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TOURIST DESTINATION PLOVDIV - SPATIAL DIFFERENCES OF BULGARIAN TOURISM IN A PANDEMIC CONTEXT¹

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ABSTRACT

The development of the pandemic and the travel restrictions around the world are leading to the collapse of the tourism industry. Tourism is an important sector of the Bulgarian economy and Plovdiv. The purpose of this article is to analyze the impact of the pandemic on the Bulgarian tourism, taking into account its severity in the tourist destination Plovdiv. Statistical analyzes of the official statistics of tourism in Plovdiv before and during the pandemic have been performed. The increase in the number of infected in the country in early autumn has led to restrictive measures and unpredictable consequences for the tourist season. The first year of the coronavirus has severely damaged the tourism and consumer perceptions of safe travel. Conclusions were formulated on the socio-economic consequences of the spread of the coronavirus pandemic for the regional markets of Bulgaria and destination Plovdiv.

KEYWORDS: tourism, COVID-19, tourists, destination Plovdiv.

INTRODUCTION

The development of the pandemic and the restrictions on travel around the world has led to the collapse of the tourism industry. The negative trends highlighted common problems for all tourism-related industries and destinations. They were forced to deal with the crisis by rationalizing their behavior in order to survive. Today, tourism is among the most affected economic sectors, whose global decline in 2020 exceeded 73%

¹ original scientific paper

in international travel². According to the World Tourism Organization³, all destinations around the world have complied with travel restrictions, but for some they have proved quite difficult to survive. Today, COVID-19 is a health catastrophe that leads to a global economic and social crisis, but also to drastic changes in tourist behavior.

In order to preserve the tourism business and protect the economic entities on the tourism market, employed in tourism, as well as to speed up the recovery of the sector after the pandemic in 2020-2021, a number of specific measures have been implemented in Bulgaria to ensure the redirection of financial resources, including such from EU and public operational programs. Public authorities have tried to coordinate them to ensure the health and safety of travelers for accommodation, dining and entertainment, tourist attractions and other sites visited by tourists⁴. What are the policies and measures implemented, and how have they affected businesses? This is the purpose of the present study - analysis of the impact of the pandemic on Bulgarian tourism, following the example of the tourist destination Plovdiv.

MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted on the basis of an online study of the consequences of the pandemic in the field of tourism at the macro and micro level - online surveys among companies in the tourism industry and interviews with public authorities. The surveys are structured in the following areas: general data; registration of the consequences of COVID-19; study of the business condition of the companies; registration of the measures taken; finding instantaneous results of the measures to deal with the pandemic; the period included is 2019-2021 with respondents from companies in the tourism sector, private companies, public sector organizations and non-governmental organizations associated with it.. The study was conducted in stages on the territory of Plovdiv by the NGO "Tourism Council - Plovdiv". The results of the study at the first stage were published on the website of the association⁵ and were reflected in the public

²<https://www.unwto.org/news/tourist-numbers-down-83-but-confidence-slowly-rising> (преглед на 10.06.2021)

³UNWTO е водещата международна организация в областта на туризма към ООН с 155 страни-членки, 7 територии и над 400 партньори.

⁴Асенова, М., 2021. Covid-кризата в културата и туризма, основан на културно наследство: идеи за изход от ситуацията – УИ „Св. К. Охридски“, ISBN 978-954-07-5215-0, с.78

⁵<https://tourismplovdiv.org/%d0%b0%d0%bd%d0%b0%d0%bb%d0%b8%d0%b7-%d0%bd%d0%b0-%d0%b0%d0%bd%d0%ba%d0%b5%d1%82%d0%bd%d0%be->

media, and from the second stage were made publicly available during the Sixth International Scientific Conference "Business and Regional Development"⁶.

RESULTS ANALYSIS

Following the online events from the period 2019-2021⁷ and the consequences of the pandemic in the field of tourism at the macro level, we have determined the following consequences of the pandemic⁸:

- an economic downturn affecting both tourism-related enterprises and the economy as a whole, a sharp decline in tourist demand leading to a vicious circle that is difficult to break⁹;
- the restriction of travel leads to reduced touristic demand and touristic activity, accompanied by social distancing and reduced trust between people¹⁰;
- an avalanche of domestic and international disputes, which sharply deteriorate trade relations, limit supplies and shrink the market;

The situation at the micro level, followed by the example of the destination Plovdiv, is no different. What did the analysis of the official tourism statistics in Plovdiv show before and during the pandemic? - The title "European Capital of Culture 2019" played a crucial role in the development of Plovdiv in the period 2014-2019. The cultural wealth of the destination is actively promoted and significant cultural, social and economic benefits are generated¹¹. The emphasis for future development was placed on unlocking the local potential through the development of diverse and modern forms of tourism¹². Global and local challenges to the destination have outlined new opportunities for tourism as a basis for improving the sustainability and competitiveness of the region. Plovdiv has become a recognizable tourist destination for Europe and a desirable environment for business in the field of tourism for 2019. The flow of foreign tourists visiting the sights and museums or having fun in restaurants

[%d0%bf%80%be%83%87%b2%b0%bd%b5-%d0%ba%b5%82%be-%d0%bf%80%be/](#)

⁶Grigorova, Z., Y. Jabarova, 2021.

Behavioural changes of the business parties in the tourist sector after the implementation of the measures for overcoming the Covid-19 crisis - том 120 на списание SHS Web of Conferences

⁷<https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/hernan.epstein/viz/OutboundDashboard/Departures>

⁸<https://www.unwto.org/covid-19-and-tourism-statistics>

⁹<https://www.e-unwto.org/doi/epdf/10.18111/9789284422432>

¹⁰<https://www.unwto.org/tourism-statistics-data>

¹¹<https://plovdiv2019.eu/en/documents>

¹²<https://plovdiv2019.eu/bg/platforms>

has visibly increased. More and more individuals and legal entities showed interest and invested in restaurants and hotels. The quality of the offered services in tourism has increased its level. There was an increase in tourism revenues, but even before the statistics came out, the speed was stopped by the global pandemic. For the period 2020-2021, the results changed dramatically. The online survey (the only one possible at the moment) outlined the current state of the tourism industry in Plovdiv during the state of emergency, as well as the industry's vision for the recovery trends - restart of the sector.

According to the type of their participation in the tourism industry, the respondents were grouped by categories: 45.1% hoteliers; 15.7% of tour operators; 7.8% restaurateurs; 5.9% are in the field of education; 3.9% of guides, the rest are representatives of public administration, non-governmental organizations, wine cellars, transport, culture and museum activities - all directly related to tourism - fig. 1.

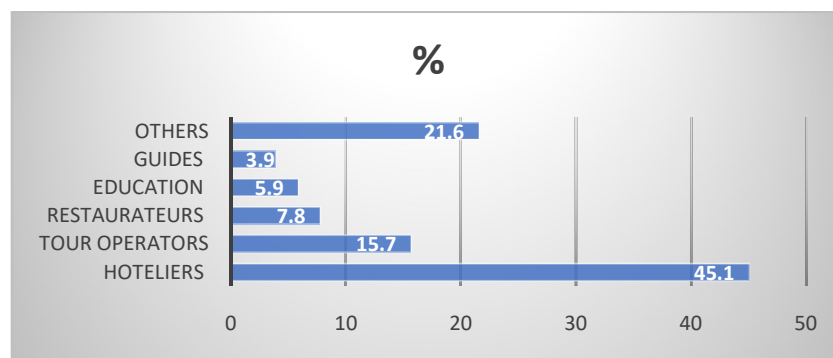


Figure 1-According to the type of their participation in the tourism industry

According to the duration of active activity on the tourist market, they are: companies established on the tourist market, which have been operating for over 20 years - 25.5% of all respondents; companies that have been operating between 10 and 20 years - 31.4%; companies operating between 5 and 10 years - 19.6%; companies with activity from 1 to 3 years 13.7%. This shows that the tourism sector has its established economic positions in Plovdiv, and the experience that most companies have can be used to create an organization for adequate work during emergencies and crises.

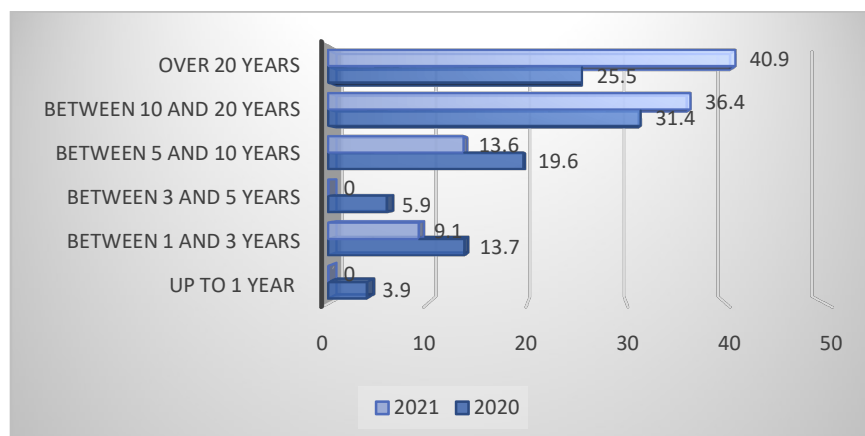


Figure 2- according to the duration of active activity on the tourist market

The current situation has a massive negative impact on business and has a strong negative impact on over 90%, of which over 60% have suspended their activities completely or temporarily, and for 13% the volume of work has been halved or in practice, only every fourth company in the industry still functions relatively normally. When tracking the number of employees among the respondents by 2020, the decline in employment is 22%, and for 2021 the data are contradictory for the first three seasons. Despite the difficulties faced by the tourism industry, there is a desire to retain staff and jobs in the sector.

In order to preserve the tourism business and prevent mass bankruptcies¹³, as well as to speed up the recovery of the sector after the pandemic, state and local authorities have implemented a number of policies and measures to ensure the health and safety of travelers in accommodation, catering and entertainment¹⁴, in tourist attractions and other sites visited by

¹³ Закон за мерките и действията по време на извънредното положение, обявено с решение на народното събрание от 13 март 2020 г. и за преодоляване на последиците. <https://www.lex.bg/bg/laws/ldoc/2137201253>

¹⁴ Заповед на Министъра на туризма от 17.03.2020 г. за преустановяване на организираните туристически пътувания до 13 април 2020 г. включително <https://www.tourism.government.bg/bg/kategorii/novini/zapoved-na-ministura-na-turizma-nikolinaangelkova-za-preustanovyavane-na>

tourists¹⁵.

The measures studied at national level by 2021 are:

- Support for medium-sized enterprises to overcome the economic consequences of the pandemic COVID-19 - OPIC¹⁶.

- Measure 60/40¹⁷.

- „Employment for you“ program¹⁸.

- Support for small businesses with a turnover of over BGN 500,000 to overcome the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic¹⁹.

- Providing grants to persons performing tour operator and travel agency activities to compensate for losses resulting from the COVID-19 epidemic²⁰.

- Support to micro and small enterprises to overcome the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic (measure 3/10)²¹.

- BDB program for portfolio guarantees in support of the liquidity of micro, small and medium enterprises (SMEs) affected by the emergency situation and the epidemic of COVID-19²².

¹⁵Заповед на Министъра на туризма от 17.03.2020 г. за преустановяване на организираните туристически пътувания до 13 април 2020 г. включително <https://www.tourism.government.bg/bg/kategorii/novini/zapoved-na-ministura-na-turizma-nikolinaangelkova-za-preustanovyavane-na>

¹⁶Заповед на Министъра на туризма от 17.03.2020 г. за преустановяване на организираните туристически пътувания до 13 април 2020 г. включително <https://www.tourism.government.bg/bg/kategorii/novini/zapoved-na-ministura-na-turizma-nikolinaangelkova-za-preustanovyavane-na>

¹⁷Заповед на Министъра на туризма от 17.03.2020 г. за преустановяване на организираните туристически пътувания до 13 април 2020 г. включително <https://www.tourism.government.bg/bg/kategorii/novini/zapoved-na-ministura-na-turizma-nikolinaangelkova-za-preustanovyavane-na>

¹⁸Заповед на Министъра на туризма от 17.03.2020 г. за преустановяване на организираните туристически пътувания до 13 април 2020 г. включително <https://www.tourism.government.bg/bg/kategorii/novini/zapoved-na-ministura-na-turizma-nikolinaangelkova-za-preustanovyavane-na>

¹⁹Заповед на Министъра на туризма от 17.03.2020 г. за преустановяване на организираните туристически пътувания до 13 април 2020 г. включително <https://www.tourism.government.bg/bg/kategorii/novini/zapoved-na-ministura-na-turizma-nikolinaangelkova-za-preustanovyavane-na>

²⁰Заповед на Министъра на туризма от 17.03.2020 г. за преустановяване на организираните туристически пътувания до 13 април 2020 г. включително <https://www.tourism.government.bg/bg/kategorii/novini/zapoved-na-ministura-na-turizma-nikolinaangelkova-za-preustanovyavane-na>

²¹Заповед на Министъра на туризма от 17.03.2020 г. за преустановяване на организираните туристически пътувания до 13 април 2020 г. включително <https://www.tourism.government.bg/bg/kategorii/novini/zapoved-na-ministura-na-turizma-nikolinaangelkova-za-preustanovyavane-na>

²²Заповед на Министъра на туризма от 17.03.2020 г. за преустановяване на организираните туристически пътувания до 13 април 2020 г. включително

- Crisis recovery loans covid-19 (by the Fund of funds)²³
- Microloans for self-employed persons and small start-ups (by the Fund of funds)²⁴
- Portfolio guarantees to support the liquidity of SMEs (European Investment Fund/Jeremy)²⁵.
- Microloans for self-employed and small start-ups²⁶.

Businesses are keenly interested in the opportunities offered - 87% of respondents are fully or largely familiar with the measures, but 2/3 say they have not fully or completely supported them - Figure 3.

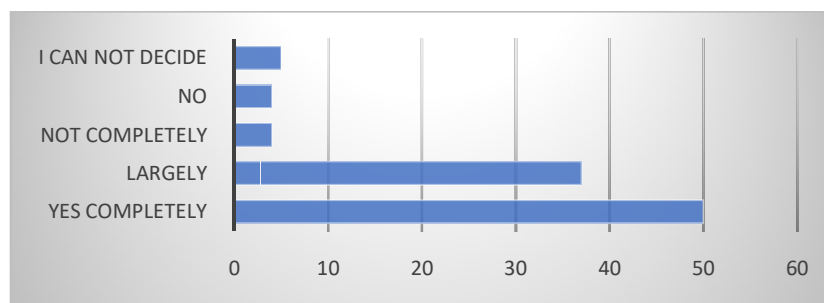


Figure3-Degree of familiarity with the measures available on national level

<https://www.tourism.government.bg/bg/kategorii/novini/zapoved-na-ministura-na-turizma-nikolinaangelkova-za-preustanovyavane-na>

²³Заповед на Министъра на туризма от 17.03.2020 г. за преустановяване на организираниите туристически пътувания до 13 април 2020 г. включително <https://www.tourism.government.bg/bg/kategorii/novini/zapoved-na-ministura-na-turizma-nikolinaangelkova-za-preustanovyavane-na>

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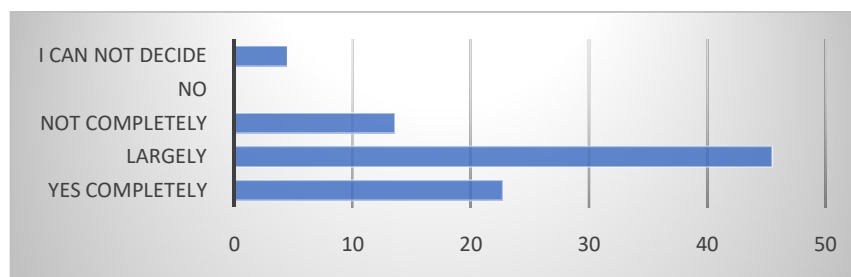
²⁶Заповед на Министъра на туризма от 17.03.2020 г. за преустановяване на организираниите туристически пътувания до 13 април 2020 г. включително <https://www.tourism.government.bg/bg/kategorii/novini/zapoved-na-ministura-na-turizma-nikolinaangelkova-za-preustanovyavane-na>

The attitude of the respondents to measure 60/40 is especially indicative. Of the respondents, 74.6% are negative, 19.6% intend to take advantage and only 5.9% have already taken advantage.

The studied measures at local level by 2021 are²⁷:

- the Municipality of Plovdiv exempts from fees for sidewalk law commercial sites and establishments closed by an order of the Minister of Health during the state of emergency²⁸;
- traders and tenants of municipal properties that fall within the scope of the order of the Minister of Health to impose a state of emergency will be exempt from rent for the time during which they were closed;
- establishments that rent municipal parking will be exempted from paying it for the time they are not working, as of the time of the state of emergency;
- Plovdiv residents receive a two-month reprieve for payment of the first installment for the garbage fee;
- The term for using a 5% discount for payment of the entire amount due for building tax and motor vehicle tax has been extended by two months. This discount can be used until June 30.

Regarding the municipal measures in the city, there is obviously a greater commitment and formed opinion - at the 1-st stage of the introduction of the measures only 13% are not aware of them, and at the 2-nd stage 18.2%. The last two on the list receive more approval than denial, which is surprising because all five measures aim to alleviate the effects of the crisis. This shows that many people in the sector are already desperate and may not believe in the effectiveness of local government - fig. 4.



²⁷<https://www.plovdiv.bg/%D0%BC%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%BA%D0%B8-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%BE%D0%B1%D1%89%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%BF%D0%BB%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B4%D0%B8%D0%B2-%D0%B2-%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%BA%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%BF%D0%B0-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%BC/>

²⁸<https://plovdiv.obshtini.bg/doc/388893>

Figure 4-Degree of familiarity with the measures available on local level

Expectations for the development of the sector after the end of the state of emergency for 2020 envisaged deterioration of the situation in the Tourism sector in 45% of respondents, improvement of the situation in 23%, or return to the situation before the declaration of the state of emergency. In 2021, 68% of respondents expect a recovery in 2 years at the earliest - this shows some positive attitudes of the tourism business in Plovdiv, which in practice means a desire to restart in 2021-2023.

CONCLUSION

Summarizing the results of the study we can draw the following conclusions:

- Plovdiv 2019 was the most prestigious „business school“ for the tourism industry in Plovdiv;
- Despite the difficulties faced by tourism in the country and in the destination, the tourism industry makes supreme efforts to maintain its positions, personnel and jobs;
- Tourism perceives the cultural industry as a springboard for restart and recovery after the pandemic;
- In 2019 Plovdiv reported a 50% increase in attendance, but this was only 1/3 of the actual reported statistics, so the survey data and interviews point to the key importance of the destination, as the main way out of the crisis through the production of various products, goods and services;
- The main goal of the tourism business is access to every potential tourist, and the forecasts are for faster recovery of domestic tourism (movement of regional travel with many alternative forms of tourism, linked to culture, traditions, patriotism, nature and local production);
- Development of event tourism with attractive and eye-catching experiences;
- Leading priority for the business is to create security and safe conditions when visiting sites and events, when consuming goods and services in the destination;

The study will be useful in the subsequent assessment of the state of the tourism sector, and these findings aim to unite the industry around universal and clear rules to support businesses in a state of emergency.