

RESIDENTS SUPPORT FOR TOURISM IN POST-PANDEMIC TIME – A CASE STUDY OF VRNJAČKA BANJA

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Abstract

The future of tourism after one of the greatest health crises caused by the novel coronavirus is uncertain. Fear of infection and health concerns increased during the pandemic. The restrictive measures have limited international travel, which led to great expectations of an end to the pandemic for freer movement and safe travel. The great consequences of the COVID-19 for the tourism industry and tourism destinations will have its effects even after the end, and the post-pandemic tourism recovery strategies should be well planned and in focus along with strategies for the keeping tourism industry during the crisis. This paper aims to investigate the residents' support for post-pandemic tourism in one of the most famous tourism destinations in Serbia, Vrnjačka Banja. The support of the residents was observed taking into account their perceptions on tourism during the pandemic.

Key Words: residents support, tourism, post-pandemic era, Vrnjačka Banja, COVID-19

JEL classification: L83, Z30, Z32

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic affected greatly the tourism industry. Considering the decrease of 73%, 2020 was the worst year for tourism, while international arrivals in 2021 were 72% below the pre-pandemic year of 2019 (UNWTO, 2022). The pandemic has led to a drastic reduction in

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employment all over the world, not only in the tourism sector but also employed in other service activities.

In Serbia, domestic tourism kept the tourism industry during hard times, but the number of foreign tourists drop down drastically (Đorđević, Milićević, 2021), as “most countries have sealed off their borders or imposed large-scale lockdowns to bring movement to a standstill” (Joo et al., 2021). It was noticed that in Serbia due to pandemic the largest decline was recorded in urban tourism (-79%), followed by mountain (-51%), while the most resilient to the pandemic was spa tourism (-43%) (Bogdanović, et al., 2021).

The consequences of this global crisis will probably remain even after the virus debilitate. Strategies for tourism recovery are already a priority for most tourism destinations where the tourism industry has one of the main roles in their economy. The logical assumption is that tourism will restart fast after the pandemic is over. Nevertheless, the fear of being infected might still be present, and on the other side, economies and stakeholders must be ready for it, after the great pause in tourism growth. The effects of the possible fast post-pandemic tourism growth must be handled by the local community, tourism companies, which must be well supported by other economies.

Pandemic and post-pandemic time is seen as a time for recovery tourism in a sustainable development direction (Brouder, 2020; Gössling, et al., 2020; Hall et al., 2020). To reach sustainability it is crucial to reduce mass tourism, which is questionable for many tourism destinations, considering the need for tourism economic benefits after the crisis is over. Besides this, sustainable tourism requires support from crucial stakeholders.

This paper aims to investigate the residents’ support for post-pandemic tourism in Vrnjačka Banja, Serbia. The support of the residents was observed taking into account their views on tourism during the pandemic (pandemic effects on their personal life, and their acceptance of tourists during pandemics). Considering this, the following hypotheses are set:

- Hypothesis 1: The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the residents’ personal lives influence their support for the post-pandemic tourism development in Vrnjačka Banja.
- Hypothesis 2: The residents’ acceptance of tourists during the pandemic in Vrnjačka Banja influences their support for the post-pandemic tourism development in Vrnjačka Banja.

Literature review

Tourism around the world has undergone tremendous changes since the World Health Organization officially declared the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020 (Hall et al., 2020). The crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic has confirmed the fact that the residents should have the role of a key stakeholder in the tourism destination (Van Bavel et al., 2020; Aleshinloye et al., 2020). As a key stakeholder, residents must be included in tourism decision-making, considering that tourism destination development depends on their support (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2016; Woo et al., 2018; Papastathopoulos et al., 2020; Đorđević et al., 2021). Residents' perceptions and attitudes about tourism development, as well as their readiness to support the development of tourism in the destination, is a crucial factor in defining the strategy of tourism development at the local level (Nunkoo & Gursoy, 2012; Liang & Hui, 2016; Styliadis, 2017; Podovac, et al., 2019; Hateftabar & Chapuis, 2020). The research conducted by Bajrami et al., (2020) showed that the impacts of tourism perceived by the host population community are related to residents' personal lives and their support for tourism development. The local community is more inclined to accept the development of tourism in the destination and to give greater support to the future development of tourism, if their perceived benefits exceed the perceived negative effects of tourism development (Olya & Gavilyan, 2017; Yu et al., 2018; Bimonte & D'Agostino, 2020; Moghavvemi et al., 2020; Chang, 2021).

Some authors have investigated whether the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on residents' personal lives affect their support for destination tourism development. The results of such studies provide useful information in order to devise tourism development planning strategies during and after the pandemic. Ramkissoon (2020) and Brouder (2020) point out that the residents' support is essential for the development of tourism, especially during the crisis period of Covid-19 pandemic, but also in the context of post-pandemic tourism development. During a pandemic, destination residents face the dilemma of whether to welcome tourists to help the tourism economy rebound or to oppose their arrival to minimize the risk of contagion (Rey-Carmona, 2022).

Seyedabolghasemi et al., (2022) conducted research on the Northern Cyprus residents' perception towards the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on tourism activities and their recommendations for post-pandemic tourism development. A study was conducted by Vinerean et al. (2022) in Sibiu,

Romania to measure the effects of Covid-19 on the residents' perception of tourism and their readiness to support the development of tourism. The results showed that the negative perception regarding the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic affects the local residents to have a negative attitude towards tourism and tourists ie. they do not support the development of tourism in the destination. Namely, the Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in the spread of deadly virus, so an increase in the number of tourists coming to the destination would result in a lack of support for the development of tourism in destinations by residents.

Joo et al., (2021) conducted a similar survey among residents of Jeju Island, the largest island in South Korea. Perceived risk associated with Covid-19 was found to be negatively related to tourism support by residents. Moreover, the residents see tourists as a source of risk and their arrival as a potential for increasing the number of Covid-19 positive residents. Perceived risk automatically had a negative impact on their support for tourism development.

Data and methodology

Vrnjačka Banja is a traditional health tourism center of Serbia. Tourism offer includes manifestations, sport, recreational activities, medical and spa treatments, cultural activities, nature-based activities, etc. There are 27,527 residents on the territory of municipality Vrnjačka Banja (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2011). Opposite to the small number of residents, there is a growing number of tourists. This growth was interrupted by the pandemic. Nevertheless, domestic tourism remained during the pandemic in Vrnjačka Banja.

Table 1: *Tourists arrivals and overnights stays in Vrnjačka Banja, for the period from 2017-2021*

Year	Tourists arrivals			Overnights stays		
	Total	Domestic tourists	Foreign tourists	Total	Domestic tourists	Foreign tourists
2017	213,194	176,202	36,992	701,622	603,279	98,343
2018	247,709	200,343	47,366	818,045	695,171	122,874
2019	283,491	230,887	52,604	907,892	774,206	133,686
2020	211,496	200,879	10,617	698,238	668,635	29,603
2021	267,672	231,112	36,560	852,297	745,118	107,179

Source: *Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (2018; 2019; 2020, 2021, 2022).*

The tourism industry started to recover even during the pandemic, in 2021, when the total number of tourists increase by 26.56% comparing the number of tourist arrivals in 2020 (the number of domestic tourists by 15.05%, the number of foreign tourists by 244.35%) (Table 1).

To investigate the residents' support for post-pandemic tourism Vrnjačka Banja the survey method is used. The research includes the examination of residents' perceptions towards pandemic effects on their personal life, their acceptance of tourists during pandemics in Vrnjačka Banja and the influence of these two variables on the residents' support for post-pandemic tourism. The items were defined according to Kamata's (2021) research. Respondents could evaluate their level of agreement with the offered items by using the 5 points Likert scale (1-strongly disagree, 5-strongly agree). The questionnaire was sent via e-mail to 450 residents of Vrnjačka Banja in February 2022. The response rate is 49.8% (224 respondents).

Data were processed by SPSS, version 26. A descriptive statistic was used to present the socio-demographic characteristics of the sample. Items grouping was verified by using factor analysis and the internal consistency of the scales is checked by calculating the Cronbach coefficients. The multiple regression is performed to test the hypotheses, ie. to test whether residents' attitudes towards pandemic effects on their personal life and their acceptance of tourists during pandemics influence their support for post-pandemic tourism in Vrnjačka Banja.

Results and discussion

A total of 224 respondents, residents of the municipality of Vrnjačka Banja, participated in the research. The questionnaire was completed by 146 women (65.2%) and 78 men (34.8%). The largest number of respondents is between 20 and 30 years old, a total of 106 respondents (47.3%), followed by a group between 31 and 40years old, a total of 68 respondents (30.4%), and 51 to 60 years old - 12 respondents (5.4%). Faculty have completed 94 respondents (42%), the secondary school graduates are 62 respondents (27.7%). There are fewer respondents who have completed college (34 - 15.2%), master's degree (26 - 11.6%), and doctoral studies (8 - 3.6%). A total of 174 respondents were employed (77.7%), while 50 were unemployed (22.3%) (Table 2).

Table 2: *Socio-demographic characteristics*

		Frequency	(%)
Gender	Male	78	34.8
	Female	146	65.2
Age	20-30	106	47.3
	31-40	68	30.4
	41-50	38	17.0
	51-60	12	5.4
	>61	0	0
Education	Secondary school	62	27.7
	College	34	15.2
	Faculty	94	42.0
	M.Sc.	26	11.6
	PhD	8	3.6
Professional status	Employed	174	77.7
	Unemployed	50	22.3
	Retired	0	0

Source: *Authors*

The items defined in the questionnaire are suitable for factor analysis, considering that Bartlett's Test of Sphericity, the statistical significance is 0.000 and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value is 0.818 (Table 3). Three factors have eigenvalues exceeding 1, and the Scree plot shows a break after the third one. The factor *effects on personal life* has an eigenvalue of 4.871, and 40.59% explained variance. The second factor named *accepting tourists during pandemic* has an eigenvalue of 2.571 and explained variance of 21.42%, while the factor named *support for post-pandemic tourism development* has an eigenvalue of 1.125 and explained variance of 9.37%. This means that considering these three factors a total explained variance is 71.39%. The simple structure of factor loadings was done by using Varimax rotation. The loadings are strong and almost all above 0.6. The item *I will accept tourists if the tourist areas are separated from residential areas, including shops for local people*, was excluded from the third-factor analysis considering its low factor loading of 0.257 (Table 4).

Table 3: *KMO and Bartlett's Test*

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		0.818
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	1668.411
	Df	66
	Sig.	.000

Source: *Authors*

Effects of pandemics on the personal life of residents of Vrnjačka Banja is the lowest rated factor. During pandemic residents usually did not avoid unnecessary and nonurgent outings (M=2.4) and crowded areas in Vrnjačka Banja (M=2.8), meaning that pandemic had a small influence on residents' daily movement. Slightly more residents agree that they wear a mask and wash their hands in order to prevent the virus from spreading (M=3.6), but this cannot still be considered as highly responsible behavior during pandemics.

A considerable number of residents believe that tourism in Vrnjačka Banja should be promoted during the COVID-19 pandemic if a pandemic prevention strategy has been prepared (M=3.9) and that interacting with tourists in Vrnjačka Banja during the COVID-19 pandemic is not a problem (M=3.8). Residents are likely to accept tourists if the tourist areas during pandemic are separated from residential areas, including shops for local people (M=3.5).

Generally, residents are open to further tourism development (M=4.7), ready to support a new form of tourism after the pandemic (M=4.6), and willing to accept tourists from around Vrnjačka Banja and abroad after the pandemic (M=4.5). Even during the Covid-19 pandemic residents are ready to support tourism development in Vrnjačka Banja (M=4.2), but slightly less than they generally support tourism development (Table 4).

Table 4: Mean rates and factor analysis

Effects on personal life (Note: Eigenvalue =4.871; Explained variance=40.59%)	Mean	St. dev.	Factor loadings	Communalities
During pandemic, I avoid crowded areas in Vrnjačka Banja.	2.8	1.51	0.909	0.832
During pandemic, I avoid unnecessary and nonurgent outings.	2.4	1.41	0.807	0.668
I prevent COVID-19 infection by wearing a mask and washing my hands.	3.6	1.50	0.766	0.636
Accepting tourists during pandemic (Note: Eigenvalue =2.571;				

Explained variance=21.42%)				
Tourism in Vrnjačka Banja should be promoted during the COVID-19 pandemic if a pandemic prevention strategy has been prepared.	3.9	1.16	0.756	0.631
Interacting with tourists in this Vrnjačka Banja during the COVID-19 pandemic is not a problem.	3.8	1.21	0.566	0.751
I accept tourists if the tourist areas during pandemic are separated from residential areas, including shops for local people.	3.5	1.32	0.737	0.737
Support for post-pandemic tourism development (Note: Eigenvalue =1.125; Explained variance=9.37%)				
I will accept tourists from around Vrnjačka Banja after pandemic.	4.5	0.90	0.864	0.843
I will accept tourists from abroad after pandemic.	4.5	0.94	0.808	.714
I support a new form of tourism after the pandemic.	4.6	0.85	0.885	0.810
I support tourism development even with COVID-19.	4.2	1.05	0.629	0.606
Generally, I am open to further tourism development.	4.7	0.73	0.891	0.814
Total explained variance	71.39%			

Source: *Authors*

The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used to measure the internal consistency of the scales. This coefficient is above 0.7 for three defined factors, which proves the internal consistency of the scales. Factor *effects on personal life* has the Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.817, *accepting tourists during the pandemic* of 0.725, and *support for post-pandemic tourism development* has a coefficient of 0.896 (Table 5).

Table 5: *The Cronbach's alpha coefficients*

	Cronbach's Alpha
Effects on personal life	0.817
Accepting tourists during pandemic	0.725
Support for post-pandemic tourism development	0.896

Source: *Authors*

To test hypotheses multiple linear regression was used. *Accepting tourists during pandemic* and *effects on personal life* (independent variables) statistically significant predict *residents' support for post-pandemic tourism* $F=52.947$, $p=0.000$ (Table 7), accounting for 32.4% of the variability in *support for post-pandemic tourism in Vrnjačka Banja* (dependent variable), with adjusted $R^2=0.318$ (Table 6). *Effects on personal life* have no statistically significant correlation and influence on the dependent variable ($p=0.326$; beta coefficient=0.058), meaning hypothesis 1: *The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the residents' personal lives influence their support for the post-pandemic tourism development in Vrnjačka Banja*, is not confirmed. There is a statistically significant ($p=0.000$) correlation of 0.567 between *accepting tourists during pandemic* and *support for post-pandemic tourism development*. In addition, *accepting tourists during pandemic* is an important predictor of *residents' support for post-pandemic tourism development in Vrnjačka Banja* ($p=0.000$), and considering the beta coefficient of 0.585, this independent variable significantly influences the *support for post-pandemic tourism development in Vrnjačka Banja* (Table 8). Accordingly hypothesis 2: *The residents' acceptance of tourists during the pandemic in Vrnjačka Banja influences their support for the post-pandemic tourism development in Vrnjačka Banja*, is confirmed.

Table 6: *Model summary*

Model Summary				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.569	0.324	0.318	0.62339

Source: *Authors*

Table 7: ANOVA results of regression

ANOVA						
Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	41.152	2	20.576	52.947	0.000
	Residual	85.885	221	0.389		
	Total	127.037	223			

Source: Authors

Table 8: Results of regression analysis (dependent variable support for post-pandemic tourism)

	Std. Beta Coefficient	t-value	Sig. level
Effects on personal life	0.058	0.984	0.326
Accepting tourists during pandemic	0.585	10.014	0.000

Source: Authors

Conclusion

The fact that the pandemic caused by the Covid-19 virus threatened tourism and almost completely paused its development, leads to the need to think about which recovery strategies should be implemented. In order to ensure the stable long-term development of tourism that will be in line with the principles of sustainable development, tourism after the pandemic should be organized in accordance with the interests of all stakeholders. The support of the residents for the development of tourism in the post-pandemic period is crucial for achieving sustainable tourism.

Vrnjačka Banja is a destination where the number of tourists significantly exceeds the number of residents, especially during the season. In this sense, the pressure of tourism development on the residents is significantly increasing, which may create antagonism among them. The attitude of the residents towards the tourism development may vary during the crisis, such as the Covid-19 pandemic. The results of this paper showed that the pandemic did not leave particularly negative effects on their personal lives. Their support for the development of tourism is great both for tourism after the pandemic and for tourism during the pandemic. Certainly, it would be good if there is a strategy to prevent the spreading of the virus in order to keep the tourism industry during the pandemic in Vrnjačka Banja. Their tolerance for tourists during the pandemic is high, which indicates that despite the probability of increased spread of the virus due to the presence of tourists, the residents show a positive attitude towards tourism.

Based on the statistical analysis, it is concluded that the residents' attitudes about the acceptance of tourists during the pandemic affect their support for the future development of tourism in Vrnjačka Banja. On the other hand, the effects of the pandemic on the residents' personal lives do not affect their support for the development of tourism in the post-pandemic time. This can be a starting point for further researches on the attitudes of residents of other tourism destinations threatened by mass tourism. Future research on the residents' attitudes on the post-pandemic development of tourism should be focused in more detail on their willingness to cooperate on the strategy of future tourism development, as well as on what forms of tourism and what scope of tourism they support.

The limitations of this study are reflected in the fact that the residents' attitudes are observed independently of their socio-demographic characteristics and whether residents are economically dependent on the development of tourism, which largely determines the attitudes about the future development of tourism. The results of this research can be used to define the strategy for future development of tourism in Banja, and to define a necessary focus on sustainable tourism development in Vrnjačka Banja. Also, the importance of research is reflected in the collection of knowledge about the residents' attitudes towards tourism during the crisis period and after the crisis period.

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