

THE EFFECTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC OVER THE TOURISM SECTOR: A REVIEW

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Abstract

Tourism is considered as one of the most relevant economic sectors at international level due to the multiple roles it holds, namely: economic, social role, cultural, educational and political. The COVID-19 pandemic caused significant damage globally and has expanded very quickly across the world by affecting almost all the industries due to the restrictions, lockdowns and quarantines. As a result of the pandemic crisis, the tourism sector was severely affected. Therefore, this paper aim is to reflect the negative and positive effects of the pandemic with SARS-COV-2 virus on tourism, and also to highlight the relevance and sensitivity of this sector during crisis events. The study focuses on the negative effects suffered by this sector during the pandemic, but also represents an effective opportunity to reconsider how that tourism interacts with our societies, thus, certain positive effects and strategies that were identified both on short and long- term, in order to try to minimize the shocks created by the pandemic. The economic crisis caused by the SARS-COV-2 virus has also encouraged inclining tourism towards upskilling, increasing the process of digitization of the ecosystem and protecting the environment.

Keywords:

Covid-19, international tourism, pandemic

JEL Classification: Z30, Z32

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic caused significant damage globally and has expanded very quickly across the world by affecting almost all the industries due to the restrictions, lockdowns and quarantines. The coronavirus disease was first identified in December 2019 in Wuhan, China and has rapidly expanded across worldwide, determining the World Health Organization to declare COVID-19 as a pandemic on March 11, 2020. The daily cases and number of deaths increased rapidly. Movement restrictions and travel bans were implemented across the world in order to stop spreading the pandemic. Thus, a lot of countries closed their borders to the tourists and the global economy suffered due to quarantines, travel restrictions, and social distancing. The United Nations World Tourism Organization reported 100% travel restrictions on global destinations in 2020. As a result, the tourism sector suffered more than other industries and it was affected on a large scale.

The tourism sector was one of the most affected sectors in the economy by the COVID-19 pandemic (Shretta, 2020). The tourism sector was affected on a large scale, due to the economic crises.

The main objective of this study is to reflect the negative and positive effects of the pandemic with SARS-COV-2 virus on tourism, and also to highlight the relevance and sensitivity of this sector during crisis events. The study focuses on the negative effects suffered by this sector during the pandemic, but also represents an effective opportunity to reconsider how that tourism interacts with our societies, thus, certain positive effects and strategies that were identified both on short and long- term, in order to try to minimize the shocks created by the pandemic. The study also concentrates on the number of international arrivals, and tourism revenues registered before the pandemic and during it. Therefore, the study focuses on analyzing both the positive and negative effects of the pandemic and the impact of Covid-19 on the tourism sector.

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2. Literature review

Research on the impact of COVID-19 on the global tourism industry are present in the existing literature. Also, many reports by the World Travel and Tourism Council and World Organization of Tourism have identified the impact of COVID-19 on the tourism sector.

Tourism is considered as one of the most relevant economic sectors at international level due to the multiple roles it holds, namely: economic, social role, cultural, educational and political.

During the 20th century, there were three pandemics recorded (Gössling et al., 2020): the ‘Spanish’ flu of 1918-1919, the ‘Asian’ flu of 1957 and the ‘Hong Kong’ flu of 1968”. Regarding the number of pandemics, in the 21st century there were five recorded: SARS (2002), bird flu (2009), MERS (2012), Ebola (2013-2014) and SARS-CoV-2, also known as Covid-19 (2019). The effects of the Covid-19 on the tourism sector is unprecedented, as it affected more than the previous crises (Gössling et al., 2020).

Besides Gössling et al. (2020), Chinazzi, Davis et al. (2020), Folinas and Metaxes (2020), Bakar and Rosbi (2020) researched on the effects of the pandemic on economy, tourism industry and global changes.

The COVID-19 caused rapid economic disruptions affecting both demand and supply in almost every sector of the economy (El-Erian, 2020). Shretta (2020) considered that the travel and tourism sector is more likely to get influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic, as the sector is affected by all the restrictions imposed by the government during pandemic (travel restrictions and bans, airports shutting down, and passenger cancellations). Ozili & Arun (2020) observed in their article that the loss registered globally by the tourism sector was of over US\$ 820 billion in revenue due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ahikul et al. (2020) revealed that the pandemic seriously also affected the Chinese tourism industry, something that was also supported by Al-Jazeera (2020). Besides China, the United States were affected by the rapid spread of Covid-19 (Farzanegan et al., 2020). The attractive touristic destinations, like France, Italy and Spain had also suffered from the pandemic, as the virus had an impact over the global tourism (Estrada et al., 2020). Other articles, Hoque, Shikha et al. (2020); Dinarto, Wanto et al. (2020) and Deb and Nafi (2020), researched the impact of Covid-19 on Indonesia and Bangladesh.

The World Travel and Tourism Council mentioned that the virus would have severe effects on the global tourism industry by reducing travel in 2020 and generating losses of jobs. The consequences of the pandemic can be correlated with the restrictive measures implemented by the countries affected by Covid-19 (Folinas & Metaxas, 2020).

3. Methodology

For this paper were used the data provided by the World Organization of Tourism (UNWTO) and World Health Organization (WHO) and the research was based on descriptive statistics, as well as on the analysis and interpretation of data. Based on this data, the analysis of the tourism sector is divided into two periods: before Covid-19 period (2011-2019) and during the Covid-19 period (2019-2020). The statistical data gathered from the reports was used to further observe the impact of Covid-19 on the tourism industry.

4. Results

4.1 *The tourism sector before the pandemic (2011-2019)*

Tourism has become one of the most important engines of economic growth in the world, representing more than 10% of the global Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Over the past ten years, the number of trips has registered a significant increase due to several aspects, namely: increased revenues, lower travel costs, but also a much larger range of accessible tourist opportunities. The tourism industry is in full compliance with other important factors that contribute to the growth of the economy, such as the accommodation units and travel industry, and which have formed an increasingly tourism supply chain (International Monetary Fund, 2021).

Between 2011 and 2019, tourism experienced a steady growth, as the number of arrivals of international tourists increased from 989 million in 2011 to 1.460 million in 2019, with Europe remaining at the top of the ranking throughout this period, followed by Asia-Pacific, Americas, Middle East and Africa.

As it can be observed in Fig. no. 1, in the year 2011 the international arrivals of tourists increased by 4.6% from 940 million in 2010 to 983 million. In 2012, the Asia-Pacific region had a significant increase of 7% compared to the previous year in international tourist arrivals, followed by Africa with an increase of 6% and Americas with a growth of 5%. The year 2013, brought an increase of 5% worldwide, while Europe, the most visited region in the world, led the growth in absolute terms with 29 million international tourists arriving. For 2014, the Americas recorded the strongest growth with 8% in international arrivals, followed by Asia and the Pacific, and the Middle East (both +5%). In Europe, the arrivals increased by 3% and in Africa by only 2% from the previous year.

As for 2015, this year brought an increase of 53 million international arrivals worldwide (+4.6%) compared to 2014 and was the 6th consecutive year in which world tourism has enjoyed growth since the 2009 crisis. Tourist flows were influenced by three major factors in 2015: important exchange rate fluctuations, falling oil prices and others, such as growing global concerns about safety and security. Moreover, during this period tourism represented 10% of the Gross Domestic Product globally and occupied the 3rd place in the top from the export revenues point of view.

In 2016, the number of international tourists had a smaller increase compared to 2015 by only 3% worldwide, with a total of 1.235 million tourists. Also, during this period, the destination on the 1st place, as being the most visited location, is France with 84.5 million tourists, followed by United States with 77.5 million, Spain 68.5 million, China 56.9 million and Italy with 50.7 million. All these countries, during the pandemic, were some of the most affected ones.

The year 2017 had a record for the largest increase in international arrivals so far, since 2009, by 7% (1.326 million tourists) compared to 2016, of which Africa (+8.6%) and Europe (+8.4%) were ranked first. In 2018, on the first places in the number of international tourists are France, followed by Spain, the United States, China, Italy, Turkey and Mexico, so the total international arrivals reached 1.401 million. On the other hand, the implementation of the concept of artificial intelligence in the tourism industry, from virtual assistants to companies that use personalized systems to create experiences for travelers, have led to an increased performance in this field.

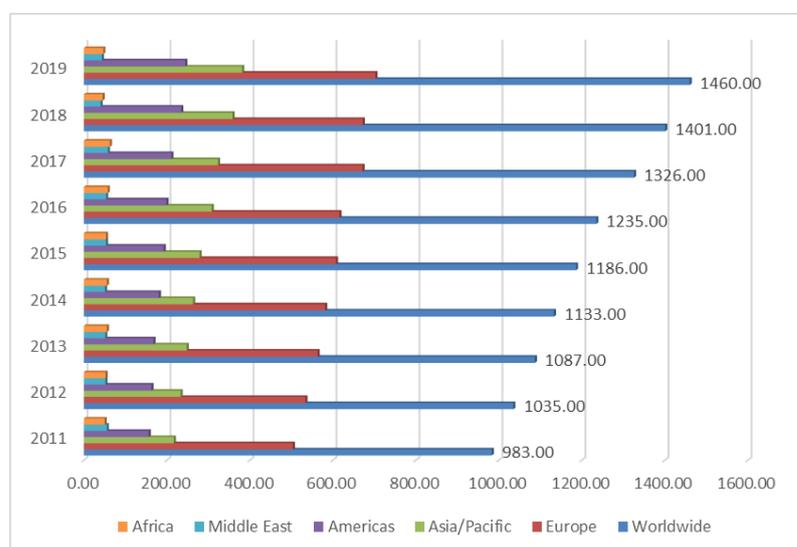


Fig. no. 1: International tourist arrivals 2011-2019 (million)

Source: UNWTO, annual reports

Year 2019 had a 4% increase in international arrivals worldwide, which is lower than 2016 and 2017. Despite Brexit, the geopolitical tensions and the decline of economic globalization, the tourism industry has been on the rise. Thus, based on the increase in the number of foreign tourists, the Middle East ranked best with a percentage of 8%, followed by the Asia-Pacific region and Europe with a percentage of 4%.

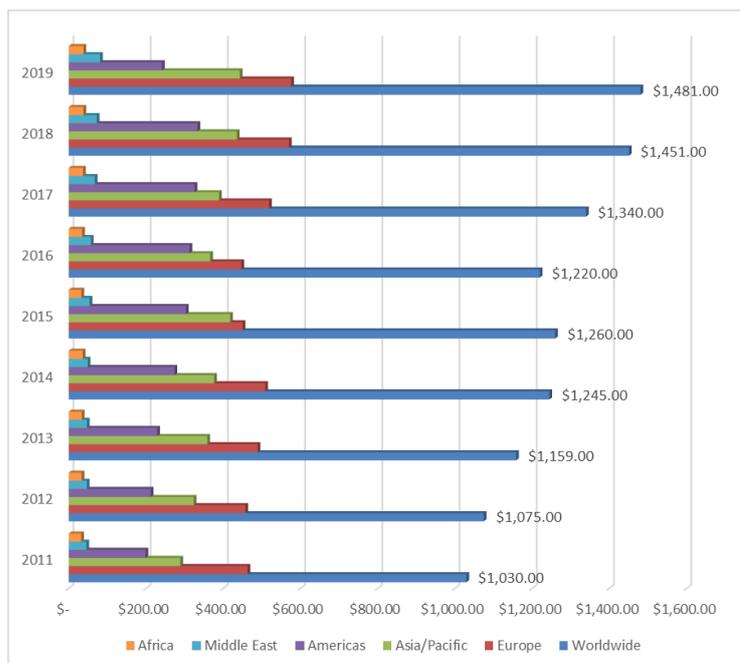


Fig. no. 2. Tourism revenues 2011-2019 (billion)

Source: UNWTO, annual reports

Over the period 2011-2019, international tourism industry revenues registered a significant increase from \$1030 billion in 2011 to \$1481 in 2019. Between 2009 and 2019, the increase in global tourism revenues (54%) exceeded the growth of the world's Gross Domestic Product (44%). Europe was best placed, followed by Asia/Pacific, Americas, the Middle East and Africa (Fig. no. 2).

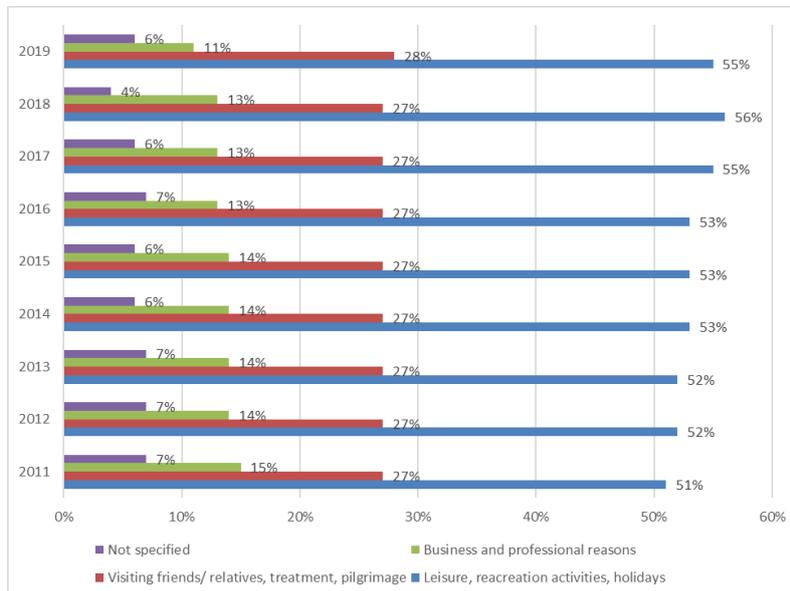


Fig. no. 3. Trips, by main reason of the trip (2011-2019)

Source: UNWTO, annual reports

The period 2011-2019 was also significant in terms of the reason for traveling. Thus, tourists chose to travel as follows (Fig. no. 3):

- leisure, recreation activities and holidays - 53.3%;
- visiting friends / relatives, treatment, pilgrimage - 27.1%;
- business and professional reasons - 13.4%;
- other reasons (not specified) - 6.2%.

At the same time, the means of transport used by tourists when traveling (Fig. no. 4) is a very important aspect in terms of accessibility, so tourists chose to travel mostly by air transport 54.6%, followed by road transport 38.5%, sea transport 4.9% and railway transport 1.9%.

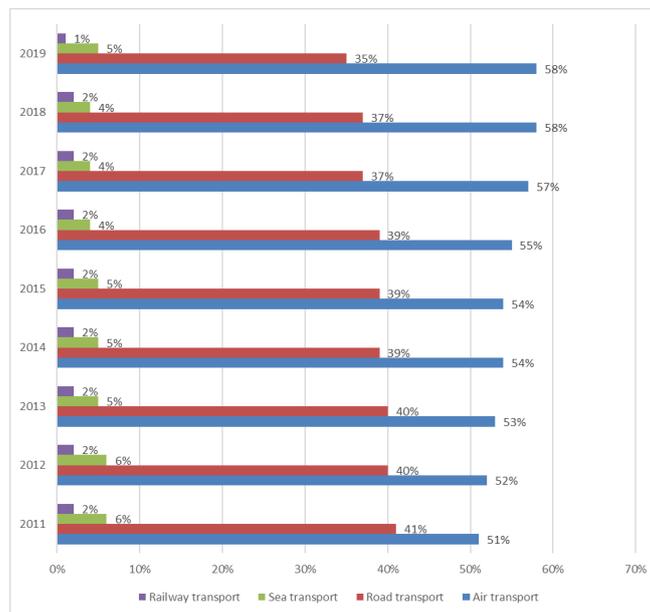


Fig. no. 4. International transport, by means of transport (2011-2019)

Source: UNWTO, annual reports

4.2 The tourism sector during the pandemic

☒ Negative effects of the pandemic

On January 23, 2020, the city of Wuhan in China, the place where the first case of coronavirus was recorded, went into total quarantine, and later, it spread all over the world and the number of cases grew in most states. So, on March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared a global pandemic.

Globally, the Covid-19 virus impacted the tourism sector, which suffered a major decline, as a wide range of travel restrictions were imposed by the governments in order to minimize the number of cases.

According to the data provided from the epidemiological report of the World Health Organization published on March 23, 2021, the SARS-COV-2 virus recorded worldwide a number of 122.536.880 confirmed cases, of which: Europe – 42.516.762, Asia / Pacific – 15.958.386, Americas – 53.937.714, the Middle East – 7.124.121 and Africa – 2.999.152 confirmed cases (Fig. no. 5).

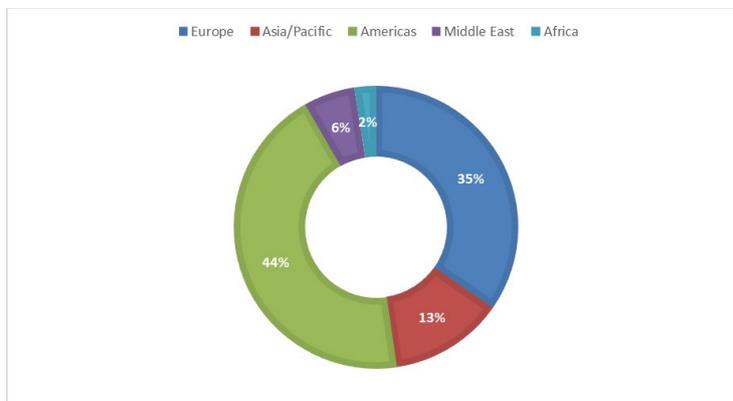


Fig. no. 5. Covid-19 cases registered by region (March 23, 2021)

Source: Epidemiological report of the World Health Organization

The number of deaths recorded until March 23, 2021, worldwide was 2.703.780 of which: Europe – 929.332, Asia/Pacific – 245.633, Americas – 1.299.243, the Middle East – 153.446 and Africa – 76.113 (Fig. no. 6).

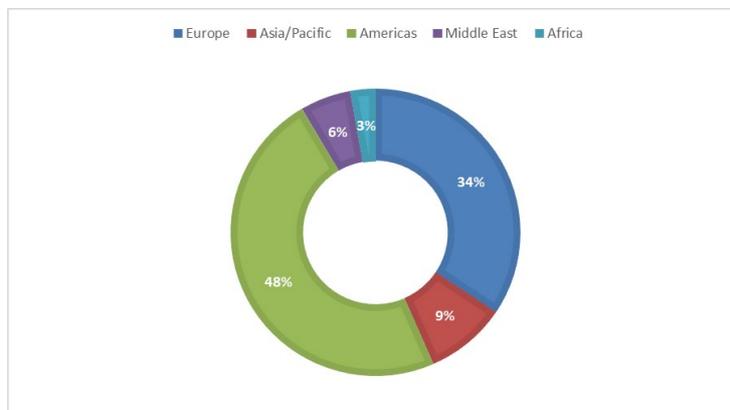


Fig. no. 6. Covid-19 deaths registered by region (March 23, 2021)
 Source: Epidemiological report of the World Health Organization

Tourism is the sector most affected by the SARS-COV-2 virus with a massive drop in tourist demand due to global travel restrictions, including states whose borders have been completely closed. Consequently, the World Tourism Organization declares, according to the data recorded since 2020 that the tourism industry at international level returned 30 years ago on regarding the consumption of tourism products. The number of international tourist arrivals (Fig. no. 7) suffered a considerable decline with a decrease of 73% (403 million tourists) compared to the same period of 2019 and was considered the worst year for tourism due to the pandemic. The largest decrease was registered by the Asia-Pacific region (84%), followed by the Middle East (74%), Europe (69%) and Americas and Africa (both 68%).

In 2021, the increase of the vaccination rates combined with less travel restrictions helped the international tourism recover. The total number of arrivals reached 421 million tourists (Fig. no. 8), an increase of 4%, but still 72% lower than the pre-pandemic values (2019). As for the analyzed regions, the highest recovery was registered by Europe and Americas with an increase of 19% and 17% compared to 2020, but still lower than the values from 2019 (62%, respectively 63%). Africa also had an upward trend, with an increase of 12% compared to 2020, but still 74% below the level from 2019. In the Middle East and Asia-Pacific region the international arrivals dropped 24% and 65% respectively compared to 2020 and even lower over 2019 (79% and 94%).

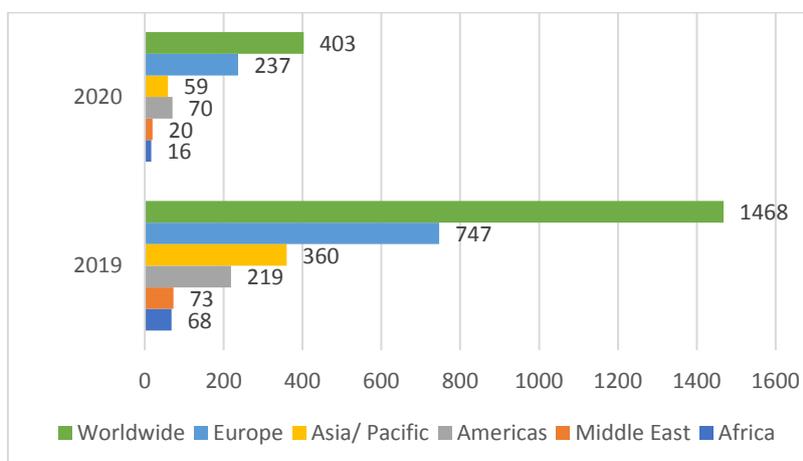


Fig. no. 7. International tourist arrivals 2019-2020 (million)
 Source: UNWTO, annual reports

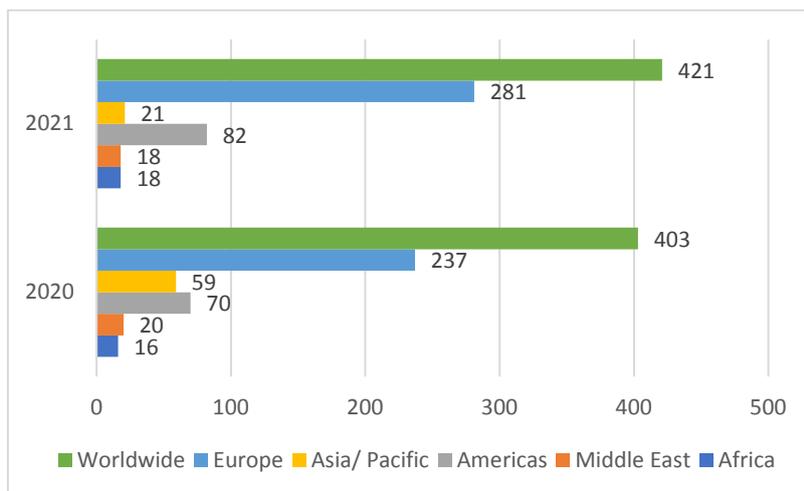


Fig. no. 8. International tourist arrivals 2020-2021 (million)

Source: UNWTO, World Tourism Barometer

Over the period 2019-2020, international tourism industry revenues registered a significant decrease from \$1482 billion in 2019 to \$549 in 2020 (63%). The largest decrease was registered by the Asia-Pacific region (70.4%), followed by Africa (62.7%), Americas (61.6%), Europe (59.6%) and Middle East (56.4%) (Fig. no. 9).

As seen in the literature review, the decline of the tourism sector may impact different sectors in the economy, especially the hospitality industry and the travel industry that supports the tourism sector. Also, the international tourism export revenues suffered a remarkable drop of \$1.3 trillion, 10 times more than the losses in 2009 under the impact of the global economic crisis. While the demand for international tourism continued to decline considerably over the period of 2020, the domestic tourism benefited from a major increase in several markets, such as China and Russia, where domestic demand for air transport has largely reached the pre-pandemic period. Due to the decline in the number of international tourist arrivals, respectively of the tourism revenues, the economic loss registered globally by the tourism sector was over US\$ 820 billion in revenue.

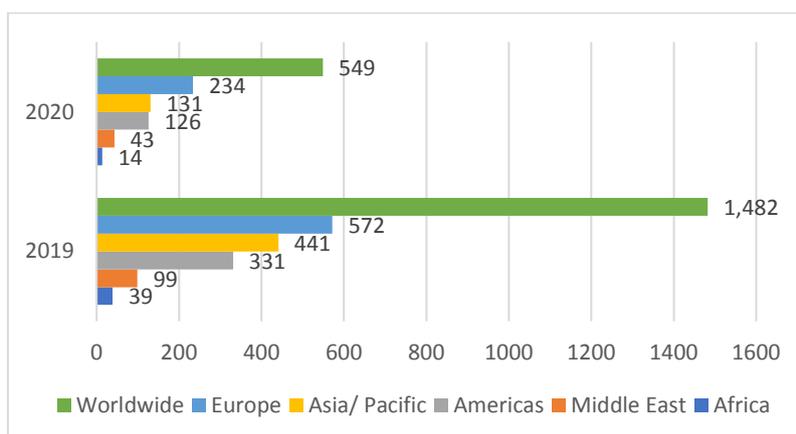


Fig. no. 9. Tourism revenues 2019-2020 (billion)

Source: UNWTO, annual reports

The vulnerability of the touristic destinations was influenced by several factors, including: tourism as a direct share of GDP and as part of total export and international tourism as a percentage of total tourism. In April 2021, the most vulnerable destinations (Table 1) as a direct share of the Gross Domestic Product are: Macau (China), Fiji, Jordan, Spain, Croatia, Montenegro, Mauritius, Panama, Jamaica and Mexico. In terms of total export, Turkey and Caicos, Macau (China), Palau, Saint Lucia, Cook Islands, Bahamas,

Maldives, Aruba, Anguilla, Cabo Verde, were the most affected destinations. And in terms of international tourism, in the top are the following destinations: Monaco, Liechtenstein, Bahrain, Montenegro, Chad, Palestine, Togo, Cabo Verde, Malta and Luxembourg.

Table no. 1. The most vulnerable countries in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic

Destination	Tourism as a direct share of GDP (%)	Destination	Tourism as a part from the total export (%)	Destination	International tourism as a percentage of total tourism (%)
Macao (China)	48	Turkey/Caicos	95	Monaco	98
Fiji	13	Macao (China)	90	Liechtenstein	98
Jordan	12	Palau	88	Bahrain	97
Spain	12	Saint Lucia	86	Montenegro	94
Croatia	11	Cook Islands	85	Chad	94
Montenegro	10	Bahamas	84	Palestine	93
Mauritius	10	Maldives	83	Togo	93
Panama	9	Aruba	79	Cabo Verde	93
Jamaica	9	Anguilla	71	Malta	90
Mexico	9	Cabo Verde	71	Luxembourg	89

Source: UNWTO Tourism Dashboard, 2020e

Tourism also plays an important role in terms of the labor force, as in 2019, 1 out of 10 jobs was in the tourism industry. So, under the influence of the Covid-19 and the imposed restrictions that affected tourism, between 100 and 120 million jobs in this sector were put at risk. Other jobs from sectors associated with tourism, such as the accommodation and the food & beverage sectors, which provide jobs for 144 million people throughout the planet, were at risk of extinction. Among the categories facing the highest risk of unemployment in the tourism industry are: women (who represent up to 54% of the labor force in the sector and young people (UNWTO,2020d).

Another sector considered one of the most affected in revenue due to the pandemic was the air travel industry, due to travel bans, restrictions and cancellations of flights. The global pandemic has brought negative effects in the period 2020-2021 where the seats offered by airlines inside planes both externally and internally, decreased by 50% in 2020 and between 34% and 40% for the first quarter of 2021. The number of passengers decreased by 60% (2,699 million passengers) in 2020 and between 43% and 54% (1,934 to 2,398 million passengers) in 2021. At the same time, the losses on the gross income of the airline industry are estimated at \$ 371 billion in 2020 and from \$ 282 to \$ 343 billion in 2021 (ICAO, 2021). The air bookings registered the highest decrease worldwide. The biggest drop was in the Asia/Pacific region (-98%), with the introduction of restrictions in China, followed by Europe (-76%), Americas (-67%), Africa, and the Middle East (-65%). As regards the number of jobs supported by the aviation sector, a decrease of around 52.5% is estimated and jobs directly involved in this industry have decreased by 43% compared to pre-pandemic figures (IATA, 2021).

Besides the air travel industry, also the hospitality industry and the hotels were affected by the Covid-19 and faced cancellations of bookings. The hotel industry worldwide recorded a drop in revenue (Asia: -67.8%, Europe: -61.7%), but also in occupancies, where the drop was from 20% to over 70% worldwide (UNWTO, 2020a).

☐ *Positive effects of the pandemic*

During the SARS-COV-2 virus pandemic, the tourism industry has also benefited from some positive effects despite the global economic decline and all the restrictions imposed by the authorities against the increase in the number of illnesses. In this time of crisis, countries directly dependent on tourism revenues have been forced to rethink strategies for maintaining or increasing the tourism sector.

Moreover, there have been tourist destinations that have benefited from an increase in the visitor market as a result of the pandemic impact on tourism.

1. Development of domestic tourism

The government and certain world organizations expect that in the pandemic, domestic tourism will benefit from a much faster recovery than international tourism and will represent a necessary help for the economic future, when investing much higher amounts than in the pre-pandemic period.

For those countries that are part of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) the domestic tourism has a weight of 75% out of the total expenditure on tourism, and in the European Union these expenses are 1.8 times higher than those for inbound tourism. Worldwide, the largest domestic tourism markets in terms of spending (Fig. no. 10) are: the United States with about \$ 1 trillion, Germany with \$ 249 billion, Japan with \$ 201 billion, the United Kingdom with \$ 154 billion and Mexico with \$ 139 billion (UNWTO, 2020a).

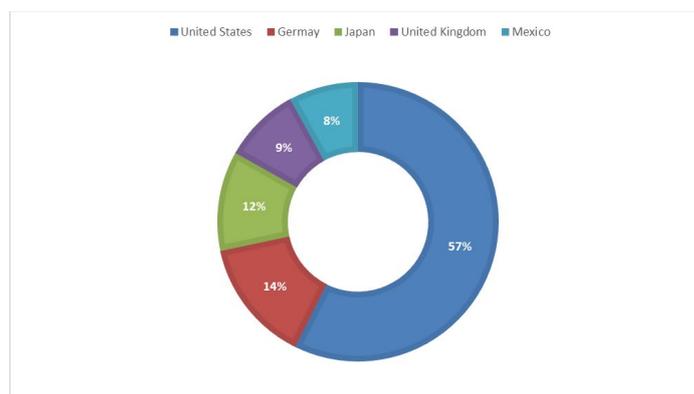


Fig. no. 10. Tourist destinations according to the largest expenditures on domestic tourism (2020)

Source: UNWTO, annual reports

In the same vein, more and more states are thinking about growth strategies for domestic tourism by promoting destinations and by giving certain financial incentives to increase the level of demand inside the borders. For example, Malaysia has allocated \$113 million for certain travel discount vouchers, as well as personal tax incentives for domestic tourism-related expenses, and Costa Rica has moved all holidays from 2020 and 2021 to Mondays for citizens to enjoy extended weekends and to increase stays during holidays in the country (UNWTO, 2020c).

Among the development strategies (Table 2) and initiatives taken to increase domestic tourism are: financial incentives (vouchers, bonuses, longer weekends), marketing and promotion (new promotion campaigns of domestic tourism, digital platforms, social media networks, etc.), development of touristic products (protected natural areas, health treatments, adventure and ecotourism, cultural and gastronomic tourism, but also rural tourism), partnerships between the Ministry of Tourism and other national authorities, market studies (forecasts and market perspectives regarding the behavior and preferences of national travelers), but also the capacity of building and training (platforms for improving the professional development of people working in the field of national tourism).

Table no. 2. Countries that have adopted development strategies for domestic tourism

Development strategies	Countries
Financial incentives	Greece, Italy, Iceland, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, Poland, Malaysia, Thailand, Denmark, Macau (China), South Korea, Hungary, Turkey, Mexico, Costa Rica, New Zealand
Marketing and promotion	Argentina, Canada, China, Costa Rica, Denmark, Fiji, Finland, France, Georgia, Hungary; Iceland, Jordan, Malaysia, Mexico, Morocco; New Zealand, Portugal, South Korea, Serbia, Slovenia, Spain and Uruguay.
Development of tourism products	Costa Rica, Paraguay, Mexico, Peru, Jordan, Argentina, Hungary.

Development strategies	Countries
Partnerships	Peru, France, Canada, Costa Rica, Hungary, Chile, Paraguay, Finland, Macau (China), South Korea.
Market studies	Malaysia, Philippines, Paraguay, China, Argentina, Australia.
Capacity of building and training	Australia, Chile, Costa Rica, Paraguay.

Source: UNWTO, 2020c

Therefore, all these development initiatives will have a positive effect in order to support domestic tourism, which represent a considerable part of the gross domestic product of each country. Moreover, this economic crisis resulting from the framework of the pandemic will continue, as well as the restrictions on movement at international level, things that will lead to an increase in the number of countries that will adopt such measures for the benefit of domestic tourism.

2. Encouraging a tourism inclined towards improvement, digitizing the ecosystem and protecting the environment

The crisis caused by the pandemic of 2019 offers an excellent opportunity to create a closer relationship between tourism and nature, contributing to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Paris Agreement on climate change. Strengthening a long-term development offers considerable benefits regarding the vulnerability of the tourism-dependent regions to economic threats, using sustainable resources, creating green jobs and improving transport connectivity (United Nations, 2020).

The tourism industry is to be reorganized with the help of various projects of the World Tourism Organization that require the involvement of all states through various key elements, able to recover in a responsible way tourism for people and the planet, respectively: public health, social inclusion, biodiversity conservation, climate action, circular economy, but also governance and finance (UNWTO,2020b).

The pandemic with the new coronavirus has demonstrated the importance of the relationship between tourism and the health sector, so investing in this regard and rethinking the strategies to be implemented will help to carry out the next impacts of other pandemics or crises of this kind. In this respect, the integration of epidemiological indicators in tourism for an efficient and rapid economic recovery, the implementation of long-term hygiene protocols between those working in the field of tourism and health authorities, as well as the creation of a communication based on trust and transparency between players on the tourist market and tourists, are some of the strategies for tourism's recovery in relation to public health.

As far as the social sector is concerned, among the solutions for relaunching tourism, there are: channels of support for disadvantaged parties and for small and medium-sized enterprises, but not least, the recovery of tourism towards community support.

From the biodiversity conservation point of view, a healthy environment is an important aspect in the competitiveness of tourist destinations, especially for countries that depend on tourism revenues.

In fact, in 2020, due to the restrictions imposed by the authorities worldwide and a lower tourist flow, the CO₂ emissions were reduced by 8% and considerable air improvements were reported (IEA, 2020). On the other hand, considerable investment in transforming tourism value chains through the concept of 'reduce and reuse' (from user to user) for reducing economic losses and pollution from the tourism industry can help to achieve a circular and efficient economy (UNEP, 2021).

The solutions proposed by the World Tourism Organization by implementing the recovery and development projects of the industry, and implicitly, through the active participation of the responsible governments, will guide tourism towards a sustainable future based on a close relationship with the planet, but also on a relationship of trust and transparency between the economic operators in tourism and tourists.

Conclusions

This paper focuses on the impact of the COVID-19 on world tourism. The pandemic severely impacted the life of people across the globe. COVID-19 has an important impact on the economic growth worldwide and created an economic recession due to all the restrictions that were imposed. As a result of global travel restrictions due to the massive spread of the SARS COV-2 virus, tourism has suffered a major decline. Previous research also analyzed and evaluated the negative effects of the virus on the tourism industry.

The paper found the decline of tourist arrivals, showing that the most affected regions were: Asia-Pacific, Middle East, Africa, Europe and Americas. Also, the tourist revenues decreased and the economic loss for 2020 is estimated at a figure of over \$ 2 trillion of the World Gross Domestic Product. The negative effects affected, besides the factors mentioned above, the transport sector (air travel industry), the hotel industry and employment. Thus, it can be said that the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the tourism sector.

The paper concludes with some positive effects brought by the pandemic, like the increase of domestic tourism and some of the strategies that a high number of countries have begun to use for developing tourism and to encourage the upskilling tourism, the digitization of the ecosystem and the protection of the environment.

This article is just a starting point for future research, providing an overview of the impact of the pandemic on tourism. More detailed research can be done further on, by taking into consideration the statistical indicators, but also the positive effects of the pandemic on this sector, in order to observe if the restrictions have brought opportunities to domestic tourism.

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