

COVID-19 VIRUS PANDEMIC – CRASH OF THE SERBIAN TOURISM OR THE OPPORTUNITY TO PROSPER?

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Abstract: The year 2020 proved to be challenging in many fields. The entire economy suffered huge losses and the tourism is no exception. The research offered in this paper was conducted in this regard, the aim of which was to examine the tourist habits of the Serbian residents before the pandemic, and then to compare them with the behaviour of passengers in this new situation. Surveys designed partly as open questions, and partly as questions with offered answers, and their analysis, revealed that the habits of the citizens of our country change forcibly and that the preferences of a typical Serbian tourist always gravitate to foreign destinations. Only the pandemic led tourists to travel around Serbia, which, as they admit, they do not know enough about. An important role in that context played the government's tourist vouchers, which to some extent helped overcome the economic difficulties of travel. The conclusion is therefore that although tourism has suffered damage, the imposed global isolation may be just an opportunity to attract domestic tourists. As could easily be concluded, tourism in 2020 faced great challenges globally, because of the Covid-19 virus epidemic. World stock markets and the world economy are in crisis and the extent and consequences of this crisis are still unknown. Tourism as an economic branch does not include only travel but relates to other economic activities that are an integral part of sustainable development. Some tourist destinations in the world once facing too many tourists, now are facing flights cancelled during the pandemic, and the number of visits dropped in a short period of time. On the other hand, we are witnessing events that are a consequence of the declining number of tourists, and which are a kind of nature's recovery from human presence (dolphins in Venice, animals on city streets, reduced air pollution, etc.). It seems that nature needed a break from man, and viewed from that side, one can see the positive effects of limited movement.

Keywords: pandemic, tourism, domestic tourists, tourist vouchers.

Field: Social Sciences and Humanities

1. INTRODUCTION

The year 2020 will certainly be remembered in historical textbooks as a year of great upheavals, difficulties, and breakdowns. This is the year in which the pandemic of the virus SARS-Cov-2, with the more common name Covid-19, was declared. The tourism sector in the Republic of Serbia is an economic segment that has suffered great losses since March 2020. Due to the pandemic, the borders of Serbia and almost all countries of the world were closed, and currently no one can say for sure how much losses there will be and when the recovery of the tourism sector will begin, considering that the pandemic is still current in the world. According to the statements of tourist workers, in the first two months of 2020, the largest number of overnight stays was realized by tourists from Romania, Montenegro, Russia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Northern Macedonia, Turkey, China and Greece. This data tells us that the opportunity for tourism comes mostly from regular tourists. The entire summer season suffered huge losses in that context, and the situation is no better during the winter season 2020/2021. It is primarily referred to sky centres, which have been attractive to foreign tourists in recent years. To this should be added the huge losses related to the New Year's Eve, during which it was customary to meet a large number of passengers from abroad on the streets of larger cities, Belgrade in particular. According to the data of the Republic Bureau of Statistics, the beginning of the corona immediately brought reduced number of tourist: "In the Republic of Serbia in March 2020, compared to March 2019, the number of tourist arrivals decreased by 56.0%, while the number of overnight stays decreased by 45.7%." A similar situation continues throughout the year, and it can be concluded that it culminated at the end of the year: "In the Republic of Serbia in November 2020, compared to November 2019, the number of tourist arrivals decreased by 61.3%, and the number of overnight stays decreased by 46.4%. In November 2020, compared to November 2019, the number of overnight stays of domestic tourists decreased by 28.9%, and the number of overnight stays of foreign tourists decreased by 68.0%." (Turistički promet, novembar 2020). Destinations that domestic tourists could orient themselves to are resorts all over Serbia. Primarily, this refers to mountain centres, spa tourism and rural tourism, which has been in its beginnings in recent years. How much influx

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of tourists was in each of these destinations certainly depended on the marketing of the destinations themselves, but also on the support of the state, not only through vouchers, but also through systemic long-term assistance. Namely, it is not unknown to domestic tourists that even if they decide on vacation in their country, they may encounter a number of discouraging elements, such as inaccessible destinations, with bad roads, without the necessary infrastructure and content.

2.RESEARCH

The research was conducted in the only acceptable way – telephone surveys, since the pandemic was ongoing, and it was necessary to follow the recommendations of the Criss Staff. The data were, therefore, collected using a “research instrument called survey” (Havelka et al., 2004, p. 97), which most accurately provides information on personal affinities and intimate thoughts, and refers not only to clearly defined attitudes of the individual, but also on beliefs, feelings and the like. (Todorović, 2008) The survey was conducted in the period from June 17th, 2020 to July 17th, 2020 and included 100 respondents of different sex, age, and education. These are the inhabitants of the cities of Belgrade, Pančevo, Kraljevo, Subotica and Raška.

The results of the research are the facts obtained after processing and analysis of the data from the survey. When it comes to open questions, only the first three most common answers were considered. Below are tables (Table 1 and Table 2) with results of the survey. They are presented numerically and in percentage, and afterwards are offered interpretations of the obtained results.

Table1. Questions with offered answers

Question	Answer YES		Answer NO		Answer MAYBE/NOT SURE	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Do you plan to go on a vacation this year?	65	65%	22	22%	13	13%
Do you fear of travelling abroad?	34	34%	52	52%	14	14%
Will you spend your holyday in Serbia?	59	59%	3	3%	38	38%
Have you heard for tourist vouchers?	95	95%	0	0%	5	5%
Are you planning to use tourist vouchers?	54	54%	18	18%	28	28%

Source: Authors' research

Table 2. Questions with descriptive answers

Question	Answer 1	Number of answers (%)	Answer 2	Number of answers (%)	Answer 3	Number of answers (%)	Answer 4	Number of answers (%)
Why do you generally choose to travel abroad?	Better offer	62 (62%)	I like to see something different	16 (16%)	I already know Serbia	12 (12%)	Different answers	10 (10%)
Why do you choose vacation in Serbia?	Covid-19	52 (52%)	Financial reasons	34 (34%)	Proximity	8 (8%)	Different answers	6 (6%)
What kind of destination do you choose in Serbia?	Mountain	31 (31%)	Lake	28 (28%)	Spa	24 (24%)	Different answers	17 (17%)
What is the biggest advantage of the vacation in Serbia?	Financial reasons	49 (49%)	Natural beauties	23 (23%)	Proximity	21 (21%)	Different answers	7 (7%)
Which destination would you visit in Serbia?	Kopaonik	25 (25%)	Zlatibor	18 (18%)	Palić	16 (16%)	Different answers	41(41%)

Source: Authors' research

3. RESEARCH RESULTS ANALYSIS

What can be immediately noticed from the respondents' answers is that more than half of them are planning a vacation (as many as 65%). Only 22% are sure they will not travel. However, what is unusual is the large number of people who decide to spend their holiday in Serbia. This number reaches as high as 59%. If we consider that 38% are still hesitant about traveling, so it is reasonable to assume that the number of domestic tourists will be even higher.

The question is whether this percentage is conditioned by the fear of going abroad or the impossibility to travel outside Serbia. Respondents' answers to the following question can help in giving answer to this one. More than half stated that they are not afraid of going abroad. This indicates that staying in Serbia is not a product of fear. It must then be concluded that this is some kind of forced stay in the country. The reason why it does not seem to be the first choice of the respondents lies in the following answers related to what attracts them abroad, which will be discussed in the following lines. It is worth dwelling briefly on the measures of the state for the promotion of domestic tourism, which has already been briefly discussed. These are vouchers for paying for accommodation in various destinations in Serbia. Although this was not the first year that vouchers were distributed, this is the first year that they have reached such popularity. Whether it is a good marketing or the consequences of the quarantine, but as many as 95% of the respondents were familiar with the vouchers, while 5% were not sure what it was. When it comes to how many of them plan to use vouchers, 54% of respondents said yes. What is important to underline is that not everyone has the right to use vouchers, as it was said in the introductory part, and therefore the number of those who plan to use them is quite large, since it exceeds half. Only 18% rejected the possibility of using vouchers, and 28% were unsure of the answer. The second part of the survey, which

stands out as a separate part because it contains open questions, referred to the tourist preferences of the citizens of Serbia. To begin with, it was important to define what attracts our fellow citizens abroad, regardless of the current events with the pandemic. This question was imposed as the first, because it is a well-known fact that the majority of passengers from Serbia spend their summers (and this especially refers to the summer season that was ahead of the time when the survey was conducted) abroad. This primarily refers to Montenegro and Greece.

As many as 62% think that the offer abroad is better, which raises questions related to the quality of the tourist offer and service in Serbia. The fact is that Serbia has no sea and that is the most attractive segment of the summer season, but it is worth mentioning that within the prevailing answer, the respondents stated reasons such as better hotels, more diverse facilities, better food, more places for nightlife and the like. It is interesting to note that only 5 respondents (which are classified as “different answers”) mentioned the sea as a reason. The conclusion is that the sea is not the advantage when it comes to choosing a foreign country for a summer vacation, but the impression of tourists that for less money they can get a better service compared to the offer in Serbia. The question arises whether local tourists know Serbia at all, whether they know which places are available and at what prices, or keep in mind only the most luxurious, and thus the most expensive, and certainly the most famous and advertised resorts in Serbia. The above confirms the result of the second question. The answers say that over half of the respondents (52%), who will spend their summer in our country this year, will do so only because of the Covid-19 virus. So, vacation in Serbia turns out to be forced, not desirable. As further stated, money and proximity are other reasons, the last one for 8% of respondents. However, when it comes to financial reasons, 34% of respondents fit in this category, which again shows that a certain part of the population chooses a vacation in Serbia, because they cannot afford a further destination. Again, the results are devastating for Serbian tourism. Regarding the choice and the type of destination respondents were suggested that the respondents do not refer to a specific location and the answers are quite uniform. In the first place are the mountains with 31% of answers, but immediately followed by lakes with 28% and spas with 24%, while a smaller number of respondents would opt for rural tourism and summer in cities (so-called city break), as well as less present answers such as “None, rafting ...” (17% in total). It should be noted that the main advantage of vacation in Serbia is money (49%), which brings the whole story back to the fact that vacation in Serbia is more a necessity than a desire. However, it is positive that natural beauties immediately follow in response (23%), which shows that there is an awareness of Serbia’s potential. To the last question (Which destination would you visit in Serbia?), which referred to specific locations, the respondents answered quite colourfully. In the first place is Kopaonik (25%), then Zlatibor (18%), while in third place is the Lake Palić with 16%. Of all the other answers, as many as 41%, only a few really offered certain destinations (such as Vrnjačka Banja, Stara planina and Srebrno jezero). The other respondents were quite uncertain in their answers and answered “some mountain; maybe a village; somewhere where there is a beach”. It should be reminded that the question referred to the specific destination they would potentially visit, and not which one they will definitely see, which leads to what seems to be the primary problem - do the residents of Serbia know their country at all and are they familiar with their tourist offer?

CONCLUSION

The research that was the subject of this paper aimed to show how the habits of domestic tourists moved in the previous years and whether the situation with the pandemic can be used in favour of the development of domestic tourism. There are certainly some indications that this is the case. To begin with, the conducted research showed that a larger number of citizens was planning to spend their vacations in Serbia, and that about half of them wanted to use vouchers. This certainly shows that the measure of promoting domestic tourism is successful, but also that we should think in the direction of increasing the number of vouchers or introducing new similar measures, since the existing vouchers are limited to certain categories of people. However, what is obvious is that the response in society for this type of action is great. This is certainly an encouraging fact. What is worrying is whether such a trend will continue even when the crisis subsides, and free travel is again an option. On the other hand, a legitimate question arises as to where citizens will travel and how familiar they are with Serbian tourist destinations. What the survey showed is that most opt for already well-known destinations, such as Kopaonik and Zlatibor, which raises a significant question: are these the best destinations or are they just the most popular? The fact is that we must work on marketing of numerous destinations that have a huge tourist potential, and which a large number of citizens do not even know about.

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