

TOURISM INDUSTRY IN EUROPE AND ROMANIA OVER THE LAST FEW YEARS-TRENDS, CHALLENGES, AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Abstract: *Tourism is in the top of the most significant industries worldwide, contributing significantly to the economic growth and development of many countries. Europe is among the top tourist destinations in the world, attracting millions of visitors each year. This paper aims to provide an overview of the tourism industry in Europe compared with the one from Romania over the last few years, including trends, challenges, and opportunities. Romania has a wide variety of natural and cultural tourist attractions that attract tourists from all over the world, but Romanian tourism still has many challenges to address. One of the challenges was the COVID-19 pandemic, which had a significant impact on tourism in Romania, with many hotels and restaurants closed, or operating at reduced capacity due to travel restrictions and a drop in the number of tourists, to which other European countries have adapted and recovered much faster.*

Key words: *tourism industry, Europe, Romania, trends*

INTRODUCTION

Analyzing what happened in the last 10 years, it could be observed that Romania has become one of the favorite touristic destination. In the last year taken into account, over 60% of foreign tourists are coming from EU countries, Romania competing with countries with countries considered consecrated holiday destinations, such as Bulgaria, Greece, Italy or Spain [1]. This influx of tourists it is owed to the fact that Romania it can be a year-round destination, in summer, mainly with the resorts on the Black Sea (from Mangalia to Mamaia) and continuing with the Danube Delta [8], and in winter, with the ski resorts from the Southern Carpathians and the south of the Eastern Carpathians [7]. However, compared to other countries in Europe, we do not manage to attract more tourists than these, nor to bring in more income.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The work is based on numerous statistical data, taken from databases in Romania and abroad, for the best approximation to reality. These data were studied and processed, respectively added with various other opinions and discussions in the field. The accumulation of all the above allowed us to form an image of the situation regarding European and Romanian tourism, respectively to elaborate the presented conclusions.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Trends in European Tourism:

Over the last few years, the tourism industry in Europe has undergone several significant changes, driven by new technology, consumer behavior, and global events. One of the significant trends is the growing popularity of sustainable tourism, which focuses on reducing the negative impact of tourism on the environment and local communities. This trend has led to the rise of eco-tourism, where visitors choose destinations and activities that have a minimal environmental impact.

Another trend is the growing interest in cultural and heritage tourism. Visitors are increasingly seeking authentic cultural experiences, such as visiting historic sites,

museums, and festivals. This trend has resulted in a surge in the number of tourists visiting cultural destinations in Europe.

The use of technology has also transformed the tourism industry, with more tourists using smartphones and mobile apps to plan and book their trips. Social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook have also become essential marketing tools for tourism businesses.

Challenges Facing the European Tourism Industry:

Despite the positive trends, the European tourism industry faces several challenges. One of the significant challenges is overtourism, which occurs when the number of tourists exceeds the capacity of the local infrastructure and environment. Overtourism can lead to overcrowding, environmental degradation, and social and cultural impacts.

Another challenge is the impact of global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has led to the closure of borders, travel restrictions, and a sharp decline in tourist arrivals. The tourism industry has been severely affected, with many businesses facing bankruptcy and job losses.

Opportunities for the European Tourism Industry:

Despite the challenges, the European tourism industry has several opportunities for growth and development. One of the significant opportunities is the rise of digital tourism, which allows visitors to explore destinations virtually through 360-degree videos, virtual reality, and augmented reality [16]. This technology can provide a unique and immersive experience for visitors, even if they cannot physically travel to a destination.

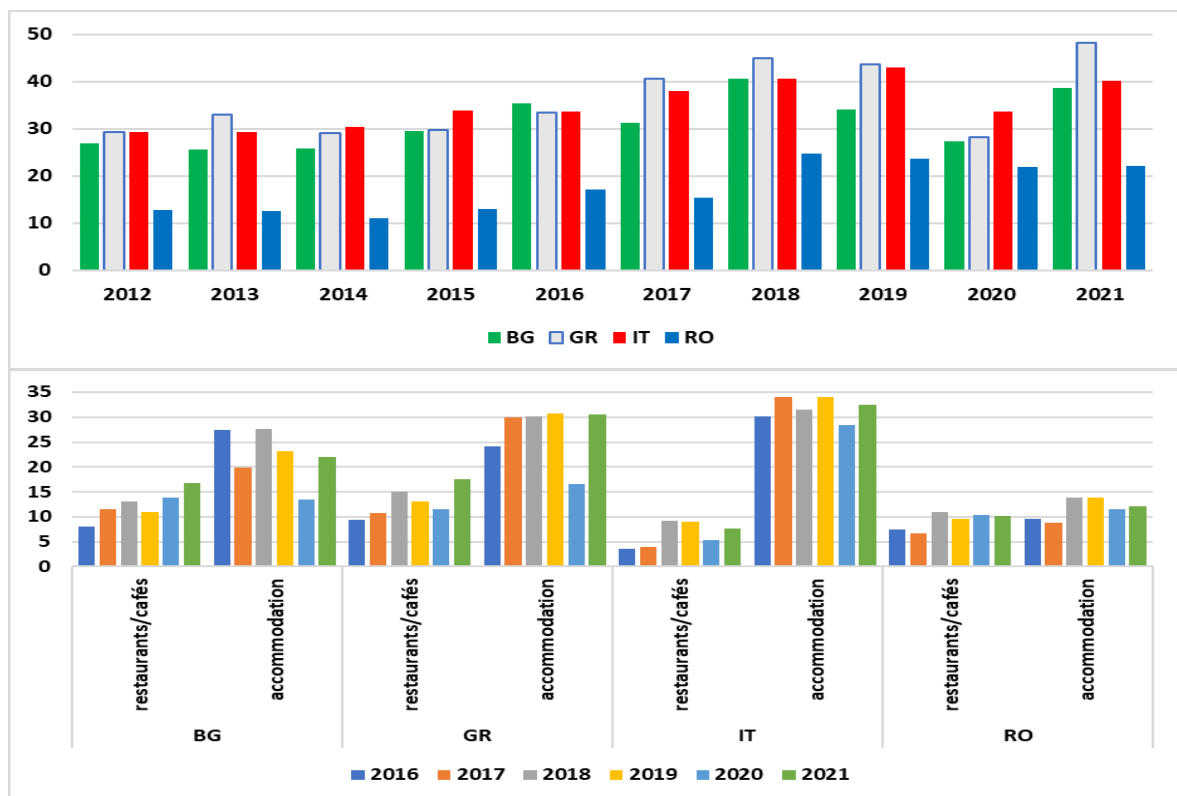


Figure 1. Expenditure by country of the main destination of the trip (euro)

Source: author's calculations after [4, 5, 9, 10, 11]

Another opportunity is the growing demand for wellness and health tourism, where visitors seek destinations that offer activities and facilities that promote well-being and relaxation. Europe has several destinations that offer wellness tourism, such as thermal baths, yoga retreats, and spa resorts.

If we make a brief comparison between the amounts spent by tourists, daily, on accommodation and food, in Romania and three of the countries quite visited by Romanians, the situation is according to the graphs in the figure 1.

As can be seen in the graphs presented, the amounts spent by tourists in Romania, except for 2020 (pandemic year), are less than half of those spent in the other three countries. Even compared to the neighboring country, Bulgaria, we barely reach half, reaching the same level, or even exceeding in certain years (2012, 2016, 2018 and 2021), the amounts spent by tourists in Italy or Greece. All this was presented, especially since the prices, as a whole, practiced in our country are lower than in the other three countries, both in terms of accommodation and in terms of consumption in restaurants or bars, as shown in the second graph.

If we refer to the percentage of net occupancy of beds in hotels and other accommodation facilities, compared to other countries in Europe, known as tourist destinations, in half of the months of a year, Romania is in last place, having an average occupancy of only 32% (in 2022). In the winter months (December and January), we manage to surpass Croatia (but not by much) and Greece (which is not a main winter tourist destination). The summer months, the favorite vacation period of many, cannot even be discussed, being surpassed by all other countries, in many cases even twice as much. For example, if in August we manage to occupy a little over 42% of the beds, Croatia, Greece and Austria exceed 80%, and the others 70% (figure 2). It is not normal, taking into account that Romania can be a tourist destination throughout the year, not only in the summer and winter months.

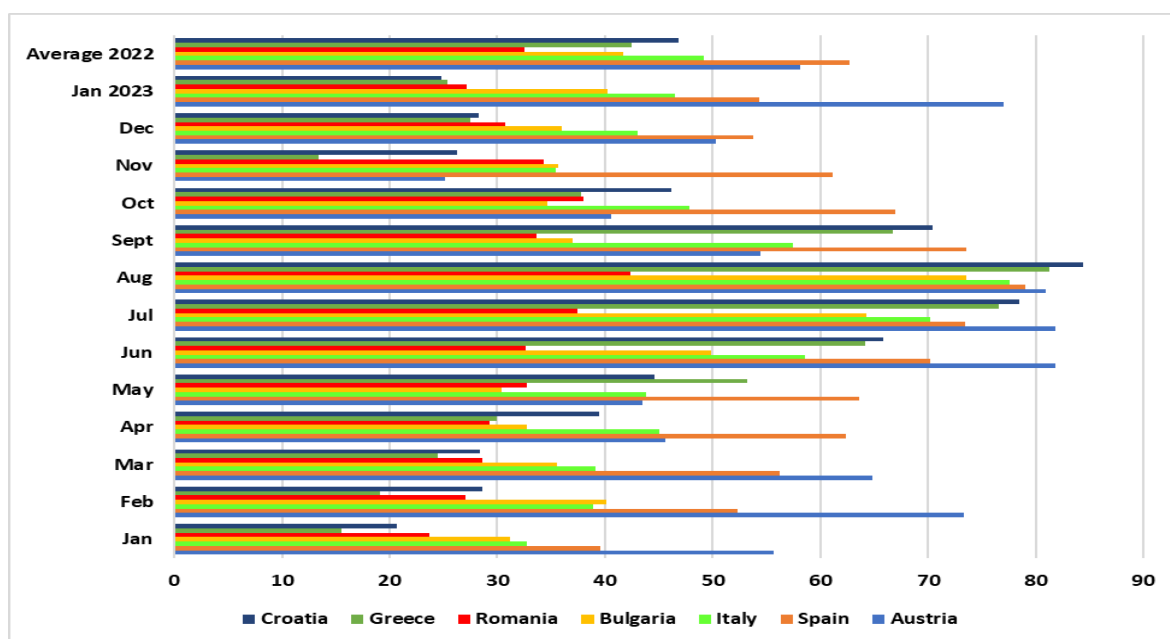


Figure 2. Net occupancy rate of bed-places and bedrooms in hotels and similar accommodation, monthly data, 2022-January 2023, %

Source: author's calculations after [4, 5, 9, 10, 11]

The previously presented data are automatically reflected on the share of tourism in the country's gross domestic product. Thus, even if at the global or European level, in 2020 and 2021 (pandemic years), we are above average, we cannot say the same if we compare ourselves to the other countries considered. Even if we exclude from the comparison countries such as Croatia, Spain or Greece, it was not expected that Hungary, a country that has neither mountains nor seas, will participate with more than double in the GDP than Romania (figure 3).

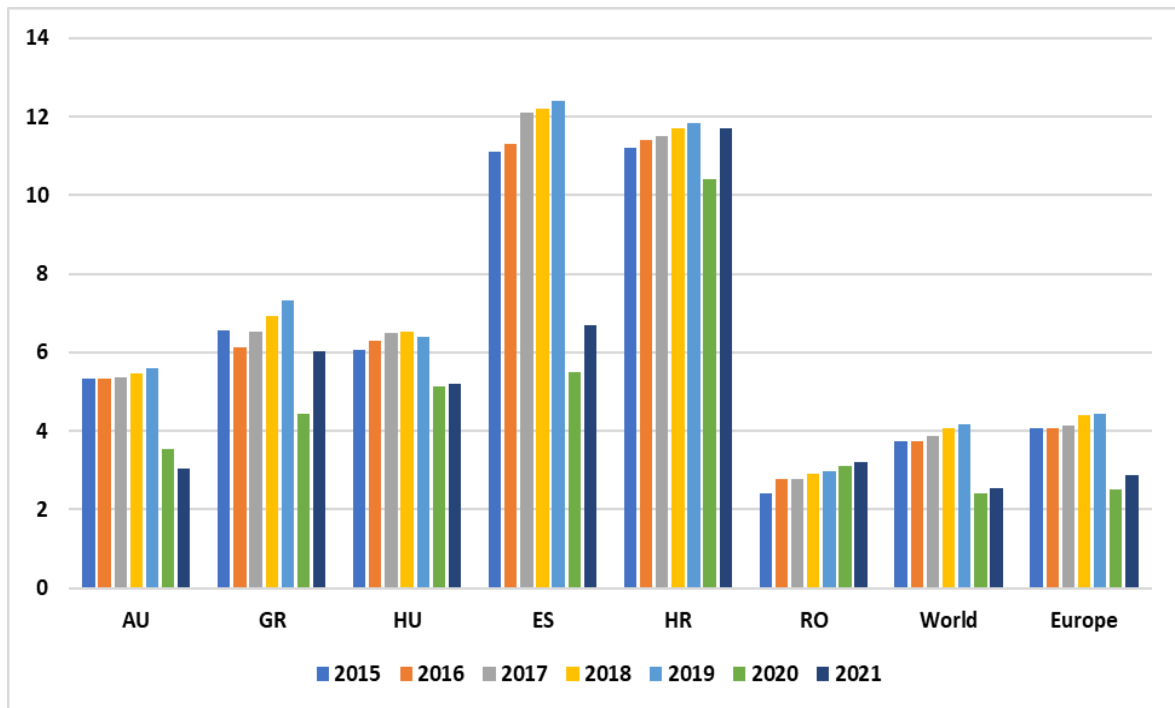


Figure 3. Tourism direct GDP as a proportion of total GDP (%)

Source: author's calculations after [3, 6, 15, 17]

One of the problems is related to the road infrastructure. According to statistical data, the network of modernized roads out of total roads in Romania was just over 47% in 2021, an increase of only 15% compared to 2011. However, even if it is not a significant increase, it is good that the biggest increase it is on the county and municipal roads, which are the main access roads to the picturesque areas of Romania. In most cases, in order to increase visitor numbers, these investments must be associated with road infrastructure arrangements for easy access to locations (in vain, the location offers everything we need if we cannot get there) [2]. If the current growth trend is maintained, Romania needs another 5 years to pass 50% of modernized roads out of total roads (figure 4), and during this period many opportunities can be lost.

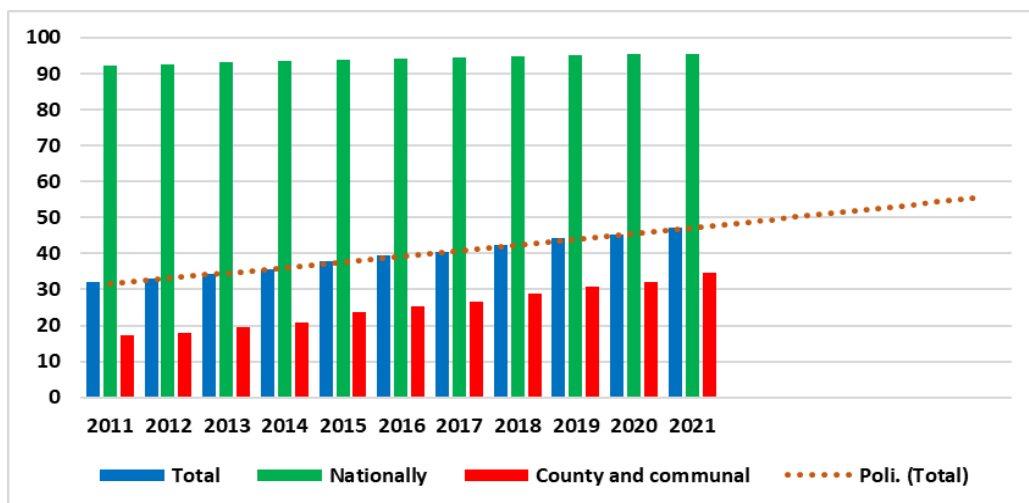


Figure 4. Share of modernized roads in the total road network

Source: author's calculations after [12, 13]

CONCLUSIONS

The whole European tourism industry has experienced significant changes over the last few years, driven by new technology, consumer behavior, and global events, facing several challenges, including overtourism and the impact of global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the industry also has several opportunities for growth and development, such as digital tourism and wellness tourism. By addressing the challenges and leveraging the opportunities, the European tourism industry can continue to thrive and contribute to the economic growth and development of the region.

Tourism in Romania has a wide variety of attractions, from medieval monasteries and castles to impressive natural landscapes, old towns and sandy beaches. Romania has a rich cultural and historical heritage and is one of the most picturesque countries in Eastern Europe. One of the most popular tourist attractions in Romania is the Danube Delta, which is the largest and best preserved in Europe, where tourists can see a wide variety of plants and animals, including rare birds and water turtles. The Danube Delta is also an ideal destination for fishing, canoeing, kayaking or boat trips.

Another major attraction is Transylvania, which is known for its medieval castles, mountain landscapes and old towns. Bran Castle, which served as the inspiration for Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula*, is a popular attraction in the region. Other important castles include Corvinilor Castle in Hunedoara and Peleş Castle in Sinaia.

Bucharest, the capital of Romania, is also a popular tourist destination. The city is known for its Belle Époque architecture, its museums, including the National Art Museum of Romania and the Village Museum which showcases Romania's rural traditions. Bucharest also has a vibrant nightlife and numerous restaurants, bars and clubs. Romania also has a wide variety of spa and ski resorts, offering a wide range of activities including skiing, snowboarding, snowmobiling, paragliding and hiking.

In addition, Romania has a wide variety of festivals and cultural events, including the International Film Festival, Electric Castle and Untold in Cluj-Napoca, the Sighisoara Festival, East European Comic Con (2023) in Bucharest, Flight Festival and Jazzx from Timișoara (2022 European Cultural Capital), Neversea from Constanța, as well as countless Street food festivals [14]. These events are a unique opportunity to experience Romanian culture and traditions.

Despite the growth, tourism in Romania faces some problems and still has challenges to address. These include limited or underdeveloped tourism infrastructure in certain regions which reduced accessibility to some tourist attractions, as well as a need to improve tourism services to attract high-quality tourists. Romania also has to deal with environmental issues such as pollution and deforestation, which can affect the country's natural tourist attractions.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also had a significant impact on tourism in Romania, with many hotels and restaurants closed or operating at reduced capacity due to travel restrictions and a drop in tourist numbers.

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