

## COVID-19 IMPACT ON EUROPEAN TOURISM- CASE STUDY

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***Abstract:** European tourism has experienced sustained development over time, becoming one of the most important sectors of the European economy. The need to protect citizens by introducing restrictive measures has led to a huge impact on the tourism sector across Europe. In this paper we have analysed tourism in terms of the population participating in the tourist activity, the type of trips, the number of overnight stays as well as country of origin to outline a picture of tourism in 2021, compared to the period before the pandemic.*

**Key words:** *tourism, activity, revival, Europe*

### INTRODUCTION

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, tourism became one of the important sectors of the European economy. [2,5,9] In many countries within the European Union, tourism makes an important contribution to the formation of GDP (gross domestic product) by attracting labor and facilitating the generation of income. [4,7,8] Travel restrictions imposed in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic have decimated the tourism sector, a major player in the EU economy. [10,12,14] Europe accounts for half of the world's tourist destinations, and the situation has been particularly difficult for tourism-dependent countries such as Spain, Italy, France and Greece. [6,14] Tourism is at the heart of a huge business ecosystem that contributes substantially to prosperity and job creation in all EU member states. [1,3] The COVID-19 epidemic has put the European Union's tourism industry under unprecedented pressure. [11,13] It led to the suspension of most domestic and international travel, causing a significant reduction in revenue and creating liquidity problems for all tourism operators. Both travelers and businesses face an uncertain outlook.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

The article is based on a thorough examination of documents issued by European institutions regarding the evolution of the tourism sector during the COVID-19 pandemic. Secondary data used in this descriptive research was collected from various documents available online on the official websites of these institutions. The primary research methods employed were observation and data analysis. These documents provided valuable insights into how the pandemic influenced tourism activities, including the implementation of flight bans, accommodation closures, and travel restrictions across different European Union (EU) countries. The use of secondary data enabled the researchers to gather comprehensive information on the tourism industry's response to the pandemic, highlighting the disparities in how different EU countries managed their tourism sectors. This approach also allowed for a detailed examination of the recovery patterns observed in 2021, including the increase in short trips, the prominence of domestic tourism in certain countries, and the overall resilience of the sector.

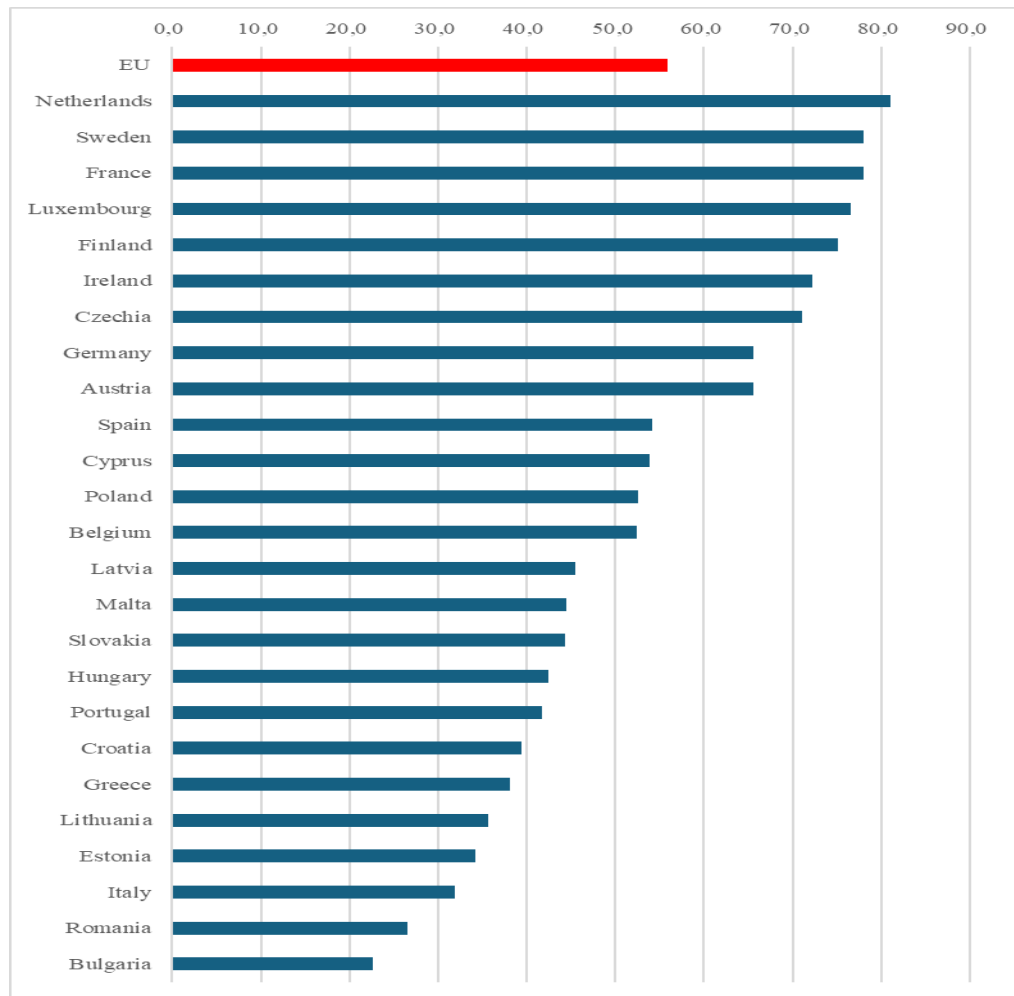
## RESEARCH RESULTS

Due to the impact of the pandemic and hence the health, social and economic implications, tourism was one of the most affected sectors, due to flight bans, the closure of accommodation units and travel restrictions established in all European states. At the level of the European Union, it is estimated that 56% of the population over 15 participated in tourism activities for personal purposes in 2021 despite all the restrictions. In other words, they took at least one personal trip during 2021.

As can be seen from figure 1, there were very large differences among the states, the participation rate varying from 22.7% in the case of Bulgaria and up to 81% in the case of the Netherlands.

For the Union as a whole, the participation rate of 56% was higher than the value recorded in 2020, the first year affected by the pandemic (52%) but remains low compared to the values before the pandemic (in 2019 it was 65% ).

Residents aged 15 or over in European Union states made more than 879 million trips in 2021, for personal or business purposes. The number of trips increased by 23% compared to the value recorded in the previous year, but is still significantly low compared to the level reached in 2019, of 1.1 billion stays.



**Figure 1. Share of the population participating in tourism in 2021 (share of the population over 15 years old)**

Source: [www.eurostat.eu](http://www.eurostat.eu), 2024

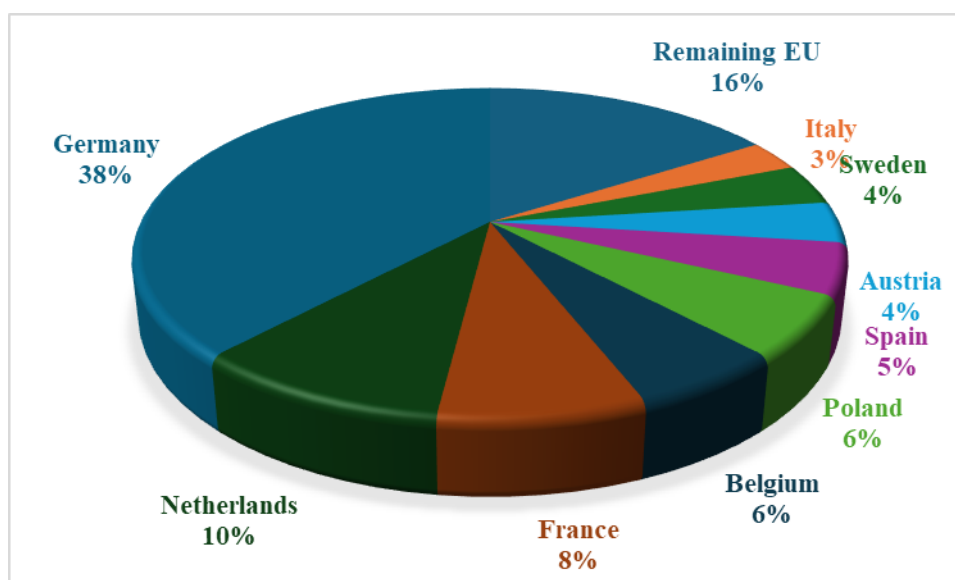
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At the level of the Union, the largest share was held by short trips, i.e. those with a duration of 1-3 nights, with a percentage of 59% (Table 1).

For Latvia, their share was the highest recorded at the EU level, with 77% short trips, followed by Estonia with 76% of the total trips as being of short duration. At the opposite pole is Greece, with only 27% short trips of the total trips made by Greek tourists. Greece, however, ranks first in terms of the share of long journeys in total journeys, with 73%. French citizens are the ones who made the most trips in 2021, more than 200 million, which represents about a quarter of the total trips of European citizens in the year under review. In second place are German citizens with approximately 178 million. More than 113 million trips were also made by Spanish citizens. Citizens from the rest of the European states made fewer trips, with the trips made by German, French and Spanish citizens together representing 55.98% of the total trips. The fewest trips were made by residents of Malta, only 672 thousand trips, which is only 0.07% of the total trips.

In 2021, of all trips made by Luxembourg residents, 92.3% were external trips, outside the country of residence. In second place were the residents of Belgium with 57.4% of the trips made abroad.

However, less than one in ten trips made by residents of our country (5.2%), by those from Spain (5.3%), Finland (5.7%), Portugal (5.9%), Bulgaria (6.0%), France (6.3%) and Greece (7.3%) were trips abroad. Based on these figures, it can be said that the number of trips seems to be influenced by the size of the country and the geographical position, highlighting the tendency for residents of smaller and more northern countries to show a propensity for traveling abroad. Residents of Latvia made 70.4% of trips within the country, being short-term trips.



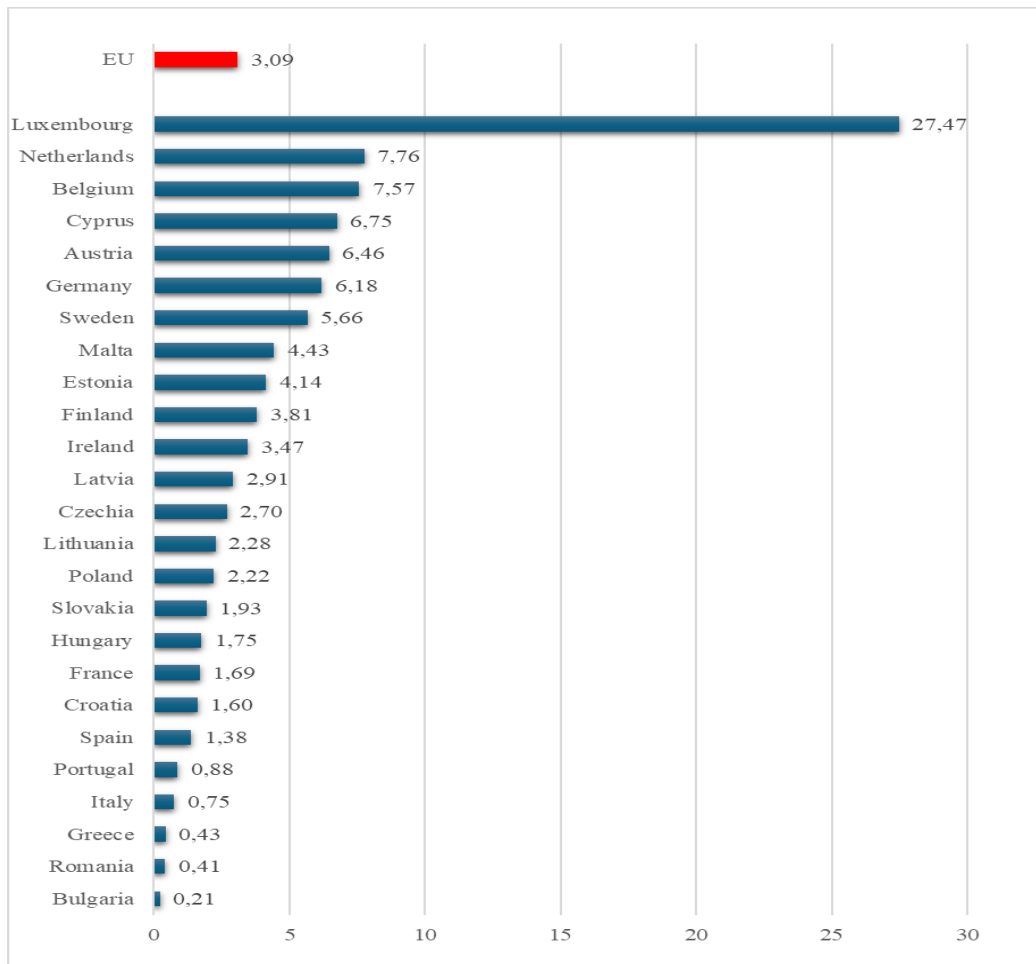
**Figure 2. Share of overnight stays in external trips by European tourists, by country of residence, 2021**

Source: [www.eurostat.eu](http://www.eurostat.eu), 2024

At the opposite pole, there are those from Luxembourg with only 6.1% of trips falling into the category of short-term domestic trips. Greek residents recorded the highest share of long-term domestic trips, 67.8%, in contrast to those in Luxembourg with only

1.6% of all long-term domestic trips. In 2021, Romanians made approximately 95% of trips within the country, as follows: 60.5% short duration (1-3 nights) and 34.3% long duration (4 or more nights). Of the total number of trips made by Romanian tourists, only 26.6% were made for personal purposes. Among Dutch tourists, 81% of trips made by people aged 15 and over were made for personal purposes. Bulgarian tourists registered the lowest percentage if we compare with the rest of the states for trips for personal purposes, only 22.7% of the total trips.

Residents of Germany and the Netherlands accounted for approximately half of the total number of overnight stays abroad among residents of the European Union in 2021. Residents of European Union states made approximately 1.2 billion foreign overnight stays as part of tourist trips in 2021. German tourists have achieved 443 million overnight stays outside Germany, while Dutch tourists only 115 million external overnight stays. Together they accounted for 47.5% of the total number of overnight stays made by European tourists.



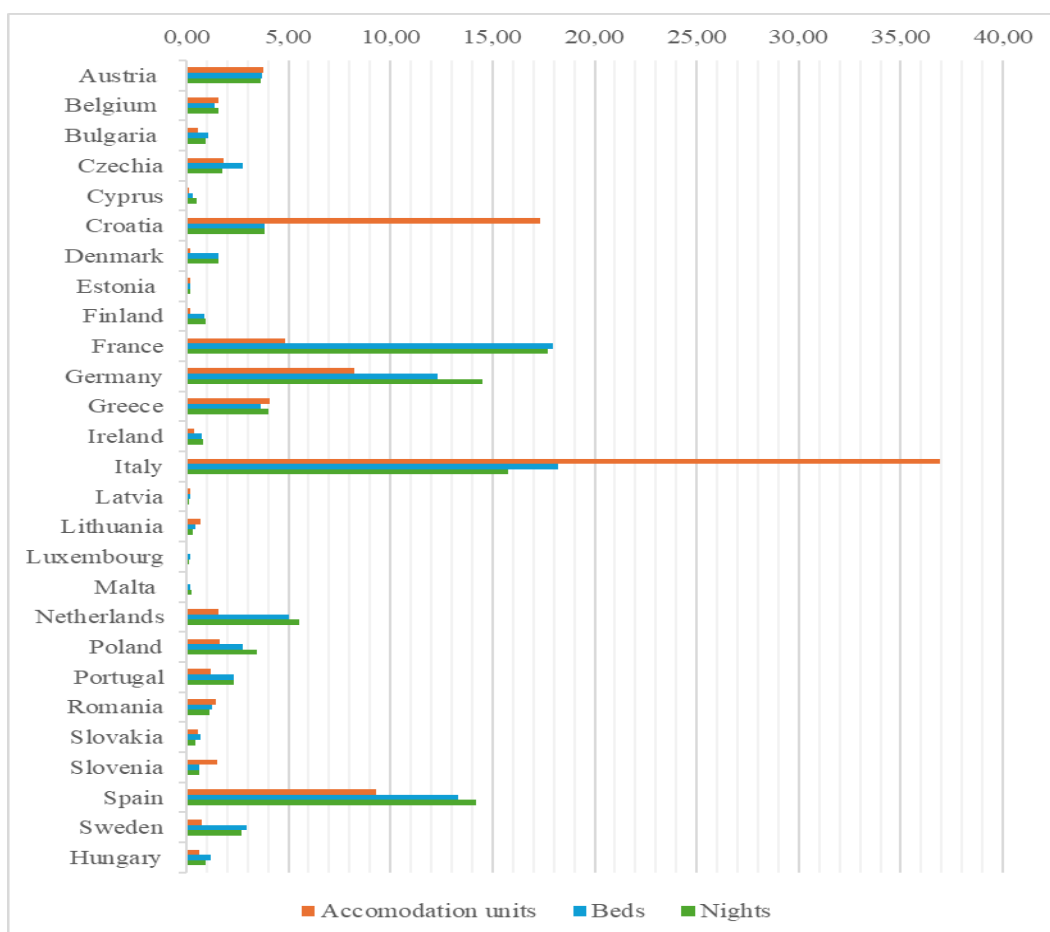
**Figure 3. Country of origin for foreign stays  
(average number of nights spent abroad by people over 15)**

Source: [www.eurostat.eu](http://www.eurostat.eu), 2024

If we refer to the size of a country in terms of population, it should be emphasized that Luxembourg is the state whose residents recorded the highest number of overnight stays abroad per inhabitant (an average of 27 overnight stays abroad in 2021). After Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Belgium follow, both with eight overnight stays per inhabitant. At the bottom of the ranking are the residents of Bulgaria, Romania, Greece,

Italy and Portugal who, on average, recorded less than one overnight stay abroad in 2021, as can be seen from Figure 3. The average recorded at the level of the European Union in terms of the average number of nights spent abroad by people over 15 years old was 3.1 in 2021. Above this average are Ireland, Finland, Estonia, Malta, Sweden, Germany, Austria, Cyprus, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg, as previously mentioned. We must point out that data were not available for all the member states of the European Union, as can be seen from the figure, Denmark and Slovenia are not included.

At the level of the European Union in 2021, 597 thousand accommodation establishments operated, which together provided 28.1 million accommodation places, as can be seen from table 3.3. Italy has the most accommodation establishments, 220,457, followed by Croatia with 103,315. The fewest accommodation units are in Malta and Luxembourg, 268 units and 404 units respectively.



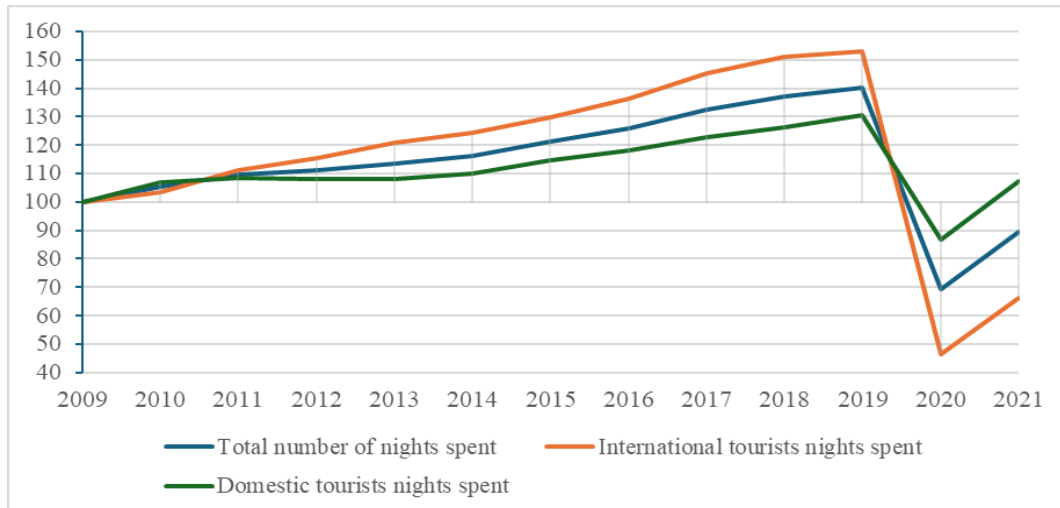
**Figure 4. Share of overnight stays, accommodation places and accommodation units in the total registered at the level of the European Union, 2021**

Source: [www.eurostat.eu](http://www.eurostat.eu), 2024

Italy and France are the countries with the largest accommodation capacity in the European Union, the accommodation places in the two states amount to approximately 36.2% of the total accommodation places (Figure 4). In each of the aforementioned states, the number of accommodation places exceeds 5 million, followed by Spain with approximately 3.8 million and Germany with approximately 3.5 million accommodation places.

Croatia, although in 2021 it had more than 100 thousand accommodation establishments, which offered more than 1 million places to stay, recorded only 70.2

million overnight stays. The situation of accommodation and overnight stays is also appropriate in the case of Greece. France and Italy each exceeded the percentage of 15% of overnight stays, followed by Germany and Spain, with approximately 14%. These four states together recorded approximately 60% of the total overnight stays registered at the level of the European Union. The Netherlands exceeded the 5 percent threshold in terms of the number of overnight stays, the rest of the states being below this threshold.



**Figure 5. Evolution of overnight stays in accommodation units in the EU, 2009-2021 (index 2009=100)**

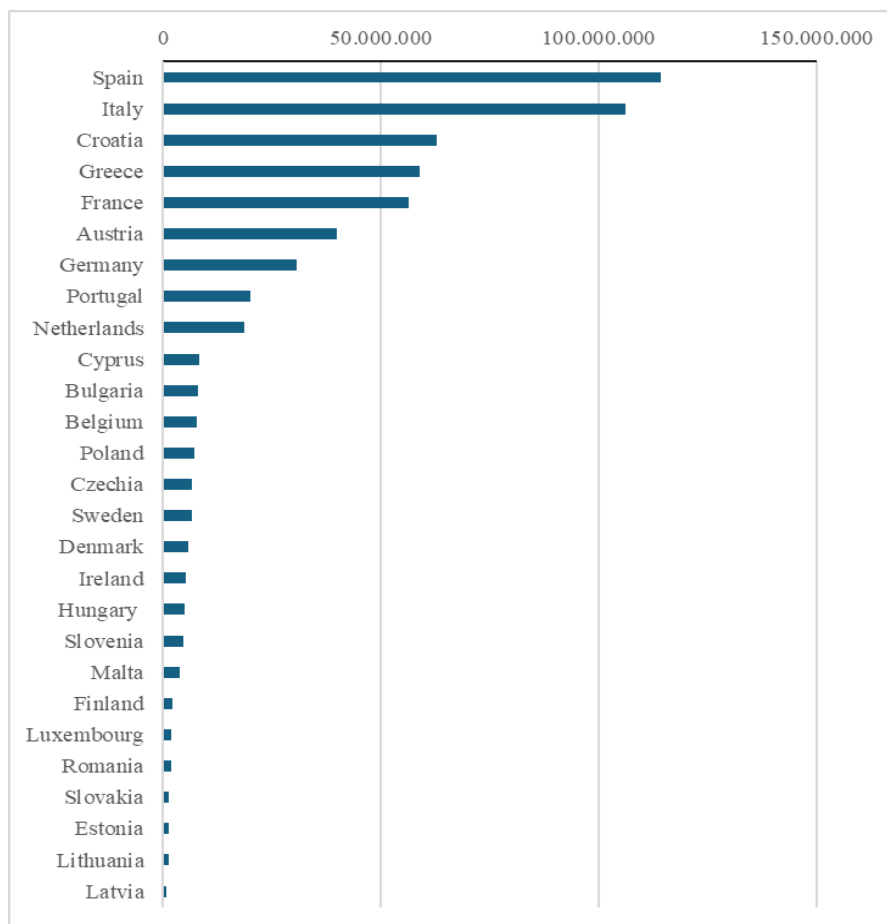
Source: [www.eurostat.eu](http://www.eurostat.eu), 2024

In the period 2009-2019, the number of overnight stays at the level of the European Union had an upward trend, as can be seen from Figure 5. If we analyze this indicator in terms of the origin of the tourists, we will be able to distinguish the overnight stays of domestic tourists from those of foreign tourists. Until mid-2010, the number of domestic tourist overnights grew at a more sustained rate than foreign tourist overnights.

After this moment and until the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, the number of overnight stays increased by approximately 40% compared to the level of 2019. Thus, in 2019, the number of overnight stays by foreign tourists reached the value of 152.9% compared to the value considered for the year 2009. The number of overnight stays by domestic tourists increased, reaching the threshold of 130.4% compared to the initial value.

The Covid-19 pandemic has led the authorities to impose travel restrictions, a fact that is also reflected in the evolution of overnight stays. Overnight stays by foreign tourists registered the most drastic decrease, reaching 46% of the value reported for 2009. Domestic tourist activities were not as much impacted by the measures ordered by the authorities as external ones, and thus, the number of overnight stays by domestic tourists decreased at a slower rate than that of overnight stays by foreign tourists. The overnight stays of domestic tourists reached the minimum point of 86.9% of the value recorded in 2009, after the previous year, this value was 130.4%.

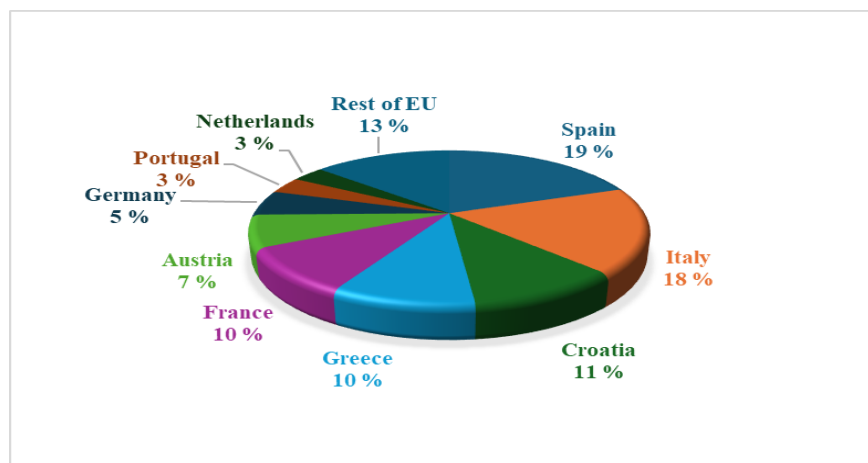
The values recorded in 2021 show clear signs of recovery, reaching two-thirds of the pre-pandemic level, while short-term indicators calculated on the basis of monthly data show that the upward trend will continue for 2022.



**Figure 6. Nights spent of non-resident tourists in accommodation units, million overnight stays, 2021**

Source: *www.eurostat.eu*, 2024

In 2021, Spain led the top tourist destinations, with approximately 114 million overnight stays by non-resident (foreign) tourists. Italy was also very attractive to foreign tourists in 2021, with over 106 million overnight stays by foreign tourists. In third place is Croatia with about 62 million, followed by Greece with 58 million and France with 56 million. Spain, Italy, Croatia, Greece and France accounted for 68% of the total overnight stays of foreign tourists in 2021, as can be seen from Figure 7.



**Figure 7. Share of overnight stays by non-resident tourists by destination, 2021**

Source: *www.eurostat.eu*, 2024

Austria had a share of only 7%, while Germany, Portugal and the Netherlands recorded much lower figures. The rest of the countries of the European Union achieved together a weight of 13%, weight much lower than the value of the states located in the first two places.

Tourist overnight stays, both resident and non-resident, are used to express the intensity of tourism in a given country, by relating the number of overnight stays in accommodation units to the number of residents in that country.

## CONCLUSIONS

The pandemic had a profound impact on European tourism, leading to flight bans, the closure of accommodations, and various travel restrictions, resulting in a sharp decline in travel activities. Despite these hurdles, 56% of the EU population over 15 years old still engaged in tourism for personal purposes in 2021. There was a significant disparity in participation rates among EU countries, from 22.7% in Bulgaria to 81% in the Netherlands, reflecting differing pandemic management and tourism sector strategies. In 2021, EU residents made over 879 million trips, a 23% increase from 2020, yet still below the 1.1 billion trips in 2019. Short trips (1-3 nights) were predominant, making up 59% of all trips. Latvia had the highest proportion of short trips at 77%, while Greece led in long trips at 73%. France, Germany, and Spain were the top three countries in terms of resident trips, together accounting for 55.98% of total EU trips. The fewest trips were made by Maltese residents. Romania had a high rate of domestic trips at 95%, whereas Luxembourg residents made the highest percentage of international trips, with 92.3% abroad. Germany and the Netherlands represented almost half of the total overnight stays abroad by EU residents, with Luxembourg residents having the highest average of overnight stays abroad per inhabitant. On average, EU residents spent 3.1 nights abroad in 2021. The EU had 597,000 accommodation establishments providing 28.1 million accommodation places in 2021. Italy and France had the largest accommodation capacities, representing 36.2% of total EU accommodation places. Despite a significant decline in 2020, the number of overnight stays showed signs of recovery in 2021, reaching two-thirds of pre-pandemic levels. Spain, Italy, Croatia, Greece, and France were the leading destinations for foreign tourists, accounting for 68% of non-resident overnight stays. Overall, the pandemic underscored both the vulnerabilities and resilience of the European tourism sector, highlighting the importance of domestic tourism and the varied impacts across different countries. The sector demonstrated recovery in 2021, with a notable shift towards sustainability and digitalization for future resilience.

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