



The Impact of COVID-19 on Albanian Tourism

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Abstract

Objectives: Nowadays, tourism continues to represent the most dynamic and open part of the countries' economic system. This research paper explores tourism in Albania over the years, with particular focus on the development of tourism during the pandemic situation, mainly the number of entrances and exits of visitors to the country compared to the years before. **Methods/Analysis:** This study will take into consideration the secondary data provided by the World Travel and Tourism Council and INSTAT Albania focused on 2020 as the pandemic year, compared to the previous years by investigating the movements of visitors in Albania, their origins, and the ways of travel through seaports, air, or land. The travel purposes of Albanian visitors are different, but this research will focus only on those purposes for holidays during the summer season. The data will be presented through the percentage of a frequency distribution at each entrance and exit point, in some cases explained by tables and graphs, comparing the months in the peak summertime. **Findings:** Statistical analyses represented in this research give a clear picture of developing tourism in Albania during the pandemic year, mostly tourists from Kosovo. **Improvement:** This research paper summarized some specific recommendations for government institutions and SMEs specializing in the tourism sector to be ready for the future challenge, even deep dives in the pandemic zone.

JEL Classification: N 20, N3 E24, P23 J5

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1- Introduction

Tourism in Albania plays a significant role and is considered a segment that provides economic development and economic growth. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) income from tourism is high, and the direct effect of tourism on GDP is more than 70 milliard leke, with the total effect on the economy more than 250 milliard leke. The tourism industry offers job vacancies, including more than 20% in workplaces. One of the fundamental questions the tourism researchers consistently seek to answer is why tourists travel [1, 2]. Therefore, travel motivators are very popular research topics in the tourism field. According to Changuk Lee (2002) [3], this area of tourism research is more likely to link with social psychology knowledge. While there is no universally accepted theory of tourist motivation [4], the researchers have provided different theories and models to study the travel motivators, including Push and Pull motivators, Travel Career Ladder Model, Cognitive Motivation Model, etc. In the meantime, apart from tourism motivators, tourism was viewed by many analysts from very different established ways from 1980s, such as history, economics, and politics, with even geographers taking part in it [5]. Different countries also seem to have different methods and policies for the management of their tourism branch. The pandemic situation is going to have big effects on the whole economy of Albanian and the tourist industry, as well. According to the annual report of the World Travel and Tourism Council, the impact of tourism on a country's GDP rise was about 8.5% in 2019, and the whole

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economy contributed about 21.2%. People engaged in the tourism sector accounted for about 22% of the total number of employed in all countries and 2.2 billion euros into the country, accounting for 48.2% of all exports. According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2019) [4], comparing 2017 and 2018, the number of international tourists increased in 2018 to 5.34 million tourists that resulted in Albanian economy spending 2.3 billion American dollars. With direct and indirect effects, this sector contributed to around 15 to 20% of GDP and increased some in other sectors such as transports and retails. Since 2012, this sector has been one of the key components of the Albanian economy; Albanian's position is becoming more important and stable in tourism market [5].

2- Literature Review

For the travelers' classification, the distinction between international and domestic tourism also needs to be made. Goeldner and Ritchie (2005) [7] note that Domestic Tourism usually refers to tourists traveling from their normal domicile to other areas within a country. International tourism normally involves a tourist leaving their country of origin to cross into another country, which involves documentation, administrative formalities, and movement to a foreign environment. Figure 1 shows the leisure spectrum about the increasing distance from home to overseas in terms of tourism definition [8]. The author explained that it shows the distance from the house on the ordinate axis while indicating the movements from home to stay in the other city for more than 24 hours on the abscissa axis. Also, tourism has become a popular global leisure activity, and as Mill and Morrison (1992) [9] indicated, the impact of the growth of the tourism industry is also getting stronger with the development of tourism, mainly as a result of economic, political, social, and cultural changes.

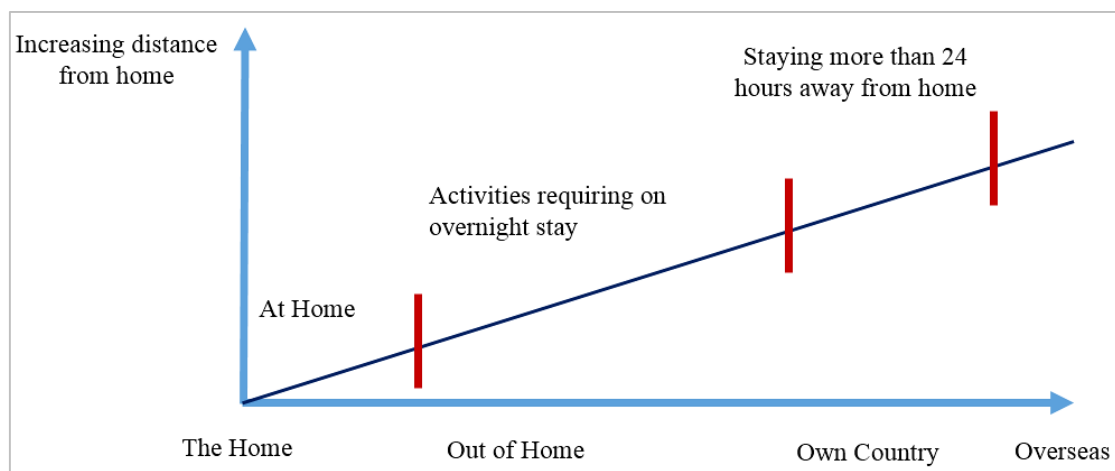


Figure 1. The Leisure Spectrum

2-1- Tourism Impact

The World Travel and Tourism Council argues that tourism is the world's largest industry, but why and how have these organizations come to this conclusion? The following data show an overview of the tourism impact worldwide, based on which different scholars have provided various opinions. The highest impact has been in the economy, including the direct and indirect effects among different countries, generally linked with the local economy. Direct impacts have to do with GDP generated directly with the industry of tourism, including hotels, restaurants, travel agencies, airlines, tour agencies, and other activities related directly to tourism. Indirect impacts are related to spending by the government for tourism, supply chain effects, and capital investment in tourism. In addition to the impact on the economy, tourism affects other parts such as gender, environment, equality, livelihoods, and poverty [10].

2-2- Social and Public Policies Impact of Tourism

Tourism has always had an important role and a positive impact on the economy. Therefore, positive policies are expected to stimulate the tourism industry. The state tourism offices often have a positive effect on tourism, which provides employment opportunities for residents and leads to state and local tax revenues. For instance, tourism spending directly supported 521 thousand jobs and created 15.5 billion dollars of earnings in Texas [11]. In the UK, it accounts for nearly 90 billion pounds of direct spending each year, contains above 200,000 businesses, and provides 4.4% of the UK jobs [12]. In addition, Song and Witts (2000) [13] show that increasing tourism produces more social contacts between tourists and local people, which leads to common understanding, tolerance, learning, and awareness. Local people educate the outside world without leaving the country, and visitors can learn about a different culture. It is not surprising that states have become increasingly organized and fervent in their efforts to compete for tourism revenues. States increase the tourism promotion budgets to attract travelers. For example, the US spent around 29 million dollars on state advertising [14]. The policy for increasing the tourism promotion budgets seems very effective in many states

As Williams and Cartee (1991) [15] claim, states could tax enough to make themselves rich by allocating money to tourism promotion. However, Cetin et al. (2017) [16] argued that the policy for increasing tourism promotion may have a bad effect on economic activity by increased taxes or by decreasing other areas of public spending that may stimulate economic growth. In addition, Pizam (1978) [17] suggested that over-concentration on developing tourism has led to negative host attitudes. Rothman (1978) [18] claimed over the development of tourism, traffic, noise, overcrowding, litter, and crime would increase. According to Mill and Morrison (1992) [9], government involvement has affected tourism development greatly, particularly for developing countries with socialist economic systems because private sectors are small in this context, leading to higher levels of government involvement than in countries with free-enterprise philosophy. As stated by Jenkins and Henry (1982) [19], the government always plays an important and active role in the development of the tourism industry. As a result, the government in developing countries should keep an active and highly-involved role to promise healthy development of tourism. Some researchers discuss the issue of the relationship of public policy and tourism marketing, referring to the effect of state tourism promotion spending on state gross product and employment growth [20]. They claimed that higher levels of tourism promotion spending can produce a good impact on tourist activity and provoke employment growth if there are high expenditures made by the lower tourist activity. However, they also indicated the benefits tourism expenditure growth brings for certain employment growth but do not fully translate into employment growth. Furthermore, states with high levels of tourist activity have negative employment growth in the high levels of state spending on tourism promotion. The reason for these is not only a weak return on marketing expenditures but also correspond with which higher tax levels to fuel tourism promotion eliminate the gains in tourism expenditures. Therefore, increasing spending in tourism promotion merely produces small benefits to the states with lower levels of tourism activity, and decreasing spending in tourism promotion would produce benefits to the states with higher levels of tourism activity [20].

2-3-Impact of Pandemic Situation on Global Tourism

It is noteworthy that tourism has had a drastic decline due to the situation created by the COVID-19 pandemic, necessitating the support of private and public policies by the state to build the sustainable capacity of the tourism sector [21]. With the spread of COVID-19, the global tourist rating decreased by 7% only with the closing of Kina, while the reduction of the big meta reduced to 23% when the whole world had the total closure of other countries [22]. Hence, the pandemic situation has affected the whole globe, influencing tourism that has faced great challenges [23].

According to McCabe & Qiao (2020) [24], travel and tourism are the main contributors at the global level, affecting socio-economic development and the creation of new jobs. Also, tourism is the main pillar of income generation, directly influencing the GDP of the economy, and at the same time the most vulnerable factor in this industry [25].

From this situation created during 2020-2021, many workers working in the tourism sector have lost their jobs due to travel restrictions. This reduction in travel to the Balkan countries, especially Albania and Kosovo, has significantly affected because it significantly supports the steady flow of remittances, which account for 10% of GDP in these countries [26]. This pandemic situation has created another economic crisis called the biggest crisis in the world since the depression in 1929 [27]. So, this crisis caused in economic and health terms was not the same as other crises in the past [28-30].

3- Research Methodology

Process flow diagram of this study is shown in Figure 2. This research are two main objectives: the first, to examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic situation in the Albanian tourism industry, and the second, to identify Albania's capacity for tourism and the most frequent entrances and exits to the country. To reach these objectives of the paper, we used secondary data, the most appropriate method for this research. Using a semi-structured interview is the most favorable method to use and achieve the purpose of tourism research in Albania during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using this method helps us not to generalize conclusions and recommendations because it is characterized by a high rate of sensitivity and reflectivity in relations and ambiguity [31-33]. The use of semi-structured interviews helped us to improve the dialog between participants and researchers as the most favorable parts of interviews better examine the participants' thoughts, knowledge, and obedience related to a specific area linked to the main cores of research. The questions during the interview are asked as open questions, identifying the problems that may arise during the interview. Throughout this process, we had an interview agenda that presents the problems of tourism during the pandemic time and its challenges in the future. This agenda was oriented towards collecting answers on several topics, including how Albanian tourism can return to a normal state as before the pandemic. Experts specialized in the field of tourism, the managerial staff of the hotel industry with a history and tradition of tourism for more than ten years, and those with a key role in the tourism area in Albania have raised such questions. Therefore, our twenty-two participants provided us with a significant contribution by providing clarifications on all the questions. The study related to the COVID-19 pandemic was conducted from June to August 2020, combining the obtained data with findings on the internet from the official websites related to tourism, the Ministry of Tourism in Albania, and the World Tourism Organization.

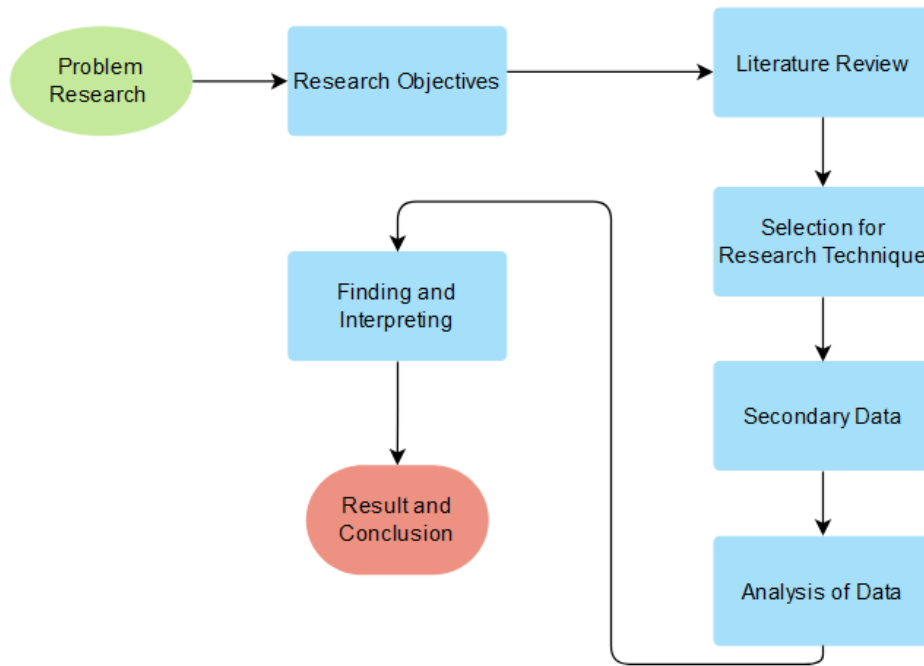


Figure 2. Flow chart of research methodology

Since the fall of communism, the development of the Albanian economy has been fueled primarily by the service and construction industries, though tourism has recently played an increasing role in the economy and is growing rapidly. Many people are curious to explore a country whose borders were closed to travel for many years. Given the continued development of both summer and winter resorts, people all over the world have begun to think of Albania as a tourist destination. A map of Albania focused on the touristic zone is shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3. Map of Albania focused on touristic zone

4- Results and Discussion

The impact of the pandemic in the world and Albania is inevitable, affecting the medium-term and long-term development of the country. Albania, with an open and small economy, has been mainly affected by the reduction of tourist flow as one of the most affected and quite weakened sectors. The country's recovery will depend on the strength and resilience of local institutions to design and implement recovery policies in the country's public decision-making process, mitigating the negative effects of the pandemic on the economy. The first cases of those infected with COVID-19 began in early 2020, with an influx of rapidly spreading viruses throughout the country. Based on the available data, Albania had the lowest number of cases in the Western Balkans with only 45953 cases per million inhabitants. The period of most cases of distribution was one year, in which the lowest daily cases in the region were recorded in May 2021, with only 7 cases per million inhabitants. Fortunately, the death toll was the lowest in the region with just 850 cases per million inhabitants (Figure 4). Albania and every other country should take concrete steps to easily cope with any crisis that may arise in the future. This is achievable by supporting the development of tourism within the national economy, the installation and use of new technologies, digitalization, creating comparative advantages, and encouraging public and private investment. According to data from the World Health Organization, there were more than 10 million infections and about 500,000 deaths globally in 2020 as a result of COVID -19. This rate of infection and death continued for a long time, forcing most countries around the world to close their borders and consequently interrupting almost all travels at the international level.

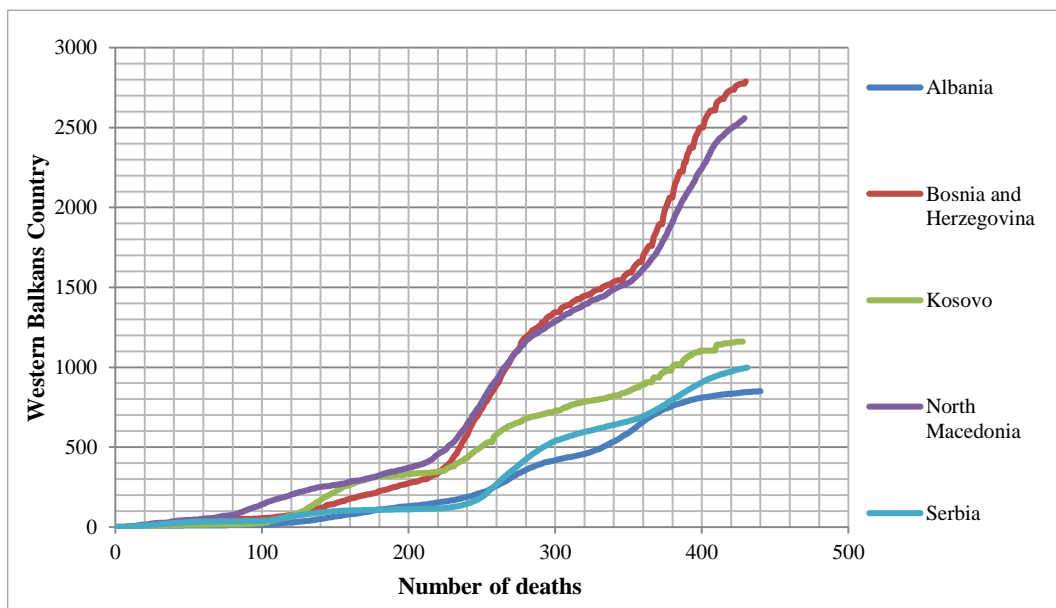


Figure 4. Number of deaths per million inhabitants in Western Balkans Country during COVID -19

Tourism is the main factor and fastest-growing economic segment. The positive impact of tourism spreads effects on gross income, employment, production, foreign exchange earnings, and balance of payment. All these positive effects are higher than any negative effect during the summer season, such as environmental damage. Based on the definition of the World Tourism Organization of the United Nations, tourism includes several industries, not only traveling and consumption. It includes twelve industries: accommodation, food and beverage serving, water passenger transport, road passenger transport, transport equipment rental, cultural activities, sports and recreation activities, travel agencies, and other country-specific tourism activities. The impact of the tourism sector is important because of employment opportunities, self-employment, and economic growth. In 2016, tourism had a 7.7% participation in total national employment and 85500 jobs while participating indirectly in 23.9% of employment and 267000 jobs.

4-1-A Comparative Data during Five Years in Albania

The entrances and exits of visitors have also influenced the structure of accommodation, representing a tourist activity and accommodation offered in Albanian tourism and presenting the tendencies for the development of the capacity of Albanian tourism. Tables 1 and 2 show number of visitors in Albania during 2016 and entrance of citizens according to the way of travel during 2016-2020, respectively.

Table 1. Number of visitors in Albania during 2016 – 2020

Years	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Totals
Number of citizens	3854023	4572863	5053297	5816684	2405064	21701931

Table 2. Entrances of citizens according to the way of travel during 2016-2020

Years	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Totals	8862202	9969322	11246520	12103767	5419417
By air	1027622	1305953	1474562	1659594	657467
By sea	624564	755346	799136	842904	233538
By land	7210016	7908023	8972822	9601269	4528412

These statistics show the total number of hotel rooms in Albania during 2020 by destination (Figure 5). Hence, Durres had 402 hotel rooms, and Tirana had the highest number of hotel rooms around 600 in 2020 [34]. During 2018-2020, a lot of people have spent the holidays in Albania, which means a value of over 2.2 billion Euros for around 7 million foreign tourists. According to INSTAT's statistics [35], 2.66 million foreign nationals entered Albania in 2020, 60% less than in 2019. However, based on the statistics provided by accommodation units, around 90% of tourists declared as foreigners are of Albanian origin and foreign citizenship or come from Kosovo or Northern Macedonia.

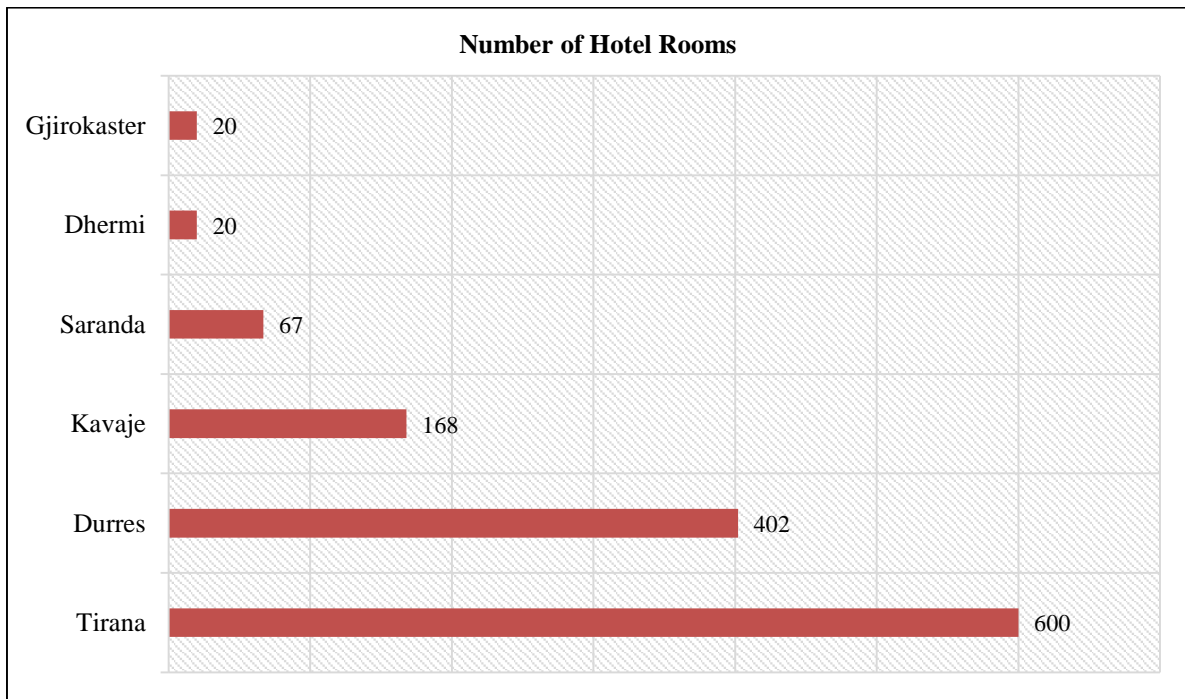


Figure 5. Number of hotel rooms in Albania in 2020, destination

Table 3. Stay overnight by nonresidents by countries year 2020

First quarter 2020					
Kosova	Italy	Germany	England	Belarus	Others
34%	15%	8%	5%	2%	36%
Second and third quarter 2020					
Kosova	Northern Macedonia	Poland	Italy	Belarus	Others
32%	8.60%	4.75%	1.30%	1.30%	7.90%
Fourth quarter 2020					
Kosova	Italy	Germany	Northern Macedonia	England	Others
17.70%	6.50%	3.90%	3.80%	1.70%	14.10%

As we can see, Kosova, kept Albanian tourism with the highest number of foreign arrivals from Kosova, about 1.3 million, followed by Italy, Germany, England, Macedonia, and others (Table 3). The main motives to visit Albania were for holidays, professional reasons, and businesses. From January to December 2020, about 14% traveled to Albania for business. International arrivals dropped by 58.5% compared to 2019. During 2020-2021, most of the arrivals by foreign citizens were for holidays, visits to relatives, health treatment, and personal motives (Table 4).

Table 4. Arrivals of foreign citizens by purpose

Period	August 2020	August 2021	January – August 2020	January – August 2021
Arrivals foreign citizens	377033	494332	2122202	4878404
Personal	367289	484459	2040544	4804878
Holidays, visit to relatives, health, treatment etc.	358820	469401	1984518	4668957
Transit	18	29	217	552
Business and	8451	15029	55809	135369
Religious	9744	9873	81658	73526

This trend of increasing tourist visits for holidays is constantly growing. If we compare the same months with different years, we notice that there has been an increase in visits from August 2020 to August 2021 (Table 5).

Table 5. Total arrives and total departures

Period	August 2020	August 20201	January – August 2020	January – August 20201
Total arrives	604703	794010	4134941	
Total Departures	706145	961342	4320664	7785781

Based on domestic tourism, Albania has a great advantage compared to other regional countries. According to the pandemic situation, tourists' preferences will shift to find better and more secure destinations, individual parts, and green, sustainable tourism. Albania should focus more on family tourism, quality, sustainability, health safety, and ecotourism for future research. After the COVID-19, preferences of clients will be different, and the tourism system needs to be reorganized and rearranged by the policy of the institutional sector, in the areas of innovation and digitalization, promotion of tourism sector; Education, and sustainability in the industry through direct action.

5- Conclusion

After the pandemic situation of the COVID-19 in 2020, global tourism needs to become more sustainable across enterprises through the necessity of business organizations and business models. Research analysis reveals strong linkages of tourism and other segments of the economy. This is the strongest pandemic in the last hundred years with mostly direct effects on the tourism industry in the entire globe. A lot of countries, including Albania, depend a lot on the tourism industry, and the effects are huge in different areas such as employment, national income, labor market, and GDP. The number of tourists in Albania is growing, mostly during the summer vacation period, with more than 16% annual growth. The main conclusion after the pandemic situation is that tourism in Albania needs a rapid revival supported not only by the owners and employees but also by tourists. More investment in marketing, infrastructure, and management of the tourism industry makes a difference from other neighbors and brings more differentiated products/services to attract foreign investment in this sector. Albanian touristic destinations should be promoted to reach Albanian and foreign operators and allow creating images in the international area. Government must support tourism enterprises that go bankrupt due to the pandemic situation, such as hotels, restaurants, and airline agencies. Some governments should rewrite the strategy of tourism coordinates with IMF and WTTC. The best and fastest way is to assist these in financial approaches through grants, subventions, and financial segments with low-interest rates. The WTTC should measure the post-pandemic situation to find which alternative will be the most applicable way to reopen economies for tourism.

Albania represents a great opportunity and destination management system that promotes the tourist offer in global markets in a modern and integrated way. For further development, the government should support the private sector in developing tourism in rural areas by contributing to sustainable, comprehensive, and competitive development. This will be possible by reducing profit tax and increasing the possibility of new entries into the tourism sector. In this way, organizations will be more competitive and have good products and services. It is better to compare Albania with other countries with similar tourism potential in multidimensional aspects, including owners, travel agencies, and the hospitality industry. Further research should focus on research between political and economic situations after the pandemic situation.

6- Declarations

6-1- Author Contributions

Conceptualization, S.A and A.S; methodology A.S and S.A.; literature review A.S. and S.A.; writing – review and editing S.A. and A.S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

6-2-Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available in article.

6-3-Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

6-4-Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interests regarding the publication of this manuscript. In addition, the ethical issues, including plagiarism, informed consent, misconduct, data fabrication and/or falsification, double publication and/or submission, and redundancies have been completely observed by the authors.

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