

## DID THE RURAL MOUNTAIN TOURISM IN ROMANIA PASS THE RESILIENCE AND SUSTAINABILITY TEST DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC?

Romeo Cătălin CREȚU, Georgiana GURBAN, Ioan Iulian ALECU, Petrică ȘTEFAN

University of Agronomic Sciences and Veterinary Medicine of Bucharest, Faculty of Management and Rural Development, Department of Economics, Accounting and Agrotourism, 011464 Bucharest, Romania; E-mails: cretu.romeo@managusamv.ro, georgiana.gurban@managusamv.ro, alecu.iulian@managusamv.ro, stefanmarian2004@yahoo.com

**Corresponding author:** stefanmarian2004@yahoo.com

### Abstract

*This research focuses on two main aspects, each equally important for tourism actors. First, we analyzed the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the rural mountain tourism in Romania and whether the resilience and sustainability test was passed. The second aim of the research was to identify solutions for the relaunch and development of the rural mountain tourism in Romania. Several research methods have been used to meet our objectives, such as analysis, synthesis, comparison, observation or documentary research. The quantitative research methodology used is limited to the questionnaire-based survey. The questionnaire contained 16 questions and was administered by telephone, between 15-30 March 2023 was addressed to a number of 100 respondents including owners or administrators of classified accommodation units in the mountain area. The analysis of the results shows that the pandemic had a neutral to positive effect for tourism in the mountain area and that, for the most part, the resilience and sustainability test was passed. We consider that this study is very useful for tourism entrepreneurs, for local and central public authorities and the conclusions and recommendations extracted from the questionnaires can suggest valuable ideas for the relaunch and development of the rural mountain tourism in Romania.*

**Key words:** Covid-19, resilience, the rural mountain tourism in Romania, sustainable management, sustainability.

### INTRODUCTION

In 2019, travel and tourism were some of the most important sectors of the world economy, almost 10% of global GDP, with over 320 million jobs worldwide and a value of nine trillion dollars [12].

In Europe, the tourism sector accounts for 10% of EU GDP (up to 25% in Croatia, 22% in Cyprus and 21% in Greece, if indirect impact is included) and generates, directly and indirectly, 23 million jobs [19]. However, the COVID-19 pandemic puts the European tourism industry under unprecedented pressure: there has been a 60% to 90% drop in bookings over the same periods in previous years, leading to an estimated loss of 6% millions of jobs [7].

2020 was an atypical, difficult and unusual year, it changed the way we live, work and many of the values we thought were important Both human health and activity in all

industries were mainly negatively affected by the coronavirus pandemic [16]. The tourism industry was no exception, as it was one of the most affected by the dreaded virus and restrictions [28]. Tourism was one of the hardest hit industries in the world, and in Romania we are talking about a decrease in turnover of about 70%, going to the complete paralysis of agencies specializing in incoming or events [24].

Destinations around the world last year saw a one billion drop in the number of international visitors, compared to a decline of only 4% during the global economic crisis of 2009 [5]. The entire HoReCa industry in Romania had in 2019 revenues of 5 billion euros, and in 2020 it lost about 3 billion euros, of which 1 billion are just the losses of hoteliers. COVID-19 did not discriminate, so that all companies in the tourism sector and all travel destinations were massively affected by

unprecedented travel restrictions and felt economic and social bottlenecks [9].

In Romania, the arrivals registered in the tourist reception structures in 2020 amounted to 6,335.4 thousand, decreasing by 52.3%

compared to 2019. Of these, 92.8% represented the arrivals of Romanian tourists and 7.2% represented the arrivals of foreign tourists (Table 1).

Table 1. Arrivals registered in the tourist reception structures in Romania, 2019-2020

Tourist arrivals in Romania	2020	2019
Romanian tourists	5,879,251	10,597,000
Foreign tourists	456,149	2,671,000
TOTAL	6,335,400	13,268,000

Source: www.insse.ro, Accessed on Oct.5, 2023 [25].

Regarding the arrivals of foreign tourists in the tourist reception structures, the largest share was held by those from Europe - 78.4% of the total foreign tourists, and of these 74.2% were from the European Union countries [25].

The overnight stays registered in the tourist reception structures in 2020 amounted to 14,444.7 thousand, decreasing by 51.6%

compared to those in 2019 (Table 2). Of these, 93.1% represented the overnight stays of Romanian tourists and 6.9% the overnight stays of foreign tourists.

Regarding the overnight stays of foreign tourists in the tourist reception structures, the largest share was held by those from Europe - 77.2% of the total foreign tourists, and 73% of them were from European Union countries.

Table 2. Overnight stays registered in the tourist reception structures in Romania 2019-2020.

Overnight stays registered in the tourist reception structures	2020	2019
Romanian tourists	13,448,015	24,612,000
Foreign tourists	996,685	5,258,000
TOTAL	14,444,700	29,870,000

Source: www.insse.ro [25].

The average length of stay in 2020 was 2.3 days for Romanian tourists and 2.2 days for foreign tourists. The index of net use of accommodation places in 2020 was 22.9% on total tourist accommodation structures, decreasing by 11.3% compared to 2019 (Table 3). Higher indices of accommodation use in 2020 were registered at accommodation spaces on ships (29.3%), bungalows (28.9%), hotels (26.7%), campsites (24.3%), tourist houses (22.1%), tourist villas (21.4%), tourist stops (19.4%) and agritourism pensions (16.7%).

The arrivals of foreign visitors in Romania, registered at the border points, were in 2015 of 5022.7 thousand, decreasing by 60.8% compared to last year. The means of road and air transport were the most used for the arrivals of foreign visitors in Romania, representing 82.6%, respectively 14.5% of the total number of arrivals [36].

The departures of Romanian visitors abroad, registered at the border points, were in 2020 of 9510.1 thousand, decreasing by 58.8% compared to 2019 (Table 3).

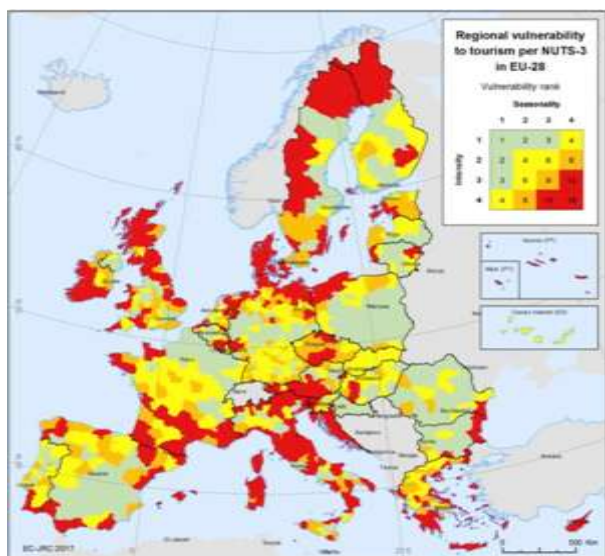
Table 3. Tourist indicators in Romania 2019-2020

Tourist indicators	2020	2019
Index of net use of accommodation	22.9%	34.2%
The departures of Romanian visitors abroad	9,510,100	23,065,000

Source: www.insse.ro [25].

The means of road and air transport were the most used for departures abroad, representing 71.0%, respectively 28.3% of the total number of departures.

The Commission's Joint Research Center, which studies the spatio-temporal patterns of tourism in Europe, has analyzed the regional vulnerability of the tourism sector (Map 1).



Map 1. Map of the regional vulnerability of the tourism sector.

Source: EU Commission Joint Research Center and [12, 17].

It points out that the region's most at risk due to the seasonal nature of activity are spread across the EU; however, the intensity is variable, for example, some islands in Greece depend 90% on tourism. Their vulnerability results from dependence on domestic or European tourism, their seasonal nature and their intensity. The trade fair and congress sector was also affected, with events being canceled or postponed in Europe [37].

Certain sectors of the tourism industry may never be able to return to pre-crisis levels, in particular due to the digital transformation that was already under way and was accelerated by the situation. An example is the MICE sector, where virtual meetings have shown that there is no need for international travel to attend conferences [30].

This research focuses on two main aspects, each equally important for tourism actors. First, we analyzed the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the rural mountain tourism in

Romania in 2020 and whether the resilience and sustainability test was passed [20].

The second aim of the research was to identify solutions for the relaunch and development of the rural mountain tourism in Romania. Several research methods have been used to meet our objectives, such as analysis, synthesis, comparison, observation or documentary research.

We consider that this study is very useful for tourism entrepreneurs, for local and central public authorities and the conclusions and recommendations extracted from the questionnaires can suggest valuable ideas for the relaunch and development of the rural mountain tourism in Romania.

### Review of the scientific literature

Used in disciplines such as psychology, ecology or engineering, resilience is a term that, in recent years, is increasingly used in connection with the success of an organization. Organizational resilience can be defined as the ability to recover or adapt quickly to adverse situations or changes [33].

Whatever definition or term we adopt, after numerous corporate scandals and a financial crisis that has shaken the entire globe, it is considered that a successful organization must be able to withstand shocks, remain as strong as a result of these shocks, adapt to change and even more, take advantage of the opportunities that any change brings [13].

But how can organization gain resilience? A well-known theory published in 2011 by a well-known UK association, AIRMIC (Association of Risk and Insurance Managers in Industry and Commerce), is the theory of the 5 Rs: Risk Radar, Resources, Organization Relations, Rapid Incident Response, and Reviewing and adapting the organizational environment [11].

The risk radar is that "concern about failure", a permanent focus on detecting errors and things that need to be learned from the mistakes of the past. It seems simple, but if we look at the great scandals in the corporate world of the last 25 years, we see so many examples of organizations that have repeated the same mistakes made by other similar companies before them [26]. Resources refer

to employees and the moral compass of a company. Relationships within the organization refer to both internal communication and that with external partners. If we study any organizational failure, poor communication appears to be one of the main causes in almost all cases [21].

This can mean that information does not "flow" freely within the organization, does not communicate effectively on all levels, or can define an organization that does not "listen", does not pay attention to what is happening inside and outside it [34]. Also, in the event of an incident, an organization must have a rapid response to prevent the incident from degenerating into a crisis, or even a disaster [18]. In this regard, it is essential to have an organizational culture in which risk and incident reporting is rewarded, in order to allow the organization to have an immediate response [1].

A culture that favors "shooting the messenger" can have serious consequences, eroding organizational resilience [4]. In addition, the continuous review of the organizational environment that requires changes and improvements, but also immediate adaptation, are key elements in ensuring resilience [2].

Continuing this idea, some specialists in the field of organizational resilience wonder if we are not wrong when we consider that the state of normalcy is represented by stability and maintaining the status quo [32]. If we considered that normalcy means permanent change and adaptation, and a period of stability would be just an accident, a short period of time that we must not be deceived? Perhaps this approach is indeed the secret of a resilient organization [8].

The tourism industry has evolved rapidly in recent decades [22]. In addition to the positive effects of generating growth in the destination areas, there are also negative effects with an impact on areas such as the environment, culture, politics, social and economic [35].

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, the growing number of tourists from some European destinations led to congestion and saturation, which risks damaging sites and making them

less attractive [29]? In addition, although tourism has the potential to generate revenue and stimulate local development, tourist flows can also have an impact on the quality of life of the local population and affect local culture [28].

The new policy framework for European tourism, adopted by the Commission in 2012, includes the promotion of sustainable, responsible and quality tourism. The key issues involve limiting the environmental impact of transport related to tourism, as well as limiting the negative impact on tourist destinations [3, 23].

The growing need for sustainability is also a result of the high volume of knowledge and concern about the impact on tourism and environmental issues in general [10]. The development of tourism without sustainability can lead to serious deterioration of society, but also of the environment and the entire tourism industry. Tourism activities have repercussions on the economy, on the natural and built environment, on the local population of the destination and on the tourists themselves [14].

Tourism activities have repercussions on the economy, on the natural and built environment, on the local population of the destination and on the tourists themselves [31]. This generates multiple impacts, the range and variety of production factors needed to produce these goods and services purchased by visitors and the range of agents interested or affected by tourism, it is necessary to adopt an integrated approach to tourism development, management and control [6].

This approach is strongly recommended for the formulation and implementation of national and local tourism policies, as well as the necessary international agreements or other mechanisms on tourism [15].

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This research focuses on two main aspects, each equally important for tourism actors. First, we analyzed the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the rural mountain tourism in

Romania and whether the resilience and sustainability test was passed. The second aim of the research was to identify solutions for the relaunch and development of the rural mountain tourism in Romania. Several research methods have been used to meet our objectives, such as analysis, synthesis, comparison, observation or documentary research.

The quantitative research methodology used is limited to the questionnaire-based survey. The questionnaire contained 16 questions and was administered between 15-30 March 2023, by phone, because not all tourist boarding houses in the mountain area have an internet connection:

- (1)What was the impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on tourism in Romania?
- (2)What was the impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on rural mountain tourism in Romania?
- (3)What was the impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on your business?
- (4)Did you have to close work points/units during this period?
- (5)Did you have to lay off staff during this period?
- (6)What losses did you have or estimate you will have?
- (7)In this crisis, the Government's assistance was?
- (8)In this crisis, the help from the local authorities was?
- (9)What steps would you like the government and state institutions working in the field of tourism to take to help you overcome the pandemic crisis?
- (10)What steps do you take to minimize the impact of Covid-19 on your company's business strategy, sales and cash flow?
- (11)When do you expect a stabilization of the Romanian tourism industry?
- (12)When do you expect a stabilization of the tourism industry in the rural mountain tourism?
- (13)Did Romanian tourists choose the rural mountain tourism as a tourist destination in 2020, because they had the opportunity to use holiday vouchers?

(14)Tourists have chosen the rural mountain tourism as a tourist destination in 2020?

(15)Tourists who visited the rural mountain tourism in 2020 preferred accommodation in the reception structures?

(16)For the development the rural mountain tourism, the authorities must....?

We had a number of 100 respondents, owners or administrators of classified accommodation units in the mountain area. We analyzed 10 tourist and agritourism pensions, classified by the Romanian Ministry of Tourism from the 10 most representative mountain counties in Romania: Alba, Argeş, Braşov, Covasna, Maramureş, Neamţ, Prahova, Sibiu, Suceava and Vâlcea (Map 2).



Map 2. Romania's physical map and the counties distribution on its territory

Source: Pinterest.com, <https://ro.pinterest.com/pin/311241024255398778/>, Accessed on Sept. 10, 2023 [27].

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

From the analysis of the answers to the questionnaires, it results that the tourism actors appreciate that the impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on tourism in Romania was devastating - negative, in proportion of 95% and neutral - 5%, Table 4.

However, at the level of pensions in the mountain area, the owners or administrators estimate that the year 2020, in terms of the number of tourists, was negative - 35%, neutral - 25% and positive - 40%. This shows that tourists chose safer, isolated and unpolluted destinations during the pandemic, Table 4.

Table 4. The impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on tourism in Romania and on rural mountain tourism

QUESTIONNAIRE QUESTIONS	What was the impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on tourism in Romania?	What was the impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on rural mountain tourism in Romania?
Negative	95%	35%
Neutral	5%	25%
Positive	0%	40%

Source: own processing based on data obtained from the centralization of questionnaire responses.

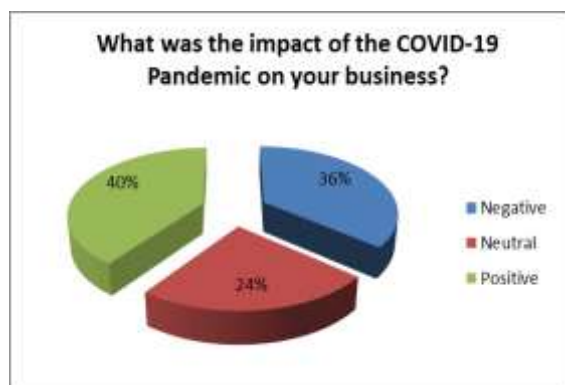


Fig. 1. The impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on business. Source: own processing based on data obtained from the centralization of questionnaire responses

This correlates with the answers received to the question related to the impact of COVID-19 on the business of each respondent: negative - 36%, neutral - 24% and positive - 40% (Figure 1).

When asked if they had to close units or work points, tourism managers stated that: yes - 8%, temporary - 12%, no - 73% and partial - 7% (Table 5).

Regarding the dismissal of staff, the employers stated that: yes - 10%, temporary - 21%, no - 65% and partially - 4% (Table 5).

Table 5. The impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on work points/units and on lay off staff.

QUESTIONNAIRE QUESTIONS	Did you have to close work points/units during this period?	Did you have to lay off staff during this period?
Yes	8%	10%
Temporary	12%	21%
No	73%	65%
Partial	7	4

Source: own processing based on data obtained from the centralization of questionnaire responses.

In addition to staffing issues, economic results are very important. Pension owners stated that during the pandemic, the losses were: very big - 13%, big - 17%, minimal - 25% and nothing - 45% (Figure 2).

According to the centralization of the data from the questionnaires, the 100 respondents stated that in this crisis, the Government's assistance was: big - 0%, small - 45%, medium - 8% and nothing - 47% (Table 6).

Regarding the help from the local authorities was: big - 0%, small - 5%, medium - 45% and nothing - 50% (Table 6).

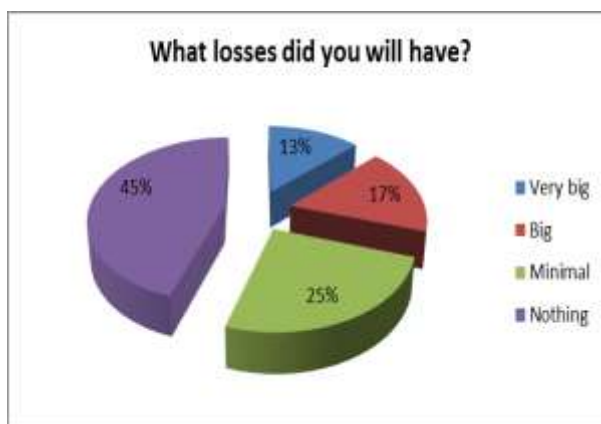


Fig. 2. The impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on business

Source: own processing based on data obtained from the centralization of questionnaire responses.

Table 6. The Government's assistance and the help from the local authorities

QUESTIONNAIRE QUESTIONS	In this crisis, the Government's assistance was:	In this crisis, the help from the local authorities was:
Big	0%	0%
Small	45%	5%
Medium	8%	45%
Nothing	47%	50%

Source: own processing based on data obtained from the centralization of questionnaire responses.

Through this questionnaire, we wanted to find out the opinion of the owners or administrators of the pensions regarding the measures that the Government and the authorities with attributions in the field of tourism must take, in order to overcome the crisis. The answers were: state funds - 30%, guaranteed/subsidized loans - 5%, exemptions or postponements of taxes and duties - 40% and insistent promotion of rural mountain tourism - 25% (Figure 3).

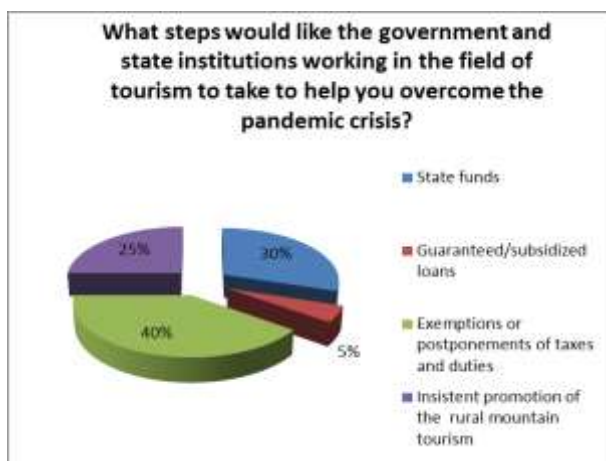


Fig. 3. Government measures to save tourism  
 Source: own processing based on data obtained from the centralization of questionnaire responses.

In the next questionnaire, we wanted to see what concrete measures taken by tourism entrepreneurs to minimize the effects of the pandemic. They stated that they had taken the following measures: reduction of staff - 2%, loans - 5%, adding other services for tourists - 35%, sale of certain products obtained locally-40%, promoting offers in agencies in other

countries - 8% and aggressive promotion - 10% (Figure 4).



Fig. 4. Measures of entrepreneurs to save the business  
 Source: own processing based on data obtained from the centralization of questionnaire responses.

We wanted to find out the opinion of the tourism actors, in connection with the moment when the tourism in Romania will return to normal (Table 7).

The answers were:

- 2021 – 8%,
- 2022 – 62%,
- 2023 – 27%
- 2024 – 3%.

Because rural tourism in the mountain area was less affected, we also wanted to see the opinion of the respondents regarding the return to normal in the areas where they live (Table 7).

The answers were:

- 2021 – 42%
- 2022 – 33%
- 2023 – 25%
- 2024 – 0%.

Table 7. The opinion of the entrepreneurs regarding the return to the normal state in tourism

QUESTIONNAIRE QUESTIONS	When do you expect a stabilization of the Romanian tourism industry?	When do you expect a stabilization of the tourism industry in the rural mountain tourism?
2021	8%	42%
2022	62%	33%
2023	27%	25%
2024	3%	0%

Source: own processing based on data obtained from the centralization of questionnaire responses.

Because the topic of holiday vouchers has been much discussed lately, we wanted to find out the opinion of entrepreneurs in the mountain area, about the number of tourists who used holiday vouchers.

The answers were: Majority - 20%, Small majority - 36%, They came anyway, even on their own money - 44% (Figure 5).



Fig. 5. Use of holiday vouchers

Source: own processing based on data obtained from the centralization of questionnaire responses.

Through this questionnaire, we wanted to identify the main motivation of tourists, who chose rural tourism in the mountain area and the connection with the restrictions during the pandemic:

Because they are passionate about the wilderness – 12%, To know the local culture and traditions – 18% , To protect yourself from Covid-19 – 51%, For the local gastronomic offer – 19% (Figure 6).

According to the respondents, the tourists who stayed in 2020 in the mountain area, preferred the pensions: Maximum 8 rooms –

65%, Between 9 and 15 rooms – 25%, Up to 15 rooms – 10% (Figure 7).

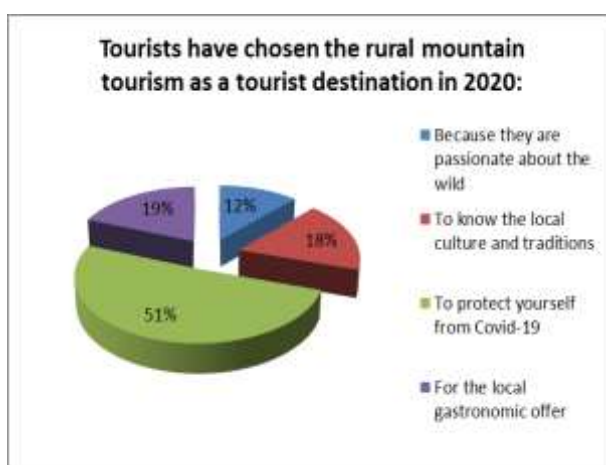


Fig. 6. The motivation for choosing rural pensions in the mountain area

Source: own processing based on data obtained from the centralization of questionnaire responses.

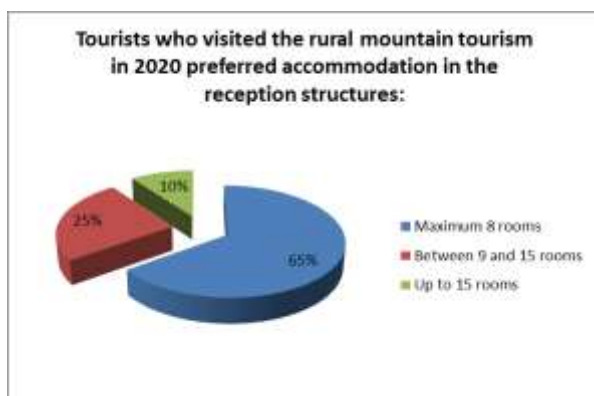


Fig. 7. The option regarding the size of the pension

Source: own processing based on data obtained from the centralization of questionnaire responses.

At the end, we asked the entrepreneurs from the rural mountain tourism about what measures the authorities must take for the future development of tourism in this area:

- Develop transport infrastructure – 25%



- Promote more aggressively the rural mountain tourism - 24%
- Organize several events – 25%
- Grants tax exemptions to classified accommodation owners – 26% (Figure 8).

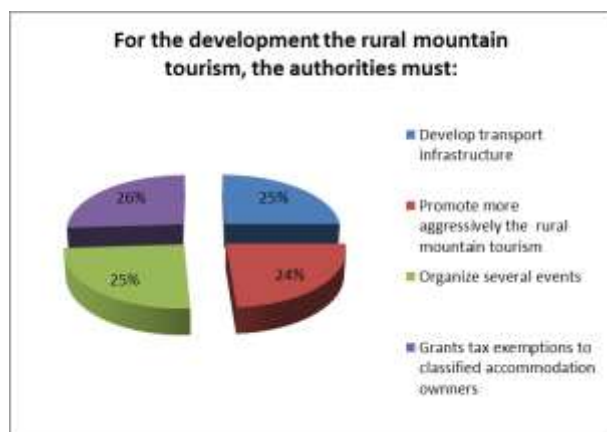


Fig. 8. What measures should the authorities take for the future development of rural mountain tourism  
Source: own processing based on data obtained from the centralization of questionnaire responses.

The analysis of the results shows that the pandemic had a neutral to positive effect for tourism in the mountain area and that, for the most part, the resilience and sustainability test was passed. We consider that this study is very useful for tourism entrepreneurs, for local and central public authorities and the conclusions and recommendations extracted from the questionnaires can suggest valuable ideas for the relaunch and development of the rural mountain tourism in Romania.

From the analysis of the answers to the questionnaires, it results that the owners and administrators of the pensions estimate that the impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on tourism in Romania was negative, in proportion of 95% and neutral - 5%. This is an x-ray of tourism in Romania from 2020 and shows the size of the tourism disaster during the pandemic.

However, at the level of pensions in the mountain area, the owners or administrators estimate that the year 2020, in terms of the number of tourists, was negative - 35%, neutral - 25% and positive - 40%.

This shows that during the pandemic, tourists chose safer, isolated and unpolluted destinations. This aspect is very important to demonstrate that the rural pensions in the

mountainous area of Romania have passed the resilience and sustainability test during this period.

This correlates with the answers received to the question related to the impact of COVID-19 on the business of each respondent in the mountain area: negative - 36%, neutral - 24% and positive - 40%.

When asked if they had to close units or work points, mountain tourism managers stated that: yes - 8%, temporary - 12%, no - 73% and partially - 7%, unlike managers in mountain tourism. urban or coastal areas, which have been severely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, with some having to close their tourism business for a long time or even permanently. We must mention the fact that many units in the urban area went bankrupt, especially those that had loans.

The same phenomenon happens regarding the dismissal of personnel, the owners from the mountain area stated that: yes - 10%, temporary - 21%, no - 65% and partially - 4%, aspects that demonstrate the successful passing of the resilience test.

In addition to the staffing issues, also related to the resilience test, the economic results are very important. Pension owners in the mountain area said that during the pandemic, the losses were: very big - 13%, big - 17%, minimal -25% and nothing - 45%, as opposed to the massive losses recorded by tourism entrepreneurs national.

A very important question referred to the size of aid coming from the state or local authorities during the pandemic.

According to the centralization of the data from the questionnaires, the 100 respondents stated that in this crisis, the Government's assistance was: big - 0%, small - 45%, medium - 8% and nothing - 47%. These answers show that the government's promises have not been honored and that employers and tourism workers have been forgotten.

Regarding the help from the local authorities was: big - 0%, small - 5%, medium - 45% and nothing - 50%. At the local level, support has come more directly, with many local governments exempting or postponing the

payment of local taxes and fees for rural pensions.

Through the following questionnaire, we wanted to find out the opinion of the owners or administrators of the pensions in the mountain area, in connection with the measures that the Government and the authorities with attributions in the field of tourism must take in order to overcome the crisis. The answers were: state funds - 30%, guaranteed/subsidized loans - 5%, exemptions or postponements of taxes and duties - 40% and insistent promotion of rural mountain tourism - 25%. A very interesting aspect is the fact that tourism entrepreneurs do not want special facilities and consider that the postponement of taxes and the insistent promotion of rural tourism in the mountain area are solutions for overcoming the crisis and for the development of mountain areas.

In the next questionnaire, we wanted to see what concrete measures taken by tourism entrepreneurs to minimize the effects of the pandemic. They stated that they had taken the following measures:

- reduction of staff - 2%,
- loans - 5%,
- adding other services for tourists - 35%,
- sale of certain products obtained locally - 40%,
- promoting offers in agencies in other countries - 8%
- aggressive promotion - 10%.

These answers show that pensioners considered that solutions to the crisis should not come from the government and that by providing diversified services to tourists (leisure, local cuisine, involvement of tourists in agricultural activities, crafts and traditions, trips to nature, harvesting of berries and mushrooms, folk art) and, especially by selling traditional local products (cheese, natural juices, jam, meat products, alcoholic beverages, handicrafts), the crisis can be overcome.

Here is another proof that rural tourism in the mountain area has passed the test of resilience and sustainability. Moreover, this aspect demonstrates the capacity of the actors involved in mountain tourism to innovate.

In the next questionnaire, we wanted to find out the opinion of tourism actors, in connection with the moment when tourism in Romania will return to normal.

The answers were:

- 2021 – 8%,
- 2022 – 62%,
- 2023 – 27% and
- 2024 – 3%.

Because rural tourism in the mountain area was less affected, we also wanted to see the opinion of the respondents regarding the return to normal in the areas where they live.

The answers were:

- 2021 – 42%
- 2022 – 33%
- 2023 – 25%
- 2024 – 0%.

This shows that entrepreneurs in mountain rural tourism have been less affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and that they are more optimistic about the return to normal in national and local tourism.

Because the topic of holiday vouchers has been much discussed lately, we wanted to find out the opinion of entrepreneurs in the mountain area, about the number of tourists who used holiday vouchers.

The answers were:

- Majority – 20%
- Small majority – 36%
- They came anyway, even on their own money – 44%.

These answers are explained by the fact that rural guesthouses in the mountains do not have the logistical means to receive holiday vouchers, as well as by the fact that many tourists used holiday vouchers on the coast and went to the mountains with their own funds.

Through the following questionnaire, we wanted to identify the main motivation of tourists, who chose rural tourism in the mountain area and the connection with the restrictions during the pandemic. The answers were:

- Because they are passionate about the wild - 12%
- To know the local culture and traditions - 18%

➤ To protect yourself from Covid-19 - 51%

➤ For the local gastronomic offer - 19%.

These answers show that many tourists have chosen isolated mountain boarding houses to protect themselves from Covid-19. This aspect must be assessed in the light of the pandemic, because many traditional destinations have not been able to offer this protection. However, in previous years, many tourists opted for ecotourism, rural and sustainable tourism.

It was very interesting to see the accommodation option for tourists. According to the respondents, the tourists who stayed in 2020 in the mountain area, preferred the pensions:

- Maximum 8 rooms – 65%
- Between 9 and 15 rooms – 25%
- Up to 15 rooms – 10%.

This shows that tourists preferred accommodation with few rooms to protect themselves from Covid-19.

At the end, we asked the entrepreneurs from the rural mountain tourism about what measures the authorities must take for the future development of tourism in this area:

- Develop transport infrastructure – 25%
- Promote more aggressively the rural mountain tourism - 24%
- Organize several events – 25%
- Grants tax exemptions to classified accommodation owners – 26%.

The answers show a balance between the desire of entrepreneurs to develop infrastructure through European funds, the promotion of mountain areas and, very interestingly, the organization of events that bring tourists. We must say that these questionnaires were addressed only to pensions classified by the Ministry of Tourism and that a quarter of those interviewed said they would like to benefit from European funds and tax facilities.

## CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the results shows that the pandemic had a neutral to positive effect for tourism in the mountain area and that, for the most part, the resilience and sustainability test

was passed. We consider that this study is very useful for tourism entrepreneurs, for local and central public authorities and the conclusions and recommendations extracted from the questionnaires can suggest valuable ideas for the relaunch and development of the rural mountain tourism in Romania.

From the analysis of the answers to the questionnaires, it results that the owners and administrators of the pensions estimate that the impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on tourism in Romania was negative, in proportion of 95% and neutral - 5%. This is an x-ray of tourism in Romania from 2020 and shows the size of the tourism disaster during the pandemic.

However, at the level of pensions in the mountain area, the owners or administrators estimate that the year 2020, in terms of the number of tourists, was negative - 35%, neutral - 25% and positive - 40%.

This shows that during the pandemic, tourists chose safer, isolated and unpolluted destinations. This aspect is very important to demonstrate that the rural pensions in the mountainous area of Romania have passed the resilience and sustainability test during this period.

Also related to the resilience test, the economic results are very important. The owners of boarding houses in the mountain area stated that, during the pandemic, the losses were minimal or not at all, unlike the massive losses registered by the national tourism entrepreneurs.

A very important question referred to the size of aid coming from the state or local authorities during the pandemic.

According to the centralization of the data from the questionnaires, the 100 respondents stated that in this crisis, the Government's assistance was very small or non-existent. These answers show that the government's promises have not been honored and that employers and tourism workers have been forgotten.

As for the help from the local authorities was average, at the local level, the support came more directly, many local administrations

exempting or postponing the payment of local taxes and fees for rural pensions.

Through this study, we also wanted to find out the opinion of the owners or administrators of boarding houses in the mountain area, in connection with the measures that the Government and the authorities with attributions in the field of tourism must take in order to overcome the crisis. The answers were: state funds - 30%, guaranteed/subsidized loans - 5%, exemptions or postponements of taxes and duties - 40% and insistent promotion of rural mountain tourism - 25%.

A very interesting aspect is the fact that tourism entrepreneurs do not want special facilities and consider that the postponement of taxes and the insistent promotion of rural tourism in the mountain area are solutions for overcoming the crisis and for the development of mountain areas.

At the end of the study, we wanted to see what concrete measures taken by tourism entrepreneurs to minimize the effects of the pandemic. They stated that they were oriented towards adding other services for tourists - 35%, and sale of certain products obtained locally-40%.

These answers show that pensioners considered that solutions to the crisis should not come from the government and that by providing diversified services to tourists (leisure, local cuisine, involvement of tourists in agricultural activities, crafts and traditions, trips to nature, harvesting of berries and mushrooms, folk art) and, especially by selling traditional local products (cheese, natural juices, jam, meat products, alcoholic beverages, handicrafts), the crisis can be overcome. Here is another proof that rural tourism in the mountain area has passed the test of resilience and sustainability. Moreover, this aspect demonstrates the capacity of the actors involved in mountain tourism to innovate.

Regarding the opinion of tourism actors, regarding the moment when tourism in Romania will return to normal, the conclusions show that most believe that 2023

will be a reasonable year to overcome the crisis.

Because rural tourism in the mountain area was less affected, we also wanted to see the opinion of the respondents regarding the return to normal in the areas where they live. The answers were more optimistic, the year 2021 being a landmark and a hope for overcoming the pandemic, especially in the context of vaccinating the population.

This shows that entrepreneurs in rural mountain tourism have been less affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and that they are more optimistic about the return to normal in national and local tourism.

The conclusions regarding the use of holiday vouchers are explained by the fact that rural guesthouses in the mountain area do not have the logistical means to receive holiday vouchers, as well as by the fact that many tourists used holiday vouchers on the seaside and went to the mountains with own funds.

Regarding the main motivation of tourists, who chose rural tourism in the mountain area and the restrictions during the pandemic, the answers show that many tourists chose isolated guesthouses in the mountain area to protect themselves from Covid-19. This aspect must be assessed in the light of the pandemic, because many traditional destinations have not been able to offer this protection. However, in previous years, many tourists opted for ecotourism, rural and sustainable tourism.

It was very interesting to see the accommodation option for tourists. According to the respondents, the tourists who stayed in 2020 in the mountain area preferred the pensions of maximum 8 rooms - 65%.

This shows that tourists preferred accommodation with few rooms to protect themselves from Covid-19.

At the end, we asked the entrepreneurs from the rural mountain tourism about what measures the authorities must take for the future development of tourism in this area:

Develop transport infrastructure - 25%

Promote more aggressively the rural mountain tourism - 24%

Organize several events - 25%

Grants tax exemptions to classified accommodation owners - 26%.

The conclusions show a balance between the desire of entrepreneurs to develop infrastructure through European funds, the promotion of mountain areas and, very interestingly, the organization of events to bring tourists. We must say that these questionnaires were addressed only to pensions classified by the Ministry of Tourism and that a quarter of those interviewed said they would like to benefit from European funds and tax facilities.

## REFERENCES

- [1]Avery, G.C., Bergsteiner, H., 2010, Honeybees & Locusts: The Business Case for Sustainable Leadership; Allen & Unwin: Sydney, NSW, Australia, 2010.
- [2]Bran, F., Rădulescu, C. V., Bodislav, D. A., Burlacu, S., 2020, Environmental risks in the context of globalization. *Economic Convergence in European Union*, 350-356.
- [3]Bran, F., Bodislav, D.A., Angheluță, S.P., Dobrea, R.C., 2020, Nature, ecosystems and biodiversity-ecosystem management <http://irek.ase.md:80/xmlui/handle/1234567890/950>, Accessed on March 10, 2023.
- [4]Brouder, P., 2020, Reset redux: possible evolutionary pathways towards the transformation of tourism in a COVID-19 world. *Tourism Geographies*, 22(3), pp.484-490.
- [5]Chiurciu, I.-A., Soare, E., Chereji, A.I., Cofas, E., 2020, Analysis regarding the evolution of agrotourism pensions in Romania between 2010 and 2019, Conference Romanian Rural Tourism in International Context. Present and prospects. Iasi. 50.
- [6]Choi, H., Ann, S., Lee, K.-W., Park, D.-B., 2018, Measuring Service Quality of Rural Accommodations. *Sustainability* 2018, 10, 443. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su10020443>
- [7]Chua, B., Ansi, A., Lee, M., Han, H., 2021, Tourists' Outbound Travel Behavior in the Aftermath of COVID-19: The Role of Corporate Social Responsibility, Response Effort, and Health Prevention. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*.
- [8]Cretu, R.F., Cretu R.C., Voinea-Mic, C.C., Stefan, P., 2019, Circular economy, green buildings and environmental protection, Quality - Access to Success, Vol. 20 S2, March 2019 WOS:000461854800032
- [9]Cretu, R.C., Cretu, R.F., Stefan, P., 2017, Analysis of the economic crisis concerning the pensions from the Danube Delta, Scientific Papers. Series "Management, Economic Engineering in Agriculture and rural development", Vol. 17(2), 67-73.
- [10]Cretu, R.C., Cretu, R.F., Stefan, P., 2013, Innovative and sustainable strategies in Romanian tourism and agritourism. Proceedings of the 7th International Management Conference "New Management for the New Economy", 7-8 November 2013, Bucharest, Romania.
- [11]Cretu, R.F., Ciobotar, G.N., Cretu, R.C., 2015, Survey regarding the corporate governance implementation in Romania. *Scientific Papers. Series "Management, Economic Engineering in Agriculture and rural development"*, Vol. 15(4), 33-38.
- [12]Cretu, R.C., Stefan, P., Alecu, I.I., 2021, Has tourism gone on holiday? Analysis of the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on tourism and post-pandemic tourism behavior. *Scientific Papers. Series "Management, Economic Engineering in Agriculture and rural development"*, Vol. 21(2), 191-198.
- [13]Dinulescu, R., Smeureanu, I., Dobrin, C., Popa, I., 2018, A statistical approach for improving the romanian public healthcare system using the lean six sigma methodology. *Economic Computation and Economic Cybernetics Studies and Research*, Vol. 52. Issue 3/2018.
- [14]Dragomir, C.C., Foris, D., Țițu, A.M., Foris, T., 2020, The Role of Intermediaries in Supporting Collaboration for Sustainability: A Model of Commissioning Intervention in the Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration for Sustainable Territorial Development. *Sustainability* 2020, 12(17), 6769.
- [15]Duțescu, A., Popa, A.F., Ponorică, A.G., 2014, Sustainability in tourism industry, based on the key performance indicators, Contemporary approaches and challenges of sustainable tourism (Sustenabilitatea în industria turismului, bazată pe indicatorii cheie de performanță, Abordări contemporane și provocări ale turismului durabil). *Amfiteatru Economic*, 16 (special issue 8), pp.830-831.
- [16]Engelmo Moriche, Á., Nieto Masot, A., Mora Aliseda, J., 2021, Economic Sustainability of Touristic Offer Funded by Public Initiatives in Spanish Rural Areas. *Sustainability* 2021, 13, 4922. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13094922>
- [17]EU Commission Joint Research Center. Regional vulnerability of tourism.
- [18]Gössling, S., Scott, D., Hall, C.M., 2020, Pandemics, tourism and global change: a rapid assessment of COVID-19. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 29(1), pp.1-20.
- [19]Hui, D.S. I Azhar, E., Madani, T.A., Ntoumi, F., Kock, R., Dar, O., Ippolito, G., Mchugh, T.D., Memish, Z.A., Drosten, C., et al. The continuing 2019-nCoV epidemic threat of novel coronaviruses to global health—The latest 2019 novel coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan, China. *IJID Off. Publ. Int. Soc. Infect. Dis.* 2020, 91, 264–266.
- [20]Iatu, C., Munteanu, A., Boghinciu, M., Coca, A., Ibanescu, B., 2011, Active tourism in Dornelor basin—Between possibilities and spatial manifestation. *Int. J. Energy Environ.* 2011, 5, 175–182.
- [21]Kemp, R., Parto, S., Gibson, R., 2005, Governance for sustainable development: Moving from theory to practice. *Int. J. Sustain. Dev.* 2005, 8, 12–30.
- [22]Marcuta, L., Marcuta, A., Popescu, A., Tindeche, C., Tudor, V., Smedescu, D., 2020, Study on the development of adventure tourism in Romania. *Scientific Papers. Series "Management, Economic*

Engineering in Agriculture and rural development", Vol. 20(4), 339-346.

[23]Mihalic, T., Mohamadi, S., Abbasi, A., Dávid, L.D., 2021, Mapping a Sustainable and Responsible Tourism Paradigm: A Bibliometric and Citation Network Analysis. *Sustainability* 2021, 13, 853. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13020853>

[24]Mitrica, B., Serban, P.-R., Mocanu, I., Damian, N., Grigorescu, I., Dumitrascu, M., Dumitrica, C., 2021, Developing an Indicator-Based Framework to Measure Sustainable Tourism in Romania. A Territorial Approach. *Sustainability* 2021, 13, 2649. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13052649>

[25]National Institute of Statistics. 2023, <http://statistici.insse.ro:8077/tempo-online/>, Accessed on 23 April 2023.

[26]Nguyen, T.Q.T., Young, T., Johnson, P., 2019, Wearing, S. Conceptualising networks in sustainable tourism development. *Tour. Manag. Perspect.* 2019, 32, 100575.

[27] Pinterest.com, Map of Romania, <https://ro.pinterest.com/pin/311241024255398778/>, Accessed on Sept. 10, 2023.

[28]Popescu, A., Plesoaiianu, D.M., 2023, Tourist arrivals and overnight stays in Romania by tourist destination in the years 2020 and 2021 of Covid-19 pandemic compared to 2019. *Scientific Papers. Series "Management, Economic Engineering in Agriculture and rural development"*, Vol. 23(1), 639-648.

[29]Popescu, A., Dinu, T.A., Stoian, E., Serban, V., Ciocan, H.N., 2022, Romania's mountain areas-present and future in their way to a sustainable development. *Scientific Papers Series "Management, Economic Engineering in Agriculture and rural development"*, Vol. 22(4), 549-564.

[30]Popescu, A., Tindeche, C., Marcuta, A., Marcuta, L., Hontus, A., Stanciu, M., 2022, Romania's tourism offer and demand in the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020 and 2021 compared to 2019. A statistical overview. *Scientific Papers Series "Management, Economic Engineering in Agriculture and rural development"*, Vol. 22(2), 579-590.

[31]Radulescu, C.V., Ladaru, G.-R., Burlacu, S., Constantin, F., Ioanas, C., Petre, I.L., 2021, Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Romanian Labor Market. *Sustainability* 2021, 13, 271. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su130102>

[32]Romeiro, P., Costa, C., 2010, The potential of management networks in the innovation and competitiveness of rural tourism: A case study on the Valle del Jerte (Spain). *Curr. Issues Tour.* 2010, 13, 75–91.

[33]Sisneros-Kidd, A.M., Monz, C., Hausner, V., Schmidt, J., Clark, D., 2019, Nature-based tourism, resource dependence, and resilience of Arctic communities: Framing complex issues in a changing environment. *J. Sustain. Tour.* 2019, 27, 1259–1276.

[34]Somoza-Medina, X., Monteserín-Abella, O., 2021, The Sustainability of Industrial Heritage Tourism Far from the Axes of Economic Development in Europe: Two Case Studies. *Sustainability* 2021, 13, 1077. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13031077>