

## RETROSPECTIVE ON MANAGING THE TOURISM CRISIS AND THE HOTEL INDUSTRY DURING THE PANDEMIC PERIOD

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### Abstract

*Research on the crisis in tourism and the hotel industry has become a topic of particular importance in the context of the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, as this crisis in the tourism sector, especially in the hotel industry, has affected a number of hotels and tourism businesses that have not recovered from the major impact of this uncertain situation. The pandemic period experienced by hoteliers provided a context for management to demonstrate their adaptability to new situations, but also the challenges associated with resilience, recovery and market value enhancement in such situations. In relation to the topic at hand, we considered it important to invoke the way governments have been able to intervene and support the hospitality industry and tourism activity when, in practice, they have been the areas most impacted in the context and scale with which the pandemic has evolved. Thus, the main objective of the paper is to review the literature on methodological approaches in determining the peculiarities of management specific to the hotel industry in times of crisis and to present the strategies to be followed by hotel managers during crises and disasters.*

**Key words:** *tourism, tourism industry, Covid 19, hotel management, crisis periods, sustainable marketing, entrepreneurial resilience.*

**JEL Classification:** *L25, L83*

### I. INTRODUCTION

Tourism, as an industry, contributes significantly to the country's foreign exchange reserves, providing the population with direct and indirect employment opportunities. The tourism industry is a key factor in the development of our country's economy, with hotel businesses occupying an important position in the country's GDP share. Given the importance of the hotel industry in the economic system, an important aspect of the paper is to describe the role played by hotel management during the pandemic period and during the recovery period, and to present the aspects of government involvement in managing the pandemic crisis. Thus, in this paper we have used the literature review on the strategies that were followed by hotel managers during crises and disasters and highlighting the measures adopted at the specific Covid-19, by the authorities.

The Covid-19 pandemic has undoubtedly exposed the vulnerability of Romania's hospitality and tourism industry to such disasters and economic volatility, as well as the industry's rate of recovery. The working environment in the tourism industry was negatively affected, generating fears about the ability of the tourism business to recover from losses, recover quickly and hire skilled labour, with redundancies or at best, staff on ethnic unemployment during critical

periods (Motoc, 2020, pp. 435 - 449). After the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the Covid-19 pandemic on 11 March 2020, more than 90% of the global population faced massive restrictions due to the blockade of countries, local and international travel bans and the closure of airports and borders (measures and policies to limit the spread of the pandemic were developed and implemented) (Motoc, 2020, pp. 435 - 449).

The unprecedented global crisis triggered in most of Europe in March 2020 resulted in a 72% drop in international tourist arrivals between January and October 2020, due to travelers' confidence to undertake trips and restrictions, which supported the need for distance and social isolation (World Tourism Barometer, 2020).

There are a number of studies in the literature that examine possible strategies that hotel managers should adopt to manage the crisis, and the actions and strategies of hotel managers are extensively analyzed in dealing with a variety of events, ranging from those caused by the action of nature such as epidemics and natural disasters to those caused by terrorism, political instability, wars or economic crises. Thus, the following sections of the paper detail and analyze the above issues.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism activity is a key component in creating goodwill among the people and as a result socio-economic growth in the country (Abhishek et al., 2021, pp. 1-19). Tourism as an industry contributes significantly to the country's foreign exchange reserves and provides direct and indirect opportunities in the employment issue for a large segment of the population (Riadil, 2020, pp. 98-108). Tourism is a significant economic activity worldwide, which not only, contributes directly to the growth of the national economy, but also has important linkages with many other sectors such as agriculture, animal husbandry, handicrafts, construction, transportation, entertainment, and the diversity of activities has increased significantly over time.

The literature presents the most relevant forms of tourism (Ohlan, 2017, pp. 9-22): religious and spiritual tourism; rural tourism; sustainable tourism; nature or ecological tourism; adventure tourism; business tourism. Religious and spiritual tourism is practiced by people all over the world, and in Romania there are many outstanding places of worship, visited by both the local population and foreign tourists. Rural tourism is one of the key sectors in the development of tourism, and it is also developing rapidly because the distances between towns and villages have become shorter and shorter, and in this context the rural environment benefits from infrastructure facilities and easier access to various services (Kido-Cruz et al., pp. 1-9). Sustainable tourism starts from the idea of sustainability, namely that people must live within the capacity of the ecosystem they support. Thus, support for environmentally sustainable development in the tourism sector is growing significantly, as it is a natural way to combine environmental issues with industry expansion and development (Meyer et al., 2017). Nature tourism takes the form of travel, and the providers of this form of tourism are currently trying to reinvent nature as a tourist resort in search of alternatives in tourist services, this modern form of tourism focusing on nature and its beauty so that visitors can enjoy the natural environment. Ecotourism takes into account untouched natural and socio-cultural attractions, with the concepts 'nature tourism' and 'ecotourism' being used interchangeably (Costa and Lima, 2018, pp. 50-62).

Adventure tourism, also referred to in some sources as youth tourism, has been considered to be one of the most important segments of international and local tourism, with this type of tourism having the potential to expand and offer more and more opportunities for those who are dormant to practice it. Business tourism or the business meetings, conferences and exhibitions industry is growing

rapidly and is closely linked to business travel (Costa and Lima, 2018, pp. 50-62).

The economic impact of tourism has been classified in the literature, targeting three categories (Baum et al., 2020, pp. 2813-2829): direct impact (changes in industries that are directly related to tourism spending are referred to as direct impact), indirect impact (has a multiplier effect due to two-way linkages, being intermediate consumption in the tourism industry for the creation of products and services) and induced impact (refers to sales, income or jobs generated by household spending as a result of income from tourism spending, business consumption that directly or indirectly gains from early investment in the tourism sector is also an example of induced impact). The three categories of impact thus form the total impact of tourism (Pablo-Romero and Molina, 2022, pp. 28-41).

A multi-state study to track the impact of tourism on the GDP of different countries assesses, analyses and presents the contribution of tourism to the economy financially, but also in terms of job creation, infrastructure development, support for local industry growth, regional development and changes that boost people's living standards (Tourism Economics Brussels, 2022). An economic impact analysis tracks the expenditure flows related to tourism activity in a region to detect changes in sales, tax revenues, job creation as a result of tourism activity, and there are several techniques for calculating the economic impact of tourism, including the tourism satellite account, the input-output table and model, the social accounting matrix and the computable general equilibrium model, among the most important (Tourism Economics Brussels, 2022).

Catastrophic events affect the tourism sector by changing the attractiveness of destinations and discouraging consumers from undertaking travel (Brouder et al., 2020, pp. 735-746), with some expert sources showing that tourism is one of the activities most exposed to global risks and is affected by events of all kinds (Nguyen et al., 2022). Among disasters, epidemic outbreaks are of particular importance as the effects are combined with sometimes forced closure of tourism activities and restrictions on citizens' mobility. In this sense, the pandemic caused by Covid-19, presents four fundamental differences from other catastrophic events that have occurred in recent years that have made it more serious, differences related to geographical scope, duration, degree of uncertainty and intensity (Navarro et al., 2020, pp. 423-437).

According to some specificity sources, by 2020, the pandemic has overwhelmingly affected more than 73% of international tourists worldwide (UNWTO, 2021). In the last twenty years, phenomena that could be comparable to Covid-19 would be the Zika virus in 2015, the Ebola virus in West Africa in 2013, swine flu (A. H1N1 flu virus) in 2009 and

Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS-Cov1) in 2003. Although they were widely covered by the media and spread to several countries, they were effectively controlled and did not reach the geographical range covered by Covid-19 (Motsa et al., 2021). Concerning tourist activity requiring mobility, in the case of Covid-19, the duration of the outbreak was uncertain, its intensity varied from week to week, and it also presented time segments where there were mobility restrictions, thus quite a few economic entities faced temporary closure forced by the authorities to control cases of contagion, with the virus derived from certain leisure places and restaurant activity (Michalkova and Gall, 2021, pp. 662-684). The Covid-19 pandemic has generated a heightened risk perception among tourists that has substantially reduced both the frequency of travel and the distance travelled. Moreover, in the specific case of the hotel sector, tourists may have opted for accommodation alternatives, such as renting apartments, which could be considered safer as they apparently favored social distancing (Donaire et al., 2021)). Thus, the business strategies to be followed by hotel managers are considered together with the prospects of demand recovery (Figini and Patuelli, 2021).

### III. MANAGEMENT PRACTICES ADOPTED IN HOTELS DURING THE PANDEMIC PERIOD

There are studies in the literature (Sigala, 2020, pp. 312-321) that attempt to specify the practices that hotel managers should adopt and what strategies should be adapted to each of the events analysed, due to the particularities of each disaster. Thus, it is shown that the actions and strategies followed by hotel managers are not related to the results obtained, and the measures taken as a response by managers to the Covid-19 disaster had to be hybrid, thus combined actions and strategies were taken for the survival of hotels, with proactive actions exercised through strategies for the recovery of tourism activity (Calderon et al., 2021, pp. 1-5). Another study related to the effects that epidemics have on the tourism sector, with direct implications specific to the Covid-19 pandemic, presents two pertinent conclusions, namely: the first conclusion shows that although the impact was expected to be severe, once the pandemic was overcome, in a short period of time, it would not take two years for tourism flows to return to their natural course, and the second conclusion, refers to the relevance of the activities carried out by hotel managers, both in managing the epidemic and in contributing to the subsistence of hotels and the recovery of their establishments and destinations (Chenguang et al., 2022).

Most of the studies focus on measures to be taken during or after an unforeseen event, especially in the case of natural disasters, focusing on hotel

management by applying different questionnaires on possible actions and business strategies. A relevant practice is the need to adapt different strategies to each event studied and to the political and economic context, especially in terms of public intervention that comes to support the hotel sector (Mariolis et al., 2021, pp. 1848-1855). Various classifications have been made that group practices or strategies applied by hotel managers, namely: practices that address workforce, marketing, innovation, financial side, government, planning and information, and other relevant practices according to the events they face. Thus, workforce strategies aim to reduce companies' labor costs and depend on labour legislation and corporate culture to connect and identify workers with their companies (Cardenete et al., 2021).

Marketing and promotion activities are aimed at redirecting demand to specific types of customers (Batic et al., 2021), i.e. offering special promotions and conducting advertising campaigns, which focus on self-promotion of a hotel and coordinating with other firms and institutions to promote specific destinations (Gossling et al., 2021, pp. 1-20). Innovation strategies are used to cope with crises, especially pandemics, and to make hotels more attractive by offering new products or services, improving the quality of existing ones, adopting new technologies (Gossling et al., 2021, pp. 1-20).

Related to the financial side, reducing current costs, but not directly related to the activity carried out is one of the strategies adopted by hotel managers, the practices described aimed at closing facilities, postponing renovation investments or any plan involving non-essential expenses, temporarily closing the hotel. Managers' practices in coordinating and cooperating between the business sector and tourism authorities and institutions consisted primarily of requesting government support through specific public subsidy programmers and postponing or reducing taxes, as well as resorting to certain protest actions. Of major importance is also considered to be the implementation of internal and external communication and information policies, as well as industry cooperation and the implementation of integrated plans in case of emergencies (Gossling et al., 2021, pp. 1-20).

Related to sustainable marketing, some authors present it as the process of creating, communicating and delivering value to customers in such a way that both natural and human capital is preserved or enhanced throughout (Martin and Schouten, 2012)[...] so that all marketing processes are environmentally and socially sound (Paea and Peev-Otiman, 2021, pp. 42-53).

An important aspect to be taken into account, in the case of strategies adopted in hotel management, is that which takes into account changes in the general profile of tourists, the supply side having to adapt

quickly in order to maintain its market share and profitability (Piga et al., 2022, pp. 503-516). Another aspect concerns digital changes, with social media becoming the main source of inspiration for travellers, a relevant example as marketing strategies in product promotion being the use of influencers to promote destinations, hotels and restaurants, etc. The COVID-19 crisis has pushed the tourism industry to digitise more than ever before, with the digital transformation of tourism providing travel opportunities for people with certain disabilities or people who cannot physically travel for various reasons (Teodorov et al., 2021). Tourism stakeholders need to adapt their services and use technology and digitization to gain loyalty, with an enlightening example presented in the literature referring to Austrian family hotels that have managed to retain their customers over the last 30 years by adapting to customer needs (Köseoglu et al., 2020). Also, the health and healthy lifestyle component has become a worldwide trend that is also applied in the tourism business, specifically in the wellness and spa sector, i.e. with specific spa treatments, which are constantly growing due to high demand. Destinations also need to consider sustainability issues, which include proper waste management, ensuring that historical heritage is properly preserved, allowing only a certain number of travellers to visit at a time, thus preserving natural resources and habitats.

The revival of tourism towards the new adapted models should change the tourism behavior, the operators' industry behavior, to become successful models (Mihalciuc, 2022). Romanian tourism entrepreneurs have acted and adopted a management specific to the pandemic context and opted for strategic planning that translates into the need for resilience and recovery. For a business operating in the tourism area to be considered resilient and able to thrive during a crisis, it must have a successful integration of crisis management and strategic planning (Mihalciuc et al, 2022). Even though the pandemic context has generated a less pleasant environment for economic activities, nevertheless, people working in the tourism industry should consider and approach the crisis as an opportunity, in the sense that this situation can be encountered once in a lifetime, practically, it could be used as a way forward towards more equitable, sustainable and resilient tourism development models.

There was thus an urgent need to diversify and strengthen the resilience of the tourism economy, to consider and be better prepared for possible shocks, to address long-standing structural vulnerabilities and to encourage digital and technological transformations by reducing carbon emissions, which will be indispensable for the transition towards more equitable and efficient sustainable models of tourism development (OECD, 2020). The emergence of

Covid-19 and the economic repercussions it has had on the tourism sector has in fact provided a distinct opportunity to understand the relationship between sustainability and the hospitality industry (Jones & Comfort, 2020).

#### **IV. GOVERNMENT MEASURES AND POLICIES ADOPTED DURING THE PANDEMIC PERIOD**

Studies that have been concerned with investigating tourism stakeholders' perceptions of the support they have received through state-implemented policies are still at an early stage (Morrone et al., 2021, pp. 257-270).

Governments play a central role in the evolution of tourism when referring to local, regional and even country-level destinations, and the concrete involvement of the executive mainly concerns policy making, introducing necessary legislation and regulations or providing various incentives that support stakeholders (wtcc.org). Local authorities have to support tourism activity even in less favourable times, such as various crisis periods, by getting involved and leveraging the means at their disposal, helping the industry, respectively companies to withstand during turbulence in order to be resilient (Lim and To, 2021, pp. 1-12). Governments of countries affected by the pandemic context have played central roles in supporting tourism recovery from the pandemic, prioritising the development of strategies and policies to help stakeholders and businesses cope with the crisis that has put them and their businesses at risk (Williams et al., 2022).

The involvement of governments in response to the impact of the pandemic on the economic environment and in particular on tourism has varied, with some disparities between countries in the strategies that have been adopted (wtcc.org, 2020). Countries more dependent on the tourism industry have developed and implemented more ambitious, somewhat more aggressive measures and policies in the hope of dramatically reducing the negative impact of the pandemic. Fiscal and monetary policies have been the most common in all regions of the world, adopted since the early phase of the pandemic (Aebli et al., 2021, pp. 60-75). The particular concern for the development and implementation of fiscal and monetary policies is related to the needs and expectations of economic agents, as the pandemic has adversely influenced their incomes, making stakeholders vulnerable, generating, in fact, dependence on financial aid from central state authorities (Renaud, 2020, pp. 679-689).

Prior to COVID-19, tourism's contribution to Europe's economy was 9.2%, but with the global pandemic in 2020, this has fallen to 5.2%. The year 2021 is associated with a first stage of recovery for

European tourism, with the increased rate of recovery supported by increased spending by international visitors and increased revenue from domestic tourists (Dinu, et al., 2021, pp. 271-285). European countries such as Greece, Turkey, Italy and Spain have shown a strong recovery in the contribution of travel to the global economy, through an increase in international visitors, as governments in these countries have significantly reduced travel restrictions on arrivals (Orîndaru et al., 2021, pp. 1-22).

As regards the involvement of the Romanian state in overcoming the consequences of the pandemic on the tourism industry, the financial aid granted to tourism companies, which have felt the shock of the pandemic, is relevant. The central authorities have been determined to seek resources so that companies operating in the HoReCa sector can avoid the most dramatic scenarios of mass bankruptcy. Thus, enterprises operating in the tourism area, benefited from exemption from the payment of the specific tax, having the possibility to follow an aid scheme whereby 40% of the minimum wage for employees could be covered by the state, by virtue of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) (Popovici, 2021, pp. 1-5). Other important measures to support the industry included the granting of holiday vouchers to public sector employees to pay for transport, accommodation, spa treatments, meals and leisure services to any tourist destination in the country, thus supporting the development of rural tourism and rental houses and contributing to the improvement of the welfare of rural areas.

Romania was one of the European Union (EU) countries whose tourism was most affected, so that at the end of February 2021, the Ministry of Economy, Entrepreneurship and Tourism announced that the Government will grant compensation worth half a billion euro allocated to the tourism sector and hotel industries, with the idea of reducing the negative impact of the pandemic. The aid from the Romanian state was established in order to cover the partial losses in turnover recorded in 2020, compared to 2019 (Cehan and Iașu, 2023, pp. 121-137). For Romania, the involvement of the Ministry of Economy, Entrepreneurship and Tourism remains essential, especially after 2020, in order to support the development of domestic tourism, in the context of the Covid-19 restrictions and the crisis of the HoReCa sector (Alonso et. al., 2020). In this sense, in order to effectively develop sustainable domestic tourism, important data about the specific landscape must be taken into account, knowing that an important part of Romania's surface is rural, and it is necessary for the national authorities to implement concrete and reliable

measures in order to relaunch the sector HoReCa (Popescu, 2022, pp. 579-590). A component of the marketing strategy used by the Ministry of Economy, Entrepreneurship and Tourism consisted in supporting the development of the National Tourist Information and Promotion Center (TIPNC) 110, an intermediary body that can provide relevant information to tourists - online and offline, this TIPNC, being considered to be a key factor in creating and promoting the image of a tourist destination in a certain area (Herman et al., 2019).

## V. CONCLUSION

Tourism, like any other economic activity carried out, is influenced by a series of factors, phenomena or contexts - some favorable, others less so, as it is well known that, starting from 2020, companies active in this field have traversed a period of crisis, in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, which also led scientifically to directions of research and studies, which analyzed how the pandemic affected the activity of tourist enterprises. The main directions of this paper, derived from the review of specialized literature, are oriented towards a theoretical part regarding the management of crises within the activities of tourism companies, given the pandemic context and the identification of patterns of good practices adapted by the management of tourism operators, in those critical periods to face adversity, to recover through innovation and improve organizational resilience. In the scientific approach of the work, various studies were presented, which aimed to develop and test a set of measures that can be implemented so that the activity of enterprises in this segment is as resilient as possible to turbulence, as it was in the case of the Covid-19 as well as identifying the most appropriate measures that can improve resilience and transform the business. New concepts were also presented regarding entrepreneurial resilience, a concept obviously linked to organizational resilience, as hotels and tourism firms must self-renew to face the unstable situation, generated by other potential instabilities.

From the studies analyzed and presented in the paper, it can be appreciated that structural and managerial resources, together with tactical strategies, can contribute to supporting the performance of tourist operators, they could also be proactive in preventing unforeseen situations that could arise, resorting to recovery strategies to deal with unpredictable events.

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