

THE IMPACTS OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

The COVID -19 pandemic made 2020 a devastating year for the tourism industry. To stop the spreading of the virus the restrictive measures such as lockdowns, have affected many economies, from which tourism suffers directly and greatly. The purpose of this study is to analyze the state of tourism at the international level and tourism in the Republic of Serbia during the pandemic, by examining the tourist arrivals and overnight stays in 2020. At the international level, the loss in tourism arrivals and receipts experience even the leading regions in tourism. Also in Serbia, there is a noticeable decrease in foreign tourist arrivals and overall tourist arrivals in 2020.

Key Words: *COVID-19, pandemic, international tourism, Serbia, tourism development*

JEL classification: *L83, Z30, Z32*

Introduction

At global and local levels tourism is a significant wealth creator (Milićević et al., 2020a), and it has many economic benefits for host communities, organizations, and the whole country (Milićević et al., 2020b; Milićević et al., 2021a), which is one of the reasons why international tourism until 2020 has continuously grown. In 2020, the COVID-19 outbreak lockdown measures and travel bans, have forced many tourism destinations to cancel

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bookings and limit logistics and all operations considering tourism (Fotiadis et al., 2021).

"Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus" (World Health Organization - WHO, 2021a). The first case of this virus was identified in the city of Wuhan, China, in 2019 (Gössling et al., 2021). According to the data of WHO (2021b), until 1 March 2021, there have been 113,820,168 cases of COVID-19, and 2,527,891 deaths, globally. The first case of coronavirus in Serbia had appeared on 6th March 2020, and until the 1st March 2021 there were 462,728 confirmed cases and 4,459 deaths (Ministry of Health of the Republic of Serbia, 2021).

To stop the virus from spreading, social distancing and wearing a face mask in public became everyday life. Besides this, various measures were applied such as: banning public gatherings, different restrictions for public and private organizations (e.g. shops, banks, hotels, restaurants, etc.) lockdowns, etc. Such measures made consequences for many economies, especially for tourism. During pandemic cruises are canceled, airlines also canceled staffing and flights, many tourism destinations have fewer tourists than before, and hotels and restaurants are being closed (Cvijanović et al., 2021).

The focus of this paper is the impact of COVID-19 on the tourism industry. The aim is to analyze tourism during the pandemic at the international level and in Serbia. The impacts of a pandemic on tourism at the international level and in Serbia are analyzed by examining tourist arrivals and overnight stays in 2020, with special attention to the possibilities to recover the tourism industry.

Tourism and health crises

In the 21st century, there are many changes in the business environment and they are rapid (Brinkley, 2008). In such an environment, there are also frequent and intense crises that affect the tourism industry (Scott et al., 2008) and there is growing interest to present valuable frameworks for crises management in the tourism industry (Faulkner, 2001; Ritchie 2004; Paraskevas & Arendell, 2007; Hystad & Keller, 2008; Paraskevas et al., 2013). According to Faulkner (2001) crises or catastrophes are sudden challenges, a temporarily difficult situation after which a solution or failure is expected. Tourism crises can be defined as an unexpected event, which

can affect the tourists' confidence in the destination and which interferes with the normal business operations (Milićević & Ervaćanin, 2016).

The competitiveness of the tourism destination depends on its ability to provide a safe and enjoyable place for tourists (Breda & Costa, 2006). It is known that in addition to economic factors, the scope and intensity of tourist demand are affected by non-economic factors, such as co-political crises, war conflicts and natural disasters (earthquakes, floods, droughts, storms, etc.), psychological factors and propaganda that stimulate consumers on the go (Vujović et al., 2012).

There are different sorts of crises according to their cause, which can be natural (tsunamis, hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, etc.) or human activity (terrorist attacks, criminal activities, etc.). There are also those that are of a combined character, which is natural in their appearance and caused by human activity, such as environmental pollution, or vice versa, such as epidemics. Therefore, risks in tourism can be classified as (Milićević & Štetić, 2017):

- Natural risks;
- Health risks;
- Risks from terrorism and criminal.

Incidents that have happened in the recent past like Tsunamis in Asia, terrorist attacks in Spain, Turkey, Russia, Egypt, United Kingdom, France, and many other countries, SARS are just several examples of tourism crises that caused great loss in the millions or even billions of U.S. dollars (Glaesser, 2006). The impacts of crises on tourism development are rather investigated at the destination level, than at the industry level (Ritchie et al., 2013). Tourism crises affect not only tourism industries but also tourists and the local population (Mansfeld & Pizam 2006). Even neighboring countries or regions are affected by the tourism crises that redirect tourism flows away from a particular tourism destination (Cavlek 2002).

Although tourism contributes to the well-being of mind and body, international and domestic tourists can be confronted with many health hazards, that have the potential to become crises that impact destination image (Henderson, 2007). The source of health problems for tourists might be the different time zones, hygiene in the accommodation facilities, unsafety food and drinks, lack of information about tourism destination, etc. Also, traveling may bring the spreading of the virus and bacteria, just as it happened in 1969 when one Yugoslavian tourist had been infected

by the smallpox virus on his pilgrimage trip (Milićević & Štetić, 2017). Therefore, tourists may be infected in their place and country, also in the tourism destination, and spread it further if they visit other destinations (Monterrubio, 2010).

The epidemics may have somewhat surreal economic costs and may affect nations and even the entire global economy (MacKellar, 2007). Some health crises have led to a great loss of tourism arrivals and spendings. Based on the report of Global Rescue & World Travel and Tourism Council (2019) about impacts of several past disease crises on tourism, the Saudi Arabia MERS (Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus) led to the greatest loss of visitors arrivals (5,599 thousand), while China SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) led to the greatest loss of spendings (US\$4,410.7 million) (Table 1). As Hung et al. (2018) state, the travel industry contributed to the speed SARS virus that first appeared in Guangdong Province in China. On the other side, this epidemic affected tourism in China by causing cancellations of scheduled flights, a decline in domestic tourism, and in hotel occupancy rate, etc. (Dombey, 2004). Similar effects on the tourism industry had the H1N1 (swine flu) pandemic that first was identified in April 2009 in Mexico and the USA, and leads to a decrease of hotel occupancy rates and massive cancellations of scheduled flights (Monterrubio, 2010). In the 21st century besides these viruses, the on-going pandemic of the COVID-19 virus appeared and exposes the tourism industry to great challenges and the consequences are huge.

Table 1: *Previous health crises and their impacts on tourism*

Disease crisis	Recovery time (months)	Lost arrivals (thousands)	Lost spendings (US\$ millions)
UK foot-and-mouth	35	3,347	2,598.3
China SARS	16	4,588	4,410.7
Singapore SARS	17	1,472	1,172.7
Taiwan SARS	25	871	1,154.3
HK SARS	14	1,362	1,000.6
Saudi Arabia MERS	-	5,599	2,444.1
Sierra Leone Ebola	23	101	67.0
Guinea Ebola	23	-	75.0
Miami Zika	10	78	98.1

Source: *Global Rescue & World Travel & Tourism Council, 2019*

In general, the recovery time from disease crises is from 10 months to 34.9 months, loss of arrivals from 78 to 5,599 thousand, loss of spendings from US\$67 million to US\$4,411 million which is comparing to political turmoil, environmental disasters, and terrorism crises the highest minimum and lowest maximum for recovery, loss of arrivals and spendings. Comparing averages for recovery, loss of arrivals and spendings the disease crises are in the second place, after leading political crises (Table 2) (Global Rescue & World Travel & Tourism Council, 2019).

Table 2: *Crises impacts on tourism and time recovery*

Recovery time (months)	min	avg	max
Crises caused by disease	10.0	19.4	34.9
Crises caused by ecological disaster	1.0	16.2	92.8
Crises caused by political disturbance	10.0	22.2	44.9
Crises caused by terrorist attacks	2.0	11.5	42.0
Total	1.0	17.7	92.8
Lost arrivals (thousands)	min	avg	max
Crises caused by disease	78	2,177	5,599
Crises caused by ecological disaster	3	761	7,824
Crises caused by political disturbance	72	2,415	18,435
Crises caused by terrorist attacks	2	1,481	17,815
Total	2	1,550	18,435
Lost spendings (millions)	min	avg	max
Crises caused by disease	\$67	\$1,447	\$4,411
Crises caused by ecological disaster	\$2	\$1,168	\$10,971
Crises caused by political disturbance	\$43	\$2,146	\$16,426
Crises caused by terrorist attacks	\$2	\$861	\$10,658
Total	\$2	\$1,335	\$16,426

Source: *Global Rescue & World Travel & Tourism Council, 2019*

To recover from a crisis is of great importance for organizations and tourism destinations as it is important to plan how to respond to a crisis (Pelfrey, 2005), and both actions are challenging (Becken & Hughey, 2013). In recovery from crises, tourism destination must find a way to restore to pre-crisis levels the business operations that were disrupted by the crises (Campiranon & Scott, 2014). According to Jamal and Budke (2020), there are some lessons that must be learned from the past pandemics in order to make a proactive strategic response plan in tourism to such health crises, and those lessons are:

- the residents need responsibility and care in the beginning of the pandemic;

- those who provide services and hospitality workers must be prepared to deal with the guests in an appropriate way because fear that they might be infected can be present.
- between regional and local public health authorities and key tourism stakeholders, the communications channels must be open;
- help from global institutions like the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) to tourism is a necessity in order to react adequately and recover from health problems around the world.
- further researches are needed about the impacts of disease crises in tourism destinations that are vulnerable.

International tourism and the COVID-19 pandemic

Farzanegan et al. (2020), state that it might be that international tourism has contributed to the strength of the COVID-19 pandemic and the spread of the virus. On the other side, a great number of tourism destinations had to stop their tourism activities because of the canceled bookings, limited logistics, travel bans, and lockdown measures due to the COVID-19 outbreak (Fotiadis, 2020). The pandemic may change national economies and society, and it has great negative impacts on the tourism in the poorest countries around the world (Gössling et al., 2021). As Stergiou and Farmaki (2020) point out that the negative effects of the pandemic might be even worse if the work behavior in hotels changes. The findings of the Qiu et al., (2020) research indicate that social costs to the residents might be created by tourism during the COVID-19 pandemic and because of it, the involvement of residents in the recovery of the tourism industry is critical.

The WTTC (2021) points out that during the pandemic there were 11.5 million losses of jobs and US\$670 billion GDP in the European travel and tourism industry. According to the data of UNWTO (2021a), the COVID-19 pandemic is the greatest crisis for the tourism industry. In 2020 there was a decrease of 74% in international tourism arrivals and a loss of USD 1.3 trillion in export revenues (more than 11 times than the global economic crisis loss in 2009). The greatest loss of international tourist arrivals has the Asia and the Pacific region of even 83%. The decrease of 75% has the regions Middle East and Africa. America has the lowest loss of 69%, while European international tourist arrivals decreased by 70% (Figure 1) (UNWTO, 2021a).

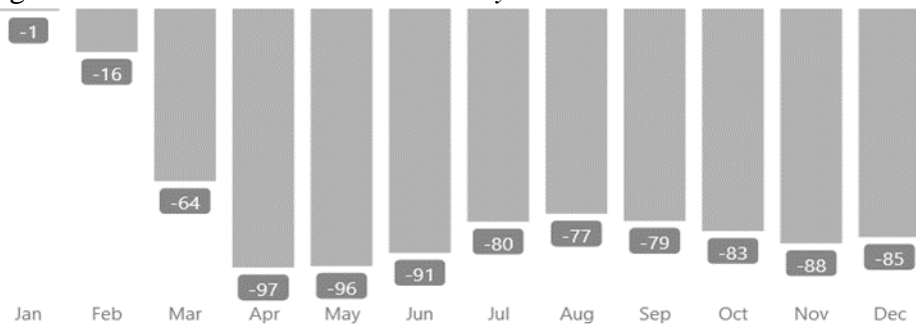
Figure 1: *International tourist arrivals in 2020.*



Source: *World Tourism Organization – UNWTO, 2021a*

When it comes to the report of world international tourist arrivals by months, the largest drop-down was in April (97%) and May (96%). During the summer months Jul (80%), August (77%), and September (83%), the decrease was 80% and lower. After the summer season, the decrease was again above 80% (Figure 2) (UNWTO, 2021b).

Figure 2: *World international arrivals by month in 2020*

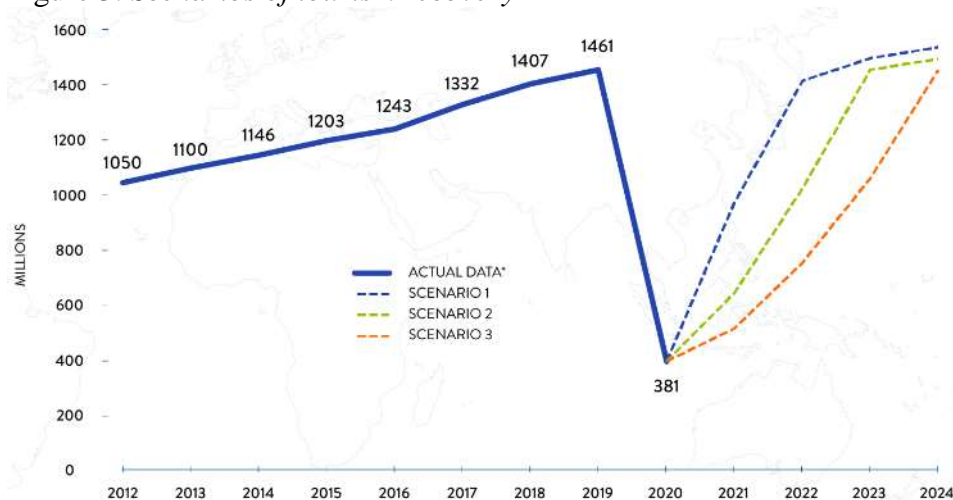


Source: *World Tourism Organization – UNWTO, 2021b*

Strielkowski (2021) states that the tourism recovery from this pandemic will come, as the COVID-19 virus is not dangerous as Black Death Plague, i.e. that infected people will recover quickly, and there are many of them

would never be infected at all. To recover from pandemic tourism destinations must moderate perceived risk among potential tourists by creating stronger risk management and control (Perić et al, 2021). The recovery strategies for the tourism industry should be more aligned to the sustainable development goals (Gössling et al., 2021). According to the UNWTO (2021a), there are possible scenarios of tourism recovery, from which Scenario 1 is the most positive one (Figure 3).

Figure 3: *Scenarios of tourism recovery*



Source: *World Tourism Organization – UNWTO, 2021a*

Tourism in Serbia and the COVID-19 pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the measures in order to stop the spreading of the virus included (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development - OECD, 2021): "bans on public gatherings involving more than five people, indoors or outdoors, and limits on the number of people present at all times in relation to the square footage of a facility; mandatory use of protective face masks in all public spaces, both outdoors and indoors when the area is crowded".

Such a situation during 2020, create a decrease in total tourist arrivals in Serbia by 50.7%, comparing to total tourist arrivals in 2019. The number of domestic tourist arrivals decreases by 25.4%, while the number of foreign tourist arrivals drops down by an incredible 75.9%. The number of overnight stays was 38.4% lower during the pandemic than in 2019. Regarding the great decrease in foreign tourist arrivals, the drop-down of

the number of their overnight was bigger (68.5%) than the drop-down in overnight stays of domestic tourists (18.6%) (Table 3) (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2020a; Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2020b).

Table 3: *Tourist arrivals and overnight stays in Serbia, 2019 and 2020 (in thousands)*

Year	Tourist arrivals			Overnight stays		
	Total	Domestic	Foreign	Total	Domestic	Foreign
2019	3,689	1,843	1,846	10,073	6,063	4,010
2020	1,820	1,374	446	6,201	4,937	1,265

Source: *Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2020a; 2020b*

In 2020, Belgrade remained the most visited tourism destination, and Vrnjačka Banja remained as the second most visited tourism destination (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2020b). Nevertheless, compared to 2019 all tourist places in Serbia experienced a decline in tourist arrivals. In *Belgrade – urban settlements* there was a decrease of 74.0% in total tourist arrivals, 49.1% less domestic, and even 78.4% fewer foreign tourist arrivals. *Novi Sad – urban settlements* in 2020 visited 65.4% fewer tourists, i.e. 46.7% less domestic and 75.0% less foreign tourist arrivals. The decline in total tourist arrivals in *spas* (22.0%) and *mountain places* (27.8%) and in their domestic tourist arrivals (*spas* – 10.1%, *mountain places* – 19.0%) were some lower than in all the rest tourist places, while there was also a great decrease in foreign tourist arrivals (*spas* – 74.7%, *mountain places* – 60.6%). There was a large drop-down in tourist arrivals also in *other tourist places*, i.e. some small cities in Serbia (total – 53.2%, domestic – 37.1%, foreign – 74.3%) and *other places* (total – 55.0%, domestic – 32.1%, foreign – 79.8%). *Spas* were the most visited tourist place in Serbia in 2020 with a total of 522,947 tourists and had the highest number of domestic tourist arrivals 491,879. In second place are *mountain places* with a total of 460,892 tourist arrivals in 2020 (Table 4) (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2020a; Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2020b).

Considering the decrease in tourist arrivals, the numbers of overnight stays of tourists by tourist places in Serbia during pandemic also were much lower than in 2019. *Belgrade - urban settlements* had the highest drop-down of total overnight stays of 65.2%, while *spas* had the lowest from all the rest tourist places (21.5%) (Table 5) (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2020a; Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2020b).

Table 4: *Tourist arrivals by tourist places in Serbia, in 2019 and 2020*

Tourist places	Year	Tourist arrivals		
		Total	Domestic	Foreign
Belgrade - urban settlements	2019	1,205,183	183,183	1,022,000
	2020	313,753	93,172	220,581
Novi Sad - urban settlements	2019	204,473	69,867	134,606
	2020	70,875	37,212	33,663
Spas	2019	670,044	547,239	122,805
	2020	522,947	491,879	31,068
Mountain places	2019	638,521	502,607	135,914
	2020	460,892	407,375	53,517
Other tourist places	2019	799,111	450,944	348,167
	2020	373,923	283,841	90,082
Other places	2019	172,651	89,592	83,059
	2020	77,631	60,831	16,800

Source: *Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2020a; 2020b*

 Table 5: *Overnight stays by tourist places in Serbia, in 2019 and 2020*

Tourist places	Year	Overnight stays		
		Total	Domestic	Foreign
Belgrade - urban settlements	2019	2,487,922	377,752	2,110,170
	2020	865,530	288,843	576,687
Novi Sad - urban settlements	2019	393,112	129,396	263,716
	2020	169,429	89,357	80,072
Spas	2019	2,781,627	2,427,434	354,193
	2020	2,184,602	2,075,951	108,651
Mountain resorts	2019	2,302,273	1,919,201	383,072
	2020	1,747,172	1,530,741	216,431
Other tourist places	2019	1,705,309	980,527	724,782
	2020	1,031,807	788,763	243,044
Other places	2019	403,056	228,611	174,445
	2020	202,750	163,077	39,673

Source: *Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2020a; 2020b*

According to the results of the study of Perić et al. (2021), people from Serbia will be mainly focused on travel within their country. Similar results are presented in the study of Cvijanović et al. (2021), that tourists from Serbia plan to travel within the country and the preferred destinations to travel are rural tourism destinations in Serbia. This is not surprising considering the great attractiveness of rural tourism offer in Serbia (Podovac et al., 2019), and that rural areas are not anymore only for

agricultural activities, but also for tourism development (Rokvić-Knežić et al., 2020).

Conclusion

The tourism industry is experiencing hard times due to the greatest health crisis in the 21st century. The COVID-19 pandemic causes measures that limited the tourism industry from the usual growth. The new coronavirus crisis led to a great loss of tourist arrivals and overnight stays at the international level. This also triggers the loss of jobs and revenue in the tourism industry. The situation was not different for tourism in Serbia. The great decreases in tourist turnover, especially in foreign tourist arrivals and their overnight stays, confirm the strength of the crisis.

However, even before the crisis is over the tourism destinations management must think about strategies for recovery. Also, there must be a plan to react according to the current pandemic consequences. Although COVID-19 is a confirmed threat to the tourism industry with devastating effects, there must be a way to find a chance and use such a situation for better progress of tourism. This chance could be to make recovery strategies for sustainable tourism growth.

During the pandemic, the most visited places in Serbia were spas and mountains. Domestic tourism and rural destinations might keep the tourism industry in Serbia during the hard times. Still, more planned measures for recovery must be set in advance, in order to use the best chances from the current position. Therefore, future studies should focus on finding a way to create and use recovery strategies after the end of health crises caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

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