

COVID-19 AND INTERNATIONAL TOURISM OF MEDITERRANEAN EUROPE COUNTRIES

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Abstract: *The still actual Covid-19 pandemic has an unprecedented negative impact on the tourism industry. Due to the nature of the pandemic, which became global in a very short time, international tourism has shown particular vulnerability. International tourism has previously shown significant sensitivity to negative external shocks, as well as a great ability to recover. Almost two years after the beginning of the current health crisis, it is still not possible to talk about its end with certainty, nor precise forecasts of the recovery of international tourism can be given. However, it is possible and useful to evaluate the negative effects of the crisis. The subject of this paper is to consider the negative effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the international tourism of the Mediterranean Europe countries. The aim is to compare the negative effects and potentially conclude about countries that have managed to cope more successfully with the challenges that the crisis has brought. Comparative and cluster analysis are applied in the paper. The results of the research enable the classification of the Mediterranean Europe countries according to the magnitude of the negative impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on international tourism and the formulation of appropriate recommendations for tourism policy makers in the analysed countries.*

Keywords: *international tourism, Covid-19, Mediterranean Europe countries*

INTRODUCTION

For more than two years, the world has been facing a health crisis that has greatly affected all spheres of life and work. The Covid-19 pandemic has affected all sectors of the economy. Tourism, especially international tourism, due to its specificity is one of the most affected sectors. The pandemic was followed by the closure, in certain periods of time and to a certain extent, the state borders of the countries. Another characteristic of the pandemic period is the restrictions that are introduced at the level of hotels, restaurants and other facilities intended for tourists. On the other hand, many tourists, depending on the level and manner of risk perception, have given up traveling or changed their travel methods. Very often, even those who decided to travel, due to numerous restrictions, replaced the international with domestic travel. In these circumstances, international tourism is going through a crisis of unprecedented proportions.

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The paper analyzes the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the international tourism of the Mediterranean European countries. This group of countries is chosen because of its very important role in the international tourism market. The aim is to determine the intensity of the impact of the crisis on specific countries and whether they differ according to the extent to which they are affected by the crisis. The paper is structured in several chapters. After a brief review of the literature, the methodological framework of the research is presented. This is followed by a presentation of the research results and their discussion. Finally, the general conclusions reached on the basis of the conducted research are drawn.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The COVID-19 pandemic, due to a series of restrictions, has hit the tourism sector like no other event in history. The impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on tourism can be summed up in several categories or dimensions, which, either alone or in interaction, have led to unprecedented scenarios (Aldao et al., 2021). Namely, in addition to the economic, ecological, social, cultural, psychological, technological dimension of the pandemic impact should be also mentioned. The world suddenly and almost overnight faced the situation of overtourism in numerous destinations to no tourism (Milano & Koens, 2022). Under the influence of this extreme, countries and tourist destinations, especially those that rely heavily on tourism in their economic development, have faced numerous financial difficulties. Also, the Covid-19 pandemic is changing the psyche of tourists and patterns of behavior. This may be a chance for the accelerated evolution of tourism towards a form in which quality will be valued more than quantity and towards a sea transformative form of tourism (Galvani et al., 2020). In terms of technology, Covid-19 has accelerated the penetration of new technologies and applications within tourism and hospitality operations and, despite its devastating effects, provided the tourism sector with a chance to recover, but in a new way (Rahimizhian & Iran, 2020). In the context of the numerous negative impacts of the pandemic, its impact on countries and communities that depend on transnational tourist flows must be especially emphasized (Lamers & Student, 2021). Global tourism and travel have one of the central roles in the spread of the virus, and on the other hand, they are extremely affected by the pandemic. In this regard, when analyzing the interdependence of international trust and crisis, the cause-and-effect relationship in creating dependence and vulnerability must always be kept in mind.

The still current pandemic is attracting the attention of numerous authors and representatives of scientific thought in the field of tourism. In addition to the global assessment of the consequences of the crisis on tourism, the extent and effects of the crisis on the tourism

of individual countries are often analyzed. Certain research is focused on Mediterranean tourist destinations or tourism of a specific country of the European Mediterranean. Kourgiantakis et al. (2021) investigated the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the intentions of tourists on the Greek island of Crete. The research was conducted in the period when there were only 15 registered cases of Covid-19 on the island, and in that sense, it is one of the pioneering research on this topic. The results of the research showed that tourists highly respect safety and privacy on vacation and that the standards of personal hygiene in hotels, as well as providing a lonely environment, play a major role in making travel decisions. The results of a study by Jafari et al. (2021) showed that the new corona virus, in an identical way to the global one, had a negative impact on the tourism industry of a small Mediterranean town in Northern Cyprus in terms of economic profit, business and business closure. With the exception of the ICT sector, the authors state that all other sectors that rely on tourism such as hotels, restaurants, travel agencies and the transport sector have suffered massively as a result of global closure due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Arbulú et al. (2021) tried to estimate the capacity of domestic tourism in Spain to mitigate the consequences of the huge or complete absence of international tourism demand caused by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. The results of the research showed that the greater or lesser capacity of domestic tourism to compensate for the losses of international tourism depends on the region's traditional orientation towards the domestic market, volatility of its domestic demand and capacity to attract new segments of domestic tourists. Exploring the economic impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the Balearic Islands tourism industry, Arbulú et al. (2021a) conclude that the pandemic leads to a reduction in production and employment, emphasizing that these effects are particularly pronounced because most jobs in tourism are not highly qualified and therefore characterized by lower wages, and that women, who are a major share of the tourism labour force, are particularly affected. Aiello et al. (2022) presents some evidence on the effects of Covid-19 on tourism in Italy. The authors emphasize that tourists are willing to pay more for security at a tourist destination, but also that the southern parts of the country are more exposed to the negative effects of the crisis since they are a destination for tourists living in the north of the country.

Grofelnik (2020) deals with the assessment of the acceptable number of tourists with regard to the physical, real and effective reception capacity of sea beaches on the example of a selected coastal city in Croatia. The authors conclude that, in the study area and in regular circumstances, the real reception capacity is close to the upper load limits, and that it is not sufficient with the current number of users if anti-epidemic recommendations are applied.

Lapko et al. (2021) analyzing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on nautical tourism in Croatia, with special emphasis on charter services, conclude that there is a large negative impact of the pandemic on nautical tourism in Croatia. Unlike previous studies, which mainly deal with the analysis of the negative effects of the pandemic on the tourism of Mediterranean countries, although rare, there are also studies that conclude on the positive effects. The study of Sifakis et al. (2021) examined the impact of state strategies for tackling the COVID-19 spread on both traffic load and air quality in Mediterranean tourism destination by employing statistical methods. The results of this study indicate that the lockdown period's impact on improving air quality and that the crisis is responsible for the potential positive lessons learned for urban tourism, especially climate change adaptation.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK OF RESEARCH

The main aim of the research is to compare the negative effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the international tourism of the Mediterranean European countries and potentially conclude about countries that have managed to cope more successfully with the challenges that the crisis has brought. In accordance with the defined aim of the research, the paper starts from the basic hypothesis that the Mediterranean European countries are homogeneous in terms of the impact of the crisis on their international tourism. The source of secondary data is the report of the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) - "World Tourism Barometer" for 2021. The sample of countries is determined in accordance with the way in which the UNWTO classifies countries in its official reports. In that sense, it should be noted that this is one more reason why France was not included in the analysis, in addition to the fact that there is no data for the France in the mentioned report. Comparative and cluster analysis are applied in the paper. Comparative analysis is applied for the analysis of data on international tourist arrivals and international tourism receipts in the Mediterranean European countries. The classification of countries according to the analysed indicators is performed by cluster analysis.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

For the purpose of comparative analysis of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on international tourism, Table 1 shows data on international tourist traffic in the Mediterranean Europe countries for the year before the crisis (2019) and the first year of the crisis (2020), as well as the percentage change in the values of the analysed indicators 2020 compared to 2019.

Table 1. International tourist arrivals and international tourism receipts in Mediterranean Europe countries (2019 and 2020)

Country	International tourist arrivals			International tourism receipts		
	2019 (1000)	2020 (1000)	20/19 (change in %)	(USD million)	(USD million)	20/19 (change in %)
Albania	5,919	2,521	-57.4	2,332	1,129	-52.6
Bosnia and Herzegovina	1,198	196	-83.6	1,176	350	-70.8
Croatia	17,353	5,545	-68.0	11,753	5,569	-54.3
Cyprus	3,977	632	-84.1	3,254	658	-80.2
Greece	31,348	7,217	-77.0	20,351	4,933	-76.2
Italy	64,513	25,190	-61.0	49,596	19,797	-60.9
Malta	2,753	659	-76.1	1,901	417	-78.5
Montenegro	2,510	351	-86.0	1,230	165	-86.8
Slovenia	4,702	1,216	-74.1	3,081	1,236	-60.7
Spain	83,509	18,958	-77.3	79,708	18,477	-77.3

Source: UNWTO. 2021. *World Tourism Barometer. Statistical Annex. Madrid: UNWTO.*

Based on the data presented in Table 1, it can be concluded that Montenegro, Cyprus and Bosnia and Herzegovina are the countries that have suffered the largest percentage decline in international tourist arrivals. The lowest percentage decrease is recorded in Albania. When it comes to international tourism receipts, Montenegro, Cyprus and Malta are the countries with the highest percentage reductions, while the smallest decline is recorded in Albania as well.

Data on international tourist arrivals and international tourism receipts for 2019 and data on change in % 2020 compared to 2019 were the basis for classifying countries into three clusters. The information about each cluster is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Final Cluster Centers

Variables	Cluster		
	1	2	3
International tourist arrivals 2019 (in 1000)	64,513.00	8,720.00	83,509.00
International tourist arrivals 20/19 (change in %)	-61.00	-75.79	-77.30
International tourism receipts 2019 (in million)	49,596.00	5,634.75	79,708.00
International tourism receipts 20/19 (change in %)	-60.90	-70.01	-77.30

Source: Authors (SPSS Statistics)

Cluster 1 includes countries with average values of international tourist arrivals and international tourism receipts in 2019 and with the lowest percentage decrease in the value of these indicators 2020 compared to 2019. Cluster 2 includes countries with the worst results in

international tourism in 2019 and with the average percentage decrease of the value of analysed indicators 2020 compared to 2019. Cluster 3 includes the countries with the best results in international tourism in 2019 and with the largest percentage decrease in the value of the analysed indicators 2020 compared to 2019.

Cluster membership of the countries is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Cluster Membership

Case	Cluster	Distance
Albania	2	4330.635
Bosnia and Hercegovina	2	8744.198
Croatia	2	10581.209
Cyprus	2	5306.995
Greece	2	26992.489
Italy	1	0.000
Malta	2	7038.896
Montenegro	2	7613.561
Slovenia	2	4760.888
Spain	3	0.000

Source: Authors (SPSS Statistics)

Based on the data shown in Table 3, it can be concluded that the largest number of Mediterranean European countries belongs to cluster 2, 8 out of 10 analysed countries. There is only one country, Italy, in cluster 1. Also, there is only one country of the Mediterranean Europe, Spain, in cluster 3.

CONCLUSION

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought challenges to international tourism unprecedented in history. The specificity of the pandemic itself, but also the specificity of international tourism are the reasons for dramatic changes in the international tourism market. Countries around the world have introduced a number of measures to combat the pandemic that have negatively affected international tourism and tourism in general. On the other hand, international tourism poses a threat of further spread of the virus. In general, it can be said that international tourism in all countries of the world has been extremely negatively affected. In this paper, an attempt to consider the intensity of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the international tourism of the Mediterranean European countries is made. The aim was to see if the countries of the European Mediterranean are homogeneous in terms of the impact of the crisis.

The results of the research showed that this can be claimed, i.e. that the initial hypothesis of the research is confirmed. Namely, 8 out of 10 analysed countries are classified in cluster 2, which includes countries with the lowest values of international tourist arrivals and international

tourism receipts in 2019 and with a medium percentage decrease in the value of analysed indicators 2020 compared to 2019. Spain and Italy are the only countries which are not covered by this cluster. It is interesting that these are countries that differ significantly from all others in terms of international tourist traffic. Namely, these are the leading tourist destinations in the Mediterranean. On the other hand, they are classified into two separate clusters when the values of all analysed indicators are taken into account. Italy is a destination that suffered less losses caused by the Covid-19 pandemic compared to Spain.

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