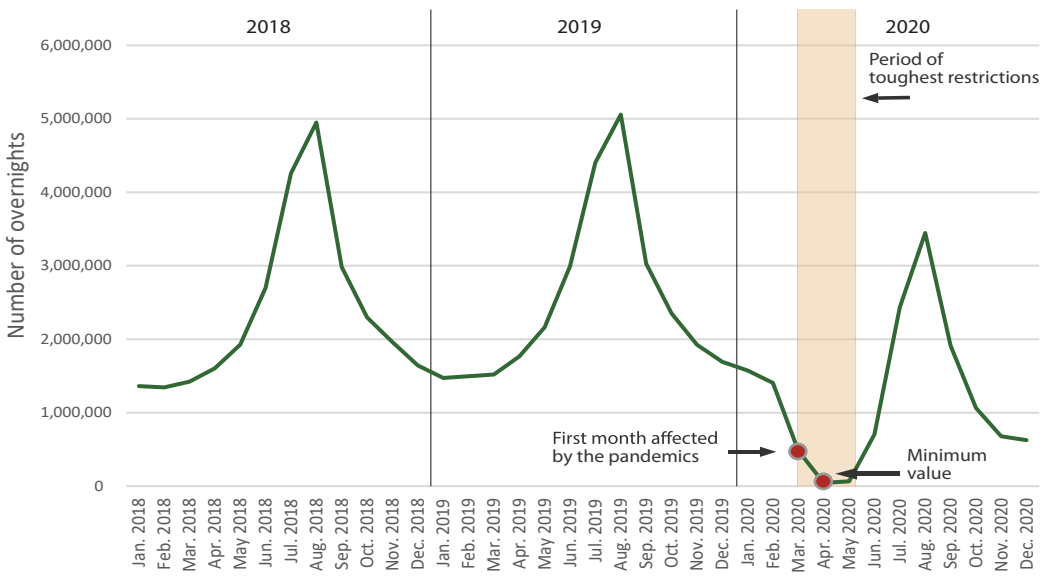
Tourism and the COVID-19 pandemic: the case of Romania

The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic represented an unprecedented event worldwide with strong negative economic effects. Tourism, as a sector highly dependent on the movement of people and on the interaction between them, has been particularly hit by this crisis (Gössling et al., 2021). Tough restrictions and periods of lockdown led to a significant decline of tourist activity, to the point where destinations registered zero tourist arrivals. Romania has been no stranger to these transformations when it comes to tourism evolution, registering a decline of 52% in the number of tourist arrivals from 2019 to 2020.

Tourism activity in Romania is highly seasonal, with its peak in the summer months, especially July-August. This seasonality is also noticeable in the year of the pandemic. After a period of tough restrictions between March and May, the gradual softening of these restrictions determined a similar trajectory of the tourist activity as in the previous years, although at a considerably lower intensity. As such, the summer months continued to be characterized by the most pronounced concentration of tourist activities, however with a decline of 32% between August 2019 and August 2020.

Tourism before and during the shock



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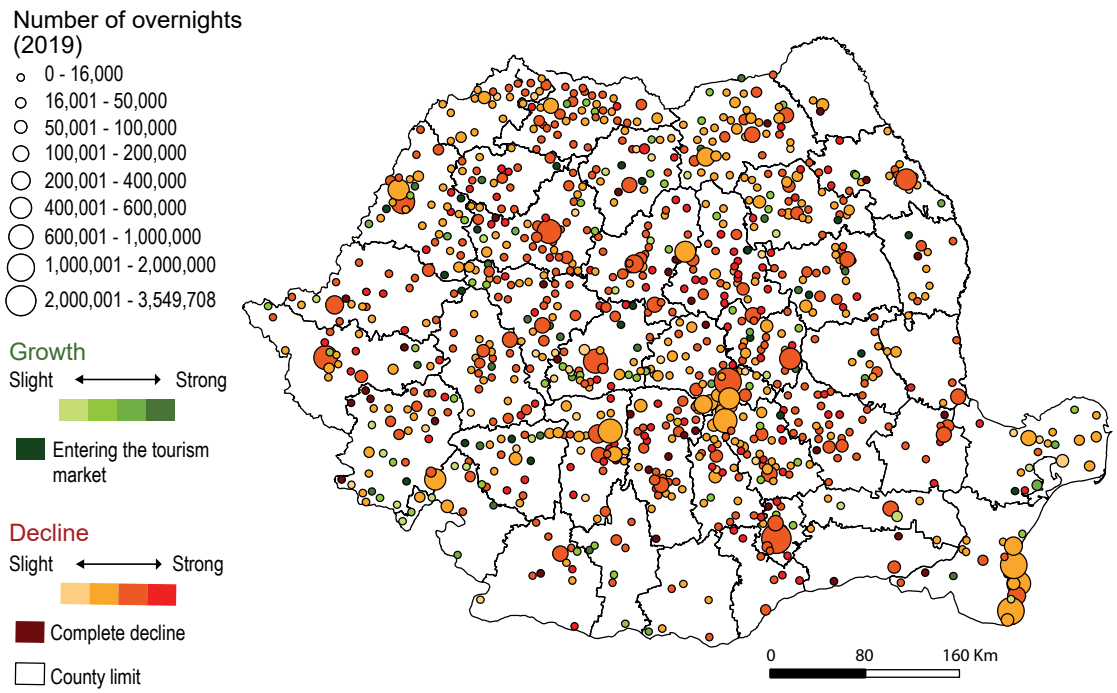
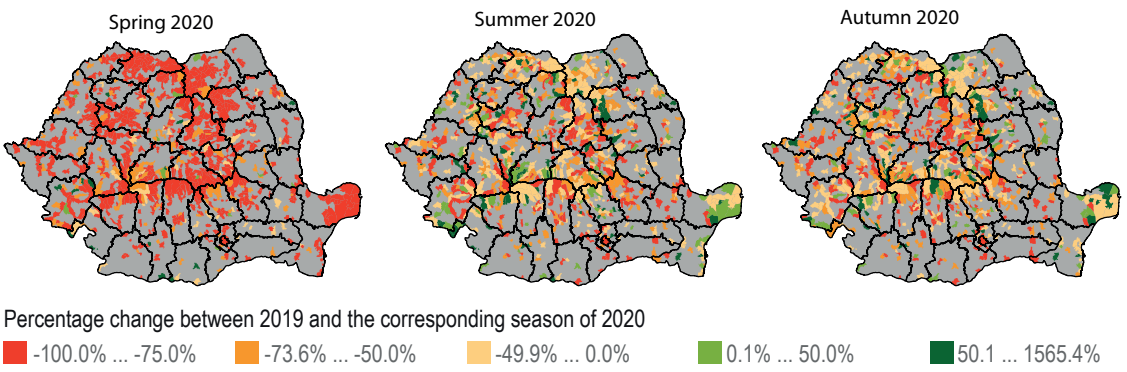


While the initial negative impact of the pandemic has been felt without exception in all destinations worldwide, its intensity and its consequent effects differed significantly from one area to the other (Skare et al., 2021; Duro et al., 2020). In Romania, the most affected destinations are dispersed around the country, being generally rather small destinations, in terms of tourist demand. However, a quite strong decline is also specific to those important urban centres with a significant tourist function (Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, Brasov, Sibiu, Timisoara, Oradea, Iasi). It is notable, at the same time, that for a number of destinations (14% of the total) this crisis led to a growth of the tourism activity, even though in many cases it was only a slight increase. This is the case of small destinations located mainly in the Carpathian area, which due to their relative isolation and lack of popularity, became attractive to tourists looking to avoid crowded and unsafe destinations following the first stages of the pandemics.

Change in tourist overnight stays between 2019 and 2020 (by season)



Note: Destinations mapped on the basis of their administrative areas.

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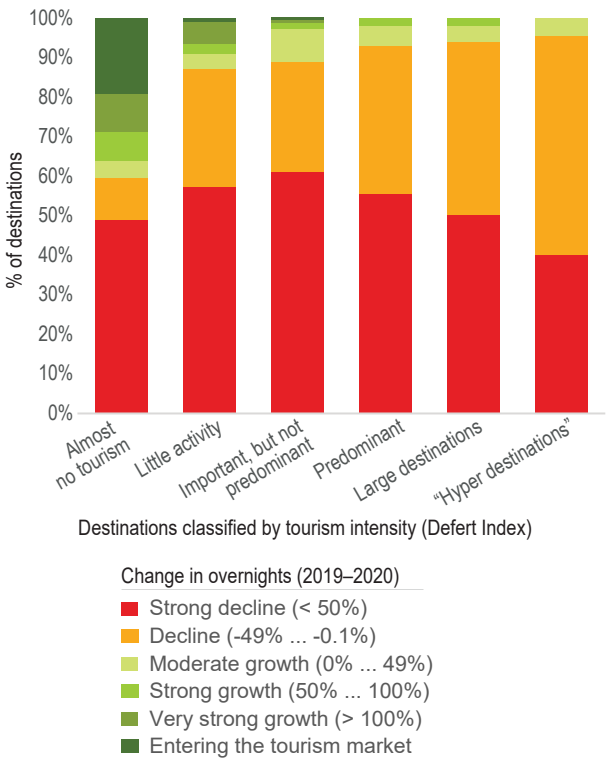
Different intensities of the impact of the crisis



Despite the general negative impact that COVID-19 had on the tourism sector, this crisis represented an important positive milestone for those destinations that had little to almost no tourism activity (according to Defert index, which measures the intensity of tourism activity). As such, these destinations proved to be the most capable to recover from the shock of the pandemic. They have been advantaged by the new preference of the tourists for destinations that are closer to their area of residence and for those which are less predisposed to gathering large masses of tourists. Consequently, destinations with an important tourist function have been avoided, most of them facing a significant decline even after the restrictions started to loosen.

Resistance of tourist destinations

The resistant destinations, respectively those which have not been deeply affected and, in fact, managed to grow right after the initial shock of the COVID-19 pandemic, can be perceived as the winners of this crisis. Naturally, these destinations are located in areas with general high tourist attractiveness, as it is the case with the Carpathian mountains and Danube Delta, because the intrinsic motivation of tourists for travelling remained mainly unchanged. The change in tourists preferences, however, is visible in terms of size of chosen destinations and their geographical position. More precisely, it is noticeable how in large areas that are regarded as tourism regions (Sibiu County, Neamt County, Danube Delta etc.) a series of small and rather isolated destinations registered a growth in the number of overnights, as opposed to the most famous destinations in those areas, which declined. It is the case of Jurilovca and Mahmudia in Tulcea, of Bicaz and Hangu in Neamt or of Gura Raului and Cartisoara in Sibiu. Such destinations took advantage of the fact that although they do not own the tradition, the appeal, and the infrastructure specific to the larger and more famous destinations in their area, they offer access to the same natural resources, along with providing a safer environment and distance from some key risk factors (large gatherings, events, exposure to people from multiple households, etc.).

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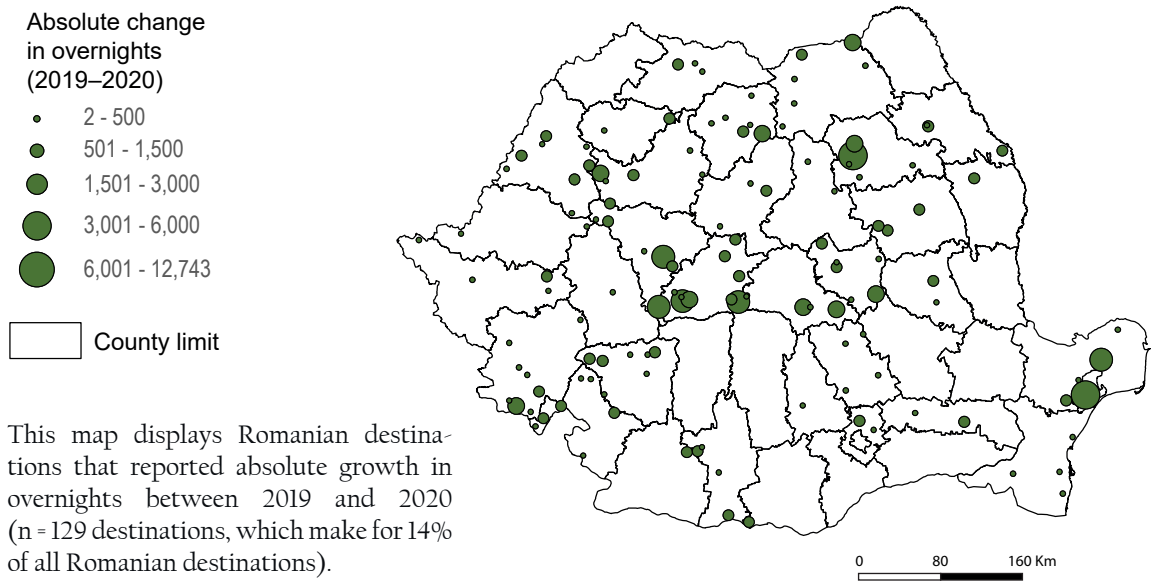
Winners of the pandemic



This map displays Romanian destinations that reported absolute growth in overnights between 2019 and 2020 (n = 129 destinations, which make for 14% of all Romanian destinations).

Drivers of tourism resistance

Among the drivers that appear to have influenced the destinations' capacity to resist in front of the pandemics, those related to the tourism intensity prior to the crisis appear to be the most relevant (number of overnights, Defert Index, seasonality). As such, the resistant destinations are small, with reduced tourist activity and without the tendency of concentrating large masses of tourists during short periods of time (low seasonality). To some extent, there is also noticeable a preference for destinations with smaller accommodation units, which might be perceived as being safer, since they do not encourage the presence of large gatherings of tourists in the same place, at the same time. Looking at accessibility measures, it can be concluded that there was also a preference for more peripheral destinations in relation to the most densely populated urban centers, preference derived, again, from the willingness to avoid crowded destinations.

	Phi Value	Phi Approx. Sig*
Population	.121	.129
Overnights (2019)	.627	.000
Defert Index (2019)	.448	.000
Seasonality (2019)	.634	.000
% bed places in hotels	.174	.005
Average size of accommodation units	.218	.000
Distance to first city with 100 000 inh.	.192	.001
Distance to first two cities with 100 000 inh.	.196	.000
Distance to first city with 200 000 inh.	.166	.011
Distance to first two cities with 200 000 inh.	.189	.001

** Statistical significance for Fisher test: p<0.05*