

# THE TRENDS OF TOURISM SECTOR AFTER COVID-19 PERIOD: A STUDY OF STRATEGY AND IMPLICATIONS

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## Abstract

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In recent years, international economic growth has been slow. The influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on the world's economies must be considered. COVID-19 is not only a risk to the public health sector, but it is also a serious threat to the entire global economy. The paper examines the diversification of tourism industry trends and volumes as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the paper presents the tourism industry's contribution to economic development, as well as its levels and trends before, during, and after the period of COVID-19 pandemic, along with predictions for the future transformation of tourism trends (International Monetary Fund [IMF], 2021; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2022). The main contribution of this paper to the existing literature is the addition of new and more relevant views about COVID-19 and the tourism sector around the world by a comparative bibliographic review with a presentation of data on tourism and economic development and how COVID-19 affected the sector, the new normality of tourism, in order that tourism is a complex and very dynamic factor in the economic cycle of each country, at the same time to its influence on the social stability of each country as a whole.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Tourism, Global Economy

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, global economic growth has slowed down because of various forms of crises. One of the factors negatively affecting the international economy is the COVID-19 pandemic. This pandemic was a catastrophic event that affected the entire human population worldwide, causing unprecedented adverse effects such as a slowdown in economic growth, a decline in trade and gross domestic product (GDP) rates, and an increase in the unemployment rate (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020a; Khan et al., 2021). One sector that was directly and severely affected is tourism. The impact of COVID-19 on tourism industry flows and services has been unprecedented. The tourism industry is one of the drivers of economic growth, accounting for more than 10% of

GDP worldwide, including the direct and indirect services of this industry (International Monetary Fund [IMF], 2021). The tourism sector is directly linked to other sectors of the economy such as transport accommodation and food services, creating a critical amount of new jobs across various age groups, and therefore inducing many people to migrate in order to find work in tourism services in advanced economies (IMF, 2021). It is worth mentioning that circa 1950 the number of foreign travellers stood at about 25 million, while by 2019 the corresponding number had reached almost 1.5 billion, with the scope of tourism services having gained a huge reach (Behsudi, 2020). According to Borma (2015), arrivals in Europe incessantly rose from 261.1 million in 1990 to 563.4 million in 2013, with the Old Continent being the largest tourist destination until recently.

The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic led to unprecedented measures such as quarantines, intermittent lockdowns, and other social distancing measures (Efthimiou, 2024). As a rule, multinational and large-scale enterprises operating around the world take into account the risks that may arise from time to time, such as political, economic or financial (Charpin et al., 2020; Yasuda & Kotabe, 2020). The global pandemic, however, is something that international businesses around the world had to deal with seriously and effectively because it was a severe blow to their normal flows (Shretta, 2020). The literature has shown particular interest in the influence that various external extreme events have on sectors of the economy and the tourism industry. Such events are weather phenomena, economic cycle downturns, earthquakes, and certain types of disease, it turns out that tourism is, by its very nature highly susceptible to various shocks, such as the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the 2003 SARS pandemic, the 2008 global economic recession, the 2015 MERS outbreak, and numerous geopolitical shocks that caused political instability (Okafor et al., 2022). A large number of studies have attempted to capture the effects of past pandemics (Barro et al., 2020). Tourism, was among the first industries to be deeply affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, as the measures for containing the pandemic led to an almost complete shutdown of tourism activities (OECD, 2020a). As the pandemic rapidly spread, governments were forced to take emergency measures, of imposing, among other things, restrictions on mobility and travel activities, with many countries totally shutting down their borders to outsiders (Aronica et al., 2022). The tourism sector is a key economic growth driver, and maintaining the attractiveness of the destinations was a major challenge for most governments. With the pandemic coming to an end, tourist flows have begun to approach pre-COVID-19 levels. A new normality has been established as new tourism habits are emerging.

This paper aims to review the literature on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on tourism trends and the way they have been shaped. The purpose of this paper is to present and analyse the effects of COVID-19 on the trends of the tourism sector.

The paper is tackling the gaps in the impacts of COVID-19 on tourism and the future transformation of the tourism industry. A comparative bibliographic review of the levels of tourism in different historical periods is presented, so that through this review it is easier for the reader to understand the effects of COVID-19 on tourism numbers. Also, through this process, the new contexts that are created regarding the transformation of the tourist industry and the changes in the behaviour of tourists are presented.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 examines the pertinent literature concerning tourism and the economy and COVID-19 effects. Section 3 introduces the methods utilized to undertake empirical research on the questions of the study. Section 4 discusses the empirical findings. Section 5 concludes with a discussion of the study's findings, limitations, and suggestions for further research.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Tourism and economic development

Tourism is a key driver as regards growth and the creation of economy-wide positive economies of scale. It is instrumental to job creation, economic growth, and the improvement of profitability prospects, also being a growing source of income (Okafor et al., 2022; Khalid et al., 2022). Among other interpretations, the UN Tourism (formerly UN World Tourism Organisation) provides the following definition of this sector: "Tourism is a social, cultural and economic phenomenon which entails the movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment for personal or business/professional purposes. These people are called visitors (which may be either tourists or excursionists; residents or non-residents) and tourism has to do with their activities, some of which involve tourism expenditure" (UN Tourism, 2008, para. 1). Tourism is conducive to the creation of positive prospects as regards the reduction of unemployment, as well as to cultural and socio-economic progress (McCabe & Qiao, 2020). That said, this job creation is usually associated with working conditions characterised by a certain degree of informality and low skill intensity, mainly because these jobs are of a seasonal nature and exhibit a low degree of rigour (IMF, 2021).

In various regions around the world that are characterised as touristic, there is a significant number of low-wage workers in the industry, consisting of people who immigrate from other countries or even from rural areas within the same country to find such employment. It is estimated that the percentage of non-local workers in the sector in Europe approaches 16% and in the US — 20% (IMF, 2021). According to the OECD (2020c), tourism in addition to the number of jobs also offers variety regarding employment, as it offers various types of work. This has the effect of stimulating local communities, creating links with several industries and offering job opportunities to various groups such as students, unskilled migrants, and older workers as well as in remote and less popular, rural and economically fragile areas (Jones & Comfort, 2020). Moreover, we can see that in areas where tourism represents a large part of the economy and jobs, the economic gap between the two sexes is evident in relation to the rest of the economy, especially in low-income areas. In contrast to the existence of large entities in the given industry, especially in the accommodation and airline categories, in the developing regions, the majority consists of small and medium-sized entities, usually single- or family-owned, especially in the restaurant, accommodation, and tour categories (IMF, 2021).

Tourism services, with their related travel flows, constitute the largest constantly growing and most multi-sectoral type of service worldwide, contributing to GDP growth and the improvement of economic conditions in host countries (Roman et al., 2022). In recent research, it was found that in 2023 the services of this sector represented about 9.1% of GDP worldwide, up by 23.2% compared to 2022 and down by 4.1% compared to 2019. Also, the same survey shows that jobs increased by 9.1% compared to 2022, which corresponds to 27 million new jobs,

were reduced by 1.4% compared to 2019. Also, reference is made to the amounts of expenditure related to domestic tourist flows, which rose by 18.1% in 2023, and were higher than in 2019, while the amounts of expenditure related to international tourist flows also increased by 33.1% in 2023, albeit were 14.4% lower than in 2019 (World Travel and Tourism Council [WTTC], 2024). Tourism activity exists at different levels in all countries and depends on geographical location, natural resources and attractions as well as the political situation at any given time. The tourism industry generates capital inflows, leads to the creation of innovative workplaces, and is a driver for the creation of new businesses in sectors as diverse as catering, gastronomy, infrastructure, and construction. This implies that local societies which attract tourists may enjoy a rise in incomes (Roman et al., 2022). The tourism industry is a multi-level sector of the economic cycle but also a very dynamic social and cultural phenomenon (Li et al., 2017; Kumudumali, 2020). The tourism industry is complementary to other sectors of the economy such as sports, transport, culture, food and beverages (Gamage et al., 2017; WTTC, 2017), while it is a form of industry which has its own characteristics, which includes the perishability of the product, its intangible nature, its heterogeneity and its uniqueness (Haq et al., 2014; Löke et al., 2018). The high position of tourism in the economic pyramid contributes to it being the industry with the highest growth rates, contributing to the creation of high levels of foreign exchange and improving the countries' trade balance (Manzoor et al., 2019; Wondirad et al., 2021). Almost half a century ago, the tourism sector, in its early stages, was a key factor in alleviating disparities between regions and locations across countries, being a driver of regional development, with industry participants highlighting its decisive contribution (Sharpley & Telfer, 2002; Sharma, 2004; Moscardo, 2008). Europe is the part of the world in which this sector has the highest levels of influence on the economy, improving economic indicators and the well-being of citizens. This particular area accounts for 50% of tourist flows worldwide and 48% of all outgoing tourist activities (Naslund et al., 2016; Boluk et al., 2019). It is acknowledged that the tourism sector, despite being the most dynamic sector of the economic cycle in terms of growth prospects, is at the same time a vulnerable sector and exposed to various forms of crises (Ma et al., 2020).

## 2.2. COVID-19 hits tourism

The COVID-19 pandemic that broke out in China in late 2019, put all sectors of the global economy at risk (OECD, 2020b; Khan et al., 2021). Given that tourism plays a key role and is a main determinant of the economic dynamics of countries, the shock caused by the pandemic was, among others, initially manifested in a slowing down of economic growth (Ritchie & Jiang, 2019). The tourism industry could not, of course, escape the impact of COVID-19, and as the pandemic broke out it was faced with mounting challenges and was consequently led into uncharted waters. Early estimates pointed to a 2.8% decline in total global GDP as a result of tourism-related global GDP losses, while the prospect of long-term disruption of tourism flows caused this

figure to worsen (OECD, 2020a). COVID-19 altered the conditions existing in all sectors of the economy such as financial services, trade, tourism and transport. Because of the uncertain climate, businesses followed tight economic policies, as profit levels were falling and people were forced to stay at home, with travel flows dwindling and in many cases being non-existent (Elliott, 2020). Although in the past the tourism industry has faced several forms of crises (SARS 2003, 2008 financial crisis, social crises, earthquakes), none have had the impact and influence of COVID-19 (Lee & Chen, 2021).

The UN Tourism (2020c) expressed the opinion that the aggressive manifestation of the pandemic has brought the world into a state of impasse, with tourism demand experiencing an unprecedented drop, endangering many jobs and, more generally, the level of sustainability and balanced development of recent years. Early figures put the number of jobs at risk at 1 million in Italy, 1.6 million in Germany, and 1.1 million in Russia<sup>1</sup>. Owing to its complexity and high labour intensity, the sector offers a large and varied volume of jobs, which was put at risk by the pandemic as many workers would have to come into contact with people. The travel and leisure services offered by this sector registered a 50% decrease, corresponding to approximately 2.86 trillion dollars. This happened because this type of service is one of the most vulnerable to COVID-19 (Wut et al., 2021). The new conditions of the pandemic shook tourism levels and created a new reality (Jelilov et al., 2020). This new reality represented not-so-good figures for tourist flows around the world, with insecurity and uncertainty prevailing (Gössling et al., 2021). Tourism industry services were disrupted, as they were down by 70% in the first eight months of the year, while the decrease reached 80% year-on-year in the eighth month, with measures for dealing with the disease, such as movement restrictions, certificate requirements and border closures, prevailing (IMF, 2021).

Moreover, the restrictive measures were compounded by a new type of behaviour that prevailed among travellers, who, affected by the pandemic, cancelled planned trips, reduced their searches regarding destinations, and chose to travel by private means, also choosing less popular restrictions or ways of recreation (Zhang et al., 2020; Li et al., 2021). Travellers' insistence on cancelling or postponing planned trips stemmed from the belief that avoiding virus infection was extremely difficult during a move (Mamirkulova et al., 2020). The tourism sector and travel flows were irreparably affected by the pandemic (Shretta, 2020). Tourism flows to international destinations recorded losses of 1.1 billion, while the overnight stay sector also fell by 40%, putting at risk a large number of jobs that approached 100 million (IMF, 2021). The numbers of losses and provisions are about 10 times higher than those of SARS (Shretta, 2020). Studies like the one by the World Bank (Dieppe et al., 2020) claim that growth rates show a decrease of around 6-15% during pandemics, while other studies, like that of Kozłowski et al. (2020), argue that the production slowdown may turn out to be more permanent than initially thought. At the same time, many studies evaluate the impact of the pandemic on the tourism industry from various perspectives such as

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1107432/travel-and-tourism-jobs-at-risk-europe-coronavirus/>

the broader perspective and response (Harchandani & Shome, 2021), the targeting of a specific factor such as specific geographic destinations (Payne et al., 2022) as well as digital transformation (Ketter & Avraham, 2021).

However, all studies conclude that the impact of the pandemic on tourism is irreversible (Sigala, 2020). The tourism sector is linked to several other sectors such as transport, health, construction, and communications and as a result, these sectors are negatively affected by negative trends in the tourism industry (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development [UNCTAD], 2020b). Estimates of the impact of COVID-19 put unemployment levels on the rise, at 24.7 million (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2020). These adverse conditions result in poor economic performance, which leads to weak demand for tourism activities, disruptions in the supply chain, reduced consumption and social isolation (Kumudumali, 2020).

Moreover, due to the travellers' lack of confidence in travel and the reduction in travel flows, workers in the sector who needed to migrate in order to offer their services were also affected, resulting in a reduction in the level of remittances sent to families in the countries of origin, thus, affecting these economies as well (IMF, 2021).

Many researchers carried out studies and indicator measurements to analyse the impact of COVID-19 and propose measures to deal with and improve conditions, reduce socio-economic impacts but also build a network of resilience, with the aim of helping the sector evolve and transform in order to prepare for future challenges similar to the ones it had been experiencing (Nhamo et al., 2020).

### 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

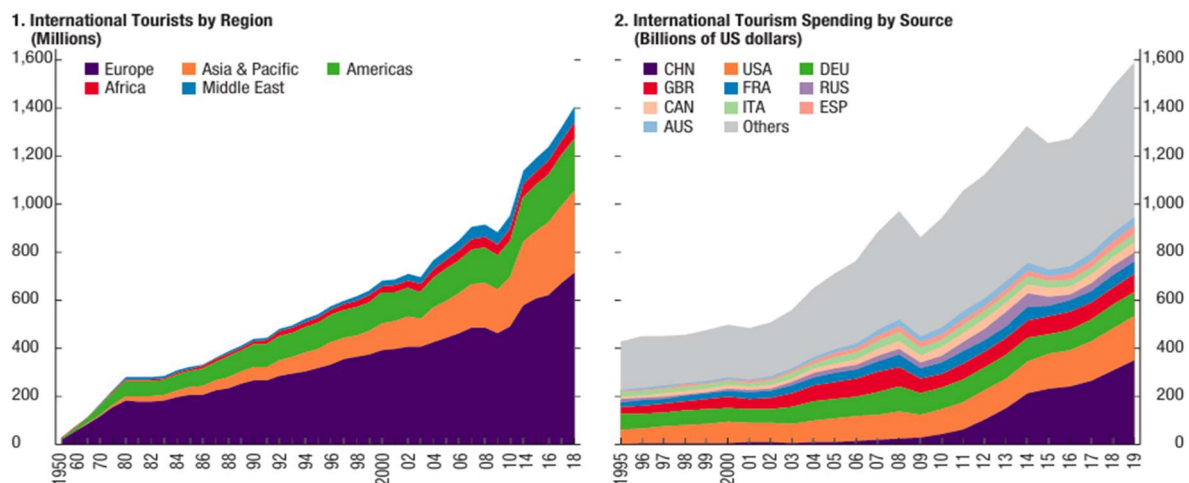
The paper examines the diversification of tourism industry trends and levels as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The clear research question is the resilience and adaptation of the tourism industry after the COVID-19 period which clarifies the scope of this review. The databases which are explored are from OECD, IMF, and tourism statistics in general.

Furthermore, the paper presents the tourism industry's contribution to economic development, as well as its levels and trends prior to, during, and after the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, along with predictions for the future transformation of tourism trends. A comparative bibliographic review of the levels of tourism in different historical periods is presented, so that through this review it is easier for the reader to understand the effects of COVID-19 on tourism numbers. Also, through this process, the new contexts that are created regarding the transformation of the tourist industry and the changes in the behaviour of tourists are presented.

#### 3.1. Tourism trends before COVID-19

Before the onset of the pandemic, the tourism industry was at a high point, with the prospects being auspicious and with positive signs (UNCTAD, 2020a). The tourism industry relies to a large extent on the use of energy for regional, economic and social development in order to achieve the desired goals, which means that an increase in the demand for tourist flows will also lead to an increase in energy levels (Abbas et al., 2021). This increase will lead to an increase in travel flows that will raise questions about the state of environmental sustainability (Usman et al., 2019). In the pre-pandemic era, services in this sector, combined with its direct and indirect effects, represented approximately 334 million jobs, corresponding to 10.5% of the total as well as 10.4% of global GDP or 10.3 trillion dollars (WTTC, 2019). A year earlier, in 2018, the region of Europe was at the top of the pyramid as regards international arrivals, accounting for 50% of arrivals worldwide (713 million), and with year-on-year growth trends of around 6% (Roman et al., 2022). In the decade before the outbreak of the pandemic, the tourism industry showed rapid growth because more and more countries contributed to the increase in tourist flows such as America and China, complementing the European countries. Tourism provided a large number of new jobs, which amounted to 14.4 million and added 782 billion euros to the economy of Europe (Abbas et al., 2021).

Figure 1. International tourism by source and destination



Source: IMF (2021, p. 4).

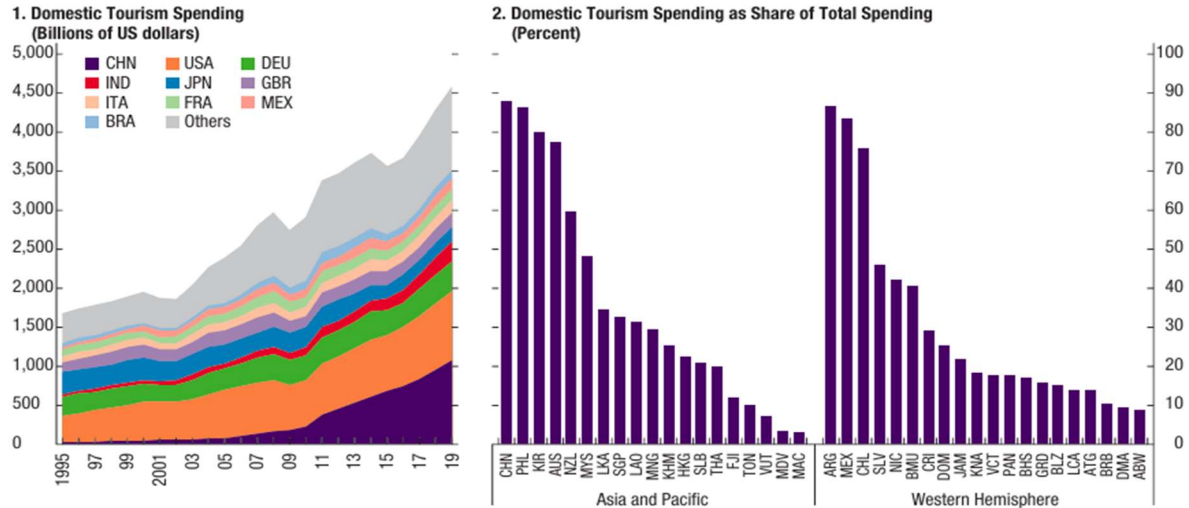
The upward trends of the economy and income indicators, combined with the downward trends of accommodation and transport cost indicators, led to

the rise in the number of tourist flows to more than one and a half billion at the end of 2019 as compared to the corresponding levels of 2000, which stood

at 680 million (see Figure 1). At the same time, international traveller expenditures during the same period amounted to 1.6 trillion dollars, mostly coming from the European region, followed by the Asian region. The same area kept the sceptre of

being the most visited region, with Asia on the rise. The most popular type of tourism is leisure travel, followed by travel with friends and family, and travel for business reasons (UN Tourism, 2019).

**Figure 2. Domestic tourism spending by country**

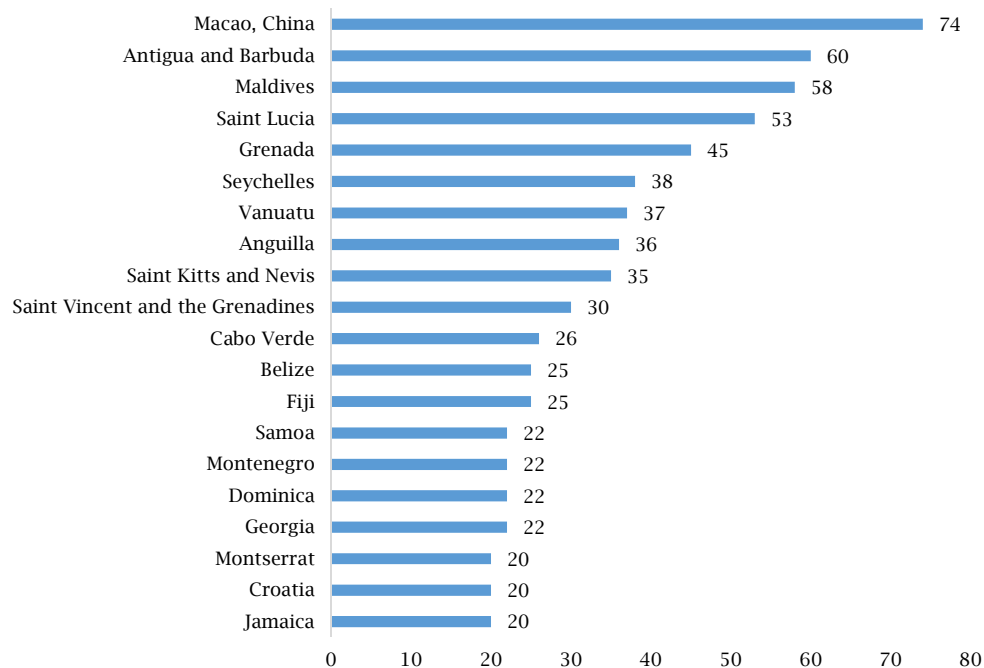


Source: IMF (2021, p. 4).

The domestic arm of the tourism industry occupies a larger part than the corresponding international tourist flows, accounting for approximately 70% of total expenditures in the sector (see Figure 2). Spending related to the sector within the traveller's country of residence, i.e., domestic spending, doubled in 2019 as compared to 2005, to almost 4.5 trillion dollars from 2.2 trillion, with China approaching more than 20% of this spending with the US, Germany, India, and Japan following (IMF, 2021).

Tourism plays an important role in many regions around the world and, according to WTTC (2023), it contributes 3.5% to global GDP, including direct as well as indirect services related to the tourism industry such as accommodation, restaurants, transport, infrastructure and any other service offered directly to travellers. For some countries, mainly smaller ones, the contribution of tourism to their GDP approaches even greater levels, of almost 10%, including capital investments, government expenditures made around this type of industry and supply chain indicators (IMF, 2021).

**Figure 3. Inbound tourism expenditure as a share of GDP, selected economies (2018)**



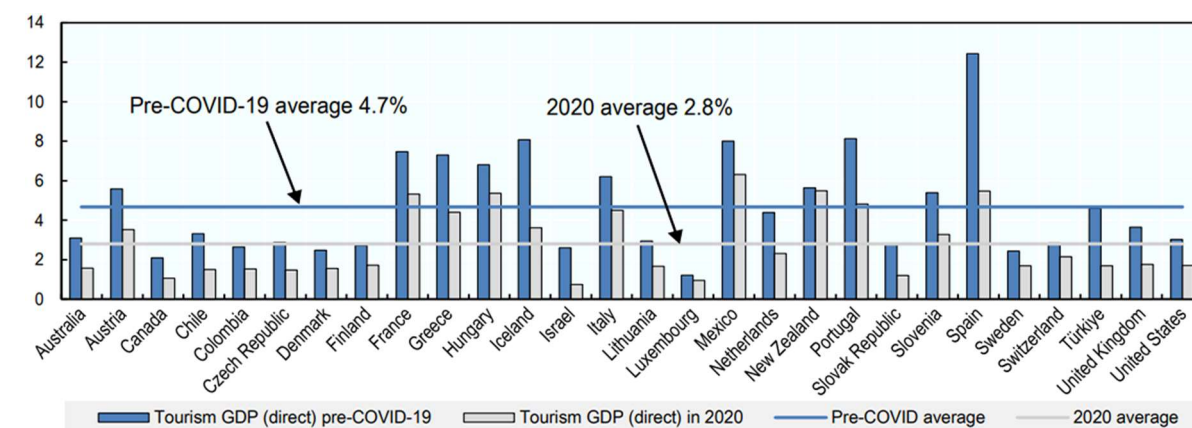
Source: UNCTAD (2020a, p. 8).



As mentioned above, tourism in smaller countries takes up a larger percentage of their GDP, and as a result, they are more dependent on this sector. The 20 countries with the highest levels of dependence on the specific sector are shown in Figure 3. This figure includes the countries with the highest levels of dependence, which have common features such as their small domestic

markets and low levels of exports. This results in these countries being more exposed to potential risks such as the COVID-19 pandemic with expected losses approaching high levels, without these countries having easy access to alternative sources of foreign exchange financing that are necessary both for exports as well as imports (UNCTAD, 2020a).

**Figure 4.** Direct contribution of tourism to selected OECD countries, pre-COVID-19 and 2020



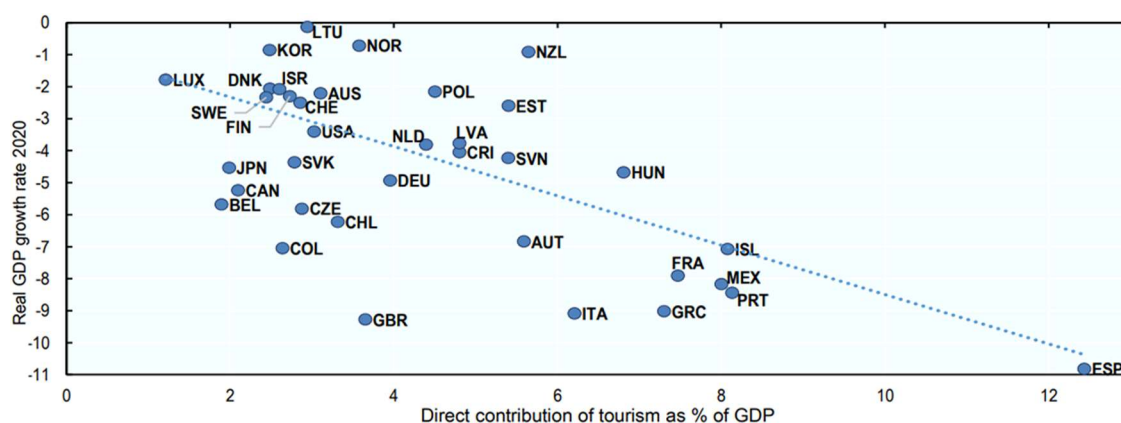
Note: As a percentage of GDP, 2019 (or the latest available year pre-COVID-19) and 2020.

Source: OECD (2022, p. 19).

As already mentioned, the tourism industry is a driver of the economic cycle and this is confirmed by trends and indicators in the pre-pandemic period. Before the emergence of COVID-19, tourism accounted for a significant percentage of GDP around the world as well as exports per territory, approaching 20.5% in OECD countries. In many countries, especially

those that have a greater dependence on this particular industry, the growth rate of the specific sector was higher than that of the national economy during the period before the pandemic, whereas after it appeared the contribution of the respective sector to the GDP of OECD countries was reduced by 1.9% (see Figure 4) (OECD, 2022).

**Figure 5.** Correlation between the direct contribution of tourism pre-COVID-19, and GDP growth in 2020, selected OECD countries



Source: OECD (2022, p. 20).

As mentioned above, the tourism sector is vulnerable to possible crises and any adverse effect on its contribution to economies around the world can cause negative consequences that will be difficult to outline. Regarding the countries for which the tourism sector largely determines the rate of growth, the comparison of GDP levels during the pre-pandemic period with post-pandemic levels shows negative results (see Figure 5), with examples of such cases of countries regarding the level before COVID-19 being Iceland with 8.1% and Portugal with 8.1% (OECD, 2022). The analysis of the OECD

captures more easily the differences between its member countries; in this sense, the contribution of indicators, pre-pandemic figures and the tourism industry is proved to be more important than any other factor or growth sector that is considered vulnerable and exposed to the onset of the pandemic or and any strict policy imposed by the countries (Rusticelli & Turner, 2021).

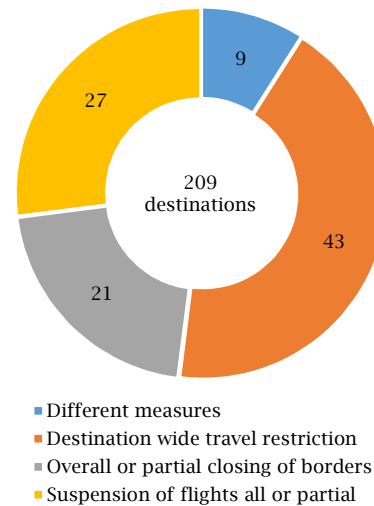
### 3.2. Tourism trends over the COVID-19 period

As is readily apparent after the outbreak of the COVID-19 disease, all sectors of the economy had to adapt. The tourism sector had to follow suit, as, during the pandemic, there was a marked change in its indicators, rates of growth, and contribution to the economic cycle of each country. With the presence of the disease, state policies moved in such a direction as to be able to mitigate the economic effects of the phenomenon. Political leadership introduced measures and actions to help tourism businesses and workers, but the need for additional aid was increasing, at a time when proactive fiscal measures, aimed at accommodations, workers, and airlines had started being implemented (IMF, 2021). It is widely acknowledged that during the first phase of COVID-19, there was a greater connection with domestic tourism activities (Gössling et al., 2021). The tourism industry was facing many challenges due to the disease. The measures to contain the pandemic, but also the pandemic itself, caused obstacles to travel around the world such as lockdowns, and recommendations to limit tourism activities, while weak cooperation between countries with different severity indicators led to significant losses of economies of scale (WTTC, 2023).

Travel restrictions related to border closures that affected travel flows to 209 destinations are grouped into four levels. Destinations that had sealed their borders stood at 43% (90 destinations),

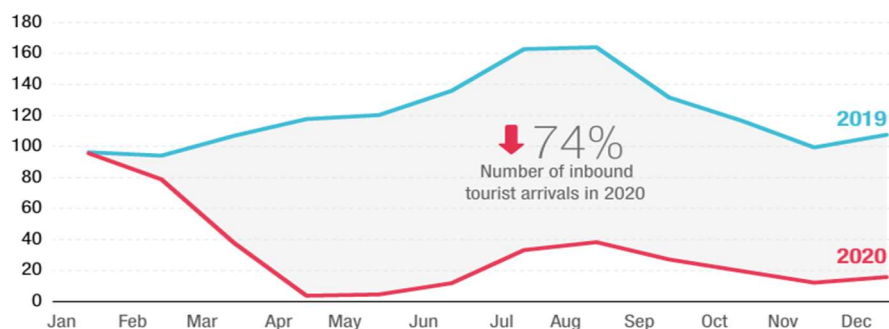
those that had sealed their borders to travellers coming from destinations that had experienced the pandemic stood at 21%, those that had sealed their borders to international tourist flows stood at 27% and finally those who had sealed their borders by means of different measures stood at 9% (see Figure 6) (UN Tourism, 2020a).

**Figure 6.** Category of travel restriction by destination with COVID-19 travel restrictions



Source: UN Tourism (2020a, p. 5).

**Figure 7.** International tourist arrivals (in thousands)

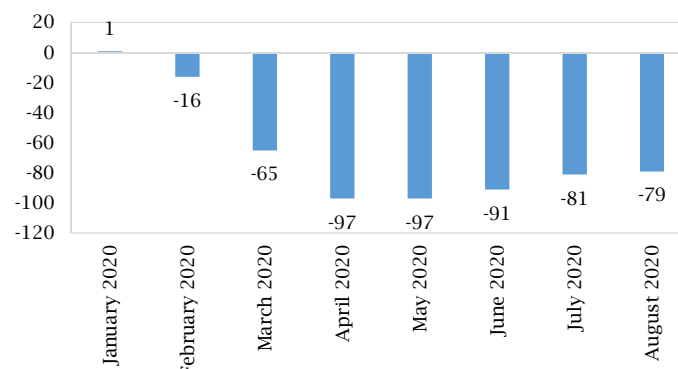


Source: UNCTAD (2021, p. 8).

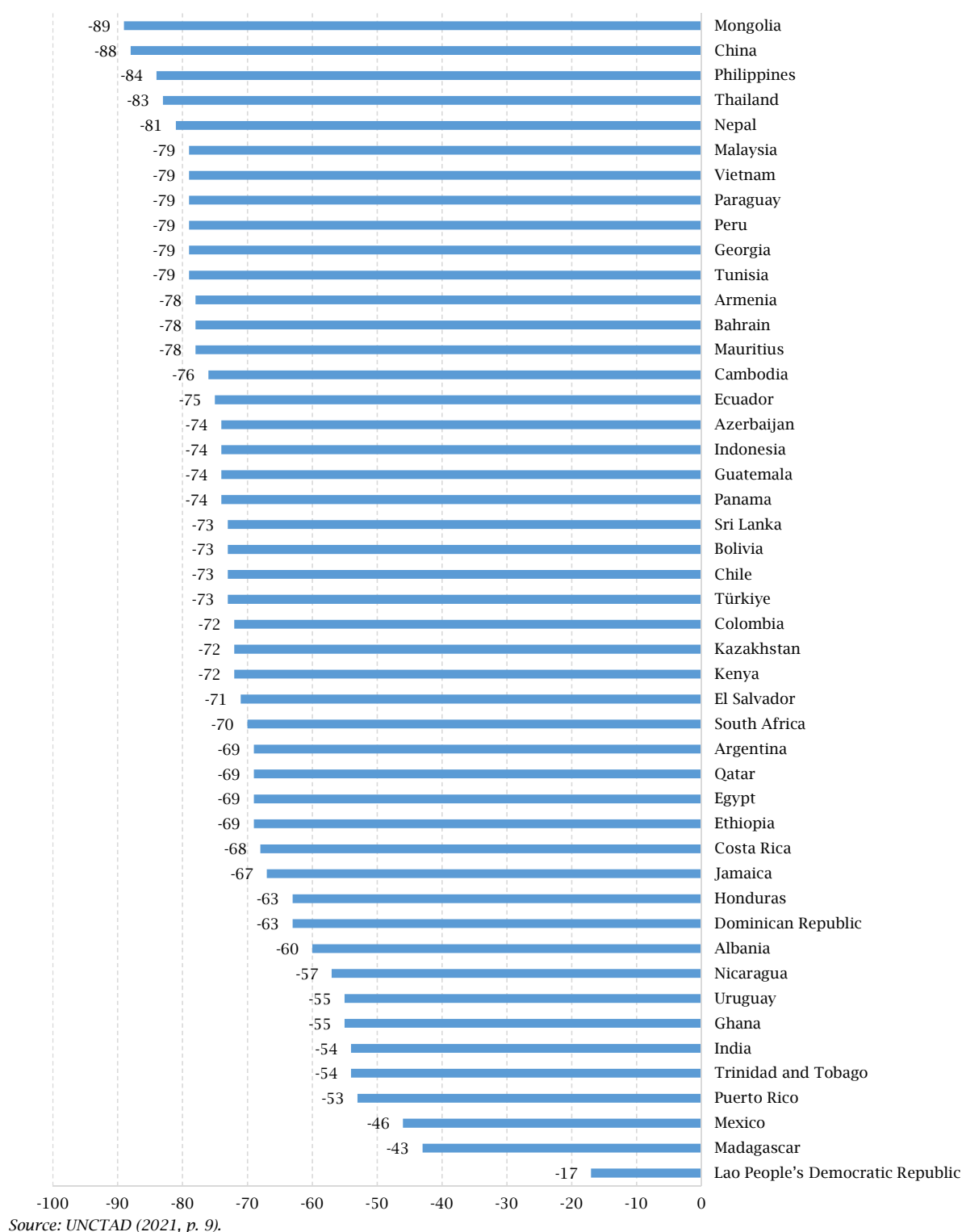
COVID-19 affected inbound travel arrivals around the world, which were down by 74% in the period from the beginning to the end of 2020, with a complete suspension of travel in the fourth and fifth months of the year this percentage

approaching 84%, if the two first months of the year are excluded, while the corresponding percentage for the eighth month approaches 80% (see Figures 7-8) (UNCTAD, 2021; IMF, 2021).

**Figure 8.** Year-to-date change in tourist arrivals (percentage)



Source: IMF (2021, p. 10).

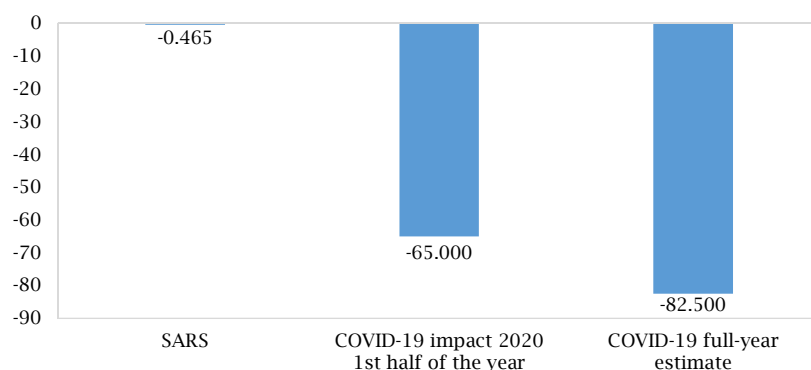
**Figure 9.** Reduction in tourist arrivals for selected developing countries in 2020 (percentage)

The regions whose inbound travel arrivals had seen the greatest reductions of 60%–80% are developing countries such as those in South and North-East Asia, Africa, and Oceania (see Figure 9) (UNCTAD, 2021).

According to the UN Tourism (2020b), total air transport capacity decreased by 38%, while the number of international tourists also fell by 40%. Accommodation and hotel bookings are another indicator of the impact of the pandemic on

the tourism industry, with the numbers of revenue in this category showing a significant decrease, which approached various levels around the world, and more specifically 61.7% in the European region and 67.8% in Asia, while worldwide occupancy shows a 50% drop (UN Tourism, 2020b). Although as reported by previous research (Zeng et al., 2005), the tourism industry has experienced the effects of some crises many times in the past, none has had the impact that COVID-19 has on it (see Figure 10).



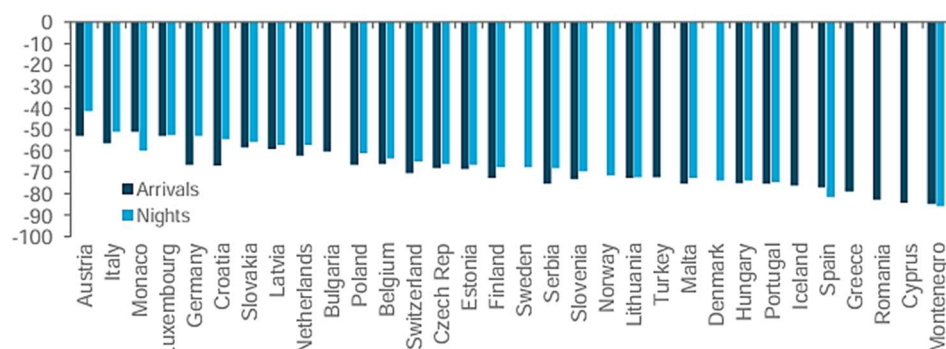
**Figure 10.** Impact of infectious diseases on tourism (percentage)

Source: IMF (2021, p. 19).

The complexity of the specific sector also differentiates the effects of the pandemic on the various sectors it includes, such as entertainment and leisure venues, which adjusted their capacity depending on the course of the pandemic (OECD, 2020a). The political choices of the states were in the same direction as they put tourism in a priority position in terms of support measures, such as benefits to boost the incomes of workers in the sector, advice to travellers regarding the observance of health protocols as well as reservation subsidy programmes related to tourism services (OECD, 2020a). The fluctuations of the pandemic made it more difficult to maintain

balance in the economic cycle, with indicators related to tourist flows constantly changing (Škare et al., 2021).

A desire for international tourist flows fell by 73% during the pandemic, and the desire for domestic travel also moved in the same direction, falling by 34%. The percentages for the corresponding European flows were also reduced by 69% and 35%, respectively. Although travel restrictions were lifted at times, demand recovered marginally and to levels well below pre-pandemic levels, which proved that travellers had not regained confidence in travel activities (see Figure 11) (European Travel Commission [ETC], 2021).

**Figure 11.** Foreign visits and overnights to select destinations

Note: 2020 year-to-date (date varies (January–December) by destination), % change year ago.  
Source: ETC (2021, p. 10).

Air travel, domestic and international, was quite affected, with consumers choosing other forms of transport (Gallego & Font, 2021). The preferences of tourists regarding the mode of transportation were directed towards private cars and short distances (Zenker & Kock, 2020). Travellers would need some time in order to return to their habits, with mistrust and uncertainty prevailing.

### 3.3. Tourism trends after COVID-19

The period after the end of COVID-19 is the trigger for a return to normality in the social and economic sectors, one of which is the tourism industry. Going back and forth to pre-COVID levels is a painstaking process. With the lifting of travel restrictions and the measures of COVID in general, businesses in the tourism industry began to restart their activities with the aim of contributing to the growth of

the economies as a whole as well as to social welfare and development (Jordan et al., 2021; OECD, 2022). With memories from the COVID-19 pandemic, which revealed the weaknesses of the sector, still fresh, the restart of the tourism industry would be combined with a shift towards more sustainable forms of tourism (Jones & Comfort, 2020). The tourism sector is characterised by energy consumption in large quantities, as a result of which it became necessary to ensure economic and environmental sustainability (Usman et al., 2019). With the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, new trends were observed regarding financial, inflationary and economic levels (Dabwor et al., 2020) but also with regard to energy consumption patterns and innovative sustainable actions (Usman et al., 2020). The domestic tourism sector was recovering faster than international tourism flows, as feelings of uncertainty still prevailed among travellers. The rate of recovery of

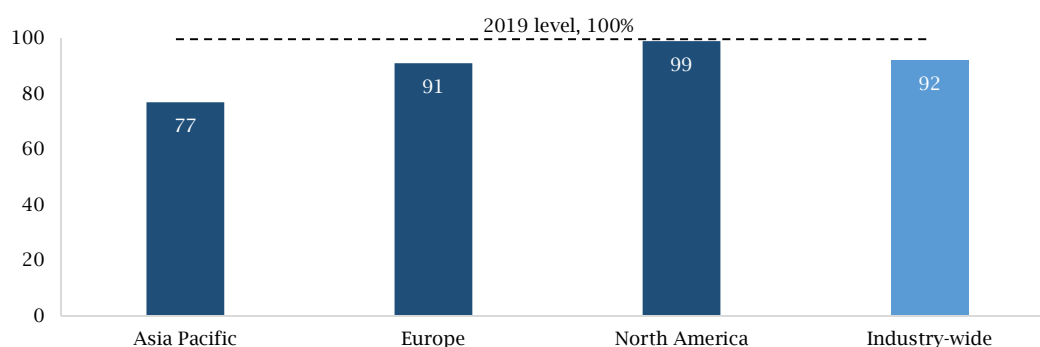
tourist flows would be more intense when combined with the recovery of international tourist flows (OECD, 2020a). Several destinations faced the pandemic as an opportunity to reconsider their model of tourism activity by promoting the green transition and sustainability of tourism as a method of recovery from the pandemic but also as a competitive advantage over other destinations.

At the same time, the reconstruction of the sector included the introduction of new innovations, the invention of new types of tourism and above all its digitisation. Digitisation refers to changes and adaptations to the new trends and

needs that have been created, with the creation of platforms and applications that contribute to the rise of virtual tourism and the promotion of destinations and natural resources (Gretzel et al., 2020).

In the first three months of recovery from the pandemic in 2023, Europe approached pre-COVID-19 levels by 95%, seemingly unaffected by inflationary trends, concerns about energy prices and the impact of the Russia-Ukraine war. In the same region, air ticket sales from the fifth to the ninth month also increased by 91% compared to pre-COVID-19 levels (see Figure 12) (ETC, 2023).

**Figure 12.** Recovery of summer air travel ticket sales (2023)



Source: ETC (2023, p. 7).

Despite high inflationary trends, travel flows appear unaffected and continue their upward trajectory relative to pre-COVID-19 levels. Inflationary trends in the last three months of 2023 show upward trends of 29% compared to the corresponding level of 2019, with all products and services related to the tourism industry sector showing increasing trends, such as international tourist flows (up by 49%),

tourist packages (47%), and accommodation (35%). However, the cost of international tourism flows is showing signs of de-escalation mainly because of the fluctuation of fuel costs. Overall, tourism demand is at risk, with most tourism businesses seeing their profit margins shrink due to inflation, which is forecast and planned to decrease in order to not thwart current recovery trends (see Figure 13) (ETC, 2024).

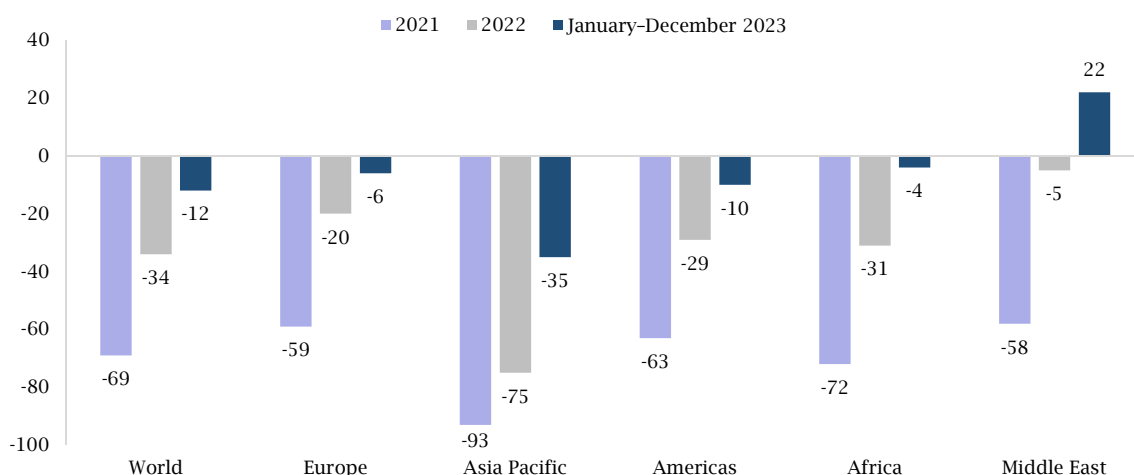
**Figure 13.** European Union's inflation for key tourism metrics: Harmonised index of consumer prices measure



Source: ETC (2024, p. 6).

International tourism flows in 2023 increased by 34% year-on-year, approaching 88% of pre-pandemic levels. More specifically, the Middle East is at the top of the recovery, surpassing pre-COVID-19 levels by 22%, Europe approached the corresponding

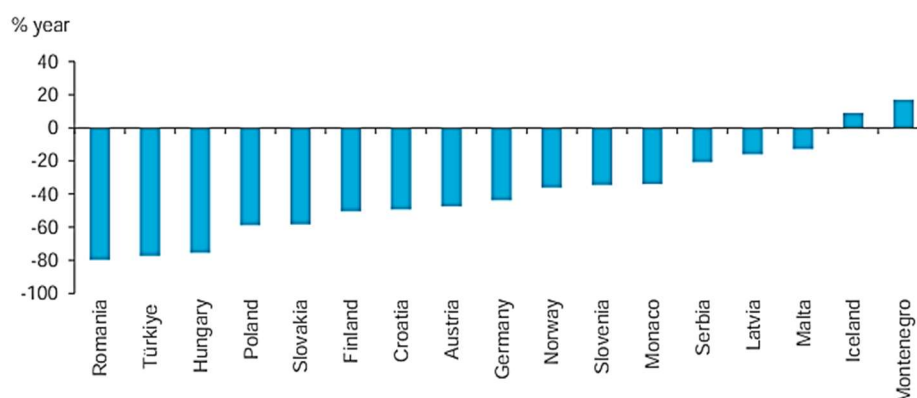
levels by 94%, and Africa and America by 96% and 90%, respectively (see Figure 14), with forecasts for international tourist flows around the world exceeding the corresponding pre-COVID-19 levels by 2% (UN Tourism, 2024).

**Figure 14.** International tourist arrivals (% change over 2019)

Source: UN Tourism (2024, p. 1).

The conflict in Israel plays a decisive role as regards confirming the positive forecasts for international tourist flows for 2024. Several scheduled bookings were cancelled because of the situation in

the region, causing downward trends in tourist flows mainly in Romania (79.7%), Turkey (77.3%), and Hungary (75.6%) resulting in uncertainty and several airlines offering package deals (Figure 15) (ETC, 2024).

**Figure 15.** Tourist arrivals from Israel to European destinations in Q4 2023

Source: ETC (2024, p. 7).

#### 4. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As the economy is moving into the post-COVID-19 era, its actors are redefining their characteristics and repositioning themselves as sectors, intending to ensure their growth and face any future challenges. The same applies to the tourism sector, which has historically made an important contribution to global economic development and cultural exchanges. This part of the paper presents and addresses the gap regarding tourism transformation as emerged through the comparative literature review. Tourism has entered a phase of transformation, the main features of which are digital integration, a redefinition of the sector's perspective towards its workforce and society, domestic tourism, but also a deeper commitment to sustainability. Sustainability scholars have been trying for many years to achieve a sustainable transition of tourist flows, and the emergence of the pandemic was an opportunity to redefine the consumption pattern of tourism services (Cohen, 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020). Several links in the tourism chain are investing in the sustainability of the sector as a result of ecological concerns and climate change (IMF, 2021).

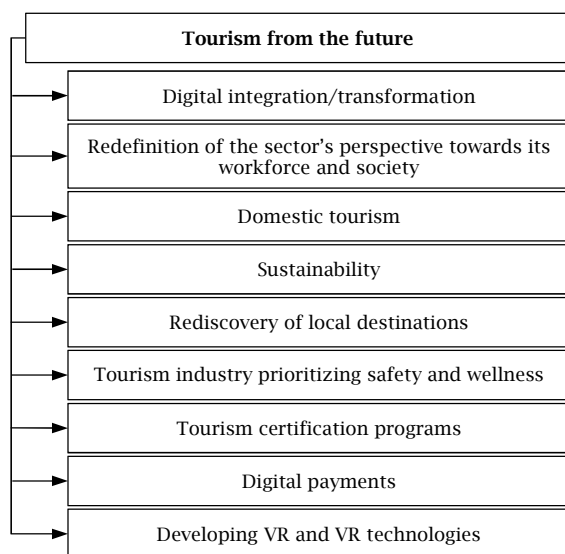
Alternative forms of tourism, due to sustainability, will become more attractive options with natural, local and regional areas showing upward trends in traveller choice (OECD, 2022). This outlook has accelerated the adoption of green practices in the industry, with hotels, resorts and tour operators increasingly investing in environmentally friendly technologies, such as solar energy and water recycling systems, and adopting policies aimed at minimising waste and reducing carbon emissions. In the same direction, travellers' attitudes about how they travel are likely to shift, where short-distance travel will see upward trends because of lower costs and pollution levels, which will have implications for various sectors such as accommodation, retail trade, and the transport and infrastructure network, and will cause fluctuations in jobs (Sigala, 2020; OECD, 2022). There is already a trend towards domestic tourism and the rediscovery of local destinations. Travellers have been rediscovering the cultural, natural and recreational assets of their countries, and re-learn to appreciate local experiences and destinations, thus supporting the rise of domestic tourism. The economic effect of this re-emergence of domestic tourism is set to be substantial, creating

jobs and leading to the stabilisation and growth of regional economies (UN Tourism, 2024). The emergence of a collective awareness of health and wellness has had a major effect on the course of the tourism industry in the post-COVID-19 era. This change sets a new standard for tourism offerings of the future, with the tourism industry prioritising safety and wellness. Traditional spas are not any more the only product wellness tourism has to offer, as it has expanded to various health-oriented offerings such as fitness retreats, nutrition programmes, and mental health retreats. Apart from attracting tourists who seek relaxation and rejuvenation, these packages are also designed serve people seeking to enhance their mental and physical health (UN Tourism, 2024). To address the complexity of health and environmental expectations, certification programmes are predicted to rise, playing a critical role in building traveller confidence and significantly influencing booking trends. Assessors predict that there will be variations in the workforce of the sector, with labour shortages making their appearance. People who used to work in the specific industry are turning to safer and more stable areas of work, while young people are reluctant to invest in their careers in the specific industry because of the insecurity of such work (Brozović & Saito, 2022). The most dynamic and interesting assessments of the future trends of the industry have to do with its increasingly digital transformation. The advancement of technology and the growing need for promotion and advertising necessitate the digitisation of the sector, which will change the way tourism services are provided and customers are served. Digital payments, online management of reservations through tourism online platforms, development of virtual reality (VR) and VR technologies, the combination of virtual tourism and gaming in video games, as well as hybrid tourism are set to see upward trends in products such as online tours combining virtual tours with product purchase (Skinner, 2020; Brozović & Saito, 2022). Apart from improving the tourism experience, these developments also make the industry more efficient and resilient against future disruptions.

## 5. CONCLUSION

As already mentioned, everyday life, as well as the economy and tourist flows were heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of changes in economic indicators, it has become even more imperative to stabilise the tourism industry and ensure its recovery. A review of the literature on worldwide tourism flows and the way they have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic shows that, based on the first confirmed indicators, travel intentions were adversely affected. In 2020, international tourist flows were down by 69% while domestic tourist flows also fell by 35% (ETC, 2021). In the same year, there were times when there were travel restrictions in 96% of the world (UN Tourism, 2020a), a quite high percentage especially if one considers that the tourism industry contributes about 10% to global GDP (IMF, 2021). The recovery of the tourism industry occurred to a greater extent when international tourist flows began to recover. In the second quarter of 2023, tourist arrivals on the Old Continent were 5.8% below 2019 levels, while overnight stays were down by 3% (ETC, 2023). The demand for tourism services during the same period is negatively affected by the war between Russia and Ukraine, with tourist flows from Russia showing downward trends, while at the same time, this crisis has been creating inflationary trends that increase the cost of travel and tourism services in total, causing travellers to select cheaper destinations (ETC, 2023). In the last three months of 2023, tourist arrivals and overnight stays in Europe showed a further quarterly improvement, but were 1.6%, and 0.6%, respectively, below the corresponding levels of 2019, despite the overall increases of 17.7% and 12.3%, respectively (ETC, 2024). The adaptation of the specific sector to the requirements of the modern market framework plays a decisive role in the recovery of the tourism sector (IMF, 2021). The response to the pandemic identified parts of the tourism industry that were exposed to risk and presented an opportunity to reshape and rebuild the tourism industry. The digital transformation of the sector contributes to this direction, transforming the way tourist services are provided and consumed. Contactless payments, online check-ins and digital room keys are just a few examples of how travel businesses are adapting. Tourism providers work with environmental experts to improve their offerings and ensure that tourism development is sustainable and beneficial to local communities. At the same time, programmes have been designed and developed on upskilling and retraining the sector's workforce, with an emphasis on digital technology and the sustainability of the sector (UN Tourism, 2024). In addition, although the tourism industry is experiencing rapid growth and is in the process of transformation, it faces two further challenges: the war in Israel and the fact that inflation has not yet returned to desired levels. These two risks do not seem able to stop the current upward trends, but they are obstacles to tourist flows. The first risk has contributed to the decline of arrivals from the region of Israel to the Old Continent while regarding the second risk, although there are still high rates of inflation that contribute to the increase in the cost of tourist services such as air tickets and accommodation, travellers save money on their other expenses and choose to make their reservations well in advance of their arrival in

**Figure 16.** Future tourism resilience



Source: Author's elaboration.

order to achieve a better price (ETC, 2024). For many economies, the tourism sector is a determining factor of economic and social stability. COVID-19 has revealed the multiple risks faced by an economy whose production structure largely depends on the volatility of international conditions and not on any type of heavy industry. Tourist flows due to COVID-19 showed a bend and fluctuations. In the first months, Europe recorded a dramatic 44% drop in international arrivals of tourists compared to the same period in 2019 while job losses in its sector of tourism in Europe in 2020 were huge, ranging between 14.2 million and 29.5 million. The tourism industry is undergoing a transformation characterized by digital integration such as contactless payments, online check-ins and digital room keys are just a few examples of how travel businesses are adapting, a redefinition of the sector's perspective towards its workforce and society, domestic tourism, but also a deeper commitment to

sustainability. It is believed that the restructuring of the sector makes it more compact and durable. Searching and documenting the situation after the reshaping of tourism industry trends combined with the effects of the newly shaped factors on the tourism environment could be an incentive for future research.

The research has some limitations: the period (before, over, and after COVID-19), the trends of tourism in these periods and the future tourism's resilience.

Finally, future research should focus on the comparative recording and presentation of the resilience of the tourism industry to various shocks, as well as the changes in tourists' choices brought about by the new forms of tourism that have resulted from the digital transformation of the tourism industry and as well as which of the resilience and adaptation factors of the branch has stood out according to the tourists' choices.

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