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ASSESSING THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL EVOLUTION OF TOURISM IN ROMANIA: NAVIGATING POST-COVID CHALLENGES

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Abstract

This study intends to evaluate the evolution and current state of Romania's tourism sector, with a particular focus on the effects generated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the strategic directions pursued in the post-pandemic context. The analysis highlights the main structural transformations within the tourism market, shifts in tourist behaviour, and the necessary adaptations of the sector to both the challenges of the pandemic period and the requirements of the recovery phase. The analysis relied on both quantitative and qualitative data. Statistical indicators on tourism dynamics, structure, and trends were drawn from the National Institute of Statistics' database and the White Card of Tourism in Romania, 2024 edition. Key metrics such as bed capacity, tourist arrivals, overnight stays, and occupancy rates were compared for 2019 and 2023 across regions and types of accommodation. Additionally, data from a survey of 705 tourism operators captured perspectives on income evolution, risk factors, financing, human resources, and digital sales channels. This mixed-method approach enabled a comprehensive assessment of how Romania's tourism sector has evolved and adapted in the post-COVID context. Among the main results of the study, we note the following: domestic tourism has developed due to Romanians' growing preference for local destinations amid the uncertainties associated with international travel; an increased preference for online booking platforms; and a greater demand for personalized travel, with tourists prioritizing safety and health measures. The results highlight the strength of the Romanian tourism sector, which, despite challenges, has a substantial potential for growth, particularly through innovative digital technologies and sustainable practices. Furthermore, the study suggests that ongoing adaptation to evolving consumer preferences and the development of local tourism infrastructure will be essential for sustaining this growth.

Key words: *tourism, COVID-19 pandemic, market response*

INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 severely disrupted the tourism sector, causing widespread temporary closures of tourist destinations, the suspension of travel plans, and a notable decline in student mobility and arrivals.

The COVID-19 pandemic had, in Romania, a multifaceted impact, but its primary consequence was a dramatic decline in the influx of tourists, particularly those from abroad [8]. Underlying this inclination, they have undergone a sequence of structural modifications, complemented by other elements that influence the current tourism landscape. These include a notable decline in the demand for "coach" tourism, favouring individual or small group tours; an increase in the proportion of last-minute bookings; a rise in black tourism, where a green certificate is no longer necessary due to vaccination requirements; and changes in the countries of origin of foreign tourists. Both the county-level and tourist destination-level analyses demonstrate distinct impacts on the tourism market. Also, the types of tourism that were generally based on indoor activities, such as business or spa tourism, were directly affected. Additionally, we observed significant alterations in the tourist offerings in certain mountainous regions, as a result of a shift in tourist demographics from foreigners to Romanians.

The National Institute of Statistics (INS) indicates that the COVID-19 epidemic has had a substantial effect on the service industry, encompassing tourism, hospitality, transportation, and entertainment [7, 10]. Because of the closure of hotels, restaurants, events, and travel restrictions, demand has decreased, resulting in job losses. Border closures, travel restrictions, and health concerns have had a profound impact on the tourism sector, resulting in a substantial decline in travellers and cancellations. The hotel, airline, restaurant, and tourism agency sectors have all incurred substantial financial losses.

Romania, as noted by Ștefanovici and Mazilu (2021) [17], promptly confronted the COVID-19 situation, demonstrating a keen awareness of the hazards and accompanying social and economic consequences. The country prioritized prompt interventions to preserve lives and reduce fatalities, implementing guidelines devised by experts in infectious illnesses and epidemiological studies. The government and central bank enacted procedures to ascertain the fundamental characteristics of the shock. The epidemic has compelled Romanian tourism to transform, as an increasing number of restaurants have made investments in terraces, travel agencies have transitioned to online platforms, and hotels have adopted online booking technologies. Improved or newly developed digital applications have also started to appear, highlighting the importance of prompt and effective responses to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 crisis. In order to reduce the adverse effects generated by the pandemic, efforts have been made to support the sector tourists. In this sense, the Government's Emergency Ordinance no. 224/2020 introduced the sup-port financial for tourism businesses [6]. To these were added state aid/minimis schemes, grants, support for investments etc. [13].

A study conducted by Gabor et al. (2020) [5] examined the conduct of Romanian tourists during the Covid-19 pandemic. One undeniable reality is that the outbreak of the new virus has significantly influenced the focus of Romanian tourists on the local market. With the increasing closure of borders and implementation of restrictions, there was a redistribution of travel towards local locations, resulting in a decrease in tourism to foreign places. Romanians have maintained their enthusiasm for travel and have instead chosen to spend their holidays within the country, in familiar locations such as family guesthouses, small hotels, or remote areas, flats, and vacation villas. The orientation of tourists towards the domestic market was also stimulated by the holiday vouchers provided by the government [16].

Concerning the influence of the epidemic on the development of tourism, numerous research have demonstrated that: tourism in the mountain regions was mostly un-affected by the epidemic due to their remote location [4]; in the more isolated mountain localities, tourist offers managed efficiently by the locals have also led to an in-crease in tourist traffic, especially after the second half of 2020 [1]; although some of the units were closed or worked at reduced capacity, the orientation of the Romanians towards domestic tourism within the limits of the restrictions allowed many accommodation units to be saved [15]; The offer's diversification, personalized packages, bonuses, price flexibility, personal safety assurance, and intensified virtual promotion attracted customers in 2021 and 2022 [14]; there is an orientation of tourists towards micro-vacations, on short distances, throughout the year, as well as a higher orientation towards rural tourism [11]; during 2020-2022 period tourism facilitated the expansion of rural areas due to their tranquil landscapes, customized packages, incentives, and adaptable pricing [12].

Studies related to the consequences of the pandemic on the tourism sector have focused, either on analyses at the country level, at the regional level, or the level of case studies. At the national level, studies have examined the pandemic's impact on tourism demand, stakeholders' perceptions, tourism flows, and conducted comparative analyses between domestic and international tourism. Regionally, the research focused on NUTS 2 territorial units, major geographical areas, and specific tourist destinations such as mountain resorts, spa towns, or deltaic zones. Cehan and Iaţu (2024) emphasize the existence of significant regional disparities in both the pandemic and post-pandemic periods, shaped by the distinct characteristics of each area (regions, counties and destinations) and reorder the expansion of research to highlight the factors that contribute to the resilience of economic agents in tourism [2].

In this context, the present paper wants to underline, starting from quantitative and qualitative data, which are the elements that contribute to the development of post-pandemic tourism.

The purpose of this research is to advance the existing literature by examining how the tourism industry has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on structural and behavioural transformations. It will analyse various geographical levels and focus on the territory of Romania in 2019 and 2023. Furthermore, we will provide the perspectives of stakeholders on crucial metrics in a comparative analysis, both before and after the epidemic.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study approach of this paper was grounded on data analysis of dynamics, structure, and trends. This study involved thoroughly examining current literature and analysing indicators sourced from the Tempo database of the National Institute of Statistics (INS) [9] and the White Card of Tourism in Romania, 2024 edition [3]. Both sources present statistical data for the designated years 2019 and 2023.

In the first part, we used indicators provided by Tempo Online. The National Tourism Statistics (INS) offers comprehensive information on key performance indicators of the tourism industry. The evolution is categorized according to geographic regions and the specific form of lodging. Our study allows us to evaluate tourism growth in the years preceding and following the pandemic (2019 and 2023) by presenting the market's structure and dynamics. To precisely assess the true magnitude of the tourism market, we performed an analysis utilizing statistical indicators provided by INS like bed capacity, tourist volume, overnight accommodation, and occupancy rate.

In the second phase of the study, we employed the tourist barometer created in 2024 by the „Government of Romania's National Council of Small and Medium Private Enterprises” and “Groupama Insurance” in partnership with the “Ministry of Economy, Entrepreneurship and Tourism”. This report functions as the sole collection of data acquired from industry participants. The report presents research findings from an extensive sample of 705 individuals (210 travel companies and 495 accommodation businesses) and analyses both large and small enterprises engaged in Romania's tourism sector. This study's sample includes all Romanian growth zones and a range of experience levels. We gathered the following indicators for the report: the factors that positively influence tourism; income from tourism; average overnight stays; the number of tourists; the support received from public institutions; financing methods; promotion channels; The main digital sales channel; the average salary in tourism; human resources (evolution, benefits); risk classification and risk management.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Quantitative assessment of the tourism sector's dynamics: 2023 versus 2019

As a result of nearly two decades of steady growth, Romania exceeded the threshold of 13.3 million tourists in 2019, representing a significant milestone in the development of the tourism sector (Table 1).

Within the initial year of the epidemic, there was a significant decline of 52.2% in the overall visitor count, with a particularly substantial drop of 83.1% in the number of international tourists.

Although a moderate recovery was recorded in 2023, with total tourist numbers surpassing pre-pandemic levels by 4%, the volume of international visitors remained approximately 20% below the figures reported in 2019. Furthermore, the number of overnight hotels stays and the occupancy rate are lower compared to the figures from 2019.

Due to its improved offer, which includes over 50% more facilities and 21% more beds, the Romanian market shows potential.

Table 1. The evolution of touristic key indicators at the country level

	2019	2020	2023	Change 2019-2020	Change 2020-2023	Change 2023 compared to 2019
Number of establishments	8,402	8,610	12,697	2.5 %	47.5 %	+51.1 %
Number of beds	356,562	358,119	433,487	0.4 %	21.0 %	+21.6 %
Number of beds - days	88,789,656	64,040,595	98,293,110	-27.9 %	53.5 %	+10.7 %
Number of tourists	13,374,943	6,398,642	13,910,956	-52.2 %	117.4 %	+4.0 %
Number of foreigners	2,683,748	453,867	2,120,068	-83.1 %	367.1 %	-21.0 %
Number of overnight stays	30,086,091	14,579,140	29,691,592	-51.5 %	103.7 %	-1.3 %
Net use indices of the tourist accommodation capacity in use	33.9%	22.8%	30.2%	-11.1 pp	7.4 pp	-3.7 pp

Source: INS, Tempo online [9].

An analysis reveals an increase in tourist amenities at the Danube Delta, Seaside, and Mountain Resorts compared to 2019. Moreover, as previously said, there was an increase in the number of Romanian tourists in all tourist destinations, except the Danube Delta. Although the occupancy rate decreased in all tourist destinations, it remains at over 40% in the coastal and spa are-as, and around 25% in the mountain and delta areas.

Table 2. The change of key indicators during the 2019-2023 period, on tourist destinations

	Total	Seaside	Spas	Mountain resorts	The Danube Delta	County capitals	Other
				%			
Number of establishments	51.1	62.7	56.6	57.6	94.1	33.7	46.7
Number of beds	21.6	25.7	13.0	28.0	51.9	8.3	29.2
Number of beds - days	10.7	21.3	5.5	20.5	-5.7	1.6	14.5
Number of tourists	4.0	20.9	3.3	16.7	-17.7	-2.3	2.1
Number of Romanian tourists	10.3	22.3	3.5	20.2	-12.3	6.8	6.0
Number of foreigners	-21.0	-25.3	-4.2	-20.9	-56.2	-20.8	-21.2
Number of overnight stays	-1.3	2.9	-13.2	10.0	-24.7	-21	-1.3
Net use indices of the tourist accommodation capacity in use in 2023	30.2%	43.3%	39.3%	24.1%	26.2%	34.7%	19.4%
Net use indices of the tourist accommodation capacity in use	-3.7 pp	-7.7 pp	-8.4 pp	-2.3 pp	-6.6 pp	-1.3 pp	-3.1 pp

Source: INS, Tempo online [9].

As can be seen, Romanian tourism recovered after the pandemic but it did not reach the same level of development as in 2019. Nevertheless, the pandemic period saw investments that contributed to the establishment of new accommodation facilities and the diversification of the tourism offer, highlighting the sector's capacity for further development.

Qualitative approach to sectoral developments from the perspective of tourism operators

As reported by key players in the tourism sector, the relaunch of local activities (festivals, concerts, etc.) to support tourist circulation has become more important after the pandemic (Table 3). Also, improving the tourist infrastructure is much more necessary to convince Romanian tourists to visit their own country.

However, it is considered that the most important factors for tourist activity are the customers returning to the Romanian tourist circuit, the attraction of new tourists, and the price level.

The decrease of over 10 percentual points of rate of return and the slow increase of the stays over 3 nights may explain the market contraction. The survey indicates that 53% of respondents had smaller incomes in 2023 compared with 2019 due to the decrease in overnight stays and the increase in expenses. For example, 57% of respondents declare an increase in wages. However, the salary increase was lower than in 2019, opting for meal vouchers that are exempt from tax or for a percentage of sales, particularly in the restaurant sector.

The report also identifies the source of financing as an issue. In 2019, nearly all

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respondents had their funds, which they partially supplemented with other sources. However, by 2023, their share has dropped below 70%, and suppliers' financing has increased, indicating a greater preference for their funds and a greater reliance on leasing and loans.

Table 3. The opinion of operators in the tourism sector (restaurants, accommodation facilities, and tourist agencies)

Category	2019	2023	Trend
What are the factors that positively influence tourism activity:			
- Tourists who revisit	70%	67%	↘
- New tourists	59%	55%	↘
- Prices	46%	43%	↘
- Local events	19%	27%	↗
- Infrastructure	5%	12%	↗
Average rate of return			
- Total	45%	33%	↘
- Accommodation units	43%	30%	↘
- Travel agencies	50%	40%	↘
Dynamics of the average number of accommodation nights (2019-2023)			
- 1-2 nights		24%	
- 2-3 nights		54%	
- 3-4 nights		17%	
- Over 4 nights		5%	
How the income evolved compared with 2019:			
- Increased		35%	
- The same		12%	
- Decreased		53%	
The level of average wage compared with 2019:			
- Increased		57%	
- The same		21%	
- Decreased		22%	
Methods of financing used in tourism:			
- Self-financing	92%	67%	↘
- Bank loans	23%	30%	↗
- Supplier credit	21%	23%	↗
- Non-refundable funds	18%	30%	↗
- Leasing	13%	35%	↗
- Other answer options	Under 10%	Under 10%	-
Pre- and post-pandemic strategic options:			
- Profit growth	66%	60%	↘
- Investment growth	58%	51%	↘
- Increase in the number of employees	42%	39%	↘
- Increasing the capacity to provide services	27%	26%	↘
- Maintaining the business at current dimensions	24%	39%	↗
Benefits offered to tourism employees			
- Annual salary increases	42%	36%	↘
- Meal vouchers	32%	37%	↗
- Specialized training	30%	20%	↘
- Health insurance	26%	26%	--
- Holiday vouchers	24%	9%	↘
- Percentage of sales value	9%	21%	↗
- Other answer options	12%	5%	↘
The first 10 risks	Rank	Rank	
- The cost of raw materials and energy	5	1	
- Road/transport infrastructure	3	2	

Category	2019	2023	Trend
- Inadequate legislation in the field	7	3	
- Tourist budgets	9	4	
- The impact of meteorological phenomena	-	5	
- Staff retention costs	2	6	
- Lack of investment funds	-	7	
- Lack of public transport infrastructure	6	8	
- Difficult relations with the authorities	8	9	
- Poor income	-	10	
- Lack of qualified personnel	1	-	
- Lack of legislative stability	4	-	
- Seasonal variation	10	-	
Risk management through:			
- Marketing campaign	61%	26%	
- Assurance	54%	11%	
- Training programs for employees	30%	31%	
- Accessing European funds	11%	41%	
- Other options	3%	5%	
Tourism promotion:			
- Website and social media (Facebook, etc.)	85%	62%	↘
- Tourists' recommendations	83%	75%	↘
- Catalogues, tourist guides, leaflets	29%	34%	↗
- Participation in tourism fairs	26%	20%	↘
- Promotion through Tourist Information Centers	18%	14%	↘
- Advertisements in newspapers, magazines, radio, TV	16%	24%	↗
Digital sales channel			
- Own site/channel	44%	48%	↗
- Specialized reservation site	30%	25%	↘
- Social media	24%	29%	↗

Source: CNIPMMR, 2024 [3].

Also, although in business management the growth of profit, in-vestments, and production capacities is still pursued, there is an increase in economic agents who prefer to remain at the current level of development (almost 40% in 2023).

Another change that occurred after the pandemic period was a shift in risk perception. In 2019, the tourism sector primarily faced risks associated with the recruitment and retention of staff and infrastructure. In 2023, we will identify issues related to energy and materials costs, infrastructure, and legislation. In 2019, we approached these risks through marketing campaigns and assurance packages, but in 2023, the respondents indicated that they prefer to access European funds or invest in staff training to resolve these issues.

The ways to promote the business didn't change much compared with 2019. Social media, tourists, and printed materials remain the primary channels for gaining clients. We observe, however, more investments in advertising (printed, online, or media channels). Additionally, there has been a surge in the utilization of websites and social media platforms for sales, particularly in the hospitality and restaurant industries.

CONCLUSIONS

The Romanian tourism sector did not return to its pre-pandemic levels in 2023. Although new facilities were constructed and tourist-offering were expanded, the number of international tourists decreased, and the rise in Romanian tourists was in-sufficient to offset the reduction in occupancy rate.

The study presented in this paper demonstrates that the tourist industry in Romania is consistently encountering a multitude of obstacles. On the other hand, there has been a marked decline in the number of international arrivals, overnight stays, and the average duration of trips, all of which have negatively affected the sector's revenue streams. At the same time, operational costs have risen significantly, particularly in relation to energy consumption, raw materials, and wages.

Compounding these challenges is the reduced circulation rate of financial resources within tourist destinations, along with the obvious need to supplement one's income with money from European funds, loans, or leasing. Also, in 2019, the economic agents complained about the lack of personnel qualifications and transport infrastructure, but currently, the main problem is the increase in costs, inadequate legislation, and the reduced purchasing power of tourists. The promotion and sales channels remained approximately the same, yet there is a clear tendency among operators to rely increasingly on their own websites and social media channels for promotion and customer interaction.

Although the Romanian tourism sector was significantly affected by the pandemic, it demonstrated a degree of adaptability in the face of crisis it failed to return to the previous level of COVID-19. This paper presents a critical approach to the sector and emphasizes the need to adapt to consumer behaviour and the current challenges of the tourism market. While Romanians' shift towards domestic consumption has compensated for the decline in foreign tourists, it becomes increasingly clear that the tourism industry requires continuous innovation and well-targeted strategic investments in order to capitalize on emerging opportunities and address the challenge of escalating operational costs. There is a pressing need to improve the offering of tourist ser-vices, make greater use of digital platforms, and, last but not least, identify measures to increase the degree of occupancy and attract foreign tourists.

In short, this paper emphasizes that sustainable practices and digital advances are essential to ensure the development of the Romanian tourism industry in a post-pandemic world. Investing in new tourist facilities is not sufficient; we also need legislative support, cost reduction, and a response to the constantly changing preferences of tourists.

In conclusion, this paper highlights the dual challenges and opportunities facing the tourism sector in Romania after the pandemic. Increased reliance on domestic tourism and the growth of online booking platforms are promising trends; however, the sector's long-term recovery depends on addressing rising operational costs, legislative inadequacies, and the need for improved infrastructure. A comprehensive strategy that includes upgrading infrastructure, attracting foreign tourists, targeted marketing, and policy reform will be essential to ensuring the long-term viability and competitiveness of the sector.

Further research is required on the long-term impacts of post-pandemic adaptations in Romania's tourism sector, particularly regarding consumer behaviour shifts, the effectiveness of digital transformation initiatives, and the sustainability of increased domestic tourism. Additionally, studies focusing on comparative analyses with other European countries could provide valuable insights into best practices and strategies for fostering international tourism recovery.

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