

The Rebirth of Sustainable Post-Pandemic Tourism. Case Study: Romania

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Abstract: Traveling is definitely a way of life for many of us. However, the year of 2020 is the year of great changes, the tourism sector collapsing with the appearance of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is still too early to see the long-term effects caused by this SARS-CoV-2 virus, especially since this paper aims to analyze the situation of the tourism sector in the first half of 2020. Thus, the review of the impediments encountered in international tourism and of some possible ways of tourist recovery for the post-pandemic period represented aspects of great interest for the author. Romania being a Carpathian-Danubian-Pontic country, has a natural tourist potential that can attract tourists and generate profits that can propel the Romanian tourism sector among the national economic sectors that contribute greatly to the formation of national GDP. It is interesting how this paper presents the situation of a country in which the tourist potential is not properly valued and in the difficult context of the present COVID-19 pandemic, can by implementing key strategies aimed at practicing sustainable tourism, gain "ground" in the international tourism, respecting by the way, at the same time as practicing tourism, the health safety measures that currently represent a daily priority.

Key words: sustainable development, COVID-19 pandemic, Romania, tourism, post-pandemic tourism, politics and strategies, sustainable tourism

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1. INTRODUCTION

Accustomed to living in a time when we had privileges that facilitated favorable living conditions, with rights and freedoms conducive to a modern lifestyle, we were put in a delicate situation, namely the outbreak of the COVID-19 Pandemic and, implicitly, the inability to be free, as we were used to living. Thus, we found ourselves in a position difficult to understand, all the more acceptable, because the appearance of the SARS-CoV-2 virus changed our perception of life. Isolation in their own homes, being just one of the many measures imposed internationally to combat this new threat to personal health.

The health crisis caused by the pandemic COVID-19 has been of such magnitude that the drop-off in economic and tourist activity in most countries is generating an economic crisis with consequences that are still difficult to measure [1]. The end of 2019 ended sadly with the registration of cases of pneumonia with an unidentified cause until then in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China [2]. From that moment it was obvious that humanity is facing a delicate problem, difficult to manage, because "We have never before seen a pandemic sparked by a coronavirus. This is the first pandemic caused by a coronavirus." [2]. Gradually, the situation worsened from day to day, the cases of infection multiplying, which led to the implementation of measures aimed at counteracting the virus.

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The concept of tourism and related terms changed with the change in the number of tourist journeys and the growing interest of many fields of science [3]. At present, the world and the entire tourism industry face the COVID-19 pandemic, which has spread across 206 countries [4].

So, in such a difficult-to-manage context, in which endangering of one's own health, the difficulties encountered in the medical field and the economic and social crises generated are the order of the day, how can we bring a ray of sunshine into our lives? Practicing tourism is a good way to relax. However, when COVID-19 spread all over the world, many countries and regions introduced restrictions on traveling and closed their borders in order to curb the pandemic [5]. At the present time of the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of tourism and its sustainable development is extremely important [6]. According to the World Tourism Organization, sustainable tourism is tourism "that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, industry, the environment and host communities" [7], therefore, what can be better welcomed in this period of restrictions, in which the tourism industry is difficult to try, than the practice of a different form of tourism than the traditional ones, the form that satisfies to some extent both the tourist demand and supply?!

Due to the geographical position and the presence of natural and semi-natural ecosystems in a percentage of 47% of the country's surface [8], with a minimum of effort an exercise of imagination can be made regarding what beauties of nature are present on the Romanian territory. Therefore, we chose to analyze Romania's main priorities in terms of the development of the tourism sector, starting from satisfactory statistical data, which represents a first step in aligning at the same level with the giants in the international tourism sector. In this sense, we have detailed aspects such as: why the practice of sustainable tourism is a form of tourism that helps the tourist demand, both in the pandemic and post-pandemic period; but also Romania's need to promote and develop sustainable national tourism, as its own "business card".

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The statistics data that exposed gloomy scenarios related to tourism in 2020, were noted by comparative studies. Thus, the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) claimed that export earnings would be 60% to 80% lower than in the same period of 2019 [9]. The World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) reports a good course of tourism in 2019, but also highlighting a nostalgic side generated by the current collapse of the tourism sector [10], especially in view of the fact that the European Travel Commission (ETC) publishes a press release at the end of April 2020, stating that "the European Union is the largest region in the world in terms of international tourism revenues", but from over 27 million places generated by the tourism sector, 13 million of them will suffer due to the current pandemic [11]. On the other hand, the impact of declining tourist travel in Europe in 2020 was reported in a well-documented study published in Oxford Economics [12].

According to Higgings-Desbioles, the 2019–2020 COVID-19 pandemic can change tourism industry and the contexts in which it operates [13]. This global crisis during which traveling, tourism, hoteling and events were frozen in many parts of the world creates an opportunity to find new possibilities in this historic moment of the transformation. The COVID-19 pandemic can constitute a rare and invaluable occasion to re-consider and redirect tourism toward a better path in the future.

In one of papers it was highlighted the fact that, 2019 was a promising one in terms of international arrivals, registering more than 1.5 billion, the trend being an ascending one for the last decade, since the last global financial crisis [14]. The crisis generated by COVID-19 has blocked the entire tourism sector. However, as the world grapples with the realities of the global pandemic there is an opportunity to rethink exactly what tourism will look like for the decades ahead. Thus, through the current pandemic, radical transformations will be imposed in the tourism sector, the impacts being long-term, both on the tourist demand and offer.

The statistical data from March to July denote the difficult trials to which the Romanian people were subjected, not only because of restrictions on the movement of individuals from one place to another, but especially because of losses in the Romanian tourism business. The HoReCa website clarifies the situation at national level from June 1, 2020, when out of the 85.3% of restaurants which reopened their doors after their closure, according to the 54,7% of respondents registered losses of at least 80% of the turnover of 2019 [15]. In fact, the study conducted by Restograf in partnership with HORA (Employers' Organization of Hotels and Restaurants in Romania) reports a series of grim data on the reduced activity of over 50% of the Romanian hospitality industry, also the percentage of reduced incomes, the reduction of the number of employees, suspended activity / completely closed locations and the percentage of insolvent businesses [15].

This paper also presents statistical data on the Romanian tourism sector during the last decade, regarding to investments in tourism infrastructure, specialization of human resources involved in tourism activities, application of the quality-price-sustainability principle, application of sustainability principles, adaptation to the needs of tourism demand etc. Thus, following the interpretation of statistical data, solid arguments will be formed that will create a clear image of the need to develop a sustainable Romanian tourism, even now, in difficult times.

We also mention the fact that the second part of this study, which focused on the huge tourist potential of Romania and what tourism should mean for this country, presents strategic plans, such as "Tourism and transport in 2020 and beyond" initiated by the European Commission (EC, 2020), which is intended to be a guide for those engaged in tourism sector [9].

3. METHODS AND DATA

The current paper was based on both qualitative and quantitative data, which mainly highlighted the crisis that the international tourism sector went through in the first half of 2020. Our attention was directed to a study area, namely Romania, a the country with a promising development in terms of sustainable tourism, currently difficult to manage and knowing the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic. The main research method was the inductive one, through which the particular case was analyzed by which the SARS-CoV-2 virus managed to block the international tourism sector, deepening this aspect, by exposing the case study targeting Romania as a sustainable tourist destination. Following the application of this research method, the foundations of personal observations were laid in order to obtain a much more detailed image of the subject under analysis.

4. THE INFLUENCE OF COVID-19 ON INTERNATIONAL TOURISM

The reality we all live in has been characterized by major changes, driven by the need to slow the spread of the current SARS-CoV-2 virus among the population. The states of the world have been severely affected by this pandemic, the repercussions being visible first of all on the world medical system, but as expected also among the different economic sectors, tourism being no exception. And as the virus that everyone is talking about, day by day, has not ceased from its fierce spread, here we are in the position to spend not only spring in his difficult "company", but also the first summer, autumn, and as the current situation tends to acquire a repetitive character, from month to month, and the first winter. The COVID-19 pandemic is an exogenous shock for almost the entire world, hitting countries unevenly in terms of citizens' health [16]. In fact, according to Guangyue Nian and collaborators, this pandemic is most felt in the world's major cities, where exist a big problem due to the pressure generated by the tens of millions and high-density populations [17]. So, what can we do, as long as practicing tourism is the "good virus" that was not discovered to us overnight, but we were born with it, being as a primary need of our existence?! In the absence of vaccines and antivirals, we need to rely on new public health measures to curb the epidemic generated by this "enemy" [18]. Therefore, the primary goal of public health measures is to prevent person-to-person spread of disease by separating people to interrupt transmission [18].

National authorities are imposing all sorts of safety measures, all in order to slow down the infection rate. In fact, as expected, the measures came with the negative side, not just with the protective one. Thus, we witnessed a series of deprivations of liberty, which until the outbreak of the pandemic, few thought could catch them in two lives, let alone in one?! We mention in this sense: isolation at home or hospitalization of people found positive with the new COVID-19, symptomatic and asymptomatic; imposing the wearing of surgical protective masks when traveling in public; the obligation to respect a social distance of at least 2 meters between individuals; closing some state borders and implicitly forcing the movement of individuals from one place to another, stopping the activity of several important economic branches etc. In any case, Mengna Guo affirms that in addition to the imminent health crisis that occurred with the spread of the virus, social issues affecting people's well-being have also emerged, including those related to coping with the crisis [19]. Also, accurate, timely information, and the development of pandemic risk management plans are necessary commodities during a health emergency [20]. In fact, the suffering in the field of tourism was best observed in the case of SMEs (Small and medium-sized enterprises) and the hospitality industry - HoReCa (Hotels-Restaurants-Cafes), but also among employees in the tourism sector. Bars, restaurants, hotels, tourism SMEs and more have powerlessly closed their doors in front of customers. Stopping the infection with the new virus is the biggest goal to be achieved by 2020, worldwide. The statistical data that will follow to be presented draw our attention to the current gloomy pandemic situation that seems to have quickly overwhelmed global tourism, but also to scenarios, which if managed well, we will return to our beloved travel habits.

We start by mentioning that the World Tourism Organization has initiated a grim statistical situation regarding the tourist life cycle in the summer of 2020, while also referring to the period at the end of this year. Thus, we recall that the decline of international tourism in terms of export earnings is expected to be 60% to 80% compared to 2019, which translates into losses between 840 billion and 1.1 trillion EURO [9]. According to the World Tourism and Travel Council, "in 2019, the Travel & Tourism sector grew by 3.5%, surpassing the growth of the global economy by 2.5%, for the ninth consecutive year." In fact, "in the last five years, one in four new jobs have been created by this sector, making Travel & Tourism the best partner for governments to generate jobs"[10]. We note the vital importance of this sector for the world economy, but COVID-19 shook this upward trend, as the European Commission for Travel (ETC), on 27.04.2020 issued a statement concluding that "The European Union is the largest region in the world in terms of international tourism revenues" [11]. At the same time, the Travel & Tourism sector was responsible for the existence of over 27 million jobs in the European Union, but it is expected that over 13 million jobs will be affected by this pandemic [11]. Furthermore, Oxford Economics predicted that in Europe, the current pandemic would be responsible for reducing travel by 38.5%, so 287 million fewer international arrivals in 2020 than in 2019 [12]. The same source mentioned the idea that 2021 will be the one in which a rapid return of the entire tourism sector will be required, tourist arrivals in Europe increasing by up to 31.75% (Figure 1) [12]. However, the losses from 2019 and 2020 will not be recovered until 2023 [12].

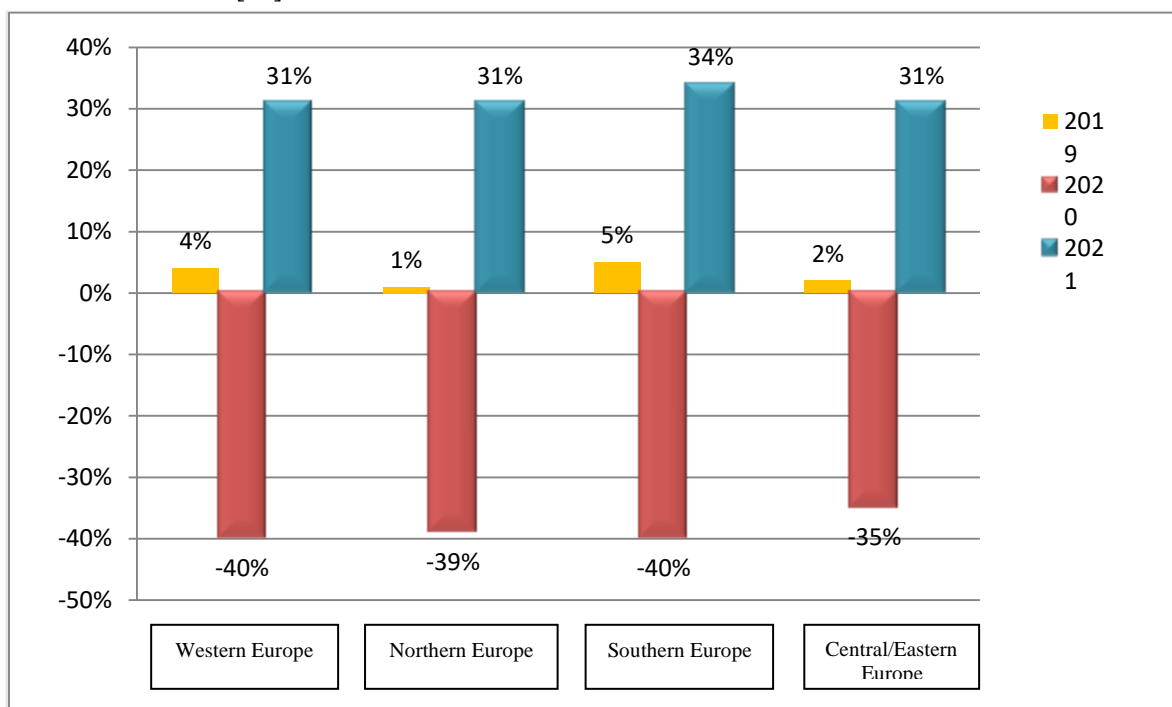


Figure 1. Tourist arrivals from Europe, by destination region

Source: Data taken from <http://resources.oxfordeconomics.com/travel-tourism-europe-updated-coronavirus-impacts-and-the-path-to-recovery?source=tewebsite> [12]

The situation of the tourism sector internationally is not a promising one at all, although optimistic scenarios exist in this regard, a conclusive example being the one previously analyzed [12], but we remain skeptical, because stopping the pandemic is difficult, the number of cases of SARS-CoV-2 virus infection increases from day to day. It seems that a return close to post-pandemic normalcy could occur with great difficulty. In this regard, Rodríguez-Antón mentioned that thousands of lives were saved by adopting security measures such as distance and social isolation or limitations in the field of transport, but the collapse of national economies was inevitable [1]. He also wanted to emphasize that within the affected economic sectors, the tourism sector was the first affected by these limitations and will be the last to return to the "new normal".

5. WHAT DOES TOURISM MEAN FOR ROMANIA?

Due to its geographical position, Romania, being a Carpathian-Danubian-Pontic country, has a very attractive tourist potential, being made various forms of tourism, among which the most popular being

stays in the coastal, mountain or balneary area. As expected, COVID-19 shook the national tourism sector, among other things.

According to the data provided by the Romanian Government, on the mioritic lands, the date of March 16, 2020 would be historical, because at that time, the President of Romania, Klaus Iohannis signed the decree on establishing the state of emergency throughout the territory for a period of 30 days, and on April 14, following that a new decree will be adopted for the same purpose [22]. Until the documentation of this article, Romania was in a new pandemic stage, namely the imposition on June 17, 2020 of the second month of alert on the entire territory of the country [23]. Admittedly, this type of decision from the authorities was intended to be seen as a "breath of fresh air" for the country's industries, industries that had come to be on the edge of an abyssal chasm.

Small businesses in the field of tourism, hotel chains and Romanian restaurants, as well as those abroad, have suffered the most from the Coronavirus, being totally or partially closed. According to official data found on the HoReCa Romania website, since June 1, when more than 85% of restaurants reopened their doors, according to the 54,7% of respondents to case study registered losses of at least 80% of the turnover of 2019 [15].

Moreover, the same study conducted on the sample of 423 respondents, between July 7-22, by Restograf in partnership with HORA (Employers' Organization of Hotels and Restaurants in Romania), highlighted the compassionate situation of the over 300,000 of employees in the HoReCa industry [15]. On average, there were 88 employees before the current pandemic, but, being technically unemployed 71 employees, to which are added, on average, another 14 employees who were laid off [15]. We mention that the same study managed to highlight many other data on the dominant image of what Coronavirus meant for the Romanian hospitality industry (Figure 2) [15].

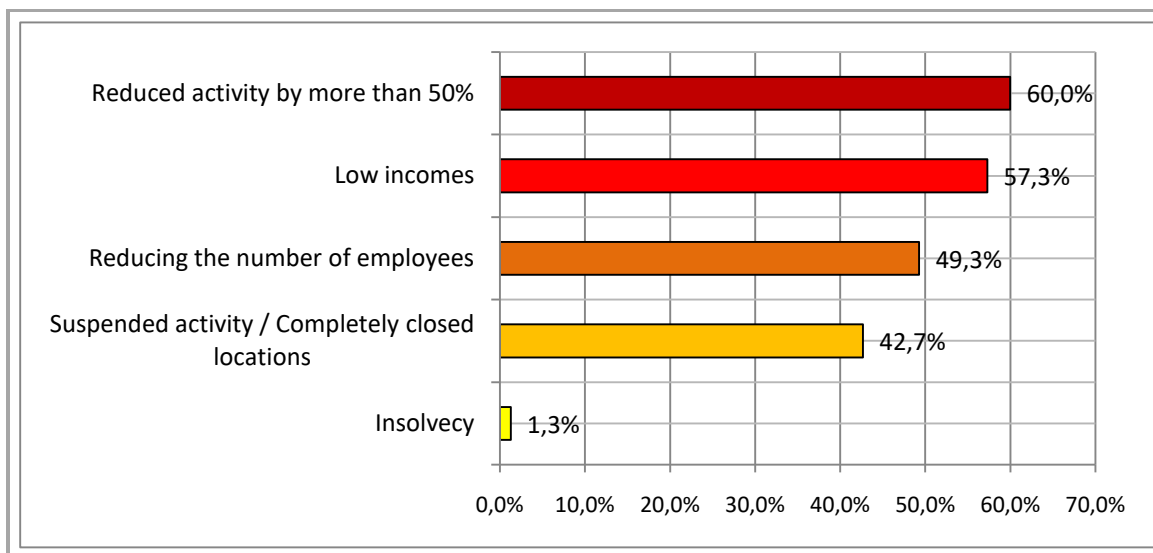


Figure 2. Romanian hospitality industry after its reopening on 01.07.2020

Source: Study conducted by Restograf in partnership with HORA, from <http://www.horeca.ro/restaurante/5908-studiu-mai-mult-de-jumatate-dintre-restaurantele-care-s-au-redeschis-la-1-iunie-au-inregistrat-pierderi-de-minim-80-din-cifra-de-afaceri-a-anului-2019.html> [15]

Therefore, it came to the natural situation of implementing a series of measures that aimed in addition to the aspects related to saving the economy and some restrictions for citizens, because otherwise the spread of the virus was becoming unstoppable. In any case, we will not go into the depths of the details, trying not to criticize, but also not bringing a laurel wreath for the situation in which the infection rate with the new COVID-19 virus was managed. However, we will analyze along the way the aspects related to the field of tourism, because only this is the subject of this paper, a topic that arouses our interest. Therefore, the figures mentioned above denote a reality of the tourism field, which seems to be on a difficult precipice, the disaster being all the more significant if we consider that it will probably take years for the tourism industry to regains the crown of "the strongest economic branch in the world".

Romanian tourism is a sensitive topic at the moment, in times of pandemic, but this trend has been known and cultivated over time, so the industry analyzed in this paper failed to align among similar countries in terms of the tourist potential. "Romania is a unique country", would say the majority of those who step on our lands, fact for which the officials from the tourist environment should insist on a series of

priorities, otherwise, the Romanian tourism will remain in the shadow of indifference. In this regard, we recall the following priorities:

- **Investments in tourist infrastructure.** According to Catudan J.M.J., the degree of qualitative and quantitative diversification of tourism infrastructure is closely related to the attractiveness of tourist attractions and the number of tourists [23]. In fact, the tourist infrastructure and tourism are in a relationship of interconditioning, each stimulating and conditioning the appearance, development and evolution of the other [24]. In the integrated retrospective investment analysis in Romanian tourism made in the period 2007-2016, important data are stipulated that denote the involvement of the Romanian authorities in the development process of the national tourism. Thus, in 2015, Romania registered approximately 120 new investments in tourism due to the increase in tourist flows and the amounts spent, on average, by one person [25]. The same source presented the situation from the end of 2016, which exposed the situation of tourism investments at national level. Thus, national funds amounting to 14,700,000 lei were allocated, representing 8.1% of the total investments at national level, expecting annual increases of 2.6% for the next 10 years, so in 2027 it should be that tourism investments to represent 8.4% of the total national investments [25]. In fact, notable investments are also needed in terms of access roads, because only in 2018 the arrivals of foreign visitors to Romania were made in proportion of 73.7% by road (out of the total number of arrivals), so we are witnessing an increase of 8.0% in this sector, compared to 2017 [26]. At the same time, foreign tourists also showed interest in air transport, registering a percentage of 23.9% of the total, so an increase of 5.6% compared to 2017, while the transport by waterways (1.4% of the total) and the one on railways (1.0%) also showing gratifying increases, of 0.7%, respectively of 3.5% [26]. In fact, notable investments were also registered in the case of tourist accommodation units, as in 2018 there was a substantial increase of 6.9%, so with 548 more units compared to the total of 7,905 tourist units in 2017 [26]. Therefore, as a brief conclusion on this priority of investments in tourist infrastructure, I consider that the existence of ascending figures in case of foreign tourists arriving in Romania, is both living proof that this country has not only a significant tourist potential, but and the fact that investments in the tourism field must be of a continuous nature, adapting to the wishes of tourists, as well as to the needs of the tourist offer. The COVID-19 pandemic is a topical issue for the entire Romanian tourism sector, the investments in this sector are minimal, which should not surprise us at all, in the current context in which measures to stop the virus are encouraged, such as keeping social distance or worse, temporary closure of accommodation, catering, agreement, transports, etc.

- **Specialization of human resources engaged in tourism.** Given the fact that in 2016 the Romanian tourism sector generated 6.2% of total jobs nationwide, and the trend is upward [25], we must certainly focus on improving staff engaged in the tourism sector. Undoubtedly, quantity without quality cannot lead to a prosperous tourism. In fact, thanks to the data provided by the National Institute of Statistics in the "Tourism Satellite Account in 2017", we can get a good overview of employment in the national tourism sector. Thus, of the total number of jobs, by sex, in the Romanian tourism sector, 34.7% is the value registered by men in the field of road passenger transport, compared to the value of 3.7% found among females in the same sector [27]. Significant employment is also found in food and beverage services, the statistical data being as expected, women (51.3%) being more numerous compared to men (29.7%) [27]. According to the same source, the accommodation services sector it is not to be neglected either when we discuss its contribution to the total number of jobs in the tourism sector, as 18.9% of employees in 2017 were women, while only 7.1% were men. In order to obtain a high yield in the tourist activities, as well as to obtain a positive feedback from the tourists, the human resource engaged in the tourist sector must be specialized in this sense. According to the Tourism Law of 2018, in the sixth chapter there are a series of articles that provide the main criteria for professional training in the Romanian tourism sector. Thus, Point 1 of Article 44, presents the following provision: "Vocational training of adults in the field of tourism is carried out through vocational training programs that ensure the acquisition and development of professional skills in accordance with the legislative provisions in force" [28]. We note, therefore, that there are legal provisions that encourage the professional training of staff engaged in the tourism sector, but there is no obligation to this approach, because according to Article 42, "Acquisition of professional skills in tourism can be done formally, informally and informally, in accordance with the legislative provisions in force" [28]. Clarifying the term "informal way", we understand the acquisition of professional skills in tourism by practicing activities specific to the tourism sector directly at work or self-training [29]. We believe that, in order to obtain the practice of qualitative and quantitative national tourism, specialization of human resources engaged in tourism must be seen as a priority by the authorities and actors involved in the tourism sector. After all, one of the first interactions between the tourist and the tourist offer is made within the tourist reception units, through the employed staff.

- **Application of sustainable tariffs, on the criterion of quality-price-sustainability:** In this sense, the practice of tourism, referring not only to the case of Romania, but to the whole world, should be based on the three criteria mentioned before, when it is necessary to apply certain tariffs. In fact, it is normal to take into account the fact that the existence of a qualitative as well as quantitative diversity within the tourist offer, can be justified in the price fluctuations. Sustainability must be seen in this case as a key factor leading to the current and future practice of tourism to ensure a balance between tourism demand and supply. The application of a sustainable tariff can be interpreted, if you want, as a "different kind of feedback", being also a good proof of "responsibility" in tourism. Practicing a fair price, which is consistent with the services offered, for example those related to accommodation, it is the action through which the tourist service provider can help to the customer loyalty, while customers will be much more receptive in making the decision to return to the place where the environment has a fair link between the quality of services offered and price. In the case of Romania, according to official data, in 2018 there were 11,720,000 arrivals of foreign visitors in Romania, with 794,000 more arrivals than in 2017 (respectively by 7.3%) [26]. In fact, out of the total of 11,720,000 tourist arrivals of foreign visitors, we mention the fact that 2,797,000 foreign tourists preferred to spend the night in accommodation units, so an increase of 0.7% compared to 2017. Therefore, in the conditions of delaying the flows of foreign tourists, the Romanian tourism officials must improve the experiences of these guests, and the practice of prices that do not present discordant notes with the quality of services must always be a priority. The break in national tourism imposed by the current pandemic is an opportunity to reflect on sustainable tariffs.

- **Tourism promotion constantly updated according to the needs of demand and the development of online trends:** We can consider that the tourist promotion represents the way in which the tourist demand and supply "meet for the first time". The tourist field must be adapted according to the tourist's behavior. The more elaborate the range of tourist offers, the more tourists can practice their travels depending on their own budget, free time, tourist potential, quality of tourist services, etc. The trends in tourism are very popular in the online environment, especially on social networks, which is why we believe that notable investments in online advertising must be indispensable. Online advertising can be the persuasion of the tourist to visit a specific destination. Companies could strategically use social media to interact with potential consumers and to exercise more persuasive marketing practices [30, 31].

- **Adapting to the needs of the tourist demand (investments in leisure spaces, diversification of the tourist offer):** In 2018, the total number of tourist accommodation structures was 8453 units, registering, compared to 2017, an increase of 548 units (respectively + 6.9%) [26]. Investments in leisure spaces are present at national level, which is gratifying for Romanian tourism, sector that must be capitalized at its true value. However, it must be taken into account that the accommodation spaces at national level must be in accordance with the size of the tourist flows. We consider auspicious the start of architectural projects for the tourist reception units, which should ensure sufficient accommodation space for tourists. According to some studies, there is clear evidence that increased tourist flows can be detrimental to the quality of the tourist experience [32-34].

- **Applying the principle of sustainability across the spectrum of the tourism industry:** In this regard, we would like to mention the significance of sustainable development by the World Commission on Environment and Development: "Humanity has the ability to make development sustainable to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" [35]. Therefore, the principle of sustainability must be implemented within the tourism industry as a condition of its existence, of the present and future good functioning. In Romania, due to the steps taken by the Romanian Ecotourism Association (REA), the foundations have been laid for a stable partnership for nature conservation and tourism in Romania between tourism associations, non-governmental organizations for local development and nature conservation, nature conservation projects and travel agencies [36]. Thus, within this association the emphasis is on three major priorities (Table 1) which is an important step in applying and promoting sustainability in Romania.

Table 1. Romanian Ecotourism Association priorities in applying and promoting sustainability

Promotion and marketing	Development strategies	Ecotourism certification (Creating a certification mechanism for three types of tourism products)
Creating and promoting a well-defined image of Romania as an ecotourism destination at international level;	Development of tourism strategies in and around national / natural parks and protected areas;	Ecotourism programs / excursions offered by tour operators or guides (eco tours for a maximum of 15 participants);
Development of ecotourism	Development of tourist	Small-scale accommodation

services and infrastructure at the level of Eco-Destinations proposed in Romania;	products: themed trails, tourist routes, interpretation and visitor centers.	structures in rural and natural areas (eco-lodge type and pensions of maximum 25 rooms);
Nature conservation and sustainable development in Romania;	-	Eco-destinations (one or more communities within natural areas).
National press campaigns focused on the development of ecotourism in Romania;	-	-
Participation in national tourism fairs.	-	-

Source: <https://www.asociatiaaer.ro/misiune-si-obiective/> [36]

In fact, the current moment of the COVID-19 pandemic can mean a boom in the popularity of sustainable development, through the Romanian Ecotourism Association being implemented tourism actions, especially eco-tours in which a maximum of 15 participants can take part [31]. In this way, the small number of participants, not only is in accordance with the principles of sustainability of nature conservation by reducing the impact of the anthropogenic factor on the environment, but is a good way to respect the social distance measures imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

-Supporting and encouraging local communities involved in tourism: The involvement of local communities in the tourism sector is achieved mainly due to the implementation of the principles of sustainable development at the national level. Thus, nature conservation and the support and development of local communities are encouraged [36]. An eco-destination would lose its authenticity in case of the disappearance of the anthropic factor from the landscape. According to an old saying known to the Romanian people, "man sanctifies the place". Therefore, in the case of local communities located within natural areas, they ennoble the entire eco-tourism landscape. Failure to provide financial support would mean the loss of traditions and customs, authenticity. The support coming from tourists can be visible by: purchasing typical traditional products, for example handmade products or gastronomic products; overnight stays in local accommodation structures; involvement in agreement activities. Another way in which tourists can help local communities would be by promoting the destinations visited on social networks, for example. This would be a way to reduce the costs of tourism promotion undertaken by tourism actors. Therefore, as a final overview, we can say that eco-destinations gain authenticity and due to the local communities in the area, not only due to a vast natural tourism potential. The support and investments in them it must not be long in coming.

Romanian tourism is the country's inexhaustible "gold mine", that's in the case where we'd want this fact more. With a significant cooperation from tourism actors, correlated with the efforts of the Ministry of Tourism, this sector would be able to make a significant contribution to the country's GDP, but also regain a prestigious image of Romania, image on which, for example, had during communism period. Romanian tourism not only gives us the chance to overcome this difficult situation, but thanks to him, there is the possibility to be on the same level with the giants of European tourism, maybe even surpassing them, because Romanians are hardworking, ambitious and persevering people.

6. KEY OBJECTIVES FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN TIMES OF PANDEMIC

Man has become skeptical about travel, fear taking deep roots in mentalities everywhere, but as the need to meet new people and places is uncontrollable, the resumption of tourism in maximum safety for the health of each of us is vital. In this regard, the European Commission launched on 13 May 2020 the strategic plan "Tourism and transport in 2020 and beyond", which aims to ensure the health of citizens by increasing confidence that travel can again be a safe and enjoyable activity, but also the recovery of transport and tourism [9].

Fortunately, the face mask can not prevent our eyes from staying focused on the beauty that is revealed to us everywhere, so in order to practice safe tourism, the European Commission has implemented a series of measures in this regard (Figure 3) [9]. hat is the purpose pursued by the European Commission, I highlighted it in the figure above (Figure 3), but we consider it auspicious a brief review of each measure implemented.



Figure 3. What "safe travel" means during the COVID-19 pandemic

Source: Data taken from "European Commission - Tourism and transport in 2020 and beyond" [9]

Step 1. "Restoring safe movement without restrictions and reopening internal borders": After all, the tourism sector, without tourism potential and in the absence of the human factor, would no longer exist. However, we can add to this general conception the free movement of the tourist masses in safe conditions, both inside a country and outside its borders. The COVID-19 pandemic imposed a restrictive measure to close the borders of certain countries, in order to prevent infection with this dreaded virus, but at the same time, the question "We keep the state borders closed, but until when?". The current restriction would affect not only an economic sector, that of tourism, the negative impact being on the chain for most industries in the world. A reopening of borders, safe for citizens, supported by other measures with a similar purpose, meant the naturalness of a society worthy of these times dominated by human freedoms and technological-scientific progress.

Step 2. "Safe restoration of transport": We remind the fact that the essence of epidemic control measures is to restrict the movement and gathering of people which can normally be conducted by travel restrain [17]. With the establishment of fear among the population, was felt the need to instauration the feeling of preservation of one's own health. To this end, limiting the interaction between individuals and maintaining social distance have encouraged travel by personal means of transport, to the detriment of public transport. In any case, for a better understanding of the current pandemic phenomenon, we mention that public transport users have dropped by more than 90% in some European cities [37, 38]. Avoiding crowded places is a priority during this period, and maintaining a social distance of at least 2 meters between individuals is certainly a visible problem among those who are constrained to use public transport for travel, means of transport that seem unsafe from this point of view [39].

However, the European Commission has encouraged travel, many of which being made for tourist purposes, even through the use of public transport [9]. The relaunch of a safe transport for the health of each of us, meant the orientation towards adopting a preventive behavior, by wearing a protective mask, disinfecting hands, but also disinfection of the interior of the respective vehicles.

Step 3. "Resumption of tourist services with minimized health risks": The courage to overcome this bad moment, in this way this measure would be best interpreted measure proposed by the representatives of the European Commission [9]. In tourism, and not only, the gradual economic recovery was indispensable, because otherwise, the financial collapse would take over the entire market economy worldwide. The resumption of tourist services, in a gradual way, without endangering the health of tourists, but also of all staff working in the tourism field was the revitalization of tourism in 2020.

Step 4. "Use of digital technology": The tourist must always be responsible the period of crisis generated by the current pandemic is no exception. In this sense, a rigorous prior information is required, usually using the digital means that each of us has in different forms. Thus, it must be quickly known information such as: areas with a high risk of infection, travel recommendations, availability of tourist reception structures, travel restrictions etc.

Furthermore, Wang D. et al. say that mobile technology is touted as the next technology wave that can fundamentally change tourism and hotels [40], while other researchers affirm that mobile technology is

playing an increasing role in the travel experience, and increasing travel research is concentrated in this field [41].

Step 5. “Protecting people’s rights”: We travel, but we also, in addition to the responsibilities we have, we also have some rights, isn't it?! In this regard, the European Commission encourages those tourists who have purchased certain travel packages in advance, and who have been canceled, to use the advice provided through the network of European Consumer Centers [9]. Even if the current pandemic has generated a very delicate situation, the relationship between the tourist and the actors in this field should remain a balanced one. A negative feedback in the present period, correlated with the fear of contacting the COVID-19 virus with the movement from one area to another, would mean the collapse of tourism by reducing tourist arrivals.

Tourism, severely affected by this current crisis, must overcome this difficult period, with the focus on new directions aimed at the niche of sustainable tourism. Why sustainable? Improperly said, but if it were necessary to think about whether there is something good about this pandemic, in addition to increasing concern for one's own health, sustainable tourism is in a position to embrace as many tourists as possible.

Sustainability has not been a topic of interest to most tourists so far, addressing a well-defined typology. However, I believe that through the current difficult situation in which all mankind finds itself, we can bring to light the feeling that has been left in the shadows in our hearts, namely the good relationship between man and nature. In fact, this connection represents a condition of human existence, because what man would do without the environment, but also vice versa, because everyone has a well-established place on this Earth, as a well-cohesive continuous circuit, in other words.

In order to achieve the practice of sustainable tourism, more than ever, the entire sector needs an energetic boost from tourists. Therefore, the data mentioned below clarifies and promotes at the same time the ways in which each of us can be useful during this period:

- Adoption of a responsible tourist behavior, necessarily related to the post-pandemic period;
- Initiating trips in rural areas discovering new traditions and customs, people and landscapes, as well as contributing to the existence and development of the tourist areas in question, by purchasing products from local producers. In fact, the duration of a tourist stay, for the whole experience to be a favorable one, must be at least three days. Otherwise, the tourist would not be able to contribute to the support of the communities in question, the traditions and customs would also be neglected, and the anthropic potential, and especially the natural one, would not be able to show its beauties in one day, for example. Traveling involves patience, the desire to know the unique, to discover our roots as individuals, to regain inner peace and tranquility, but last but not least and to make a lifelong friendship with our second mother, nature;

- Using the sustainable means of transport as much as possible. Circulating in tourist areas can be done with the help of bicycles, scooters, animal-drawn vehicles, or even walking on their own feet.

On the other hand, according to the provisions encouraged by the European Commission, the involvement of the authorities, but also of all those responsible in the tourism sector, in the process of arousing the interest of tourists to the sustainable side of the traveler is vital, so the following measures are welcome [6]:

- Emphasizing value, quality, sustainability and innovation in tourism;
- Initiating a more sustainable transport at affordable prices, in order to efficiently manage tourist flows;

- Diversification of the tourist offer in order to attract tourist flows in the off-season;

- Development of sustainability skills for tourism professionals;

- Promoting sustainable tourist accommodation structures (through voluntary systems, such as the EU Ecolabel and EMAS);

- The transition of tourism to digitalism, in the sense that a fair approach to the Internet can help, offering new ways in which tourism flows can be managed, the use of limited resources being much more efficient;

- Digitization in tourism during pandemics can also mean a measure to regain the trust of tourists, ensuring access to the latest data on the place where the actual trip is to take place, at the same time, at the opposite pole, tourism actors also need to become familiar with the deeper use of the Internet (referring mainly to areas where sustainable tourism is practiced, places where the connection to the online environment can be difficult). For example, connecting local businesses to a database can provide important information about accommodation, transportation, tourism potential in the area, but also about the degree of security that tourists can have. Such information often remains difficult to access if we talk about sustainable tourism, which is fragmented in rural areas.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic surprised each of us. Scenarios regarding the outbreak of such a threat to humanity have been brought up in recent years, but until we were confronted with the fact, we remained indifferent to this danger. I conclude by expressing my interest and at the same time the ecstasy towards this subject, of the situation of the tourism sector during the COVID-19 Pandemic. The current circumstance is a new one, in which the current generations have not taken part until now, and tourism is also put to a difficult test, apparently, more than six months after the introduction of the COVID-19 virus.

I hope that the global tourism sector will return to its promising pre-pandemic form, and in terms of Romanian tourism and sustainable tourism, this is certainly the right time to revalue it and increase confidence in Romania's natural potential, thus motivating my state of ecstasy mentioned in the above lines. In fact, the social distance will culminate in the tourist's desire to avoid areas with increased passenger traffic, so rediscovering their roots through sustainable tourism will become dominant. This is the time when the tourist will realize the richness of sustainable tourism, so I can commit to making the following prediction: sustainable tourism will become in the coming years the main reason why tourists will feel at ease when traveling.

Respecting the measures issued by the European Commission, I am convinced that the health of people everywhere will cease to be endangered, fear will be replaced by hope and confidence, and tourism will once again be crowned as one of the most prolific sectors of the world economy.

Unfortunately, the principle "in life man learns from his own mistakes", can be adapted to this pandemic period that will pass at some point, but until then, man must learn to take care of the health of his own home, the Earth, for so that he too can live a harmonious life.

"Tempora mutantur et nos mutamur in illis", in translation "Times change, and we in them", the Latin would say ... Change, adaptation and continuous improvement, man must guide his life according to these natural processes of our existence.

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