CONSUMER TRAVEL BEHAVIOR DURING THE PANDEMIC. A ROMANIAN CASE STUDY

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Abstract

Starting with the emergence of the new COVID-19 virus, tourism was among the sectors most affected by the pandemic. The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2021) announced a 65% reduction in the number of international arrivals in the first half of 2020 and 97% less in the second half, which means losses of 460 billion euros for the travel industry worldwide. The aim of this research is to present the Romanian consumer behavior after COVID -19 pandemic by using an online questionnaire on 680 of respondents and to analyze, in the European and international context the main changes on Romanian tourism industry. For the statistical analysis of the main changes of the Romanian tourism indicators the secondary data respectively the statistical data was used, both from national statistical data and international sources. For the research regarding the analysis of changes of the Romanian consumer for tourism packages, primary data from 680 respondents was collected by online questionnaire by using a convenience sampling. Following the results of research based on secondary data by using the statistical indicators, we made an extensive analysis in terms of how much the tourism sector was affected by the pandemic, for example at the global level, the revenues generated by this important sector of the economy decreased by 51.4%, in 2020, the number of jobs in tourism decreased by 9.3%, i.e. 3.6 million people out of the 38.5 million reported in 2019 as workers in the tourism sector, were left without a place to work or have changed their field of activity. Romania is no exception, the number of foreign tourist arrivals decreased considerably in 2020, compared to 2019, approximately 35% of Romanians had to cancel their holiday booking due to travel restrictions. However, the COVID-19 pandemic made Romanians' tourist options oriented towards the domestic market.

Keywords: *COVID-19 pandemic, Romania, consumer behavior, statistical analysis, sampling*

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the most important economic activities in the world, it represents an economic-social phenomenon, a promoter of globalization and a factor of sustainable development. In the last decades, the tourism sector has demonstrated that it can contribute to a large extent to economic development and job creation. Representing 10% of global GDP, 7% of global trade and 1 out of 11 jobs (Sorensen, 2017), tourism is today one of the main socio-economic sectors, a promoter of globalization and a factor of sustainable development.

In the domestic and international tourist activity, a wide range of forms and tourist arrangements are practiced, determined by the ways of satisfying the need for tourism, the conditions for achieving the supply-demand balance, and the peculiarities of the organization of the trip. In many places there are opportunities for special forms of tourism based on interesting or unusual local attractions (Moisescu, 2016). The forms of tourism are defined according to different criteria or factors that leave their mark on the individualization and development of the phenomenon. Such criteria are distance, duration, origin of tourists, number of tourists, degree of organization, mode of operation, means of transport used, age of tourists, social contribution, particularities of the destination region, etc. Today in tourism practice there is a diverse series of criteria and possibilities for grouping forms of tourism, the most important and relevant categories, types, and forms.

On the economic level, tourism is a factor of economic progress, with broad and positive implications on the development of the entire society, acting in the direction of the introduction into the economic

circuit (domestic and international) of tourist resources, of the historical cultural heritage, of great attraction and of some of the achievements contemporaries in the fields of constructions and art. Tourism acts as a stimulating factor of the global economic system. Through the development of tourism, a significant increase in production is obtained, its contribution to GDP being proportional to the level of development of each country.

The research undertaken on the role of tourism has highlighted the fact that it has a considerable impact on the economy of the societies and cultures of different countries. Its action is manifested on multiple levels: economic, social, cultural, political. The intensity of these actions differs from one country to another depending on its level of development and the policy promoted towards it. From an economic point of view, the tourist is a consumer of goods and benefits from services, from his expenses and, implicitly, from the financial means resulting from the activity of the economic units of the tourism industry (transport, accommodation, food, leisure, etc.), a part goes directly to these units in the form of profit and money funds for the payment of the salaries of the workers employed in the respective units, another part enters the state or local budget in the form of taxes, fees, etc., and the third part is absorbed directly into other branches of the economy for the payment of the products and goods delivered and the services provided by these sectors for the needs of the tourism industry. In the following I will present the economic role of tourism (Minciu, 2004), which is direct and indirect.

From the point of view of the impact that tourism has on the economy, the specialized literature has identified the existence of three approaches (Postelnicu, 2006):

- underestimating the place and role of tourism in the economy
- overestimation of the place and role of tourism in the economy,
- realistic approach

The economic effects of tourism have both a positive and a negative effect (Moisescu, 2017). From negative effects point of view, we can include the recent COVID-19 pandemic, respectively:

- the inflationary effect of tourism
- negative economic effects on jobs
- incidental costs

The aim of this research is to present the Romanian consumer behavior after COVID -19 pandemic by using an online questionnaire on 680 of respondents and to analyses, in the European and international context the main changes on Romanian tourism industry.

In addition to the economic consequences, tourism also has a profound socio-human significance. It acts, by its nature, both on tourists directly and on the population of the visited areas. Also, the effects of tourism also affect the quality of the environment, the use of free time and, finally, the ties between nations (Stănciulescu, 2003).

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1. Materials

For the statistical analysis of the main changes of the Romanian tourism indicators the secondary data respectively the statistical data was used, both from national statistical data and international sources.

For the research regarding the analysis of changes of the Romanian consumer for tourism packages, primary data from 680 respondents was collected by online questionnaire during 2-7 December 2021 by using a convenience sampling. For online questionnaire the Google Forms was used and for collecting the data the questionnaire was distributed on social media, especially on Facebook on the tourists' groups for 5 days. The sample description is presented in Table 1.

Characteristic (n=680)	Absolute frequencies	Relative frequencies
Gender		
• Female	584	86%
• Male	96	14%
Age		
• Under 20 years old	24	4%
• 21–30 years old	212	31%
• 31-40 years old	210	31%
• 41-50 years old	145	21%
• Over 50 years old	89	13%
Marital status		
• Married	379	56%
• Unmarried	259	38%
• Divorced/widow	42	6%
The environment of origin		
• Urban	595	87%
• Rural	85	13%
The net income		
• No income	40	6%
• < 1000 lei	21	3%
• 1001 -2000 lei	58	9%
• 2001 -3000 lei	125	18%
• > 3000 lei	436	64%
Education level		
• Vocational school	6	1%
• High school	111	16%
• University studies	563	83%
Occupational status		
• Student	62	9%
• Employee	492	72%
• Owner	103	15%
• Unemployed	6	1%
• Retired	17	3%
Nationality		
• Romanian	671	99%
• Others	9	1%

Table 1. Sample description

Source: own calculation

2.2. Methods

For the statistical analysis of primary data collected by convenience sampling the SPSS 23.0 software was used, respectively: *descriptive statistics* (absolute and relative frequencies, means) and for testing if there are statistically differences between respondents the *chi – square test* was used with statistically significance for $p < 0.05$. For testing the associations between variables, the *Spearman correlation' coefficient* was applied.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Results for secondary data for Romanian tourism in international context

Starting with the emergence of the new COVID-19 virus, tourism was among the sectors most affected by the pandemic. The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2021) announced a 65% reduction in the number of international arrivals in the first half of 2020 and 97% less in the second half, which means losses of 460 billion euros for the travel industry worldwide. In the European Union about 27 million people work in this sector (European Parliament, 2021) which represents a contribution of around 10.4% or 9.2 trillion dollars to the global GDP every year. In some countries such as Greece or Malta, this branch even covers 20 or 25 percent of GDP. The tourism sector brings Spain, for example, approximately 145 billion euros annually, and the turnover of German hotels and tour operators amounts to 240 billion euros per year. The damage to Germany, the country from which many tourists come, is in absolute numbers even higher than in the target countries, such as Spain or Italy (Deutsche Welle, 2021).

Border closures and travel restrictions around the world have reduced the mobility of people, by all means – air, land, sea or rail (Brady, 2021)– and therefore the negative effects on the world economy have been felt immediately. Figure 1 shows the map of the global economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism industry worldwide. We can see that the income from tourism has decreased considerably in the 8 large regions represented on the map, the same has happened with the jobs in this industry, thousands of people have lost their jobs or changed their field of work. activity. The Caribbean Islands are one of the most tourism-dependent regions in the world, in 2019, 14.1% of total income was from tourism, in 2020 this decreased by 58%, or 34 billion USD, and so did the number jobs in the tourism industry decreased considerably, by 24.7%, because in 2019, 15.4% of the total jobs belonged to the tourism industry.

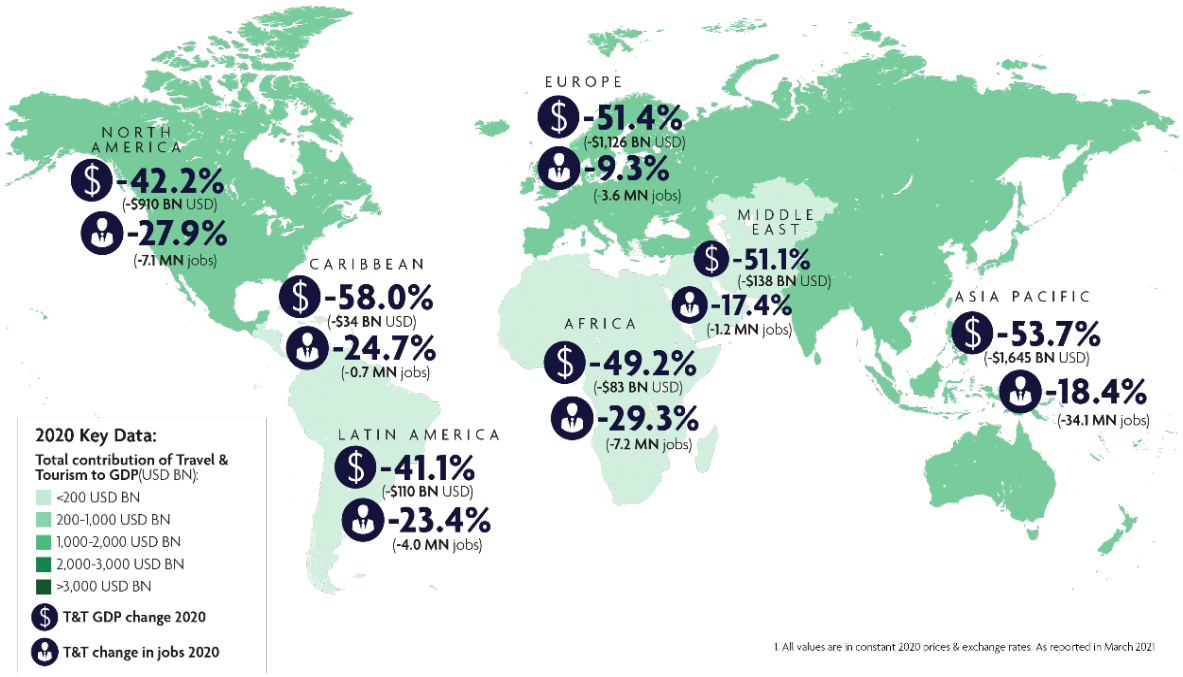

Fig. 1. The economic impact of COVID-19 pandemic on tourism in 2020

Source: https://wttc.org/Research/Economic-Impact

The pandemic caused by COVID-19 has a devastating impact on the tourism industry and in Europe, the data obtained by the World Tourism and Travel Council show us that the revenues generated by this important sector of the economy decreased by 51.4%, in 2020, compared to the previous year, when 9.5% of the total GDP was covered by the tourism sector. According to the same report, we can observe that the number of jobs in tourism also decreased by 9.3%, that is, 3.6 million people out of the 38.5 million reported in 2019 as workers in the tourism sector, were left without a job or have changed their field of activity (WTTC, 2021).

The World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC, 2021) and the World Bank (2021), tourism news portal Traveler (2021), has revealed the list of countries with the biggest loss of tourism revenue due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020: USA, Spain, France, Thailand, Germany, Italy, UK< Australia, Japan and Hong Kong.

In this international context, Romania registered also significant malfunction but according the research results based on primary data presented below, the Romanian tourists redirecting to the domestic tourism. Countries that rely more on domestic tourism are less affected by the crisis generated by Covid-19, according to a report by the UNWTO - World Tourism Organization. Romania is one of the examples offered by the organization in the context where 78% of those staying in hotels, guesthouses and other such facilities are locals. The number of foreign tourist arrivals decreased considerably in 2020 compared to 2019 from 12815 thousand persons to 5023 thousand persons.

As more and more borders were closed and more and more restrictions were imposed, they led to a reallocation of travel to internal destinations to the detriment of external ones, Romanians did not lose their appetite for travel, they opted rather for holidays in the country, in destinations close to home, family guesthouses, small hotels or located in isolated regions, apartments and holiday villas, with the possibility of canceling them without penalties. Those who chose foreign destinations preferred, especially, Bulgaria, Greece, or Turkey. Some of the examples of holidays that Romanians opted for during the pandemic: local travels, nature escapes, rental of private property.

3.2. Results for primary data from questionnaire

From the total number of the respondents, regarding *the importance of tourism for them* (1- very important….5 – not important), the mean (1.43) indicate that tourism is an important activity for respondents. From the total of 680 respondents, 49% travel more than 3 times/year, 43% travel 2-3 times and only 9% travel one time during a year. Also, 33% of the respondents practice tourism only during the legal/national feasts and/or holidays but 67% of consumers practice tourism during the entire year.

Regarding the *budget allocated to travel*, 48% made economies the entire year especially for tourism, 50% used the actual salaries and, a very small percent (2%) has credits or short-term loans for tourism. Regarding the criteria that influence travel, in the figure 2 are presented the average score for each criterion included in the research (1- no influence….5 – a lot of influence).

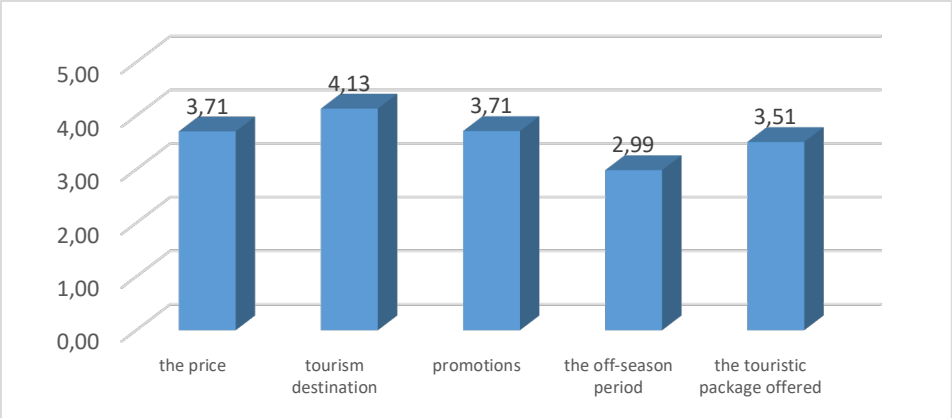

Fig. 2. The importance of criterions for travel

Source: own calculations

For travel, the respondents usually use their own car (71%), air transport (62%), a small percent (7%) prefer the rail transport and only 3% prefer the naval transport. Regarding the *organizing of the travel*, 77% prefer self-organization and only 22% buy a tourism package from tourism agencies. The *type of accommodation* preferred by the respondents: 78% - hotel, 7% -motel, 22% - mountain cabins, 26% - villas, 17% - holiday houses, 27% - touristic pensions, 5%-other type of accommodation. Regarding the allocated amount/person for tourism in the figure 3 is presented the structure of the budget options.

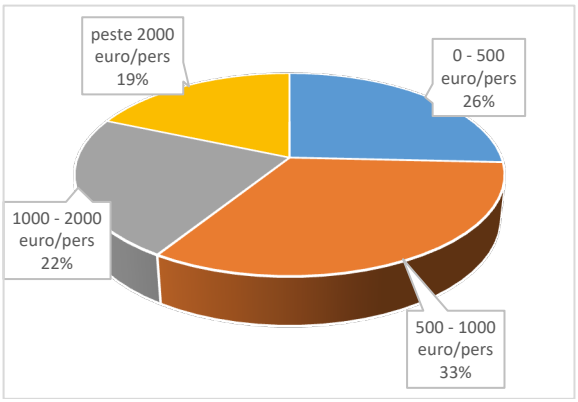

Fig. 3. The structure of the budget options

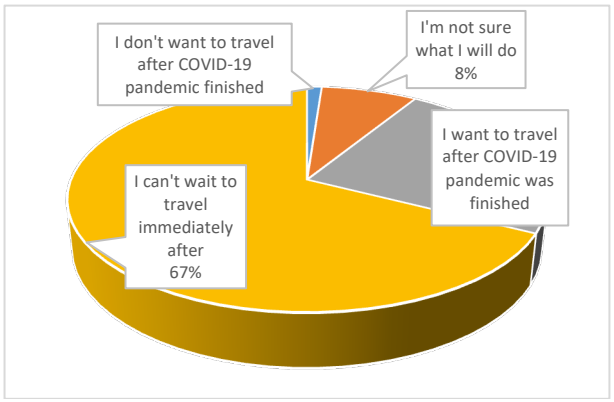

Fig. 4. The structure of intention to travel post COVID-19 pandemic

Source: own calculations

Because the aim of the paper is to identified changes in the Romanian consumer behavior during COVID-19 pandemic, with the questionnaire we collected data regarding these aspects. Therefore, an important percent (67%) has changed their prefer and they reoriented to domestic tourism during the COVID-19 travel restrictions but the structure of the post-Covid -19 intention to travel, indicate that 67% of respondents are anxious to travel soon is possible, 24% have the intention to travel, 8% are not sure and only 1% don't want to travel after COVID-19 pandemic finished.

Regarding the *main motivations for travel after COVID-19 pandemic finished*, 57% will travel for relaxation, 34% for family holiday, 6% for visiting friends or family relatives, 2% for health and 1% for business. The *estimating time for travel after the COVID-19 pandemic will finished (*figure 4*)*, 42% estimate 1-6 months after the finished of COVID-19 travel restrictions, 28% - immediately, 15% immediately than national and international authorities recommend travel, 8% estimate 6-12 months, 5% in 2 weeks after the finished of the travel restrictions and only 2% after 1 year after COVID-19 pandemic will finished.

Regarding the *type of tourism* after COVID-19 pandemic will finished, 81% prefer to travel abroad and 20% in Romania. Regarding the *travel conditions that they expect in the tourism after the restrictions on the movement of people will be lifted, in the period after the COVID-19 crisis*, 89% indicate the same conditions from the pre-pandemic time, 11% mention other conditions.

For the statistical hypothesis *H_0: There are no statistically significant differences according to the age of Romanian tourists referring to the allocated budget for holidays*, the *chi square bivariate test* was applied, the results being presented in Table 2 For p-value = 0.001 we can reject the hypothesis and conclude that it is a statistically significant differences according to the age referring to the holiday budget for Romanian tourists.

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	33.351[a]	12	.001
Likelihood Ratio	25.144	12	.014
Linear-by-Linear Association	.164	1	.686
N of Valid Cases	680		

a. 10 cells (50.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .07.

Table 2. Results of chi square test

Source: own calculations

For the statistical hypothesis *H_0: There are no statistically significant differences according to the occupational status of Romanian tourists referring to the period of the year for travel/tourism*, the *chi square bivariate test* was applied, the results being presented in Table 3. For p-value = 0.001 we can reject the hypothesis and conclude that it is a statistically significant differences according to the age referring to the holiday budget for Romanian tourists.

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	22.495[a]	4	.000
Likelihood Ratio	24.900	4	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	2.227	1	.136
N of Valid Cases	680		

a. 2 cells (20.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 2.00.

Table 3. Results of chi square test

Source: own calculations

To analyze if there are statistically significant associations between criteria used for travel decision, we applied the Spearman correlations, the results being presented in Table 4.

			price	tourism destination	promotions	the off-season period	touristic package offered
Spearman's rho	price	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.325**	.455**	.260**	.329**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000	.000	.000	.000
		N	680	680	680	680	680
	Tourism destination	Correlation Coefficient		1.000	.237**	.194**	.207**
		Sig. (2-tailed)		.	.000	.000	.000
		N		680	680	680	680
	Promotions	Correlation Coefficient			1.000	.403**	.494**
		Sig. (2-tailed)			.	.000	.000
		N			680	680	680
	The off-season period	Correlation Coefficient				1.000	.393**
		Sig. (2-tailed)				.	.000
		N				680	680
	Touristic package offered	Correlation Coefficient					1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)					.
		N					680

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 4. Correlation coefficients

It can be seen the following statistically significant correlations:

- positive correlations of medium intensity between price and promotions (0.455) for p-value = 0.01
- positive correlations of medium intensity between price and tourism packages offered by the tourism agencies (0.494) for p-value = 0.01
- positive correlations of low to medium intensity between promotions and the off-season period for travel offered by the tourism agencies (0.403) for p-value = 0.01
- positive correlations of low to medium intensity between tourism packages offered by the tourism agencies and the off-season period for travel (0.393) for p-value = 0.01

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In our opinion we consider that it has fully fulfilled its originally proposed purpose, therefore, we have brought multiple arguments and reasoning to explain the importance of tourism in the economic life of a country, which represents in 2019, 10% of global GDP, 7% of global trade and 1 in 11 jobs. With the emergence of the new virus at the end of 2019 and its rapid spread, tourism was among the sectors most affected by the pandemic, it did not discriminate, so all companies in the tourism sector and all travel destinations were massively affected by the restrictions of unprecedented travel but also due to the reluctance of consumers to travel, thus the major economic and social blockages were felt.

Following the results of research based on secondary data by using the statistical indicators, we made an extensive analysis in terms of how much the tourism sector was affected by the pandemic, for example at the global level, the revenues generated by this important sector of the economy decreased by 51.4%, in 2020, the number of jobs in tourism decreased by 9.3%, i.e. 3.6 million people out of the 38.5 million reported in 2019 as workers in the tourism sector, were left without a place to work or have changed their field of activity. Romania is no exception, the number of foreign tourist arrivals decreased considerably in 2020, compared to 2019, approximately 35% of Romanians had to cancel their holiday booking due to travel restrictions. The results from this study could help explain the mobility patterns of park visits during the pandemic and predict the process of returning to normal (Nagy et al., 2022). Another research made by the authors in 2020 on a sample of 435 people (Babă et al., 2020) highlight the significant differences regarding the pre-purchase behavior of the tourist product, respectively the mode, travel booking, preferences, motivations of the tourist, in the context of the predominance of a specific factor during COVID-19 and post COVID-19 and respectively the trust in the tourist services/in the travel agencies in general.

However, the pandemic caused by the new virus made Romanians' tourist options oriented towards the domestic market. As more and more borders were closed and more and more restrictions were imposed, they led to a reallocation of travel to internal destinations to the detriment of external ones, Romanians did not lose their appetite for travel, they opted rather for holidays in the country, in destinations close to home, family guesthouses, small hotels or located in isolated regions, apartments and holiday villas, with the possibility of canceling them without penalties.

Because the COVID-19 pandemic is a global challenge and requires a global response. The European Union and its Member States are actively contributing, in a spirit of solidarity, to global efforts to combat the pandemic and counter its disruptive consequences on a global scale. For this various scheme and set of guidelines have been discussed and approved to help the tourism sector emerge stronger and more sustainable from this unprecedented crisis.

In addition to the thorough analysis of tourism affected by the pandemic, on a national and international level, based on primary data collected by convenience sampling on 680 Romanian tourists the purpose of which is to understand the travel behavior characteristics of Romanian tourists, during the crisis caused by the COVID-19 virus, as well as after its disappearance. Following the centralization of the questionnaires, we can state that 48.8% of Romanians travel more than 3 times a year, 42.5% 2-3 times

a year and only 8.7% of the Romanians surveyed go on vacation once a year. 66.6% of them travel at any time of the year, planning their vacations not only during vacations and public holidays.

In conclusion, we can say that the pandemic caused by COVID-19 is a major tragedy, so countries will need several years to recover both socially and economically, as well as emotionally. The major challenge is that many operators and indirect service providers will be overtaken by digitization that will accelerate online sales, reducing the need for sales outlets such as travel agencies to avoid exposing travelers to human-to-human contact. All the transformations caused by the virus will force the industry to offer a different type of post-pandemic tourism, such as local travel and nature tourism.

The World Tourism Organization (WTO) has launched a set of guidelines to help the tourism sector emerge stronger and more sustainable from COVID-19. The guidelines were developed in consultation with the Global Committee on the Tourism Crisis (Global Tourism Forum, 2021) and aim to support governments and the private sector to recover from an unprecedented crisis.

Specialists say that they do not expect a quick total reconstruction of tourism, they say that only in 2024 the arrivals of international tourists will return to normal before the pandemic. We can also see this in figure 5, where on the left are presented, the estimates provided by the UNWTO for the arrivals of international tourists from 2017 to 2019. And from 2020 onwards are the forecasts of Euler Hermes analysts. The results of the analysis show that a return to normal tourism activity will not take place in the next two years. A recent survey of tourism professionals by the UN World Tourism Organization reaffirms these results. Most respondents said they don't expect a return to pre-pandemic levels before 2023. In fact, 41% of respondents said they expect a return to normal only in 2024 or later (UNWTO, 2021).

Millions	2017	2018	2019	2020e	2021f	2022f	2023f	2024f
World	**1 333**	**1 408**	**1 459**	**400**	**550**	**800**	**1 200**	**1 400**
Europe	677	716	744	227	281	406	655	771
APAC	323	347	361	64	119	178	267	326
North America	137	142	146	47	71	94	112	136
Africa	63	68	70	22	27	38	51	63
Middle East	58	60	65	17	24	37	49	58

Fig. 5. The estimated worldwide arrivals for 2017-2024 according to UNWTO

In Romania, the government is preparing plans to rebuild the tourism industry, together with the Alliance for Tourism (APT). S.O.S. Turismul Romanesc (SOS Romanian Tourism) (Solutions for the Organization and Support of Romanian Tourism) is the first project of this Alliance and represents a unitary approach, coordinated, and focused on the future of Romanian tourism. The S.O.S. project Romanian tourism has two well-defined objectives that were the basis of the entire work:

- The first objective is to remove tourism from the critical state in which it is in these extremely difficult moments that we are going through in the context of the crisis generated by the coronavirus epidemic.
- The second objective is to reset the entire hospitality industry, to position it on other coordinates, to consider world trends in the field, to consider international models of success but also local specificities.

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