

TRAVEL AND TOURISM SUSTAINABILITY IN THE BALKAN COUNTRIES

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Abstract

Tourism is one of the fastest growing sectors and a significant wealth generator in contemporary conditions. However, along with tourism growth, its negative sides emerge, such as overtourism and inadequate management of natural and cultural resources, which can lead to their devastation. That is why the concept of sustainable tourism is essential in order to preserve all the resources and attractiveness of tourism destinations for future generations. The subject of the paper is the analysis of travel and tourism sustainability in the Balkan countries. The results of the research pointed to critical dimensions of the tourism sustainability in the Balkan countries that require improvement, but also made it possible to single out countries where it is especially necessary to make efforts to ensure more sustainable tourism development.

Key Words: *sustainable tourism, Covid-19, Balkan countries*

JEL classification: *Z30, Z32, Q01*

Introduction

Sustainable tourism has been researched by numerous authors, experts and relevant institutions. However, it seems that it has only been given proper attention with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Covid-19 pandemic

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has offered an opportunity to reevaluate how tourism should develop going forward, emphasizing the need to base such growth on sustainability and reduce negative effects (Seabra & Bhatt, 2022). The pandemic provided an opportunity to reflect on the pre-pandemic unsustainable practices of the tourism sector and initiate greater sustainability through the adoption of responsible behavior, quality tourism and innovative products (Tiwari & Chowdhary, 2021). Additionally, the pandemic is seen as an opportunity to end overtourism (Koh, 2020) as well as to alleviate the negative effects that unsustainable tourism practices, such as the misuse of natural tourist attractions, have on the environment (Sumanapala & Wolf, 2022). Hence, it is possible to consider the Covid-19 pandemic as a chance to embed the conscientious behavior of tourists in order to avoid the already existing phenomenon of excessive tourism and unsustainable practices. Numerous other authors pointed out that the Covid-19 crisis presents a chance for sustainable tourism (Palacios-Florencio et al., 2021; Romagosa, 2020). In addition, the topic has received increasing attention from relevant institutions, including the World Economic Forum (WEF), which redesigned the Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index (TTCI) and started calculating the Travel & Tourism Development Index (TTDI). The TTDI includes new subindex Travel and Tourism Sustainability, thus emphasizing the importance of sustainability and resilience of tourism. The subject of the paper is the analysis of travel and tourism sustainability in the Balkan countries, based on the ratings of the WEF. The aim of the paper is to identify the critical dimensions of the sustainability of tourism in this group of countries, but also to single out the countries that record relatively weaker results in this field.

Literature Review

With the growth of international tourism, it is necessary for destinations to reassess their tourism strategies. Unrestrained tourism growth, if not controlled, could harm the local community, cultural heritage, and ecosystems. That is why a growing number of destinations are embracing environmental initiatives that seek to balance the appeal of tourism with responsible and sustainable practices. Sustainable tourism practices benefit destinations in many ways, providing financial support, new employment opportunities and innovative work methods, and contributing to nature conservation and renewal of underdeveloped rural areas (Coroş et al., 2017).

Sustainable tourism is such a form of tourism that actively contributes to the overall development process or, at the very least, aligns with the principles of

sustainable development, ensuring the ability to meet the needs and desires of future generations without endangering their resources. Sustainable tourism is defined as „tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities” (UNWTO & UNEP, 2005, p. 12). UNWTO (2015) further elaborates that sustainable tourism should use environmental resources that are a key element in tourism development optimally, while helping to preserve natural heritage and biodiversity; respect the socio-cultural authenticity and preserve the heritage of the host communities and contribute to intercultural understanding and tolerance; and ensures sustainable, long-term, fairly distributed socio-economic benefits to all stakeholders, and contributes to poverty reduction.

Sustainable tourism practices have become a strategic necessity for destinations seeking long-term sustainability. A successful strategy for sustainable tourism should prioritize the development of strong adaptive capacities while encouraging the continued engagement of all parties involved (Tao & Wall, 2009). However, it is challenging to introduce sustainable tourism practices in the tourism sector, due to the fact that there are many different interests and many stakeholders, such as residents, visitors, the public sector and the tourism industry. In order to manage this process, to make a tourism destination sustainable and to preserve it for future tourists, the cooperation between the public and private sectors, and all other stakeholders is necessity.

Methodology

The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of shifting tourism development towards sustainable tourism. These circumstances prompted the WEF to modify the traditional TTCI and create the TTDI, stating the need to incorporate the „long-term inclusivity, sustainability and resilience into the sector as it faces evolving challenges and risks” (WEF, 2022, p. 4) on its path to recovery. In addition to the new pillars (Non-Leisure Resources, Socioeconomic Resilience and Conditions and T&T Demand Pressure and Impact), TTDI includes new Travel and Tourism (T&T) Sustainability subindex, which consists of three pillars (Environmental Sustainability, Socioeconomic Resilience and Conditions and T&T Demand Pressure and Impact), covering the risks and challenges related to T&T sustainability. The first pillar, Environmental Sustainability, measures „the general sustainability of an economy’s

natural environment, protection of its natural resources, and vulnerability to and readiness for climate change” (WEF, 2022, p. 11). The Socioeconomic Resilience and Conditions pillar depicts the resilience and socioeconomic well-being of an economy, and the T&T Demand Pressure and Impact pillar measures the quality and impact of T&T, as well as factors that could indicate the presence of demand fluctuation and overcrowding (WEF, 2022). Data regarding the subindex T&T Sustainability will be used as an indicator of travel and tourism sustainability of the Balkan countries. Comparative analysis of relevant indicators in the Balkan countries in relation to the world average of each of them is applied in the paper. A cross-country comparison was also carried out. The paper is based on the initial hypothesis that the sustainability of tourism in the Balkan countries is at a satisfactory level.

Research results

In order to evaluate the tourism sustainability dimensions in the Balkan countries, Table 1 provides an overview of the scores and ranks of the pillars within the T&T Sustainability subindex. Also, Table 1 shows the average values of scores of the analysed pillars in the Balkan countries, as well as the world average.

Table 1: *Pillars of the T&T Sustainability subindex*

	P1. Environmental Sustainability, 1- 7 (best)		P2. Socioeconomic Resilience and Conditions, 1-7 (best)		P3. T&T Demand Pressure and Impact, 1-7 (best)	
	score	rank	score	rank	score	rank
Albania	4.43	27	4.66	39	3.35	111
Bosnia and Herzegovina	3.48	105	4.35	50	3.33	112
Bulgaria	4.57	19	4.79	35	3.77	82
Croatia	4.49	25	5.09	31	2.79	117
North Macedonia	3.70	91	4.21	56	3.32	113
Montenegro	3.97	64	4.54	42	4.02	64
Romania	4.34	34	4.43	47	4.03	62
Serbia	3.83	78	4.35	51	3.69	93
Balkan countries' average	4.10	-	4.55	-	3.53	-
World average	4.08	-	4.28	-	4.07	-

Legend: country with a score of pillar lower than the world average

Source: Authors, based on WEF (2022a)

Based on the results shown in Table 1, it can be concluded that the average score of the Environmental Sustainability pillar corresponds to the world average score of this pillar. Also, four of the eight analysed Balkan countries have a low score of this pillar compared to the world average. The average score of the Socioeconomic Resilience and Conditions pillar of the Balkans is higher compared to the global average and only one Balkan country (North Macedonia), records a lower value of this pillar in comparison to the average score of the pillar at the world level. The average score of the T&T Demand Pressure and Impact pillar in the Balkan countries is lower than the world average. In addition, if the fact that all analysed Balkan countries record lower scores of this pillar in comparison to the world average is taken into account, it can be assessed as the most critical aspect of travel and tourism sustainability in the Balkan countries.

In accordance with the WEF methodology, there are three subpillars within the Environmental Sustainability pillar, which enables a more detailed analysis of this dimension of travel and tourism sustainability. Table 2 shows the scores and ranks of the Environmental Sustainability subpillars of the Balkans, and average scores for the analysed group of countries and the world average of each subpillar.

Table 2: *Environmental Sustainability subpillars*

	S1. Climate Change Exposure and Management, 1-7 (best)		S2. Pollution & Environmental Conditions, 1-7 (best)		S3. Preservation of Nature, 1-7 (best)	
	score	rank	score	rank	score	rank
Albania	4.51	15	4.14	60	4.65	33
Bosnia and Herzegovina	3.19	96	4.27	53	2.98	114
Bulgaria	3.99	35	4.80	31	4.94	21
Croatia	3.88	47	5.11	19	4.48	43
North Macedonia	3.91	45	3.99	70	3.20	108
Montenegro	3.75	57	4.65	41	3.52	98
Romania	3.87	48	4.68	37	4.46	44
Serbia	3.33	87	4.61	45	3.55	97
Balkan countries' average	3.80	-	4.53	-	3.97	-
World average	3.73	-	4.29	-	4.22	-

Legend: a country with a score of subpillar lower than the world average

Source: Authors, based on WEF (2022a)

If the subpillars within the Environmental Sustainability pillar are observed, it can be concluded that the average score of the Climate Change Exposure and the Management and Pollution & Environmental Conditions in the Balkan countries is higher than the world average. Only two countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia) recorded score of the Climate Change Exposure and the Management subpillar lower than the world average, while in the case of the second mentioned subpillar, three countries have a score lower than the world average. The situation is different when it comes to the Preservation of Nature subpillar. Namely, its average score of the Balkans is lower than the global average, and four countries are individually behind the world average. In this sense, nature protection can be identified as a key problem within the dimension of ecological sustainability in the Balkan countries.

A summary of the critical pillars and subpillars within the T&T Sustainability subindex (pillars and subpillars whose scores are lower than the world average) by the Balkan countries is provided in Table 3. This type of review enables the identification of domains within travel and tourism sustainability that require special attention and improvement for each observed country.

Table 3: *Pillars of the T&T Sustainability subindex*

Countries	Critical pillars and subpillars	
Albania	P3	S2
Bosnia and Herzegovina	P1, P3	S1, S2,S3
Bulgaria	P3	
Croatia	P3	
North Macedonia	P1, P2, P3	S2, S3
Montenegro	P1, P3	S3
Romania	P3	
Serbia	P1, P3	S1, S3

Source: *Authors*

Based on the overview given in Table 3, Bulgaria, Croatia and Romania can be singled out as countries with a relatively good position when it comes to travel and tourism sustainability and with only one pillar (T&T Demand Pressure and Impact) separated as critical. Countries in which most dimensions of the area of travel and tourism sustainability can be assessed as critical and in which serious actions and improvements are needed in this field are Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Serbia.

Conclusion

Effective destination management, with the implementation of sustainable tourism practices, plays a crucial role in improving the well-being of the community, preventing improper use of natural resources and enabling the improvement of the overall tourist experience. Through sustainability, the destination increases its competitiveness and differentiates itself from its competitors, by attracting environmentally conscious tourists and establishing a positive reputation. That is why, rather than being considered a separate aspect of tourism, sustainable tourism should be regarded as a state of the tourism industry overall, which needs to strive toward greater sustainability. However, the different interests of key stakeholders make this process very complex.

The results of the research made it possible to draw several conclusions. First, when considering the pillars of the T&T Sustainability subindex, the T&T Demand Pressure and Impact pillar is identified as the most critical. In this regard, the existence or potential danger of overcrowding, as well as the instability of demand, can be highlighted as a special problem of the tourism sustainability in the Balkan countries. All this requires adequate management of tourism development, in order to alleviate the problem of seasonal concentration of tourism, ensure a more even distribution of tourists in tourist destinations and avoid resistance and ensure a positive attitude of the resident population towards tourism development. When it comes to the Environmental Sustainability subpillars, the preservation of nature is singled out as a particularly sensitive area. Progress is necessary in terms of the relationship between the public and private sectors to the need for nature conservation, as well as efforts to implement international positive practice in this field in the Balkan countries. A greater effort in the field of preserving natural resources can create more adequate conditions for the implementation of nature-based forms of tourism. In this way, by identifying certain critical dimensions of travel and tourism sustainability in the Balkan countries, we come to the conclusion that the initial hypothesis of the research has not been confirmed. The sustainability of tourism in the Balkan countries is not at a satisfactory level. Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Serbia were singled out as countries where special improvements are needed in this field.

The limitation of the paper is reflected in the fact that the cross-country comparison was performed only on the basis of data for one year. The

reason lies in the fact that the WEF calculates the new TTDI only from 2021. Future research can be focused on a comparative analysis of the TTDI when the new values are available, with the aim of assessing the progress of the Balkan countries in terms of travel and tourism sustainability.

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