWTO, 2020b). UNWTO's expert panel predicts a bounce back of international tourism only in the third quarter of 2021, and some of them expect this to happen only in 2022.

According to UNWTO's World Tourism Barometer, the number of international tourist arrivals fell by 81% in July and by 79% in August, the two peak months for tourism in the northern hemisphere summer season. The fall recorded in August represents 700 million fewer arrivals, compared to the same period in 2019, which translates into a loss of 730 billion USD in export revenues - in international tourism, i.e., more than 8 times the loss recorded after the global economic and financial crisis of 2019 (UNWTO, 2020a).

Europe recorded a more moderate decline in July and August (-72% and -69%, respectively), but the rebound was short-lived, with new travel restrictions being reintroduced, following the increase in the number of COVID-19 infections.

According to EUROSTAT data, between January and September 2020, compared to the same period in 2019, the number of overnight stays in EU countries' accommodation units decreased from 2.4 million to 1.2 million (-49%) (EUROSTAT, 2020). During this period, all EU Member States recorded significant decreases. The most affected EU countries were Greece, Malta, Spain, where the number of overnight stays fell by at least 67%. In Romania, the decrease was 49.5% in terms of tourist accommodation establishments and 51% - hotels and similar accommodation.

4.2. Summer tourist season in 2020 in the EU countries

In January and February 2020 there were significant increases in the number of overnight stays, by 4.4% and 5.7%, respectively, compared to similar provisions in 2019. However, March 2020 marked the start of the lockdown measures and the introduction of travel restrictions in most EU countries, and the decrease in the number of overnight stays compared to March 2019 was 63%. The decline continued and intensified in April (a 95% decrease compared to April 2019). Then a slight rebound began, in May, which continued in June 2020. However, in May and June, the worst results were recorded in terms of the number of overnight stays, compared to the same period of the previous year (- 88% and -71%, respectively).

Between July and September 2020, there was a 38% decrease in the number of overnight stays in tourist accommodation units in EU27 countries, compared to the similar period in 2019, with decreases of 42% in July, 32% in August and 41% in September.

One can note that 5 EU member states recorded decreases of at least 50% in the number of overnight stays in tourist accommodation units: Malta, Greece, Spain, Portugal and Bulgaria. We can also see that all these countries have a tourist offer based mainly on coastal tourism.

Comparing the results recorded by Romania with those of Bulgaria, a neighboring country with a similar tourist offer structure, we note that, regarding the number of overnight stays in July-September 2020, compared to the same period in 2019, the decreases recorded in Romania were lower than those in Bulgaria (-37.6% in Romania, compared to -50.8% in Bulgaria). These decreases were recorded each month, from July to September, respectively decreases of 44.7%, in July, in Romania, compared to 61.9%, in Bulgaria, of 31.9%, compared to 44.7% in August and 32.3% compared to 42.3% in September (Eurostat, 2020). The explanation for these differences can lie in the much higher number of overnight stays of foreign tourists in 2019 in Bulgaria, compared to Romania, while the travel restrictions for non-resident tourists imposed in the summer of 2020 led to more pronounced decreases in the non-resident tourist flows in Bulgaria.

Analyzing the evolution of the number of overnight stays of EU residents in their own countries (domestic tourism), we note that while residents of Malta and Slovenia recorded more than double the number of overnight stays in domestic tourism in 2020 compared to 2019, other countries (Greece, Spain, and Romania) recorded the largest decreases in this indicator (-29% or more).

On the other hand, the most severe decreases in the number of overnight stays of non-residents were recorded in the third quarter of 2020, compared to the similar period of 2019, in Romania, Spain, Finland and Sweden (Eurostat, 2020, p.7).

4.3. Evolution in the Romanian coastal area

Table no. 1 Evolution of tourist arrivals in the Romanian coastal area, January-September, 2019-2020

City or resort	Tourist arrivals								
	Total		20/19 %	Romanians		20/19 %	Foreigners		20/19 %
	'19	'20		'19	'20		'19	'20	
Coastal	129,378,3	964,710	-25.43	1,238,401	954,080	-22.96	55,382	10,630	-80.81
Constanța	173,431	77,826	-55.13	149,109	72,646	-51.28	24,322	5,180	-78.70
Mamaia	394,902	294,233	-25.49	377,383	290,456	-23.03	17,519	3,777	-78.44
Eforie Sud	298,88	18,306	-38.75	29,789	18,288	-38.61	99	18	-81.82
Eforie Nord	177,359	131,112	-26.08	172,139	130,580	-24.14	5,220	532	-8.81
Mangalia	197,32	13,458	-31.80	18,769	13,223	-29.55	963	235	-75.60
Năvodari	269,55	22,135	-17.88	25,117	21,852	-13.00	1,838	283	-84.60
Mamaia Sat	57,852	53,527	-7.48	55,889	53,218	4.78	1,963	309	-84.26
Techirghiol	9,013	5,886	-34.69	8,895	5,858	-34.14	118	28	-76.27
2 Mai	6,422	3,105	-51.65	6,407	3,105	-51.54	15	-	n/a
Vama Veche	13,519	12,496	-7.57	13,257	12,476	5.89	262	20	-92.37
Costinești	55,113	29,186	-47.04	54,572	29,128	-46.62	541	58	-89.28
Schitu	3,489	663	-81.00	3,448	663	-80.77	41	-	n/a
Olimp	2,5779	41,489	60.94	25,574	41,489	62.23	205	-	n/a
Neptun	75,949	107,202	41.15	75,144	107,117	42.55	805	85	-89.44
Jupiter	41,614	33,219	-20.17	41,466	33,192	-19.95	148	27	-81.76
Cap Aurora	33,282	18,173	-45.40	33,175	18,148	-45.30	107	25	-76.64
Venus	85,828	59,460	-30.72	84,681	59,429	-29.82	1,147	31	-97.30
Saturn	63,656	43,234	-32.08	63,587	43,212	-32.04	69	22	-68.12

Source: Data processed by the author, data provided by Constanța County Department of Statistics, 2020

Analyzing the comparative situation of the number of tourist arrivals on the Romanian coast, in the first 9 months of 2020, compared to the similar period of 2019, we can observe the following developments:

- A decrease by 25.43% of the total number of tourists, in the period January-September of the year 2020, compared to the same period of 2019, at the level of the entire coastal area, of which:
 - A decrease by 22.96% in the number of arrivals of Romanian tourists;
 - A dramatic decrease, by 80.81%, in the number of arrivals of foreign tourists.
- From the analysis of each resort and tourist locality on the Romanian coast, it results that the most severe decrease was recorded in Schitu localities - belonging to Costinești commune (-81%), followed by Constanța city (-55.13%), 2 Mai locality (-51.65%), Costinești resort (-44.04%) and Cap Aurora resort (-45.4%).
- Decreasing the average length of stay, from 4.07 days in 2019 to 3.64 days in 2020 (Constanța County Directorate of Statistics).

There were also tourist resorts, respectively coastal localities where the decrease in the values of this indicator was much smaller, as is the case of Vama Veche localities (-7.57%) and Mamaia Sat - Năvodari resort (-7.48%). On the other hand, there were tourist resorts which recorded increases in the number of tourist arrivals: Olimp resort (+ 60.94%), respectively Neptun (+ 41.15%). In the structure, by categories of tourists, depending on their origin, we notice that the largest decrease in

the number of Romanian tourists was recorded in Schitu – Costinești, where the decrease was 80.77%, followed by 2 Mai locality (-51.54%), the city of Constanța (-51.28%), the Costinești resort (-46.62%) and Cap Aurora resort (-45.30%). On the opposite side, two tourist resorts even recorded increases in the number of Romanian tourists: Olimp (+ 62.23%) and Neptun (+ 42.55%). The explanation lies in the fact that extensive repairs and modernizations of some hotels were carried out in these resorts, which were re-opened in 2020.

Regarding the arrivals of foreign tourists, the most important decrease was recorded in the coastal localities 2 Mai and Schitu, where no foreign tourists stayed, and in all the other resorts and coastal localities very large decreases were recorded, the most severe being in Venus (-97.3%), Vama Veche locality (-92.37%), Eforie Nord (-89.81%) and Neptun (-89.44%) resorts, followed by Costinești (-89.28%), Năvodari (-84.6%) and Mamaia Sat (-84.28%). The smallest decreases in the number of foreign tourists were recorded in Mangalia (-75.6%), Techirghiol (-76.27%) and Cap Aurora (-76.64%). A thorough analysis of the causes for these differences in evolution is necessary, from one resort or locality to another, in view of adopting the most appropriate measures in the 2021 season.

Figure no. 1 and table no. 2 show the comparative evolutions of the number of tourist arrivals, at national level, in Romania and in the coastal area, on months, in the January-September period, in 2020, compared to 2019. One can note the much more severe amplitude of the decrease in the number of arrivals throughout the country, compared to the situation in the coastal area.

Furthermore, in figure no.2 and table no.3 the evolutions of the indicator number of overnight stays are presented, for the same period. The data of the National Institute of Statistics of Romania regarding Constanța County, within which the coastal area is located, were processed. Less than 2% of the number of tourist arrivals and overnight stays in Constanța County were recorded in other localities that do not belong to the coastal area, thus we can incorporate the data about Constanța County in the data about the coastal area.

4.4. An exceptional opportunity to increase the attractiveness of the Romanian coast – beach extension works

One of the largest projects funded by the European Union, carried out in Romania, is called "Reducing coastal erosion - Phase II", a project with a total value of over 800 million euros.

In the first phase of this project the sanding works of the beaches, in the area Mamaia - Constanța - Eforie Nord, in total 5 large beach sectors, with a cumulative length of about 7.3 km and a width of the beaches extended to over 100 m were carried out, among others. Since 2016, when the first phase of the project was completed, tourists have been able to use these beaches, whose area has increased by 60.66 hectares. The second phase of the project, which will be completed by December 30, 2023, will result in the expansion of another 11 beach areas, with an area of over 200 hectares, and the width of these beaches will also increase to 100 meters. The sanding works started in October 2020, in the Năvodari and Mamaia resorts, and from the spring of 2021 the works will start in Eforie, as well. In the second phase of the project, the beaches in the resorts and localities Costinești, Olimp, Neptun, Jupiter, Cap Aurora, Venus, Saturn, Mangalia and 2 Mai will be extended. These works will not only reduce the risk of coastal erosion, but tourists will enjoy very wide (probably the widest beaches in Europe) and modern beaches. These generous beaches will provide greater comfort to the tourists and allow physical distancing between tourists which will thus feel much safer in the pandemic context (ANAR, 2020a; 2020b).

At the same time, however, these beaches will be an ideal place for organizing and conducting cultural and artistic events (concerts, festivals), outdoors, as a much safer alternative than closed spaces. The organization of such events on the beach will be able to attract, additionally, a larger number of tourists, on the Romanian coast, in the 2021 tourist season.

4.5. Expectations regarding the 2021 summer tourist season on the Romanian coast

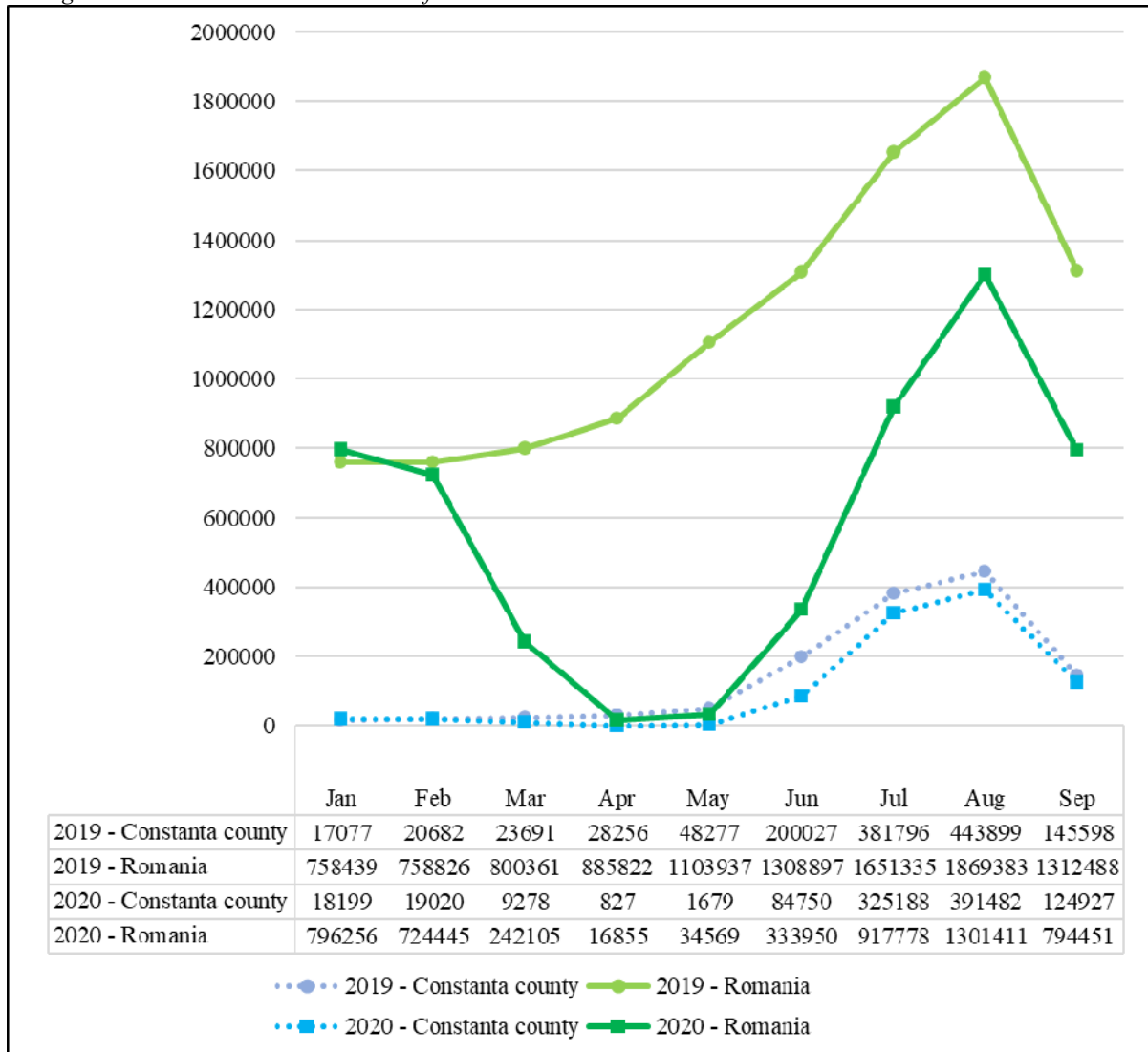
The analysis of the way the tourist activity was carried out on the Romanian coast in the summer tourism season 2020 will allow highlighting the wrong measures and avoiding their repetition in the next season.

4.6. Some mistakes which were made in the 2020 tourist season

From our own observations and following the discussions we had with over 20 managers of some tourist reception structures from several resorts and tourist localities on the Romanian coast, some interesting comments and proposals resulted, among which:

- Entrepreneurs in the hospitality industry made substantial efforts to adapt to the new conditions, investing in devices and disinfectants, protective equipment, new technologies that allow compliance with all the rules of health protection of the tourists, however, Romanian authorities did not allow serving the meal for tourists in the interior spaces of the restaurants. It is important to emphasize that, during the entire tourist season on the coast there was no outbreak of COVID-19 infection, in any unit for tourist accommodation or food, in all the localities and seaside resorts in Romania, which proves that all the necessary health protection measures were taken by these units;
- The lack of controls, by the competent authorities (Police and Gendarmerie) during the observance of the rules of distancing and wearing the face mask, led to many situations of large crowds of people on terraces, in clubs, on the beach, etc., without these violations of the rules imposed by the health authorities being sanctioned with fines, in order to discourage similar phenomena. There were controls and fines, but very few, and television stations caught numerous cases of violations of the restrictions which went unpunished. One explanation for this situation is the fact that, in 2020, in Romania there were two important elections (local and parliamentary elections), in June and early December, respectively, and the authorities did not want to impose too many sanctions on the population, having the electoral interest in mind, in order not to lose votes;
- Some tourist accommodation structures with accommodation functions, but especially some restaurants on the coast, have considerably increased either their accommodation fees, at the peak of the tourist season, or the prices of food and drinks, in some units. The managers of these units relied on the fact that there was a favorable situation, of increased tourist demand for domestic tourism, when foreign tourist destinations were inaccessible to the Romanian tourists. But the fact that such tariffs were presented in the media, respectively the unreasonably high prices practiced in some units, transmitted, among the population, the idea that everywhere on the coast accommodation and food prices increased significantly, thus discouraging domestic tourist demand;
- However, we consider that the most important loss that the Romanian seaside tourism recorded, at the beginning of the summer tourist season, 2020, is not the decrease in the activity, the number of clients and the obtained incomes, but the loss of a part of the staff, especially the qualified one. The uncertain situation regarding the date and conditions when the restaurants were to open, determined some workers, especially seasonal workers, to look for other jobs, in other fields, and even in other localities (Juganaru, 2020, p.178)
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Figure no. 1 and Table no. 2: Number of tourist arrivals



Source: National Institute of Statistics, Romania, Tempo online database

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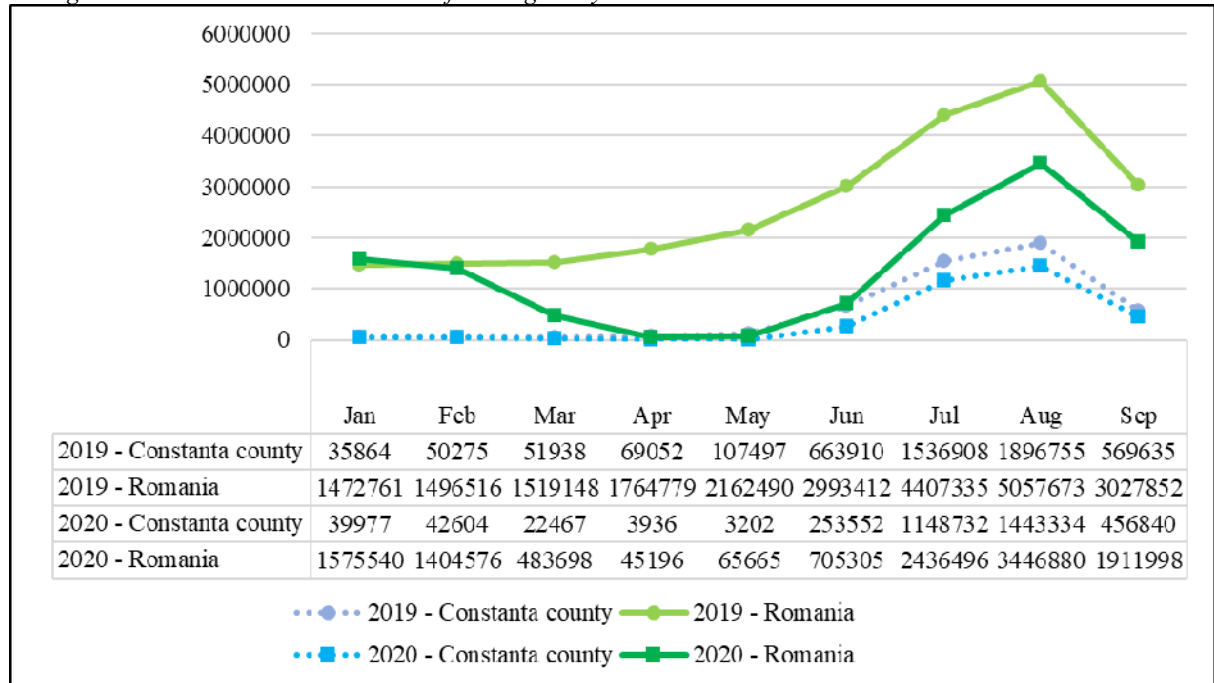
4.7. A controversial and damaging measure for Romanian tourism: restaurants were not allowed to operate indoors

Despite the insistent requests of the representatives of the employers' and professional tourism organizations in Romania, the authorities did not accept the restaurants' operation after June 1, except for serving customers in the outdoor spaces of the restaurants, popularly called "terraces". Romanian authorities have received assurances from the representatives of the hotel industry that all the hygiene rules and all the imposed conditions will be observed, including the operation of the restaurants in the interior spaces at half of the usual capacity, at the most. Unfortunately, the

response received from the Romanian Prime Minister was negative, citing a major epidemiological risk if restaurants would open. Romania thus remained, in the summer of 2020, the last EU country with this imposed restriction.

This situation was a major reason for dissatisfaction on the part of tourists, who had to wait for a long time in queues in order to be served, in successive series, on the outdoor terraces of the restaurants. But some of the hotels had very small spaces for arranging such terraces, where tourists could be served. The situation was even more unpleasant, for the tourists, on rainy and windy days (even if, fortunately, there were not many such days in the summer tourist season of 2020, on the Romanian coast). There were many tourists who brought food from home or bought it from grocery stores and ate in the hotel rooms, which caused restaurant revenues to fall dramatically.

Figure no. 2 and Table no. 3: Number of overnight stays



Source: National Institute of Statistics, Romania, Tempo online database

5. Conclusions

The summer tourist season of 2020, in Romania’s coastal area, recorded significant decreases compared to previous years in terms of the number of tourist arrivals, the number of overnight stays, especially by foreign tourists and, obviously, significant decreases in revenues. However, these decreases were much smaller than those registered in the entire tourism activity in Romania and compared to those in other European countries.

The vast majority of accommodation, food and leisure units on the coast will be able to open for the 2021 summer tourist season in good conditions, especially if they receive, as soon as possible, the long-promised support of the authorities (grants to cover losses of up to 20% of the decrease in the turnover of the companies, in 2020, compared to the one in 2019).

On the other hand, the state authorities will be responsible for keeping under control the evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic in Romania before the opening of the seaside tourist season. This will require stronger control measures and to sanction people who do not comply with the rules of physical distancing, wearing a mask and other health rules.

Accelerated population testing is needed, with both rapid and PCR tests, so that all the direct contacts of the people infected with COVID-19 could be identified in time, for their quarantine or hospitalization, and in order to ensure the appropriate treatments. Until then, the vaccination of the population would begin, which will have to be well organized and accompanied by a good

campaign to convince the population to be vaccinated and thus counteract the increasingly frequent appearances of "Corona-skeptics" spreading anti-vaccination messages on social networks.

Considering that in the coastal area there is the largest tourist accommodation capacity in Romania (over 25% of the accommodation units), we consider that a pilot project for the establishment of the "tourist police" would be opportune, to act in the summer on the coast, and in winter in the mountainous areas.

Moreover, the National Administration „Romanian Waters” could offer some facilities and incentives to the beach operators who set up, at their expense, toilets and modular shower units, located at the edge of the beaches, so that they meet the criteria for granting the status of "Blue Flag", which would increase the attractiveness of the Romanian beaches for the tourists, especially foreigners.

On the beaches, in the sectors which will already be expanded, it will be possible to organize several cultural, sports and leisure events, respecting the physical distancing among the participants, which would also be an additional element of attractiveness of the tourist offer.

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