

**IS ROMANIAN RURAL TOURISM RESILIENT TO EXTERNAL SHOCKS?
CASE STUDY: COVID-19 PANDEMIC LOCKDOWNS AND THEIR
CONSEQUENCES**

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***Abstract:** This paper documents the short- and medium-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on Romanian rural tourism by analyzing the growth patterns in some of its rural and urban areas in terms of arrivals before and after the lockdown period. The results show that rural touristic destinations fared better than urban ones in the period following the lockdowns, showing that this external shock affected both businesses in this sector and possibly consumer behavior.*

***Key words:** rural tourism resilience; Covid-19 lockdowns; external shocks in tourism*

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the Romanian rural tourism sector has experienced unprecedented growth, attracting domestic and international visitors seeking authentic experiences amidst the country's picturesque countryside. [1,6,7,17] However, the COVID-19 pandemic presented a significant challenge, disrupting global travel patterns and imposing stringent lockdown measures worldwide. [5,21] As such, this paper aims to examine the resilience of Romanian rural tourism in the face of such external shocks, with a particular focus on the ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns. [22]

The global tourism sector has navigated numerous adversities over time, including economic recessions and natural calamities, yet the COVID-19 crisis tested its fortitude like never before. [2,11] Rural destinations, often perceived as sanctuaries for those seeking peace, cultural authenticity, and a connection with nature, faced these trials with a unique set of advantages and vulnerabilities. [16,20] Romania, with its picturesque landscapes, rich heritage, and vibrant rural communities, has become an increasingly popular locale for rural tourism. [9,12] This research assesses how well Romania's rural tourism withstood and adapted to these disruptions, offering insights into its resilience and potential for future growth.

Rural tourism in Romania has witnessed significant growth in recent years, fueled by increasing interest from both domestic and international travelers. The allure of authentic experiences, traditional cuisine, outdoor activities, and immersive encounters with local communities has contributed to the popularity of rural tourism as a sustainable alternative to mass tourism. [3] However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent implementation of lockdown measures imposed severe challenges on the tourism sector, disrupting travel patterns, limiting mobility, and altering consumer behavior. [8,13]

By examining the extent to which rural tourism in Romania withstood and adapted to these disruptions, we can gain insights into the sector's resilience capacity and potential for future development. This paper presents an analysis of empirical data collected in both rural and urban destinations, endeavoring to contribute some perspectives to the discourse surrounding the sustainability and adaptability of rural tourism in Romania amidst unforeseen crises.

The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated swift and stringent measures to contain the spread of the virus, including travel restrictions, quarantine protocols, the closure of tourism-related businesses, and subsequent attempts to alleviate the financial burden of those organizations through government grants. [4] In Romania, as in many other countries, rural tourism enterprises faced unprecedented challenges as lockdowns effectively halted travel and tourism activities. The sudden cessation of revenue streams, coupled with uncertainty about the duration and severity of the crisis, posed existential threats to many rural tourism businesses and communities.

As such, understanding the resilience of Romanian rural tourism to external shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic is of significant importance for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers alike. Resilience, defined as the ability to withstand and recover from adversity, encompasses various dimensions, including economic, social, environmental, and institutional aspects. [19] In our research, we seek to assess the capacity of rural destinations to continue to attract tourists after such a significant external shock.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Data for this study were obtained from the TEMPO online database, which provides publicly available information on tourist arrivals in Romania. The dataset encompassed both pre-pandemic, pandemic, and post-pandemic periods, allowing for an examination of temporal dynamics in rural and urban tourism.

We employed a quantitative approach to analyze the data, focusing on trends and patterns in tourist arrivals before and after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. To examine trends in touristic arrivals, we aggregated the data by destination, allowing us to identify fluctuations in tourism activity over time. [10,15]

The pre-pandemic period was defined as the time leading up to the declaration of the pandemic by the World Health Organization in March 2020, while the pandemic period encompassed the subsequent months during which lockdown measures and travel restrictions were imposed. The post-pandemic period (or post-restrictions period) started in March 2022, when all travel restrictions and compulsory precautionary measures ended in Romania. [14,18] It should be noted that new Coronavirus cases were reported in 2023; however, those are considered endemic cases

Limitations of the study include the reliance on publicly available datasets, which may have inherent biases or limitations in terms of data coverage and accuracy. Additionally, the analysis was limited to aggregated statistics and did not capture individual-level data or qualitative insights from tourism stakeholders.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Table 1 tracks tourist arrivals in urban and rural areas from 2019 through 2023, detailing absolute numbers, their respective share as a percentage of total arrivals, and percentage changes in arrivals relative to the base year of 2019.

Urban areas accounted for the majority of touristic arrivals throughout the period, though their share slightly decreased in 2020 and 2021, reflecting a relative shift towards rural destinations. In other words, the dataset reveals a dominant urban preference for tourism in 2019, which shifts noticeably during the pandemic as rural areas increase their share of total arrivals. This shift suggests a seemingly temporary pivot towards rural tourism, driven by pandemic-related preferences for less crowded and possibly perceived safer destinations.

Table 1.**Arrivals structure and dynamics by destination type**

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Urban	10.911.055	4.993.872	7.862.986	9.880.820	10.941.265
Rural	2.357.701	1.341.529	2.167.841	2.474.317	2.706.002
% Urban	82,23	78,82	78,38	79,97	80,17
% Rural	17,76	21,17	21,61	20,02	19,82
% change urban		-61,61	-27,66	4,26	5,41
% change rural		-43,10	-8,05	4,94	14,77

Source: [15]

In 2019, urban areas saw significantly higher tourist arrivals at 10,911,055 compared to rural areas, which had 2,357,701. The distribution shows a dominant urban preference, with 82.23% of tourists opting for urban destinations, leaving 17.77% in rural areas.

A dramatic change occurred in 2020 when both urban and rural areas experienced a sharp decline in tourist numbers—urban areas by 61.62% and rural by 43.10% compared to 2019. This reflects the impact of the global pandemic and the public health measures put in place in order to attempt to contain it, which drastically reduced travel and tourism activities. By 2021, the decline continues though less sharply, with urban areas still 27.66% below their 2019 levels and the rural regions 8.05% down.

The percentage of arrivals to rural areas increased in 2020 and 2021, suggesting that more tourists were seeking rural destinations during these years, possibly due to pandemic-related preferences. From 2022 onwards, the share of urban touristic arrivals began to rise again, indicating a return of tourists to urban areas as conditions normalized. Recovery began in 2022 (+4.95%) and showed a significant increase in 2023 (+14.77%), indicating a strong rebound in rural tourism, possibly due to increased interest in less crowded and more nature-oriented destinations post-pandemic. Urban tourism maintained stable levels in 2022 and 2023 (+4.26% and 5.41%), showing limited growth compared to rural areas (+4.94 and +14.77%, respectively).

The recovery phase post-2022 shows a resurgence in urban tourism but with more significant growth in rural areas, suggesting a rebound possibly fueled by a sustained interest in open, nature-centric destinations. Such trends underline the resilient nature of rural tourism, capable of not only recovering but potentially expanding post-crisis.

Overall, the data illustrates a significant disruption in tourism in 2020 and 2021, with a gradual recovery that appears to lead to stabilization and grow by 2023. This trajectory highlights the resilience and gradual resurgence of the tourism sector, especially in the context of rural tourism, influenced by factors like changing travel preferences, safety perceptions, and the lifting of travel restrictions.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the findings of this study underscore the resilience of Romania's rural tourism sector in the face of the unprecedented challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis reveals a significant shift in tourist preferences during the pandemic, with a noticeable increase in the share of arrivals to rural areas. This trend was likely driven by the demand for safer, less crowded environments, as well as the appeal of natural, open spaces during a time of heightened health concerns. The data from 2020 and 2021 illustrates how rural tourism, despite facing a sharp decline in absolute numbers, managed to perform relatively better than urban tourism, reflecting its potential as a resilient and adaptive segment within the broader tourism industry.

As the world began to emerge from the pandemic in 2022, rural tourism in Romania demonstrated a strong recovery, with substantial growth in tourist arrivals compared to urban areas. This recovery highlights the sector's ability to not only rebound but also capitalize on the growing interest in sustainable, nature-oriented travel experiences. The enduring appeal of rural tourism, combined with changing consumer preferences, suggests that this sector is well-positioned to continue its growth trajectory in the post-pandemic era. The data from 2023, showing a marked increase in rural tourist arrivals, reinforces the notion that rural destinations in Romania have become increasingly attractive to both domestic and international visitors.

Furthermore, the study emphasizes the importance of resilience in the tourism sector, particularly in the face of external shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The ability of rural tourism in Romania to adapt and recover from such disruptions is indicative of its broader potential for sustainable development. Policymakers and tourism stakeholders should take note of these findings, as they highlight the need for continued support and investment in rural tourism infrastructure and services. By fostering a resilient tourism sector, Romania can ensure that its rural areas remain vibrant and attractive destinations, contributing to the overall economic and social well-being of the country.

In summary, the Romanian rural tourism sector has shown remarkable resilience and adaptability in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, with a strong recovery that points to continued growth potential. The shifts in tourist behavior observed during and after the pandemic suggest that rural tourism will play a crucial role in the future of the country's tourism industry. As such, ongoing efforts to support and promote rural tourism, coupled with a focus on sustainability and resilience, will be key to ensuring the long-term success and vitality of this sector.

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