

IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON TOURIST TRAFFIC IN SERBIA

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Abstract: *The COVID-19 pandemic represents a significant challenge for the tourism industry and has led to 2020 being rated as the worst year in the history of tourism. The number of tourists has fallen at rates that are more than tens of times lower than the rates of decline in the periods of some other major crises that occurred at the beginning of the twenty-first century. This trend on a global level has not missed Serbia, which is facing one of the most difficult years for tourism and hospitality. The level of impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on tourist traffic in Serbia by comparative analysis of relevant statistical data in the year before and the year of the pandemic is researched in the paper. Chain indices and monthly growth rates of the number of tourists in 2020 compared to the same month of the previous year are used in the analysis. The total, domestic and foreign tourist traffic in the country are analyzed separately. The results of the research confirm the assumption of an extremely negative impact of this health crisis on Serbian tourism, but also indicate significant differences between the level of impact of the crisis on domestic tourist traffic and the level of impact of the crisis on foreign tourist traffic in the country.*

Keywords: *COVID-19, tourism, tourist traffic*

INTRODUCTION

The dynamic growth of tourism, characteristic for the second half of the twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first century, was periodically interrupted by unpredictable events and under the influence of factors of economic and non-economic nature, i.e. various types of crises. Many authors have tried to understand the phenomenon of crises, for which the term catastrophe is often used in the literature, by defining crises and catastrophes, explaining the nature of crises and catastrophes and their life cycle and forms of manifestation, and finally, emphasizing the complexity and chaotic nature of incidents which pose challenges in managing or preventing crises or catastrophes (Ritchie, 2004, p. 670). Although the terms crisis and catastrophes are often used as synonyms, crises, as opposed to catastrophes, are not events to which we simply indulge. They are processes of existential anxiety with high uncertainty, which are characterized by the fact that the usual and proven solutions to the problem cancel. Crises are decision-making situations (Senić and Senić, 2015, p. 57). Most generally, crises can be defined as processes that are unplanned and unwanted, time-limited, and that can be conditionally influenced (Senić and Lukić, 2008).

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Globalization has made crises also get a global character, given the growing global connectivity, interdependence and thus greater susceptibility to crisis (Keller and Bieger, 2010, p. 10). Tourism as a global phenomenon is not immune to the negative effects of crises that can occur in all spheres of social and economic life. The crisis in tourism is a situation in which the destination suffers a sudden and significant decline in the arrival of tourists. Of course, this drop in arrival is, in fact, the result of the reaction of tourists to real or perceived threats to their personal safety, health or even simpler enjoyment of their vacation (Senić and Senić, 2015, p. 61). The vulnerability of international tourism needs to be emphasized. The basic characteristic of crises in tourism, especially since the beginning of the twenty-first century, is that they are more frequent, occur at shorter intervals and are caused by various reasons.

The aim of this paper is a comprehensive analysis of the effects of the global COVID-19 pandemic on the tourist traffic of the Republic of Serbia. The paper starts from the assumption that the global pandemic has had an extremely negative impact on tourist traffic in the Republic of Serbia, but also that there are certain differences in the impact of the pandemic on foreign tourist traffic in relation to the impact on domestic. Although tourism in the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic is largely under the loupe of researchers and although numerous papers and preliminary analyzes were published during the previous year, only the beginning of the current year enables a complete analysis at the national level, since official data on tourist traffic are now available.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The link between health and tourism is two-way and multiple and as such is the subject of a multidisciplinary approach to study. One of the aspects of studying the mentioned connection emphasizes the importance of health as an integral part of the overall tourist experience and a factor that affects the level of tourist satisfaction and the quality of the overall tourist experience at the destination. Different types of epidemics are a potential threat to tourists and a factor influencing the choice of destination. Some of the epidemics, due to the breadth of scale, as potentially unsafe destinations in a certain period of time characterize not only individual countries, but also wider spatial coverage, i.e. one or more global regions. Tourism, due to its massiveness and the huge number of people involved in the tourist movements, can be a factor that helps spread the epidemic.

In recent history, several serious health crises have had an impact on the development of tourism in the world. SARS coronavirus (SARS-CoV) caused an international epidemic in 2003 and was the cause of the first global infectious disease in the twenty-first century. The

H1N1 virus, whose first signs appeared in Mexico in April 2009, also had a certain negative impact on international tourism, primarily in the American tourist region, and especially in Mexico (Verikios et al., 2011, p. 4). . The Ebola virus, which is characteristic for the African continent and has a high mortality rate, took on epidemic proportions in West African countries in 2014. Although these health crises affected either global tourism or tourism in the regions where they occurred, none of them had such a strong negative impact as the current crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The nature of the current crisis, but also the nature and evolution of tourism and its growth paradigms are the reason that tourism is, on the one hand, the most severely affected activity, and, on the other hand, a contributor to such circumstances, because it is responsible for highly interconnected and global world (Sigala, 2020). In terms of dealing with the virus which is unknown, the key measures to restrain the pandemic were restricting people's mobility and social distancing. These measures immediately and directly affected all elements of the tourist system, from domestic and international travel to transport, catering, events (Gössling, Scott and Hall, 2020). In addition to the fact that travel opportunities have been reduced or totally eliminated by closing national borders, the main reasons for tourist travel have been removed by closing cultural institutions and canceling numerous events in many destinations (Baum and Hai, 2020).

Already in the first months of this health crisis, numerous organizations and institutions began to publish estimates of the consequences of COVID19 for the global tourism industry in 2020. (Gössling, Scott and Hall, 2020). The unpredictability of the direction of the pandemic has certainly demanded and still demands that all prognoses need to be treated with extensive caution. The interest of the scientific public in researching the issue of the impact of the COVID19 pandemic on tourism in the first year of the crisis was also surprisingly high. In addition to the impact of the pandemic on tourism globally (Farzanegan et al, 2020; Uğur and Akbıyık, 2020; Luković and Stojković, 2020; Škare, Soriano and Porada-Rochoń, 2021), there are also numerous studies of the impact on the tourism industry of individual countries (Foo et al, 2020; Kumar, 2020; Kaushal and Srivastava, 2021; Hoque et al, 2020). While on the one hand, tourists and tourism are threatened by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, on the other hand the movement of tourists in such specific circumstances carries a risk for the local population of the destination. Qiu, Park and Song (2020) investigate the social costs of tourism during the COVID-19 pandemic and conclude that residents in tourist destinations are ready for risk reduction and action in responding to the pandemic crisis.

Not a small number of scientific papers deal with the forecasts of the recovery of tourism after the end of the pandemic. Fotiadis, Polyzos and Huan (2021) predict that the decline in tourist arrivals will persist at least until June 2021 and that a certain type of recovery should be expected after the summer of 2021. Besides that how tourism will recover, the question which also stands out is how travel and tourism will evolve as a socio-economic activity in our society (Gretzel et al, 2020). Some authors see a chance for tourism to be transformed after the crisis in accordance with the community-centered tourism framework, which implies a wider respect for the interests of the local community (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; Lapointe, 2020). One thing is certain, tourism will continue its recovery in the new normal post COVID-19 conditions (Brouder et al, 2020). These new conditions will inevitably mean that tourists' psyches will likely settle on a new equilibrium (Kock, 2020).

METHODOLOGY AND INFORMATION BASIS OF RESEARCH

The basic method applied in the paper is the method of comparative analysis of data on tourist traffic in Serbia in the years before the crisis and 2020. The instruments used to conduct the analysis are chain indices and growth rates of tourist traffic. The information basis of the research is the data of the official Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia on the total, domestic and foreign tourist traffic in the country in 2019 and 2020.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on tourist traffic in Serbia, it is necessary to consider movement of tourist traffic that were valid in non-crisis circumstances. Table 1 provides monthly data on total, domestic and foreign tourist traffic in the Republic of Serbia in 2019.

Table 1. Tourist traffic in the Republic of Serbia in 2019

	Total		Domestic		Foreign	
	Number of tourists	indices (previous month = 100)	Number of tourists	indices (previous month = 100)	Number of tourists	indices (previous month = 100)
2019/January	177,750	75.9	94,811	83.6	82,939	68.6
2019/February	195,932	110.2	115,429	121.7	80,503	97.1
2019/March	233,302	119.1	121,268	105.1	112,034	139.2
2019/April	300,927	129	169,731	140	131,196	117.1
2019/May	384,840	127.9	220,824	130.1	164,016	125
2019/June	358,529	93.2	174,384	79	184,145	112.3
2019/July	391,387	109.2	175,521	100.7	215,866	117.2
2019/August	448,310	114.5	210,509	119.9	237,801	110.2
2019/September	344,038	76.7	148,865	70.7	195,173	82.1
2019/October	332,044	96.5	157,553	105.8	174,491	89.4
2019/November	253,502	76.3	124,030	78.7	129,472	74.2
2019/December	269,422	106.3	130,507	105.2	138,915	107.3

Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia

The most visited month in 2019 was August, while the least visited was January. Although a certain concentration of tourists can be noticed in the summer months, the general conclusion is that the tourism of the Republic of Serbia does not have such a pronounced seasonality in regular circumstances. The largest number of domestic and foreign tourists was recorded in August. The relative uniformity of the number of domestic and foreign tourists can also be noticed, while the number of foreign tourists was still slightly higher during even seven months in 2019, from June to December.

Table 2 shows data on the total number of tourists, the number of domestic and foreign tourists in 2020. January and February 2020 were very promising months when it comes to tourist traffic in the Republic of Serbia. However, already in March, instead of the expected further growth, the number of tourists decreased. The first cases of COVID-19 in Serbia were recorded in the first half of March. However, April was the month when the country was closed and when the most restrictive measures were introduced, which all drastically affected tourist traffic. This is also the least visited month of the year, when only 6,293 tourists were recorded in total, out of which 5,241 domestic tourists and 1,052 foreign tourists. After that, there is an increase in the number of tourists, primarily domestic. The limited possibilities for the movement of people reflected on the fact that a large number of Serbian citizens decided to go on vacation in their own country. In August and September 2020, the number of domestic tourists in Serbia was even higher than in the same months last year. When it comes to foreign tourist traffic, certain positive shifts have been recorded since June 2020. However, the number of foreign tourists is at a far lower level than in the previous year.

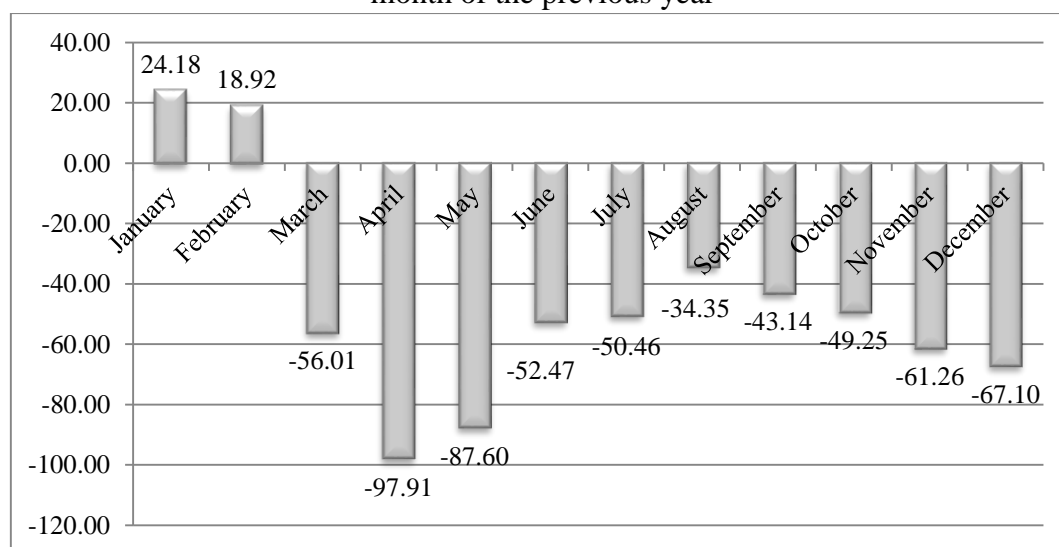
Table 2. Tourist traffic in the Republic of Serbia in 2020

	Total		Domestic		Foreign	
	Number of tourists	indices (previous month = 100)	Number of tourists	indices (previous month = 100)	Number of tourists	indices (previous month = 100)
2020/January	220,733	81.9	113,959	87.3	106,774	76.9
2020/February	232,995	105.6	141,597	124.3	91,398	85.6
2020/March	102,623	44	64,306	45.4	38,317	41.9
2020/April	6,293	6.1	5,241	8.2	1,052	2.7
2020/May	47,730	758.5	44,091	841.3	3,639	345.9
2020/June	170,411	357	145,970	331.1	24,441	671.6
2020/July	193,912	113.8	169,587	116.2	24,325	99.5
2020/August	294,334	151.8	263,719	155.5	30,615	125.9
2020/September	195,633	66.5	162,186	61.5	33,447	109.3
2020/October	168,497	86.1	124,877	77	43,620	130.4
2020/November	98,218	58.3	71,367	57.1	26,851	61.6
2020/December	88,642	90.3	67,410	94.5	21,232	79.1

Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia

If the monthly growth rates of the total number of tourists in 2020 compared to the same month last year are observed (Figure 1), the excellent results recorded in January and February can be confirmed once again. However, already in April and May the largest negative monthly growth rates of the total number of tourists in 2020 compared to the same months of the previous year were recorded. The lowest negative monthly growth rate of the total number of tourists in 2020 compared to the same month of the previous year was recorded in September. After that, the epidemiological situation in the country and the number of visitors worsened again, which made December the third month of the year in terms of the size of the negative growth rate of the total number of tourists compared to the same month last year.

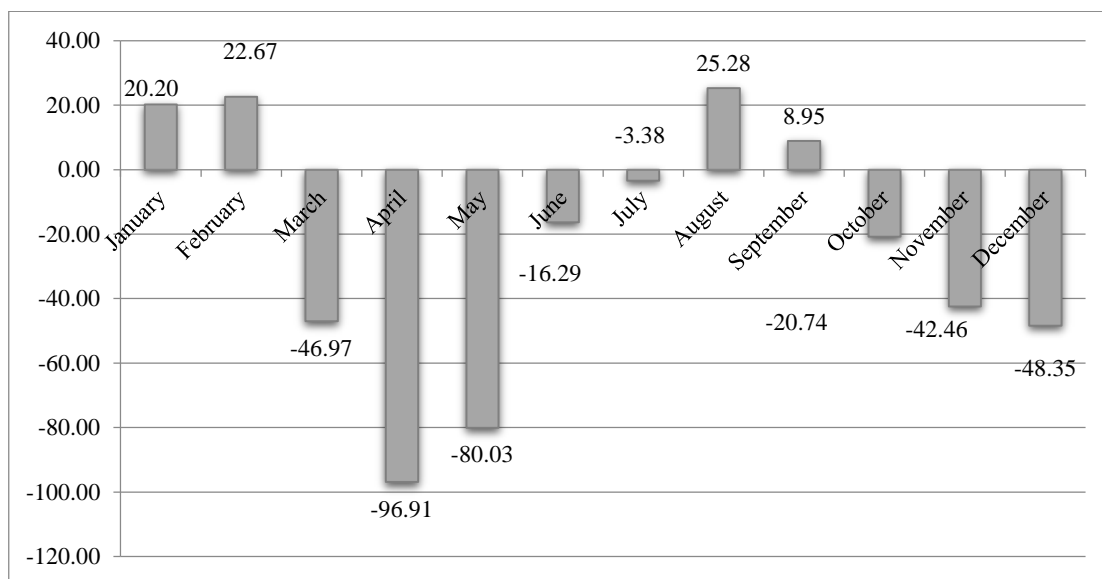
Figure 1. Monthly growth rates of the total number of tourists in 2020 in relation to the same month of the previous year



Source: Authors, based on Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia

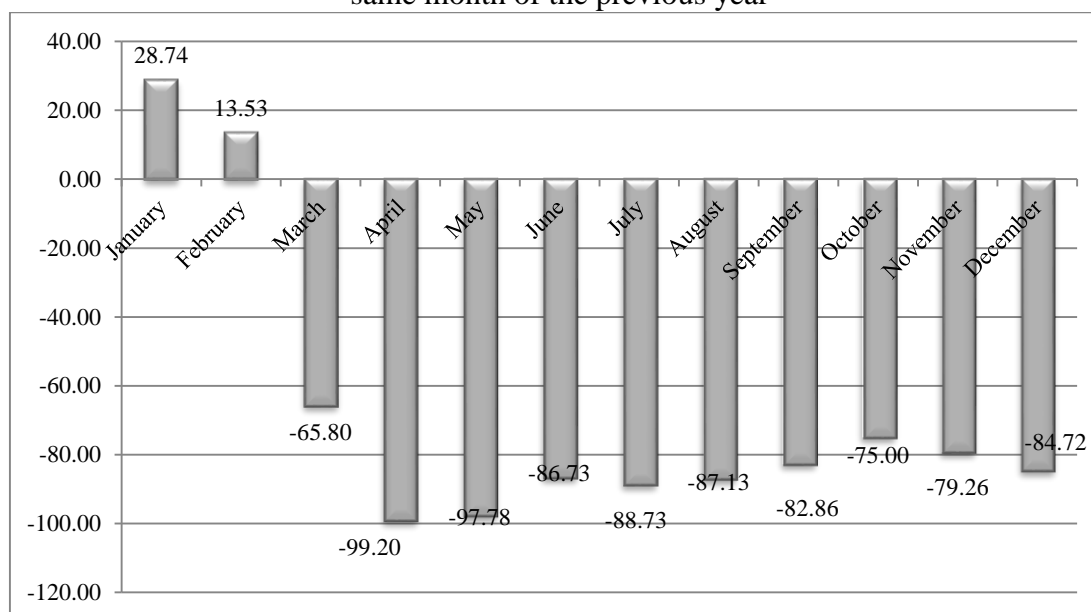
Graph 2 shows the monthly growth rates of the number of domestic tourists in 2020 in relation to the same month of the previous year, while Graph 3 shows the monthly growth rates of the number of foreign tourists 2020 in relation to the same month of the previous year. These reviews enable a comparative analysis of the impact of the pandemic on domestic and foreign trusit traffic in the Republic of Serbia.

Figure 2. Monthly growth rates of the number of domestic tourists in 2020 in relation to the same month of the previous year



Source: Authors, based on Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia

Figure 3. Monthly growth rates of the number of foreign tourists in 2020 in relation to the same month of the previous year



Source: Authors, based on Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia

After the positive growth rates of the number of domestic tourists in January and February 2020 compared to the same months of the previous year, the number of domestic tourists decreased in March. The largest negative monthly growth rate of the number of domestic tourists in 2020 compared to the same month last year was recorded in April. Surprisingly, and contrary to the tendencies recorded in foreign tourist traffic, positive growth

rates of the number of domestic tourists in relation to the same months of the previous year were recorded in August and September 2020. When it comes to foreign tourist traffic, after the negative tendencies recorded in March and the negative growth rate of as much as 99.2% in April 2020 compared to the same month of the previous year, foreign tourist traffic did not recover throughout the year. Negative monthly growth rates ranged from -75% to -97.78% in all subsequent months.

CONCLUSION

Due to the specificity of tourism, which is based on mobility, the COVID-19 pandemic and the related measure of restricting the movement of people have had a particularly negative impact on this economic activity. The negative growth rates of the number of tourists recorded at the global level, at the level of individual regions, as well as the level of the countries, are incomparable with the negative growth rates in any previous crisis that has hit tourism. Such global tendencies have not missed the Republic of Serbia, where the tourism sector is suffering the serious consequences of the crisis caused by the global pandemic.

In Serbia, the consequences of the crisis on tourist traffic became visible in March 2020. April was the worst month of the year. Regardless of certain positive results recorded in the summer months of 2020, especially when it comes to domestic tourist traffic, tourism in Serbia throughout 2020 suffered from the serious negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. This primarily refers to foreign tourist traffic. If we take into account the fact that Serbia has only succeeded to significantly increase foreign tourist traffic in the last few years, the consequences of the crisis are even more pronounced and represent the elimination of the results of efforts to promote the Republic of Serbia on the foreign tourist market.

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