

ANALYSIS OF TOURISM IN ROMANIA DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract. *The paper analyzes the evolution of tourism in Romania, during the COVID-19 pandemic period, from December 2019 to January 2021. The processed data referred to the number of tourists, Romanians and foreigners, respectively to the index of net use of the tourist accommodation capacity in several types of tourist reception structures. The study reveals a significant decrease in the number of tourists and obviously in the index of net use of accommodation capacity. The largest decreases were recorded, as expected, in the number of foreign tourists and in tourist structures with higher accommodation capacity, such as hotels and cottages.*

Key words: *tourism, COVID-19, tourist accommodation*

INTRODUCTION

In all countries of the world it is proven that tourism is one of the factors that contribute to the growth and development of the national economy. Tourism has become in our days a strategic choice and very important for the development of national economy, due to its benefic effects in economic, social, and cultural plan [1]. This is achieved through the many economic connections generated in existing relations with other sectors of the economy, through the creation and maintenance of jobs and last but not least through its contribution to GDP.

Tourism also contributes to building and consolidating an image identity, practically a country brand. The tourism industry is in a continuous dynamics, which implies a permanent adaptation and improvement of management [2].

Each country evaluates the economic field of tourism not only from the perspective of the capacity to attract tourists, but as a platform for economic growth and sustainable development. [5]

Analyzing the recent years it shows that our country has become a favorite destination for many Europeans, over 60% of foreign tourists coming from EU countries, Romania competing with countries such as Bulgaria, Greece, Italy or Spain. This influx of tourists is also due to the fact that Romania is a destination both in summer, mainly with the resorts on the Black Sea (from Mamaia to Mangalia) and the Danube Delta [15], and in winter, with the resorts ski resort on Prahova Valley and Poiana Brasov [13]. We must not forget many Transylvanian cities such as Sibiu, Brașov, Sighișoara, Cluj-Napoca or Târgu Mureș, for their medieval atmosphere and for the castles located there, which have become important points of attraction for tourists. Recently, in these areas, and not only, rural tourism has developed, focusing on the promotion of Romanian folklore and traditions [11].

Practically, in almost all the country there are various points of tourist attraction, such as Bran Castle, Huniazilor Castle, monasteries from the northern Moldova [14], wooden churches from Transylvania, the Merry Cemetery in Săpânța, the Iron Gates, caves in the Apuseni Mountains, Bigăr waterfall and so on. All these were points of attraction both for Romanian tourists and for those from other countries and, automatically, they all suffered as a result of the decrease in their number as a result of travel, service and accommodation bans during the COVID-19 pandemic.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The analysis performed in the paper used data taken from various statistical sources, of the National Institute of Statistics, the website of the Romanian Government regarding COVID-19, etc., these representing the basis for further processing. The initial data referred to the number of Romanian and foreign tourists who stayed and spent the night in various tourist accommodation structures in Romania, as well as to the index of net use of tourist accommodation capacity. These data were taken over and compared for the period January 2018 February 2021 in order to highlight the differences between them, with special attention to 2020, the year in which the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic was reached in the absence of a vaccine.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The new Coronavirus appeared in China at the end of 2019 in Wuhan, manifesting itself as a severe respiratory infection, caused by infection with the SARS-CoV-2 virus. The debut of COVID-19 in Romania took place at the end of February 2020.

Some European milestones in the evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020)

March 17 - Members of the European Council at the second Covid-19 video conference agreed to strengthen external borders by applying a coordinated temporary restriction of non-essential travel to the EU for a period of 30 days.

March 30 - The EU adopts measures for the immediate release of cohesion funds, amending the rules applicable to the Structural and Investment Funds to allow greater flexibility and the release of EUR 37 billion to the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative.

April 27 and May 20. Tourism ministers discuss the impact of the COVID-19 epidemic on the tourism sector and measures to recover the EU tourism sector. The aim is to help Member States gradually remove travel restrictions and allow the reopening of businesses in the tourism sector, with all the necessary health precautions.

June 30 - The Council agrees to start removing travel restrictions for residents from certain third countries. From 1 July 2020, Member States should start removing travel restrictions at the external borders for third-country residents included in the recommendation list. This list will be reviewed and, if necessary, updated every two weeks.

July 30, August 7, October 22, December 17, January 28 (2021) - the Council reviews the list of third countries

To date, the European Commission has granted a conditional authorization for four vaccines against COVID-19, following positive evaluations by the European Medicines Agency:

- The BioNTech-Pfizer vaccine was authorized on December 21, 2020;
- the Moderna vaccine was authorized on January 6, 2021;
- the AstraZeneca vaccine was authorized on January 29, 2021;
- the Janssen vaccine (Johnson & Johnson) was authorized on March 11, 2021.

December 27, 2020 - begins BioNTech-Pfizer vaccination;

February 4, 2021 - begins Moderna vaccination;

February 15, 2021 - started AstraZeneca vaccination.

As a result of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, the global travel and tourism market is predicted to see a loss of 100.8 million jobs worldwide in 2020. The region that is supposed to see the biggest loss from COVID-19 is the Asia Pacific region, losing approximately 63.4 million jobs, while Europe, and implicitly Romania, is forecast to be the second hardest hit with a forecasted employment drop of 13 million [16].

The effects of the pandemic in the tourism and hospitality industry were

automatically reflected on the gross domestic product. Even if the contribution of tourism to GDP in Romania is not very high compared to other countries (Romania ranks 148th out of 160 - table 1, figure 1 [10]), still a value of almost 10 billion euros is not an amount to be overlooked. [6]

Table 1.

**Contribution of travel and tourism to GDP as a share of GDP, %
- Ranks - 160 countries**

Rank	Country	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
1	Macau	76,9	78,8	79,5	82,2	72,5	64	65,7	68,4	72,2	72
2	Maldives	69,8	64,5	67,1	73,9	78,5	71,6	65,4	66,1	66,4	66,1
3	Seychelles	64	65,7	68,4	63,3	61,1	62	62	65,5	67,1	65,8
22	Croatia	20,3	21,7	20,7	22,1	22,7	23,4	24	24,7	24,9	25,1
28	Greece	15,6	16	15,7	17,4	18,2	19,2	19,1	20	20,6	21,2
66	Bulgaria	11	10,8	10,4	11,5	11,6	10,8	11,2	11,5	11,7	11,6
85	France	9,6	9,1	9,8	9,1	9,6	9,5	9,3	9,4	9,5	9,6
102	Hungary	8,2	8,1	8	6,9	7,5	7,9	8	8,3	8,5	8,5
148	Romania	5	5	5,1	4,9	5,3	5,4	5,2	5,4	5,3	5,3

Source: own processing after [6,10,17]

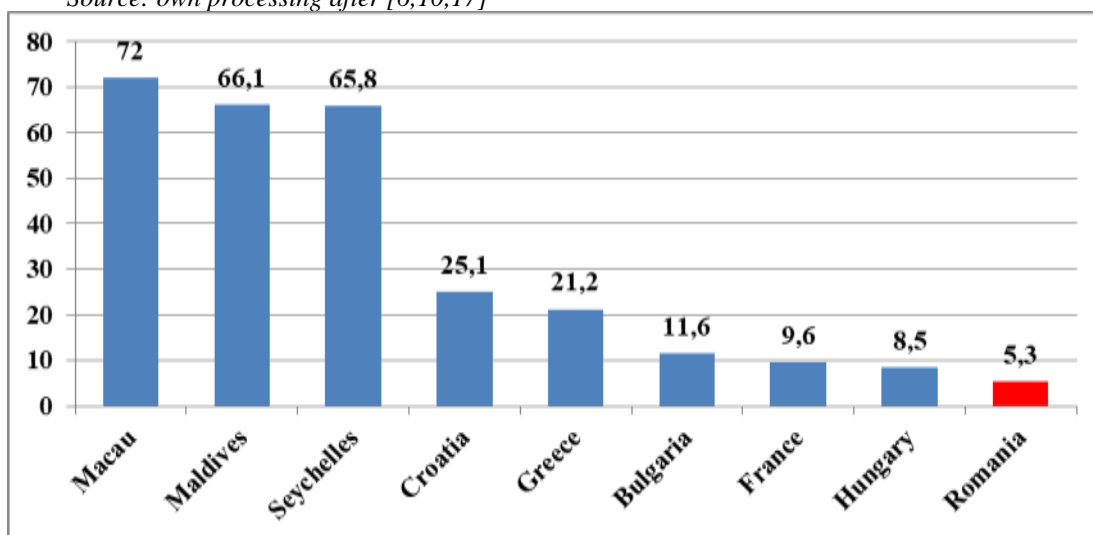


Figure 1. Contribution of travel and tourism to GDP as a share of GDP, 2019, %

Source: own processing after [6,10,17]

The effects of the pandemic on Romanian tourism can be seen in the statistics: arrivals registered in the tourist reception structures decreased by 44.4% in July 2020 compared to July 2019 [12].

Considering that the peak months in terms of tourism are January and August, comparing the structure of the number of tourists, Romanian and foreign, in recent years, there was a significant decrease, both in August 2020 and in January 2021. Thus, if among Romanian tourists the decrease was about 25% (in August 2020), respectively almost 36% (in January 2021), in terms of foreign tourists the decrease was much higher, reaching 88.5%, respectively 83.91%, compared to previous years (Table 2).

Table 2.
The structure of the number of Romanian and foreign tourists from the peak months,
comparison 2021, 2020, 2019, 2018, %

	Jan 2019/2018	Aug 2019/2018	Jan 2020/2019	Aug 2020/2019	Jan 2021/2020
Total	108,2	102,2	107,0	68,2	56,1
Romanians	111,8	103,0	109,4	75,9	64,6
Foreigners	95,3	96,4	97,0	11,5	16,1

Source: own processing after [3,7-9]

These decreases (figure 2) started right from the beginning of the pandemic in China (December 2019), intensified with its onset in Romania (end of February 2020) and had the highest value, as expected, during the state of emergency (March 16 - May 14, 2020).

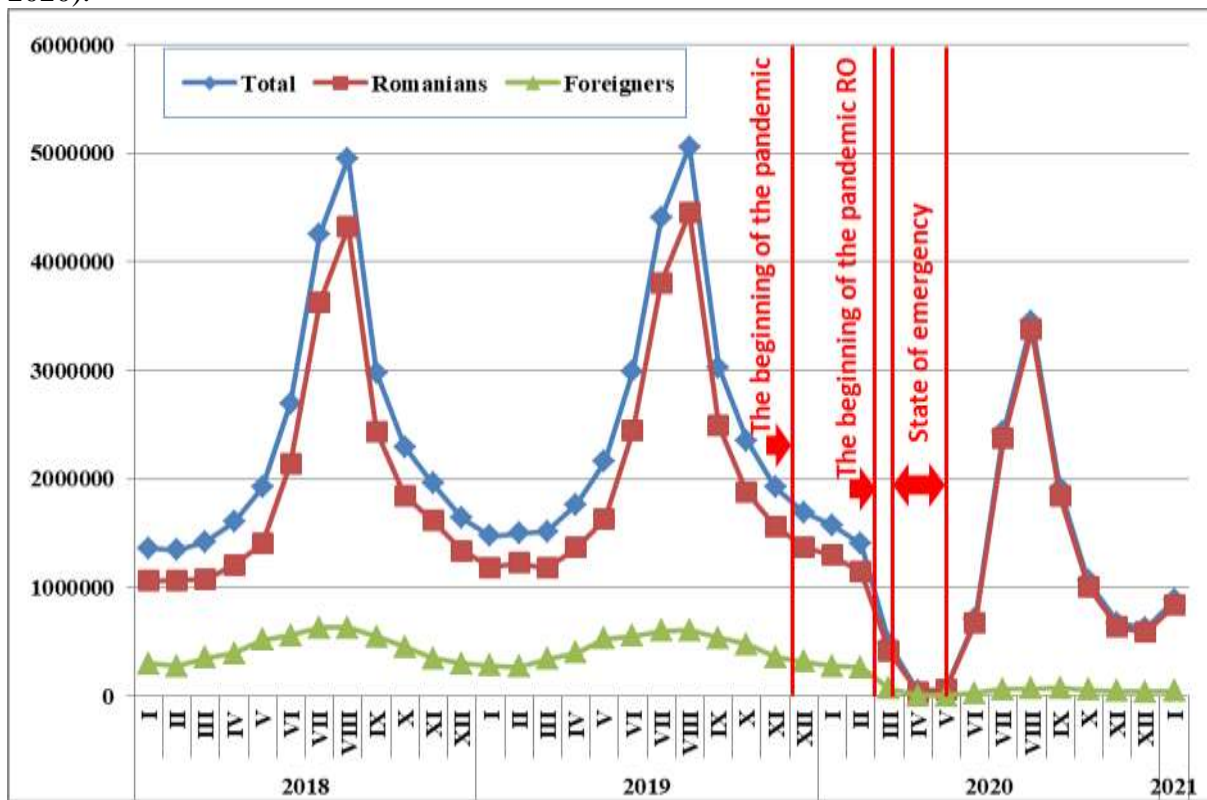


Figure 2. Overnight stays in tourist reception structures per months, 2018-2021,
number

Source: own processing after [3,4,7-9]

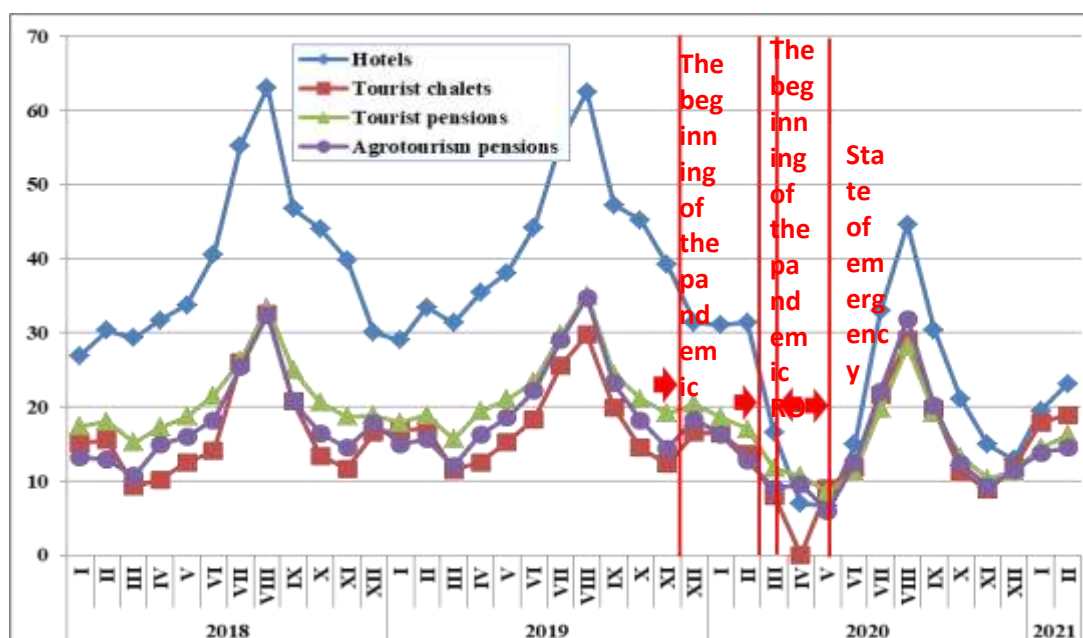


Figure 3. The index of net use of the tourist accommodation structures per month, 2018-2021, %

Source: own processing after [3,7-9]

After the emergency period, the number of tourists decreased, during the summer, from 4.45 million to 3.37 million, in the case of Romanian tourists, and from 607 thousand to a dramatic 70 thousand, in the case of foreign tourists (figure 2). For the winter period, in 2020 there was no significant decrease in the number of tourists, Romanian or foreign, the differences being insignificant. The winter of 2021, on the other hand, has maintained the declining pattern of the summer of 2020, especially among foreign tourists. If for the Romanians the decrease was a little over 35%, for the foreigners the decrease was almost 84%.

Ignoring the period of emergency, when the net occupancy rate of the tourist reception structures was below 10%, in the rest of the interval, the locations that offered many accommodation and service places, such as hotels, suffered the most (figure 3). They have failed to exceed 50% of tourist occupancy rate in any period of 2020. The same cannot be said of those who serve fewer tourists at a time, such as pensions (tourist or agrotourist), and who have managed to maintain an acceptable level of net use with tourists in 2020, compared to previous years.

CONCLUSIONS

Taking into account the above, we can say that tourism and the hospitality industry in Romania has suffered, as expected, a dramatic decline, especially in the summer months of 2020. This decline, although not as large, has been preserved to this day.

The biggest decrease in the number of tourists was among foreigners (overnight stays), the restrictions on movement between states "working" fully. After the emergency, there was a revival of tourism, thanks to Romanians, but, as presented, it failed to reach the values of previous years, the decrease being about 1 million tourists.

Regarding the index of net use of the tourist accommodation structures, the largest decrease was in hotels, from 63 to 44%, tourist and agritourism pensions, having much smaller decreases, most likely due to smaller congestion than in hotels.

Resolving this situation is not an easy task, especially since some countries have already begun to open their borders and facilities to tourists. For this reason, it is necessary

for the government to introduce, as soon as possible, on the one hand facilities to speed up the vaccination campaign and, on the other hand, which will provide, in conditions of health security, access to more tourists to services. It must also be taken into account measures for supporting the tourism workforce during the alert and quarantine of localities by granting subsidized working capital loans and / or investment loans for SMEs and tourism companies affected by COVID-19, for reduction of local taxes, proportional to the period in which the tourist units were closed and / or postponement without penalties until after the end of the pandemic state and for the partial or full support, by the state, of the additional costs generated by the additional hygienic-sanitary measures that will have to be taken, in order not to affect the costs and implicitly the final prices.

These measures would automatically lead to the retain of the employees and to support the businesses in order to avoid bankruptcy, at the possibility to continue investments in the field, to ensure the health of employees at work and ensure that tourists will benefit from safe and hygienic services.

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