

STUDY REGARDING THE EVOLUTION OF MOUNTAIN TOURISM AND RURAL MOUNTAIN TOURISM IN THE ROMANIAN CARPATHIANS DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

The study aimed to analyze the evolution of mountain tourism and rural mountain tourism in Romanian Carpathians during Covid19-Pandemic, to understand the level of damage that was done by this crisis in Romania in the tourism sector. For this we analyzed the comparison of the dynamic of tourists number between 2014-2019 and 2019-2020, and also the dynamic of the accommodation structures. All these researches were done by analyzing and generating reports provided by National Institute of Statistics (NIS). We discovered that even in pandemic times, investors still invested in accommodation structures, and that now more and more tourists choose rural mountain tourism because due to Covid-19 Pandemic they prefer to rent private villas, mountain huts, apartments or holiday homes, trying to maintain the social distance from others, and where they have the possibility to use their own facilities.

Key words: Covid-19, rural mountain tourism, pandemic, Romanian Carpathians Mountains.

INTRODUCTION

When the entire world celebrated the dawn of the New Year, on the 01st of January, few could have imagined what 2020 prepared for the humanity. 2020 has been defined by the coronavirus pandemic, the worst pandemic that the world ever saw within the last 100 years. Within the last 12 months coronavirus – Covid19 – paralyzed economies, confined people around the world to their homes, devastated entire communities. It has been a year that changed the world not for a single generation but for entire generations. More than 2,86 million people died, more than 133 million contracted the virus. More than 107 million healed [10].

Grandparents were lost, partners bereaved as their loved ones died alone in hospitals, because visits were considered too dangerous. Children became orphans. Contracting coronavirus is very simple: you only have to breathe in the wrong place at the wrong time.

"I went to the gate of hell and came back, I saw with my own eyes that others failed to recover and died, which has had a big impact on me", said Wan Chunhui, a 44-year-old

Chinese survivor who spent 17 days in hospital [3].

On the 31st of December 2019, when the Chinese authorities announced 27 cases of "viral pneumonia of unknown origin", the scale of the global disaster was scarcely imaginable. On the 31st of December 2019, when the Chinese authorities announced 27 cases of "viral pneumonia of unknown origin", the scale of the global disaster was scarcely imaginable.

The next day, the Chinese authorities quietly shut down the animal market from Wuhan that was initially linked to the outbreak (Fig1).



Fig.1 China and Wuhan
Source: [11].

On January 07th, the Chinese officials announced that they identified the new virus, and they called it 2019-nCoV. On January 11th, China announced the first death in China [2]. Within days, 2019-nCoV flared across Asia, Europe and United States. On the 11th of February, the World Health Organization called the new disease Covid-19 [9]. Only four days later, on the 15th of February, the first death outside Asia has been reported by France [1]. Terrified, Europe watched how northern Italy turned into an epicentre of Covid-19 disease. First Italy, shortly after that Spain, France and Great Britain went into lockdown. United States borders, already closed for China, closed for Europe as well. By mid-April almost the entire humanity were living under some form of lockdown. Around the entire world the streets fell early silent. The only sound that could have been heard were the ambulance sirens, a reminder that we are all vulnerable, and that the danger is so close.

26th of February 2020. 26th of February is date when Romania announced its first case of coronavirus. While the first patient of Covid-19 has healed, the number of cases grown from one week to another. If one month later Romania had almost 1,000 cases of Covid-19, two months later 1,000 turned into 10,000 cases. The chaos begun. Businesses were closed, schools and colleges shut, everything that meant live sport cancelled. Inessential shops, clubs, bars and restaurants were closed as well. Those who had the possibility, worked from home. Conference calls, video meetings replaced travels, parties, gatherings. Those who couldn't transfer their jobs into the virtual world were often fired or forced to risk their health and go to work regardless. Because of that, businesses closed or went in bankruptcy. Commercial airlines travel and tourism industry saw their most violent contraction in our history, being some of the areas severely affected globally by the Covid-19 pandemic.

World Travel & Tourism Council (WTCC), who represents the travel and tourism sector globally, shows with one of their studies that "various events that take place in the world negatively influence the tourism market, due

to the consequences they have on collective memory. If the return to the initial values takes place after thirteen months in case of terrorist attacks, in case of an epidemic the decrease of tourist circulation is maintained for a period of twenty-one months" [6].

Among various forms of tourism, mountain and rural tourism have been and looked to be over the time of high attraction during holidays, due to their specificity regarding the position in regions where nature shows its splendours, life is more relaxed, peaceful, quiet, the urban citizens could bring their families for enjoying how rural life and traditions are running and tasting local gastronomy [7].

Despite that these destinations could be found in more isolated places sometimes, during the pandemic of covid-19, these forms of tourism have been also affected [8].

In this context, the main purpose of our research is to be able to see the damage done by the Covid-19 pandemic in Romania, especially within the mountain tourism and rural mountain tourism in the Romanian Carpathians.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The methodology used in this research has a step by step approach:

Step 1 – There were identified the cities and the rural regions situated in the mountain area within the Romanian Carpathians. To do this selection, there were used the information from the "Mountain Law" from 20th of July 2020. Once this selection was achieved, reports with regards to the tourist arrivals were generated from National Institute of Statistics (NIS). In this way, it was established how many tourists travelled to the Carpathians Mountains within the 2020's. Also, the number of accommodation structures that "survived" during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the number of the ones that closed their doors forever in 2020 was also of high interest in this study to understand the situation.

Step 2 – The statistical data collected before were used for making different comparisons. First, it was analysed the dynamics for 2014-

2019 to identify the accommodation structures available in the Romanian Carpathians within the pre-pandemic era. To determine the dynamics the following formula was used:

$$\text{Dynamics} = \frac{\text{Total Number of Accommodation Structures in 2019}}{\text{Total Number of Accommodation Structures in 2014}} \times 100.$$

This formula allowed to compare the number of accommodation structure operating before Covid-19 Pandemic and after.

Step 3 – To have a better overview on the pandemic year, and to be able to determine whether important fluctuations took place, it was also analysed the dynamics of the accommodation structures for 2019-2020. The formula applied was the same:

$$\text{Dynamics} = \frac{\text{Total Number of Accommodation units in 2020}}{\text{Total Number of Accommodation units in 2019}} \times 100.$$

Step 4 – To understand the flow of the tourists arrivals within the rural mountain regions, it was also studied the dynamics of this indicator. For this we chose the timeframe 2014-2019 and we used the formula given below:

$$\text{Dynamics} = \frac{\text{Total Number of Tourists Arrivals in the timeframe 2019}}{\text{Total Number of Tourists Arrivals in 2014}} \times 100.$$

Step 5 – To have a better understanding over the pandemic year, to see whether the tourists still travelled or whether they stopped doing this (at least for a while), we checked also the dynamics for 2019 and 2020.

For this purpose, the same formula was used:

$$\text{Dynamics} = \frac{\text{Total Number of Tourists Arrivals in the timeframe 2020}}{\text{Total Number of Tourists Arrivals in 2019}} \times 100.$$

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

To have an overview over the tourism industry in Romanian Carpathians during the Covid-19 Pandemic, first, it was analysed the dynamics for the number of accommodation units between the timeframe 2014-2019 (Fig. 2), the pre-pandemic era, when tourism had no restrictions, when life had no restrictions.

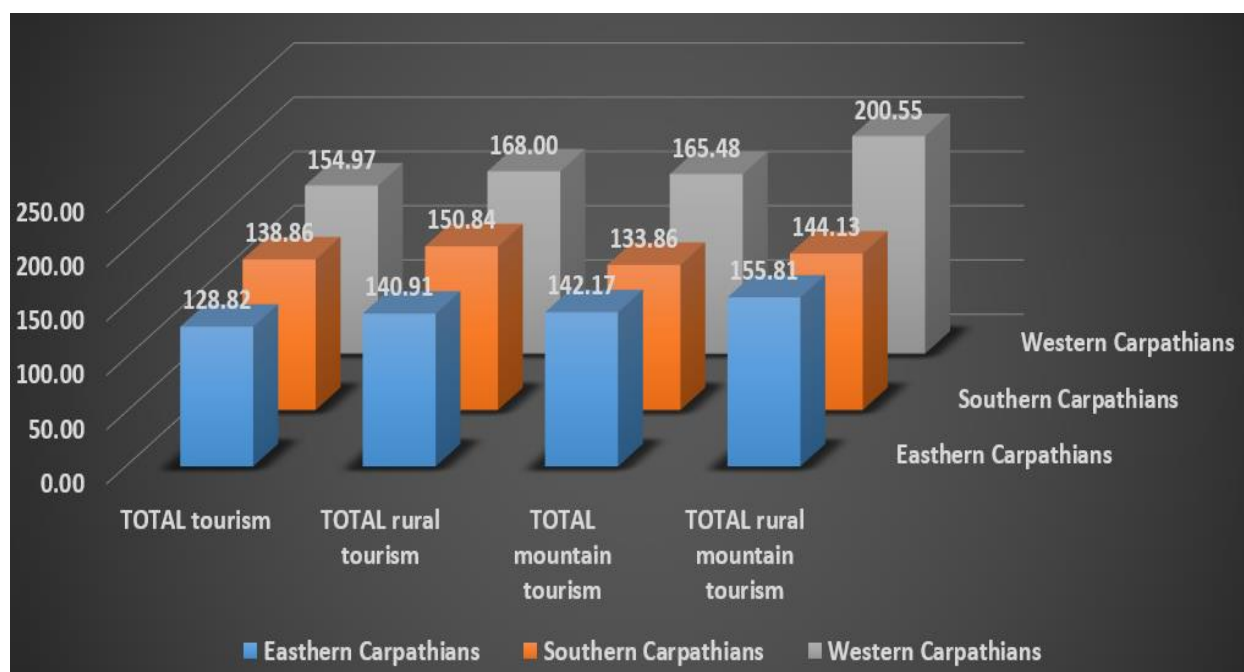


Fig. 2. Growth rate of accommodation units in 2019 versus 2014 for Romania's tourism mountain and rural tourism by the Romanian Carpathians zones (%)

Source: Own calculation.

To see the impact that Covid-19 Pandemic on the rural mountain tourism, it was analysed

the dynamics of the number of accommodation units in 2014-2019 to see

how the things went in the pre-Pandemic era. The analysis showed a slightly upward trend between 2014-2019, especially in the Western Carpathians, where the rural mountain tourism had an increase of 100.55% in the year of 2019. We could say that the number of accommodation units has doubled in 2019. They are being followed by the Eastern Carpathians with an increase of the accommodation capacity of 55.81%, and by Southern Carpathians with an increase of its dynamic of 44.13%. Therefore, the accommodation structures sector was in full development in the pre-Pandemic era. Some of the reasons that led to all these investments that almost doubled the number of constructions for the accommodation structures, could be the need for peace and space that can be found only in the rural space. The need for nature and all its beauty. Investments in constructions of accommodation structures were done in 2020 as well. Even though the Covid-19 hit the whole world in all its industries.

We could assume that this happened because when there is a crisis, people with high risk appetite, who have the opportunity to invest are usually doing this in the most affected areas because there are lower prices, more flexible conditions and profitability in the

future, when the crisis will decrease. All these benefits during this time will disappear as the industry recovers. May be these were the main reasons who led to the new constructions that were made in 2020.

Also, the international travel restrictions made the investors to think that the demand of quality accommodation structures will increase. That the definition of a “vacation” of an “escape” of “travel” will be changed. It will be a new one now. Since some of the most important recommendations in the Covid-19 Pandemic is to keep your distance from other people, to avoid all kinds of congestions, to avoid spending time with unknown people, the tourists will search for rural mountain tourism that will offer them the possibility to rent the entire structure, where they will be able to cook for themselves, to disinfect and sanitize everything on their way and each time they feel the need. The rural mountain tourism will offer them the autonomy that they need in this pandemic time. With numbers like 11.4% in the Eastern Carpathians, 10.08% in Western Carpathians and 8.99% in Southern Carpathians, there were noticed slight increases in the investments done in 2020 (Fig.3).

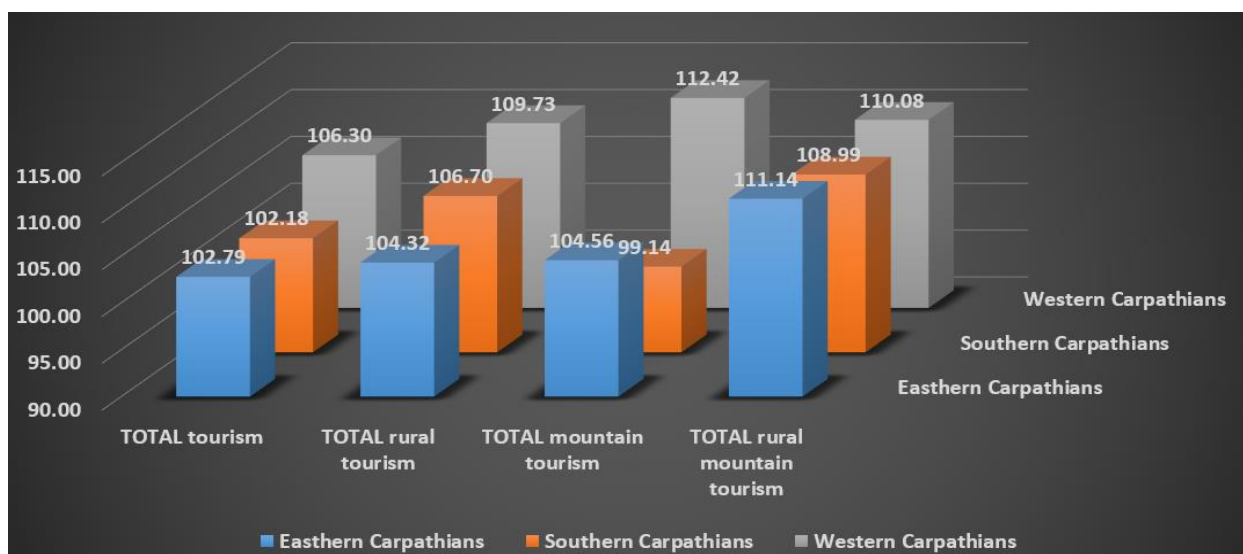


Fig. 3. Growth rate of accommodation units in 2020 versus 2019 for Romania's tourism mountain and rural tourism by the Romanian Carpathians zones (%)

Source: Own calculation.

Rural tourism could represent a good deal for those who, “tired of the pace stressful life of the city and eager to make a change, may be interested in the idea of moving to the country along with his family to work the land and provide hospitality to tourists” [5]. Mostly now, when everything in the world changed and Covid-19 is part of our life.

After we checked the accommodation structures level, and we decided that this wasn't affected by the pandemic, we wanted to see also the number of tourists. For this, we checked the dynamic of the tourists number in pre-Pandemic era (2014-2019) and in the Pandemic times (2019-2020). The analysis presented showed us that the pre-pandemic

era made our tourists to travel quite enough. It was identified an upward trend especially for the rural mountain tourism. The highest increase can be seen in the Western Carpathians, 151.41%. Not very far, on the second place in the tourists preferences, there are the Eastern Carpathians with an increase of 137.70%, and then the Southern Carpathians with 107.22% (Fig.4). In this way, it is easy to understand that the behaviour of our tourists, before Covid-19 Pandemic was slightly the same. Wanting to explore nature, to enjoy all the unique sensations that the rural tourism offers them, always in search of uncrowded places, of the flow of our tourists was huge.

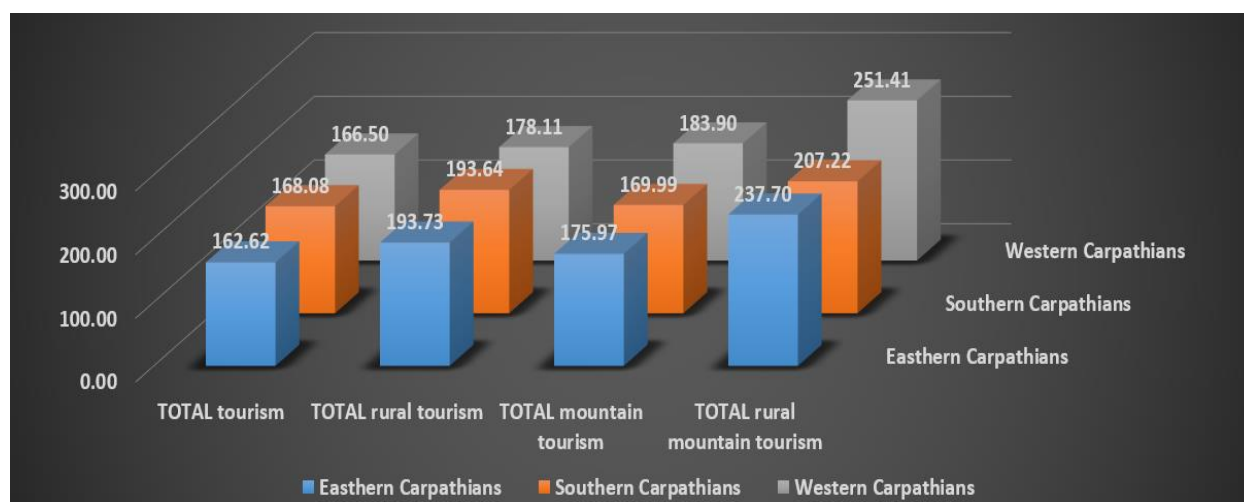


Fig. 4. Growth rate of the number of tourist arrivals in 2019 versus 2014 for Romania's tourism mountain and rural tourism by the Romanian Carpathians zones (%)

Source: Own calculation.

Once the conclusion is clear, that is more and more tourists were in search of rural mountain tourism, a reason to have a look at the 2020 year as well. From this point of view, it was noticed that the Western Carpathians kept its first place in tourists preferences. Western Carpathians represents the only group of mountains from Romanian Carpathians that had an increase in 2020 (Fig.5).

The increase was only 10.08%, but it was an increase. Eastern and Southern Carpathians had severe decreases that could have led to high losses for the economy. With a decrease of 37.97% for the Southern Carpathians and

45.82% for Eastern Carpathians, it is obvious the fear that Covid-19 brought to our tourists.

Why for only these 2 groups of mountains? It is assumed that this is because the Eastern and Southern Carpathians are very accessible to tourists from all over the country. Grace to their geographical position it is very easy for almost everyone from all over the country to reach them out.

Tourists, wanting to avoid congestions of all types, chose to avoid them in 2020, and reach out some other “virgin” places, unknown by everyone. In this particular case, Western Carpathians.

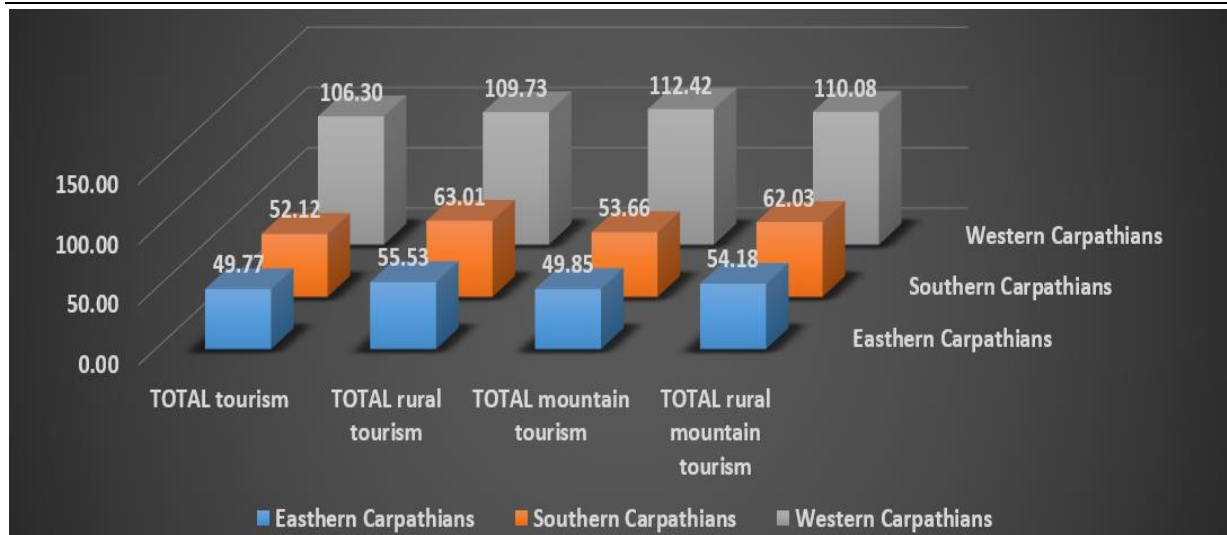


Fig. 5. Growth rate of the number of tourist arrivals in 2020 versus 2019 for Romania's tourism mountain and rural tourism by the Romanian Carpathians zones (%)

Source: Own calculation.

CONCLUSIONS

Covid-19 Pandemic did not discriminate and all the tourism was affected. All travel destinations were deeply affected by unprecedented travel restrictions and felt economic and social bottlenecks. A major and unanimous question is how the pandemic and economic impact will be felt and when the recovery will begin. The forecast indicates at least three years for tourism demand to return to pre-crisis levels, according to a study made by market research firm Euromonitor International. It is possible that certain sectors of tourism industry will never be able to return to the pre-crisis level, especially due to the digital transformation that was already under way, and that it was accelerated by the pandemic. An example is the MICE (meetings, incentives, conferencing, exhibitions) sector where virtual meetings shown that there is no need for travels to attend conferences. Everyone in tourism sector will be able to use this break caused by Covid-19 to review their business concept and travel offers. Tourists will apply for nature destinations – rural mountain tourism – because this form of tourism will allow them to keep their social distance and to access the nature contact and discovery, which they have not been able to benefit from in the recent times. The concept of micro-vacation will probably also be common. Given the dangers

associated with long-distance travel, the typical large annual journey will be replaced by smaller ones, closer to home, throughout the year. The travel and tourism industry has been one of the hardest hit by the coronavirus pandemic. It will take a long time to return to something we all recognize as “normal”, but there are plenty of opportunities to be innovative and improve the travel experience for all who wish.

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