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**Tourism in the COVID-19 Pandemic Era:
Good Practices within the European Union**

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Abstract

Tourism is an important activity worldwide, which makes an important contribution to the global GDP. The COVID-19 pandemic has severely affected the tourism sector at the global and regional level, perhaps even more than other sectors of activity. The European Union (EU) countries are among the most visited destinations in the world, but the COVID-19 pandemic has affected many of them. Despite the difficulties encountered during the pandemic, tourism in the EU countries has continued to survive in various ways. Making use of a quantitative approach, the article aims to identify what were the solutions found and put into practice for carrying out the touristic activity in the difficult conditions imposed by the pandemic. From the analysis of two hypotheses, which were validated, we conclude that: measures taken by the EU member states to reduce the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus have directly affected tourism contribution to exports, and travel restrictions imposed by the EU countries have negatively affected international tourist flows. In addition to this, examples of good practices that have supported tourism under the conditions of the pandemic are analysed.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, tourism, travel restrictions, European Union, good practices.

JEL Classification: L80, L83, L88, Z33.

1. Introduction

Tourism is one of the most dynamic activities, reaching in 2019 almost 1.5 billion international tourist arrivals and USD 1,468 billion in revenues (WTTC, 2021). At the same time, tourism is very sensitive to external factors that can seriously

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affect the evolution of international tourist arrivals. After the announcement of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic on 11 March 2020, the rapid spread of the virus was immediately felt in tourism everywhere. Restrictions to prevent or slow the spread of the virus have led to the isolation of major tourist destinations. These measures have been rapidly adopted by more and more regions over a period of time, in line with the specific situation of each region (UNWTO, 2021a).

Europe has been among the regions most affected by the pandemic, with almost all the EU countries being forced to impose harsh isolation measures and travel restrictions since the pandemic was declared (Eurostat, 2021). At the beginning of the pandemic, among the EU countries most affected were Italy (Dorrucci et al., 2021) and Austria (Kreidl et al., 2020). The EU member states are among the most developed countries in the world, and mobility in these countries is very high. One of the factors that contributed to the spread of the virus was precisely this high mobility, in the context of globalization, but also the facilities related to free movement in the European space (Eurostat, 2021).

If in 2019, out of a total of 1,464 million tourists, almost half, 746.3 million (51%) arrived in Europe, of which 540.7 million arrived in EU countries, it can be said that the EU is the most important tourist region in the world, with 37% of international tourist arrivals (ECA, 2021). These statistics show how important tourism is for these countries, but also the fact that it is a preferred destination globally, not only regionally. Among the most favourite destinations in the world, in 2019 we find in the first places also EU countries, such as France, on the first place in international tourist arrivals, followed by Spain, on the second place, then Italy, on the fifth place, and Germany, on the ninth place (UNWTO, 2021b). A similar situation is found in tourism revenues.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has changed this situation in a way that is hard to imagine. In 2020, world tourism faced the largest loss in the number of international tourists, -73%, registering only 400 million international tourists (UNWTO, 2022), out of which Europe received 59%, the EU countries being among the preferred ones, even in these conditions (177.9 million international tourists). Due to the numerous restrictions that were introduced at the beginning of 2020 and reintroduced in the autumn and winter of 2020 for different states, due to numerous pandemic waves, the consequences for tourism have been major (Eurostat, 2021). The year 2021 brought only a small increase in the number of international tourists, especially in the second half of the year. Thus, if in the entire 2021 there were 415 million international tourists, Europe received 279.8 million (representing 67% of the world total), out of which the majority of them, 203.9 million, were received by the EU countries (representing 73% of total arrivals in Europe) (UNWTO, 2022). The highest number of tourists was registered in Southern Europe (Mediterranean Europe), 33%, followed by Western Europe with 17%, then East-Central Europe and Northern Europe. Among the European countries with a high number of tourists and which are not in the EU-27 are the United Kingdom and the Russian Federation, the other European countries receiving a lower number of tourists.

The COVID-19 pandemic did not end at the beginning of 2022, even though throughout 2021 medical solutions appeared that were considered absolutely necessary for a return to a state of normalcy (pre-pandemic). The various variants of the virus, which appeared along the way, more or less dangerous, maintained the pandemic. If the Delta version of 2021 was very aggressive, the Omicron version proved to be less dangerous. This situation has made the restrictions less severe and has gradually begun to decrease in more and more countries. However, the end of 2021 continued to be under threat from the Omicron variant, which experienced a high spread rate (UNWTO, 2022).

With the rapid spread of the Omicron variant, another challenge has hit the EU – the aggression of the Russian Federation on Ukraine – which could prolong the end of the pandemic. Under these conditions, tourism in EU countries is facing new situations, such as the massive wave of refugees heading in the first phase to EU border countries (Baltic countries, Poland, Hungary, Romania, but also the Czech Republic and Slovakia). This wave of refugees can sustain the pandemic for a period of time, given the difficulty in managing the health situation in these conditions. In other words, the tourism of the EU countries will lose a significant number of tourists who came from the Russian Federation and Ukraine, in countries like Spain, Italy, Cyprus, Finland, Germany, etc. At the same time, these EU border countries are considered unsafe due to the war in Ukraine, and many trips to these countries will be cancelled, which is another blow to EU tourism.

The purpose of this paper is to present some of the measures taken by EU countries to support tourism during the health crisis and to relaunch tourism after the end of the pandemic, in order to return to a pre-pandemic situation. The approach used quantitative methods, through the empirical analysis of statistical data, combined with the analysis of documents concerning the measures taken by EU countries, in order to reduce the negative effects of the pandemic. The article introduces the context to which the subject is related, followed by a brief review of the literature, the presentation of research methods, results, and conclusions.

2. Problem Statement

The devastating effects that epidemics or pandemics have had on tourism have been addressed over time in numerous articles (Debashish, 2021; Papanikos, 2020). The impact of these health challenges has been felt intensely at the regional level. This time, humanity is facing the hardest test, and the economic losses are greater than during the great economic crises (Guridno, Guridno, 2020). Therefore, Duro et al. (2022) addresses tourism resilience in Spain, one of the most important tourist recipient countries. At the same time, governments, travel agencies, and the media have warned of the contagious risks of Sars-Cov-2 in an interconnected world, but these warnings have not been heeded, leading to undesirable effects in Spain (Moreno-Luna et al., 2021).

Another direction of research was to find solutions to support tourism under the conditions in which freedom of movement was restricted by a series of measures taken by each country, but also at the regional level. Close collaboration between the

public and private sectors during the pandemic can be a sustainable model that can also be applied in the tourism sector. Governments should play a key role in revitalizing the tourism sector through packages of financial incentives and subsidies (Debashish, 2021). In addition, in the process of relaunching tourism, the use of promotion tools through social media platforms would be very helpful.

Of particular importance during the lockdown were the alternative forms of the armchair tourism, in which people supplemented physical travel with virtual travel. Armchair tourism, even if it does not bring immediate benefits to tourism, has the role of preparing people for future journeys by providing them with the needed information for the journeys to follow through books, television, or the internet (Papathanassis, 2011; Mazanec et al., 2002). People can thus participate in visiting museums, shows, events, in a virtual environment, thus arousing curiosity and the desire to visit them physically. Although virtual reality (VR) technology has been implemented since the early 1990s also in tourism, especially in heritage sites, museums, and other attractions (Hudson et al., 2019), virtual tourism has been relatively low before the pandemic, but it became increasingly important during the pandemic (Bunghez, 2021), when people rejoiced that they could discover unique experiences with technology, as an alternative to real experiences. The tourism industry may soon bring new tourism experiences for those who cannot travel, such as Žilina tourism metaverse, which may be a solution. This type of travel can help promote tourist destinations. Various industries, such as tourism, marketing, and education, recognize the metaverse as a new business model. The cultural tourism could be oriented towards the metaverse, thus opening new spaces of interest for this type of tourism (Um et al., 2022).

3. Aims of the Research

The purpose of this paper is to present some of the measures taken by EU countries to support tourism during the health crisis and the recovery after the end of the pandemic, in other words to return to a pre-pandemic situation.

In order to carry out this research, two hypotheses were formulated:

- H1:* The measures taken by the EU member states to overcome the economic and health crisis caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus have directly influenced tourism exports;
- H2:* Travel restrictions imposed by EU countries to reduce the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus have negatively affected international tourist flows.

4. Research Methods

The method used is quantitative, through the empirical analysis of statistical data obtained from various specialized sources, such as UNWTO, WTTC, and Eurostat, from 2019 (pre-pandemic year), 2020 and 2021. The Statistical Program for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to demonstrate the correlation between the following variables: tourism exports and the number of anti-COVID-19 measures in each country. At the same, an analysis of documents prepared during the pandemic

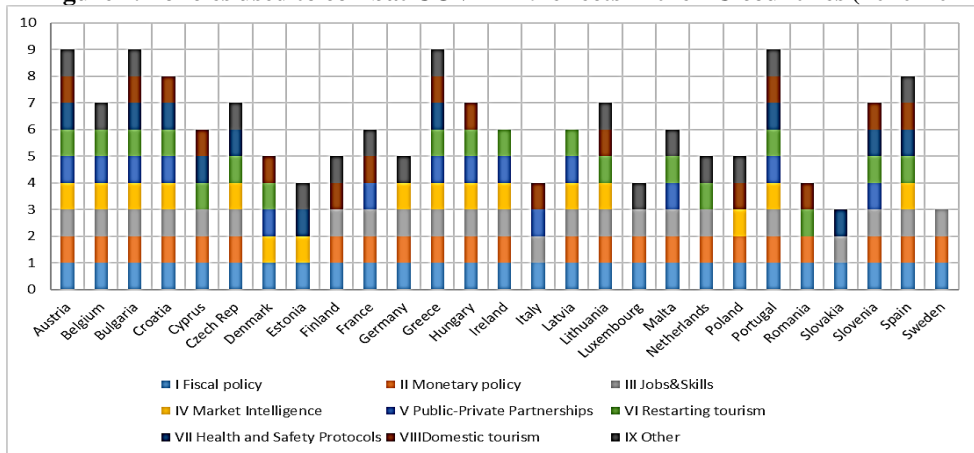
by the European Commission (EC) or policies presented on the UNWTO website (2021c) by each country, which took into account measures to support the tourism sector, by developing a mix of policies, was performed.

5. Findings

5.1 Measures Taken by the EU Countries to Support Tourism during Pandemic

Initially, at the level of the EU countries, there were no unitary strategies to combat the effects of the pandemic, so each country has implemented its own strategies (Papanikos, 2020). On 13 May 2020, the EC adopted a comprehensive package of initiatives to enable a framework for resumption of activities following the first pandemic wave. Analysing the measures adopted by EU countries on the UNWTO (2021c), nine categories of measures were identified: fiscal policy, monetary policy, jobs and skills, marketing intelligence, public-private partnerships, restarting tourism, health and safety protocols, domestic tourism, and others. In our approach, we registered for each country the identified strategies. The results are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Policies used to combat COVID- 19 effects in the EU countries (2020-2021)



Source: Made by authors based on research, data provided by UNWTO, 2021c.

The analysis showed that four countries, namely Austria, Bulgaria, Greece, and Portugal, took measures that targeted all nine categories, whereas fewer types of measures were implemented in Slovakia and Sweden. At the end of 2021, the EC initiated actions to reduce the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism sector (ECA, 2021).

In order to validate the first hypothesis (H1), which refers to the measures taken by EU member states to overcome the economic and health crisis generated by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, we tested the existence of a correlation between these measures and tourism exports to each EU country, using the SPSS.

Table 1. Correlations between tourism contribution to exports and the measures to boost tourism for the EU countries

		Tourism contribution to exports	Measures to support travel and tourism
Tourism contribution to exports	Pearson Correlation	1	
	Sig. (2-tailed)		
	N	27	
Measures to support travel and tourism	Pearson Correlation	,554**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,003	
	N	27	27

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

Source: Made by authors based on research.

A bivariate analysis was performed to test the assumption that measures against the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have affected tourism revenues, in this case the tourism contribution to exports for the EU countries. According to the results (Table 1), the connection between the variables under analysis is of a direct nature and of moderate intensity (Pearson Correlation being equal to 0.554). Thus, we can say that the application of a wide range of measures against the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly influenced the tourist traffic. Based on these analyses, the first hypothesis (H1) was validated.

5.2 Travel Restrictions in the EU Countries during the Pandemic and the Consequences for Tourism

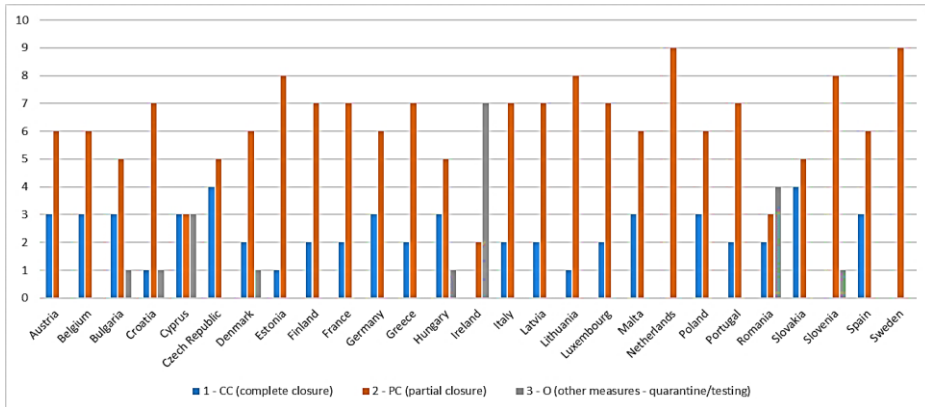
Another factor able to influence the practice of tourism was the one regarding the travel restrictions. The EC has issued guidelines on non-essential travel restrictions (COM, 2020), with the gradual restoration depending on epidemiological conditions. On 15 April 2020, the EC, in collaboration with the European Council, presented a joint European roadmap on lifting restrictions in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Based on the data provided by UNWTO (2021a), we grouped the actions of the states into three broad categories, creating a matrix in which the following codes were assigned: 1 for complete closure (CC), 2 for partial closure (PC), and 3 for other measures (O) (quarantine/testing) in order to validate the second hypothesis (H2).

From the analysis, it is found that only two countries focused on only one type of restrictions (PC), the Netherlands and Sweden, while the rest applied at least two of the strategies (the most common CC and PC).

The graphical representation of the results is highlighted in Figure 2. Also, here we note that countries applied for the analysed period a combination of these restrictions with some exceptions.

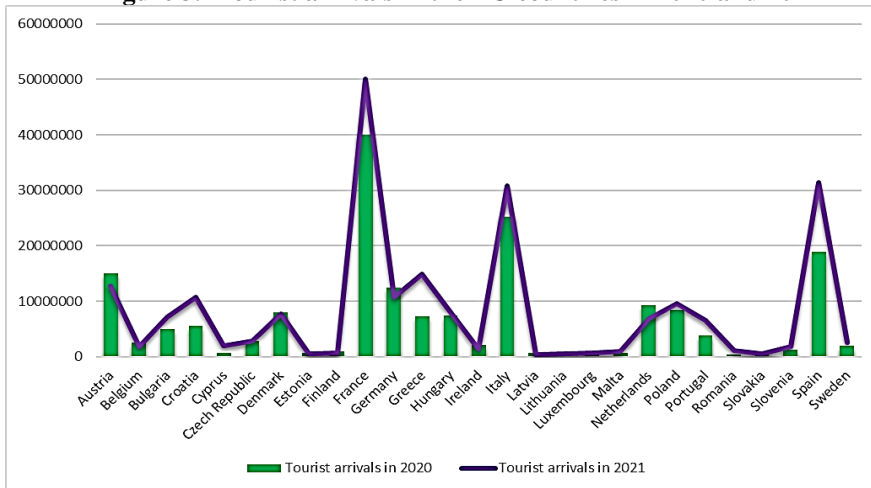
Figure 2. Travel restrictions throughout April 2020 - November 2021 in the EU Countries



Source: Made by authors based on research, data provided by UNWTO, 2021a.

If at the beginning of the pandemic almost all EU countries relied on the CC, as the information about the pandemic evolved, so did the options for combating it. Figure 3 shows the impact of decisions on restrictions on the number of arrivals in the EU-27 member states.

Figure 3. Tourist arrivals in the EU countries in 2020 and 2021

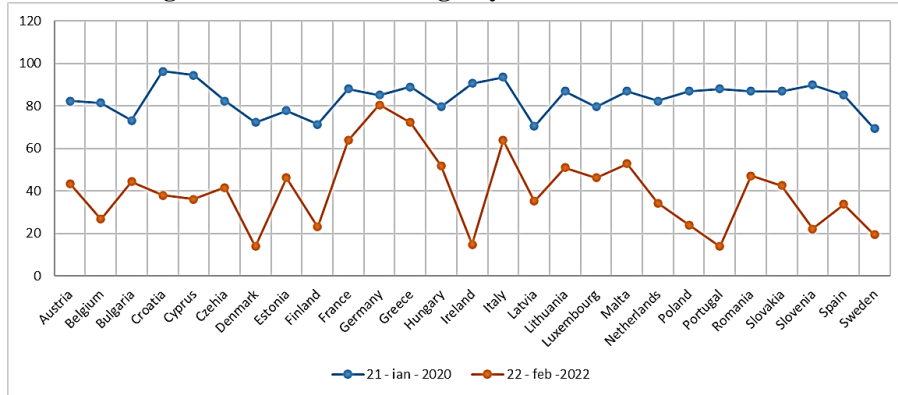


Source: Made by authors based on data provided by UNWTO, 2021a.

Based on data available on Our World in Data (2022a), we extracted the values for the COVID-19 Stringency Index for the EU-27 member states. This index is calculated on the basis of nine crisis response indicators generated by COVID-19, including the closure of schools, the closure of businesses, and the introduction of travel restrictions. In the case of each country, the index can take values from 0 to 100 (100 meaning the strictest measures). Two key periods in the evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic were considered, namely 21 January 2020 (correlated with the

beginning of the epidemic) and 22 February 2022 (date of research and relaxation of many restrictions). The results are highlighted in Figure 4.

Figure 4. COVID-19 Stringency Index for the EU countries



Source: Made by authors based on data provided by Our World in Data, 2022a.

Thus, analysing the two periods considered relevant for the evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic in the EU, significant differences are found in each country. There was a reduction in the intensity of the restrictions on the background of the sustained vaccination campaign promoted at the level of the EU, such in the cases of Denmark, Ireland and Portugal, where the population over 18 years of age vaccinated with the full scheme was 81%, 80%, and 90% (Our World in Data, 2022b). Overall, it can be stated that the restrictions have negatively influenced the flows of international tourists in the EU member states, fact highlighted by the COVID-19 Stringency Index, the number and type of restrictions imposed in each EU member state, and the evolution of the tourist arrivals indicator in 2020 and 2021, thus Hypothesis 2 (H2) being validated.

5.3 Examples of Good Practices for the EU Countries during the Pandemic

Many EU countries have made it a priority to restart tourism and promote domestic tourism. Domestic tourism has a large share in countries such as Germany, Romania, Finland, Belgium, France, and the Netherlands. This is also encouraged by the use of holiday vouchers, holiday cards, special discounts, or other measures designed to encourage domestic tourism. The most preferred places are the most isolated ones, which receive a smaller number of tourists, with camping-type accommodation, caravans or less crowded villas, as close as possible to nature. On this occasion, many EU countries made available for tourists sites where they could post impressions and images or movies, thus contributing to the presentation and popularization of lesser known but particularly attractive places, being incentivized through campaigns with awards, as in Denmark. Therefore, several countries offered virtual experiences during the pandemic, which would involve future tourists until

restrictions were lifted. The subsequent transformations in the tourism sector will be oriented towards the promotion of innovations and digital technologies, through the development of tourist services and products. This is an important goal of the EU, and Lithuania is one of the countries most interested in the digitization process. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused EU countries to pay close attention to health safety measures in accommodation, restaurants, or entertainment, with strong protocols on compliance with rules in tourist units, from hygiene measures to social restraint measures.

6. Conclusions

Restrictions to prevent or slow the spread of the virus have led to the isolation of major tourist destinations. In addition to travel restrictions, governments have also imposed restrictions on tourism businesses on how they operate, for reasons of health security, in some cases leading to their complete closure, most of them being lifted before the summer season. Thus, the two hypotheses taken into consideration were validated. Close collaboration between the public and private sectors during the pandemic can be a sustainable model that can also be applied in the tourism sector, with governments playing a key role in revitalizing the tourism sector through packages of financial incentives and subsidies.

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