

Matei, Daniela; Chiriță, Viorel

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RURAL TOURISM IN BUKOVINA IN THE FACE OF SARS-COV-2 PANDEMIC

DANIELA MATEI¹, VIOREL CHIRIȚĂ²

Abstract: *Tourism is one of the most vulnerable industries when facing a global threat of sanitary, economic, or military considerations. From an economic activity comprising nearly 3% of the country's GDP, the tourism has dropped to a flat zero in Romania. For three months, specifically March – May 2020, almost 97% of the accommodation units were closed, and only those hosting medical staff or quarantined persons were open during this period. The present study runs an analysis on the tourism in Bukovina during March-July 2020 and employs both quantitative and qualitative methods. The results have highlighted that tourists were partial to a certain type of accommodation units, namely agritourist and tourist guesthouses in Bukovina. Another visible fact is the predilection for remote places with good accessibility located along the main road axes to Bukovina (stopovers, tourist cottages, chalets, and campsites).*

Keywords: *Tourism, Pandemic, SARS-CoV-2, Resilience, Bukovina.*

JEL classification: *Q26, Q54, Q56, Z32*

INTRODUCTION

The literature review emphasizes the high level of complexity of the current crisis triggered by the new coronavirus pandemic (Zenker, Kock, 2020). There is talk about a natural disaster affecting a large part of the globe and generating instability of the interdependent sanitary, socio-political, or economic systems (Ritchie & Jiang, 2019). Even if we are still far away from understanding the way in which these crises influence each other (Pennington-Grey, 2018), there is a domain which registers the most critical response to the variables of the systems mentioned earlier, namely tourism. Tourism is one of the economic sectors which has been profoundly affected by the current SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, both in terms of offer and demand. As an interdependent industry, the present context of the global economy with high odds of recession, along with the geopolitical tensions, social and commercial pressures, as well as the yet uncertain status of the pandemic evolution coupled with the measures of security enforced by most countries (travel restrictions, closing borders, suspension of cultural events, activities of the commercial centres, accommodation units, restaurants, etc.) are all extra risks to be taken under consideration by the tourism industry (Muscalu, 2020, McCreary, Fatoric & Seekamp, 2018).

The analysis run covers the reference area of Bukovina region, the third tourist destination in Romania according to the number of accommodation places. The paper aims to show the impact of the pandemic upon the Bukovinian tourism, especially on its rural side. The starting point of this analysis is addressing the premise of a faster recovery of the tourist fluxes to the small accommodation units, particularly the units located in the deep rural areas benefiting from good access. Another analysis hypothesis presumes a more active involvement of the local administration in identifying some sources of resilience adjusted to the specificity of the tourist region, considering the confrontation with a real change of paradigm regarding the tourism business.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

To get an image as accurate as possible of the pandemic impact on the rural tourism of Bukovina, we have used a blend of methods, namely quantitative and qualitative methods complemented by the analysis of relevant studies for the current pandemic context of the national and international tourism. In the case of the quantitative analysis, the focus is placed on the

¹ Dr. Daniela Matei, established researcher (R3), “Gh. Zane” Institute of Economic and Social Research, Romanian Academy, Iași Branch, daniela_matei2004@yahoo.com

² Dr. Viorel Chiriță, associate professor, Ștefan cel Mare University of Suceava, Romania

systematization of data recorded by the National Institute of Statistics for the indicator *Arrivals of tourists at hosting facilities*, at the lowest possible level of aggregation (on localities) covering the period between March and July 2020, and also the same period of the 2018 and 2019, for comparison reasons. The qualitative method has been engaged for increasing the relevance of the analysis run in relation to the specificity of the Bukovinian rural tourism. The analysis relies on the results of the field research done by the authors themselves in June 2020, who used the techniques of direct interviews. All six phone interviews focused on the perspective of the questioned persons upon the tourist activities and evolution of tourism in Bukovina during and post-pandemic. Out of the persons interviewed, three were with the local public administration, two were owners of accommodation units, and one was a tourism agent. It was proceeded on the basis that the tourist phenomenon has reached a restart point where it is crucial to understand the private and institutional mechanisms which must be primed locally to create or increase the resilience of a key economic sector of Bukovina region.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

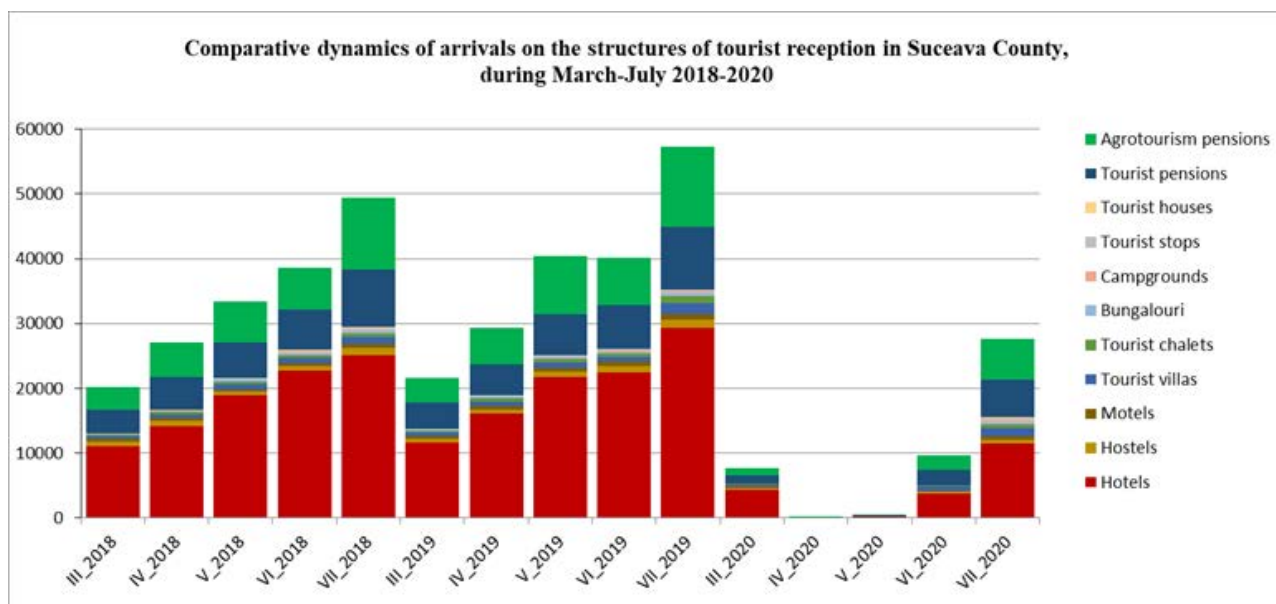
Several days after the new coronavirus outbreak was officially labelled a pandemic by WHO (World Health Organization), the state of emergency was enforced on the Romanian territory, which lasted 2 months (March 16 – May 14, 2020). Two weeks after enforcing the state of emergency, during March 1 and May 15, 2020, Suceava city and 8 of its neighbouring localities were under total quarantine (red zones) as a measure limiting the spread of SARS COV 2 virus. The initial premise of this research is based on the fact that this pandemic completely blocked the movement of people and radically modified their attitude towards human interaction, travel, and, generally, towards tourist phenomenon (Glowka & Zehrer, 2019). The changes induced by the sanitary circumstances compounded by the mass media and complemented by the uncertainty of a time horizon difficult to estimate, have generated shock waves for each player involved in the tourism industry. The Tourism of Suceava holds 59% of the accommodation units in the rural area, and, additionally, the category of agritourist guesthouses located in the urban area, which registers hosting units in the following towns (one in each town): Broșteni (12 accommodation places since 2017), Frasin (14 accommodation places), and Gura Humorului (8 accommodation places since 2017). As nearly 60% of the tourism is run in rural areas, we can state that Suceava county is a travel destination predominated by rural tourism (PATJ Suceava, Faza II-a, 2019).

The present study has been built so it could employ two types of approaches (Hammersley et al., 2008). The data used belong to these two categories: analysis of the indicator *Tourists' arrivals at accommodation units* has employed quantitative data — which are relatively easy to process and interpret (observing trends in the evolution of certain tourist variables for a larger number of data) — and qualitative data supplied by the questions with free answers included in the interviews. For fluency reasons, we have firstly approached the quantitative analysis. By corroborating the number of arrivals registered in all the accommodation units (AU aka STP) from Suceava county (which largely overlaps the tourist region of Bukovina), it can be noticed that they can be correlated with the sanitary measures taken all over the country. Firstly, the month of March, although is not a period of high tourist season for Bukovina, has only registered the arrivals in the first half of the month since that the state of emergency was decreed on the 16th of April. The decreased number of arrivals is shown in Figure 1, and made by comparing March, April, May, and July in 2018, 2019, and 2020.

It should be mentioned that, during the state of emergency, the accommodation units were not suspended; however, they were severely affected by the travel restrictions enforced during this period. Thus, they could offer accommodation services, if not for tourist purposes, for reasons such as business trips, maintenance, etc. Furthermore, this is the reason for which we have introduced in the analysis the number of arrivals at urban locations, which along with the rural ones, highlight the number of quarantined persons and medical staff accommodated by hosting units. Additionally, the month of April renders the particular dynamics of the urban environment (Tables 1,2) and rural

space as well. All the relaxation stages of the sanitary conditions have a counterpart in the economic dynamics of tourists' arrivals. After 1st of June, most restrictions were lifted, such as movement of people outside the locality, resumption of the international railway and road transport, and opening of outdoor terraces.

Figure 1



Source: authors processing by tempo online site

Resuming the balneotherapy activities, reopening the gyms and outdoor pools, restarting the activity of the gambling operators have translated into an instant increase of the number of tourists in the resorts of Bukovina. The increase of 7 times the number of arrivals in July 2020 registered in the hotels of Vatra Dornei, for example, is correlated with the opening of Bradul and Călimani hotels, and with resuming the balneotherapy activities from the 10th of July.

Table 1 Arrivals of tourists in hotels in the urban area of Suceava county

The city	March 2020	April 2020	May 2020	June 2020	July 2020	August 2020
Suceava	1651	20	80	1807	4845	7679
Vatra Dornei	532	:	:	283	2075	3949
Gura Humorului	682	:	30	524	1400	3935
Câmpulung Moldovenesc	193	:	:	137	512	1274
Fălticeni	194	:	:	183	421	805
Rădăuți	98	:	:	48	90	225
Siret	30	:	:	30	50	165

Source: National Institute of Statistics

In the case of the tourist guesthouses, the most important figures, which show a recovery of the tourist activity, record three particular situations: a) small isolated guesthouses (from Dornelor Basin, Dorna Arini, Dorna Candreni, Pojorâta, Vatra Moldoviței, Șaru Dornei, including Vatra Dornei resort); b) accommodation units located on the main road axes or nearby major tourist attractions, such as: Putna, Sadova, Mănăstirea Humorului, Pojorâta, Gura Humorului, and Câmpulung Moldovenesc); c) guesthouses from resorts, nearby resorts or located in the periurban area of the municipalities (Cacica, Șcheia).

Table 2 Arrivals of tourists in tourist and agritourism guesthouses in the urban area of Suceava county

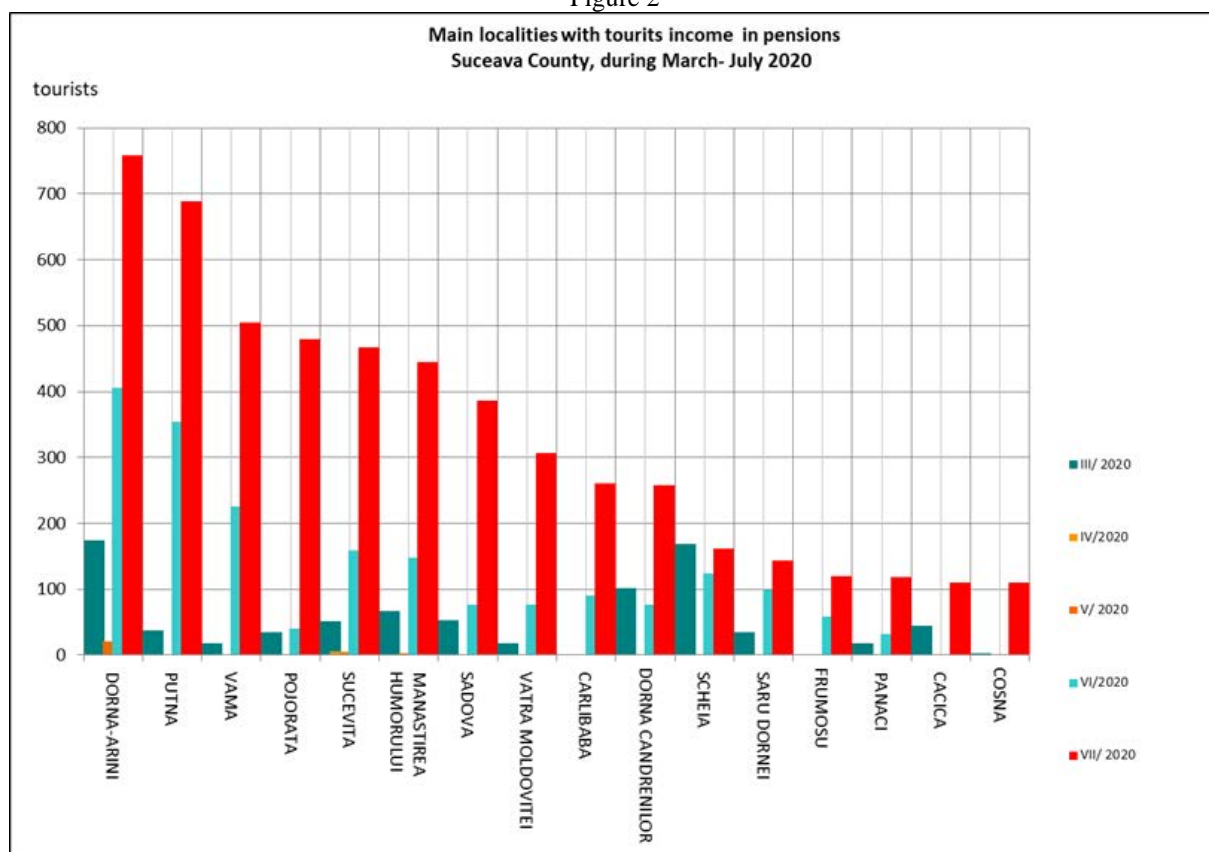
The city	Martie 2020	Aprilie 2020	Mai 2020	Iunie 2020	Iulie 2020	August 2020
Suceava	243	:	:	258	378	482
Vatra Dornei	216	25	31	409	1542	2573
Gura Humorului	671	2	47	1178	2674	5046

Câmpulung Moldovenesc	50	12	13	175	459	962
Fălticeni	80	:	54	138	163	204
Rădăuți	33	:	:	29	57	95
Siret	10	:	:	70	212	240
Frasin	:	:	:	32	336	432
Broșteni	10	:	:	22	64	152
Solca	6	:	:	:	23	66

Source: National Institute of Statistics

In the rural area, the tourist activity has taken a turn for the better since July 2020, especially for the small accommodation units (tourist and agritourist guesthouses) located in relatively isolated regions (Figure 2). Considering the emphasis on the special sanitary conditions imposed by this pandemic, the highest influx of tourists occurred in the months of June and July, at the relatively remote guesthouses, due to, most likely, a regular clientele (Pojorâta increased 10 ten times the number of arrivals during June and July, Sadova increased 5 times, and Vatra Moldoviței increased 4 times), which, in August this year, led to a level of tourists 'arrivals recorded in July 2018. The urban-rural analysis has highlighted that the recovery is made at a faster pace in the case of the small guesthouses with fewer accommodation places, regardless of their location (urban or rural), yet correlated with the isolation degree of their position.

Figure 2



Source: authors processing by tempo online site

Although the number of arrivals per total region shows a recovery (in June, July, and August 2020) which is about the level of June 2018 (statistically, 2018 was a less successful year for the tourism industry than 2019), we have identified several types of accommodation units which surpassed the level of the previous years:

1. Agritourist guesthouses located in some mountain localities, namely Berchișești, Breaza, Brodina (registering an increase of 3 times the number of arrivals compared to the same period of the previous year), Cârlibaba (registering an increase of 3 times and a half) or Ciocănești, Sucevița, Vama and Putna (they doubled the arrivals by comparison to 2019). These communities

have overtaken some traditional tourist localities, such as Panaci, Frumosu or Șaru Dornei. The analysis proves that there is a tourist reception basin, at least in the case of Putna and Sucevița, comprising all those who are familiar with the region and favour certain places in terms of service quality (and sanitary safety too) and active tourism.

2. The campsites from Vatra Dornei and Sucevița have registered a higher number of arrivals than it was recorded in the same month of 2019. Here we are talking about the tourists who have a high degree of independence in planning their holidays.

3. The tourist chalets from Crucea, Horodnic de Sus, and Sucevița have also registered a higher number of arrivals than it was recorded in previous years, while the chalet from Pârteștii de Jos has doubled the arrivals recorded in July and August.

The total analysis reveals that the tourism in the rural space has registered, even under the circumstances dictated by the state of alert, the most constant increases of the number of tourists. Most tourists prefer agritourist guesthouses, tourist villas, tourist cottages or chalets rented by groups of people. All the categories of the above-mentioned accommodation units provide good conditions under the circumstances of the current sanitary crisis, and their relatively small sizes allow a fast adjustment at low costs to the extra demands of sanitary materials for disinfecting and sanitizing purposes. Hotels have been most affected by the present sanitary crisis. Not only their size can present an impediment for an effective management of the extra costs, but they can barely function without restaurants (only outdoor terraces have been open). Moreover, the mandatory decrease of the rooms used, as well as the present collapse of the business tourism where many of these were active, or of those which operated in closed circuit accommodating mainly foreign tourists, are other negative factors.

To further the quantitative analysis, we have taken an interest in the manner in which the tourism entrepreneurs managed the period under investigation, and which were/ will be their most appropriate strategies for increasing the resilience of the tourist sector in Bukovina. For this purpose, several research questions have been formulated, each provided with the answers of the persons interviewed, along with our conclusions and comments.

Q1. How was affected, in terms of percentages, the profit of the tourism business during the states of emergency and alert?

The answer to this question varies depending on the size of the tourist location and its position in the tourist region. Thus, during March-June 2020, the small guesthouses had an occupancy degree of 30-40%, especially during the Eastern celebrations, while, in the case of hotels the variation ranges between 70% and 100% for the same period. Since May 2020, the entrepreneurs from Bukovina have relied on the weekend trips. All the persons interviewed have agreed with the fact that what is a real cause of concern is not missing out the Eastern celebration or the reduced number of tourists in the following period, but the cancellation of reservations till July, lack of new bookings for the summer, and cancellation of school summer camps which were off-season. Nevertheless, the interviews have highlighted a rather optimistic attitude of the managers of small accommodation units (both guesthouses and hotels) about the tourist season in 2020 as follows: *What it has been reserved from now on, it has not been cancelled anything. However, to be sure, from now on we will start calling our tourists who made reservations and see what they think of it. We have not cashed anything in advance. Maybe just holiday tickets. Those who came for Christmas, left their holiday tickets for Eastern or summer. We will have to make calls for confirmation. And if they cancelled for Eastern, they told us to keep the tickets for the summer or next year, because their validity has been prolonged. So, we are waiting for the time being, and so are our clients. (Valentina, C., tourism entrepreneur, Vatra Dornei resort)*

In financial terms, all tourist locations of Bukovina have been severely affected. The only revenue during April-May was generated by using the hotels/ guesthouses as quarantine accommodations. However, merely 9 units from Gura Humorului and another 9 from Vatra Dornei resorts benefited from this facility, covering a maximum of 500 accommodation places during the

state of emergency. Although the period of reference corresponds to the worsening of the sanitary crisis and some major travel restrictions, it is necessary to underline that it did not overlap the peak season of Bukovina, and, consequently, the losses were moderate by comparison to the profits registered in the same period from previous years. The financial situation has taken on a whole new meaning since June 2020, which has led to extra losses as follows:

1) the recoil of the tourist activity triggered by the tourists 'fear of coming to Bukovina after the 15th of June relaxation.

2) many units have failed to adjust to the new requirements related to social distancing (which imposes the use of fewer accommodation places out of the available ones), the exclusive use of places on terraces for locations which have restaurants, or adjusting the internal spaces and their constant sanitizing with extra costs which are hard to manage.

During the same period, another negative impact is the issue of cancellations for the peak season and 2020/2021 winter celebrations (Christmas, New Year's Eve) potentiated by the adverse weather conditions from June-July in Romania and uncertainty caused by the global pandemic. The most professional accommodation units were, are, and will be most affected, namely, those units holding contracts with corporations, foreign tourists, large, organized groups. They no longer can open their restaurants or bars inside the building, and the capacity of terraces is generally reduced. They have big losses, as the more they were involved in the tourist systems of booking, the bigger the loss. (Laurențiu, B. — manager of tourist agency)

The result of all these unknown data invites to caution when it comes to safely assess the profit evolution for the following period, especially in the case of tourist and agritourist guesthouses.

... Generally, the reservations are for smaller accommodation units and, especially, for those isolated. In this case, we are even talking about 80% booking, especially the remote ones. (Petru, tourist local councillor, Vatra Dornei resort)

Q2. Which are the strategies employed for increasing the resilience of the tourist sector?

Two strategies of resilience have been identified in the case of the Bukovinian tourist sector, depending on their applicability level, namely individual solutions (applied by managers/owners of hosting facilities) and regional or local solutions (at the level of Bukovina region).

Most tourist structures focused on survival strategies during the period under analysis. The interviews have tried to get more data about the behaviour during the states of emergency and alert, and post them, on medium-term.

Saving financial resources and reluctance to apply for bank loans.

Both guesthouses (tourist and agritourist) and hotels showed, during this period, a saving behaviour determined by the inability to predict the end of restrictions and return to normality.

We cut down expenses everywhere we could, and this was visible on the bills. We tried to be as thrifty as possible, use our own reserves for the bare necessities, we used what we had in the freezers or pantry, so we would keep our expenses to minimum. (Valentina, C., tourism entrepreneur, Vatra Dornei resort)

We did not apply for bank loans. We confined our tourist activities and focused on agriculture since we have a farm. We were not idle. We said that if one does not work, the other one will, and we have always kept them in tandem. (Mihaela, I., agritourist guesthouse, Neagra Șarului).

1. Communicating and keeping in touch with tourists.

Most reservations directed to tourist and agritourist guesthouses are made through personal channels of accommodation to which generally resort the same families or groups, year after year. Even if the cancellations from March-April were numerous, the owners/ managers kept in touch with their tourists by engaging into a bidirectional communication via social media and phone. A part of the tourists rescheduled their holidays after June 15, when the relaxation of restriction was

expected to happen. Mindful of the emphasis placed on sanitary safety, the guesthouses have wrapped their offers around the security of their locations and isolation of their places.

Most small guesthouses have their own clientele and speak directly to them. Thus, the owner can persuade his/ her clients to overcome their fears and go on holiday. Yes, I believe that here there is still some hope for normality. However, the strength of the Bukovinian tourism does not lie here. (Emil, manager of the Bukovina's Museum /National Museum of Bukovina)

We have kept in touch with our clients mostly by phone. They called us, we called them too. They called to inquire how were things here, if we opened and under which conditions, we called to check the reservations for the following period. (Valentina, tourism entrepreneur, Vatra Dornei resort)

The offer must start from the epidemiological safety. All packages to be sold from now on must start with the phrase "from an epidemiological point of view, the destination is safe, our guesthouse offers complete safety". (Emil, manager of the Bukovina's Museum /National Museum of Bukovina)

2. Re-dimensioning the tourist activity

Even if all tourist structures have been gravely affected by the sanitary crisis and travel restrictions imposed by the pandemic, many of them do not wish to confine their activities, but merely broaden their offer or even reorganize. In the case of hotels, there is a wider view shared by the managers about resizing the type of activity and redirecting towards investments in staff training. For instance, if we take into account that one of the highest costs is related to food preparing, a hotel manager suggests a Western model for serving meals in accordance with a tight schedule, between certain hours, and wishes to invest in the training of the kitchen staff to be able to come up with new and diverse menu.

All the offers like all inclusive or half-board have disappeared. Instead, it has appeared catering and room-service. (Petru A., tourism local councillor, Vatra Dornei resort)

I will not confine my activities, I will reorganize. Let me tell you what I have in mind: all the countries, that are famous for their tourism, share a common praxis which I am thinking of putting into practice: I will reduce the meal programme at certain hours of the day, because I think that only in Romania one can enter and have a meal at any hour of the day. This way we will be more effective without any real confinement. Because, after all, in a hotel, the kitchen carries the most part of expenses. And, under these circumstances, with only three courses and a tight schedule, people will self-discipline in time and, definitely, the expenses will look differently. (Valentina, tourism entrepreneur, Vatra Dornei resort)

Solutions are sought for hotels and guesthouses with a larger number of accommodation places, such as checking in tourists according to a chess scheme, so after they check out, their rooms should stay unoccupied for at least 48 hours for safety and sanitizing reasons.

Q3. How is the tourist activity supported by the central administration?

One of the aspects we have taken a special interest in was the viewpoint of small entrepreneurs about the utility of the protection measures and the support given to the entrepreneurs and population promoted by the central/ governmental administration. If all the categories of persons interviewed agree that, in sanitary terms, all the necessary measures were taken quite quickly, regarding the financial support, the answers were far more nuanced. Thus, the small entrepreneurs consider that the only real help received from the government was the possibility of starting technical unemployment of the tourism workers, while the facilities for accessing loans (granted through emergency ordinance OUG 29/2020 which stipulates, among others, the implementation of a multiannual programme for supporting SMEs by ensuring certain loans and interest subsidies for these grants) are difficult to access and also risky on long term. The same ordinance specifies the possibility of suspending the utilities payment. However, this provision did not apply as the big utility companies accepted a deferral period of no more than 1 month for utilities payment. In addition to these measures adopted nationwide, some local administrations

stepped in with their own support packages for entrepreneurs. Therefore, if in the case of Vatra Dornei resort it was implemented a 50% reduction of local taxes and duties, the townhall of Gura Humorului supported the local economic activities not only by cutting down taxes and duties, but by cancelling the penalties for those indebted from previous years, lowering rents for the spaces leased by townhall, annulment of leasing for several parking lots on public domain, and the 25% reduction of taxes in the local farmers 'market.

The biggest threat to tourism is, now, the fiscal and legislative instability. Mihaela states the following: *We know nothing of the conditions under which we will be able to carry on our activity and, especially, since when can we start making certain reservations... We do not expect much from anyone. We are used to doing it ourselves ... I am certain that things will come back to the way they were... I do not know what is going to happen in autumn and what can we expect once the cold comes back again. Who knows how things will go? We cannot make long-term projects because it is not possible. That's it!* (Mihaela, I., agritourist guesthouse, Neagra Șarului).

Speaking of agritourist guesthouses, the optimistic attitude pairs well with the mutual supportive activities of the farm: *I believe that the small-scale tourism will be fine, I mean we hope that the mountain agritourism is going to work here too, at least in this area.* (Mihaela, I., agritourist guesthouse, Neagra Șarului).

CONCLUSIONS

In the case of most tourists, knowing the risks taken by travelling to a certain tourist region comes mainly from information picked from social media and mass media channels. From this viewpoint, both tourism managers and managers of local administration admit that they are facing two main insecurities about Bukovina as tourist destination. The former is generated by the status "awarded" to Suceava county, namely Lombardy of Romania, by mass media in March-April 2020. The latter is related to the fact that the decision taken by the county council do not reflect the will and requests of the tourism operators.

Far from regarding the summer season of Bukovina as a failure, we consider that the post-pandemic strategies of tourist development are shadowed by uncertainty. First, it concerns a decisional incoherence about tourism which is visible nationwide, complemented by the difficulty of understanding the local mechanisms that make it run. Locally, the situation is nuanced by the different capacity of administrations for taking over a part of the central administration's attributes and come up with solutions for concrete issues of strategic management. This pandemic has actually awakened numbed social instincts and brought back the necessity of joint action in the face of a problem which affects severely a major resource on which everybody's well-being depends, namely tourism. For this purpose, the small entrepreneurs, and representatives of the public administration (local and county) rely on integrative strategies of tourist development, such as Bukovina Tourist Resort. For now, they do not include scenarios of a crisis comparable to the current one (and which displays the signs of a real economic hiatus), instead, they bet on growing the degree of tourism appeal, a constant marketing, expanding the stays, developing novel forms of tourism in certain areas or on the festival tourism. At the moment, it is clear that the largest accommodation units were the most affected. Therefore, the most likely strategy for the following period will aim at winning back their place in the market through a series of actions meant to win again the interest of the foreign or corporate tourists.

The conclusion of the analysis run here suggests two types of scenarios for restoring the prior- pandemic status of the Bukovinian tourism. The optimistic scenario is based on the need of returning to an unconstrained lifestyle which could compensate psychologically for the months of social and travel restrictions. Regarding this scenario, we can estimate that coming back to the prior-pandemic parameters will take up to one year since the state of emergency was ended. However, the central administration needs to come up with clear rules on sanitary and legislative issues, and activate forms of supporting the tourism entrepreneurs, regardless of their business size. The pessimistic scenario takes into consideration the extension of the pandemic duration over a

period we cannot possibly predict. Each month that passes by brings up more economic insecurities, and affects the recovery capacity of the tourist sector, as well as its resilience on medium and long-term. Under these grey perspectives, tourism will finally breathe again in two years after the pandemic comes to an end. In both scenarios, tourism will be mainly supported through an active type of tourism, such as agritourism, hikes, ecotourism, cyclotourism, hipotourism, which boost the natural potential of Bukovina region.

Tackling the relaunching of tourism in Bukovina is, we believe, a bold strategy and brave solution for rebuilding the trust of tourists and rediscovering its destinations. At least, for some time, the home tourism will be on the preference list of the Romanians, favouring short distance travelling, most likely in their home region. The key criteria for choosing a holiday destination this year will be primarily the following: sanitary safety, uncrowded places, quality, sustainability, and ecotourism. The cottages and apartments will be on the top of the list, as well as smaller boarding houses and hotels. In this respect, Bukovina has all the ideal options of a such a holiday, despite being flagged by the quarantine shadow cast upon the metropolitan area of Suceava.

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