A study of the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on tourist behaviour and expectations: A case of Serbia

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Abstract: Due to the spread of COVID-19 and the closing of the borders of a large number of countries, tourists' interest in domestic tourist destinations has grown. The objective of this paper is to identify future behaviour patterns of tourists and to propose measures that would affect the interest of domestic tourists in domestic destinations after COVID-19. The study starts with an analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on global tourism, then focuses on trends in the tourism market in Serbia and ends by examining citizens' attitudes towards key factors for domestic tourism development. It is estimated that tourism can benefit from an essential understanding of tourists' demands for a safe journey. Research results indicate statistically significant differences in the attitudes of respondents in relation to age, gender and education, but most respondents believe that it is necessary for the state to invest more in tourist infrastructure and to adjust pricing policy to remain competitive domestic destinations after Covid-19.

Keywords*:* tourism, COVID-19, tourist behaviour, crisis, Serbia
JEL classification: D11, M21, M31, Z30

Studija uticaja pandemije COVID-19 na ponašanje i očekivanja turista: Slučaj Srbije

Sažetak: Usled širenja COVID-19 i zatvaranja granica velikog broja zemalja, poraslo je interesovanje domaćih turista za domaće turističke destinacije. Cilj rada je identifikovanje budućeg ponašanja turista i predlaganje mera koje bi uticale na interesovanje domaćih turista za domaće destinacije nakon COVID-19. Studija počinje analizom uticaja COVID-19 na globalni turizam, zatim se fokusira na trendove na turističkom tržištu u Srbiji i završava ispitivanjem stavova građana o ključnim faktorima za razvoj domaćeg turizma. Procenjuje se da turizam može imati koristi od suštinskog razumevanja zahteva turista za bezbednim putovanjem. Rezultati istraživanja ukazuju na statistički značajne razlike u stavovima ispitanika u odnosu na godine, pol i obrazovanje, ali većina ispitanika smatra da je neophodno da država više ulaže u turističku infrastrukturu i da prilagodi politiku cena kako bi domaće destinacije ostale konkurentne nakon COVID-19.

Ključne reči*:* turizam, COVID-19, ponašanje turista, kriza, Srbija
JEL klasifikacija: D11, M21, M31, Z30

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1. Introduction

It is well-known that the crisis connected with the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted and continues to impact people and businesses around the world. The pandemic has affected people and business activities around the world (countries, businesses and social relations) and also has changed the organization in all areas of business, including the tertiary sector and within it, educational services, health services, but also tourism services (Mandarić & Sekulić, 2021; Milovanović et al, 2021). The paper focuses on the expected changes in the behaviour of tourists and the perception of future travel, because the tourism industry has great potential for growth and income generation. Tourism has great impact on regional development growth and could be an effective tool in achieving balanced regional development (Vuković et al., 2022). The United Nations claims that tourism will have an important role in the recovery of national economies and global trade over the next few years (UNWTO, 2022a). Bonacci and Anwar (2020) highlight that "before COVID-19, travel and tourism was accounting for 10% of global GDP" (p. 75), which is why tourism has become one of the most important sectors of the world economy. Certainly, the pandemic has negative consequences for the tourism of all countries, with the impact being greater in countries where tourism participates in a higher percentage of GDP and, as Luković and Stojković (2020) stand out "small and less developed countries where tourism accounts for over 50% of gross domestic product" (p. 83).

The global pandemic has significantly affected the tourist activity in Serbia in two ways, on the one hand, international travel and tourism have practically stopped, and on the other hand, the interest of domestic tourists in spending shorter or longer vacations in domestic destinations has increased. The increase in interest in domestic destinations has raised questions about the sustainability of future tourism, pricing strategies, improving the quality of the offer and tourist facilities. The question arises as to what is the role of the state in the development of domestic destinations. This paper investigates the motives and intentions of tourists in the coming period and whether and to what extent Covid-19 influences changes in tourist behaviour. Also, this paper explores the possibilities of retaining domestic tourists in Serbia after the opening of international borders.

2. Background

2.1. Global changes and tourism in the COVID-19 era

After six decades of continuous development, tourism had become an important driver of economic growth (Bonacci & Anwar, 2020; Deb & Nafi, 2020; Mandarić & Sekulić, 2021). However, this situation changed dramatically with the spread of the pandemic in 2020, which has affected all countries, regardless of their level of development, with wide-ranging economic consequences. According to Bonacci and Anwar (2020) "by April 28, 2020, 100% of global destinations had introduced travel restrictions" (p. 76). The pandemic hit the entire economy, but it affected in particular the tourism industry due to travel restrictions imposed by the authorities worldwide. The Covid-19 put the global tourism industry under great pressure as most domestic and international travel was canceled. Isolation strategies, border closures and flight suspensions have affected revenue reductions and liquidity problems for all tour operators (Nica & Lăceanu, 2021). A large number of countries in the world provided extensive financial support to companies and employees in the tourism sector. COVID-19 and lockdown have had the effect of reducing the business capacity of tourism companies, while hotel companies are in a much better position to recover faster financially and be the first to contribute to the stabilization of the tourism sector (Casado-Aranda et al, 2021).

High sensitivity to crises is an important aspect of tourism, but the economic impact of the crisis on tourism has not been sufficiently explored so far (Wen et al, 2021). Mandarić and

Sekulić (2021) note that "tourism contributes to the growth of national economies, employment of the population and the creation of conditions for a better life, both in developed and developing countries, but it is also the sector of the economy that is sensitive to numerous environmental, political and socio-economic risks, and affected of various crises (for instance terrorism, earthquakes, ebola, SARS, etc.)" (p. 318). Among the various factors that negatively affect tourism, those that stand out in particular are health emergencies and climate change, which is why COVID-19 is so important for tourism research and analysis (Deb & Nafi, 2020). The tourism industry is very vulnerable to many risks, but it is obvious that this crisis is specific and different that it will have major, long-term and deep structural changes for tourism and it can be assumed that the actual impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak on tourism will not be apparent until after the pandemic has ended (Božović et al, 2021; Deb & Nafi, 2020; Sigala, 2020). Candia and Pirlone (2022) state that "in 2020, tourists preferred unpopular and uncrowded destinations, often in the countryside, in order to be able to continue travelling while avoiding contagion and it is important to highlight these new travel trends by analyzing the development prospects of the tourism sector that characterize the COVID era and will characterize the post-COVID era in the coming years" (p. 2).

The UNWTO points out that vaccination and mitigation of measures related to international travel have helped the recovery of the tourism industry. The report (UNWTO, 2022a) indicates that "global tourism experienced a 4% increase in 2021 compared to 2020, but that international tourist arrivals were still 72% below 2019 before the pandemic". Therefore, 2020 is considered to be the most difficult year for tourism.

The recovery of the tourism industry is very slow and different in different parts of the world, due to different rates of vaccination, restrictions on movement and trust of tourists. good results were achieved by Europe and America in 2021 compared to 2020, but they are significantly lower than before COVID-19. According to the sub-regions, the Caribbean has achieved the best results; also Mediterranean Europe and Central America have experienced a considerable recovery, but are still more than 50% down on 2019 levels. Africa also recorded an increase in the number of tourists in 2021 compared to 2020, but even that number is significantly lower than the number from the period before the pandemic.

It is encouraging that the majority of experts expect a recovery in 2022 (projected to grow by 4% in 2022), while the others indicate a potential recovery only in 2023 (projected to grow by 3.5% in 2023) (UNWTO, 2022b). Also, many experts now expect to international arrivals will not return to the level of 2019 until 2024 or later (UNWTO, 2022a). Although the pandemic had a greater impact on tourism in countries whose GDP is more dependent on tourism, with the recovery of the tourism industry, economic growth is expected in all parts of the world.

2.2. Tourism in Serbia during the COVID-19 pandemic and changes in the behaviour of tourists

The pandemic has a strong impact on tourism in Serbia and there are at least two ways in which the consequences of the pandemic can be seen. On the one hand, the pandemic negatively caused the business for travel agencies and city hotels, and on the other hand, the interest of tourists all over Serbia for certain domestic destinations increased, to the extent that demand exceeded supply (Mandarić & Sekulić, 2021).

Table 1: Tourist arrivals in Serbia (2019-2021)

Republic of Serbia	Year	Total	Domestic tourists	Foreign tourists
Tourist arrivals	2019	3,689,983	1,843,432	1,846,551
	2020	1,820,021	1,374,310	445,711
	2021	2,591,293	1,720,054	871,239
Tourist nights	2019	10,073,299	6,062,921	4,010,378
	2020	6,201,290	4,936,732	1,264,558
	2021	8,162,430	5,732,833	2,429,597

Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (2022)

Table 1 shows the data for the Republic of Serbia (2022) for the period 2019-2021, the following can be concluded. Total tourist arrivals in 2021 were 2,591,293 (a decrease compared to 2019 with 3,689,983 tourist arrivals but growth compared to 2020 with 1,820,021 tourist arrivals). Domestic tourist arrivals in 2021 accounted for 1,720,054 (domestic tourists in 2019 were 1,843,432 and in 2020 were 1,374,310) and number of foreign tourist arrivals was 871,239 in 2021 (while in 2019 there were 1,846,551 and in 2020 only 445,711 foreign tourists). These data indicate a large share of domestic tourists in the total tourist arrivals during 2020 and 2021.

According to the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (2022), in Serbian accommodation facilities in January 2022, 193,263 domestic arrivals were recorded, which is 56.4% more compared to the same period in 2021. In January 2022, tourists realized 706,742 overnight stays, of which by 61.2% were domestic tourists and 38.8% by foreign tourists. The number of overnight stays is higher, compared to January 2021, by 54.3%.

In such circumstances, the question is whether the wishes of domestic tourists are different during the pandemic in terms of what they expect from the destination. Also, the question arises as to whether and in what ways it is possible to retain domestic tourists, what are their expectations and whether future behaviour can be predicted. Bearing in mind the positive impacts of tourism on other economic branches, the state should take an active role in improving the tourist offer.

In the interest of future development and adjustment of the tourist offer, it is useful to research and understand the behaviour of tourists. This will require adequate human resources in tourism, which are otherwise key factor to success in tourism (Perić et al, 2021). They will also be responsible for understanding the behaviour of tourists and changes in tourism after COVID-19. According to Petković and Užar (2020) "through market research, it is possible to identify not only the needs and desires of consumers, their motives and behaviours, but also the behavior of other key market players" (p. 103). The behaviour of tourists is the result of numerous internal and external factors, including many social factors. An analysis of the needs and changes in the behaviour of tourists as a consequence of the pandemic will be crucial to the future success of the tourism industry. Some research shows that once the pandemic is over, people will prefer to choose short breaks and change their destinations, choosing more remote and less populated destinations and preferring relatively safe and hygienic tourist destinations (Kuo, 2021). The pandemic has prompted tourists to be interested in health information (hygiene, cleanliness, the quality of medical institutions in the environment, etc.) regarding the destination, and has increased their interest in accommodation and places where they can improve their physical and mental health. The COVID-19 pandemic has also led to an increase in the awareness of the importance of food safety, so available information on food safety can be an important factor in the tourist offer (Gajić et al, 2021). Only destinations that will provide a safe health environment, can expect tourists. Hygiene and cleanliness are essential for tourism after the public health crisis (Gössling et al., 2021; Mandarić & Sekulić, 2021).

The results of some studies indicate that maintaining health is a key determinant of future travel and that the focus of tourists will be on hygiene and cleanliness when considering tourist offers. Also, after the public health crisis, tourists give more importance to the quality of medical services and only destinations that provide a safe environment can expect to attract visitors (Chebli & Ben, 2020; Kaushal & Srivastava, 2021; Wen & Jiang, 2020).

3. Questionnaire survey and data collection

A survey was conducted during the pandemic period in March 2021 with the aim of investigating the impact of the pandemic on the behaviour and expectations of domestic tourists. The research was conducted in order to examine the attitudes, intentions and expectations of potential tourists regarding future travel, with special reference to domestic destinations. Attitudes during the pandemic and assumptions about future behaviour affected by the COVID pandemic were analyzed.

The study is a continuation of previously conducted research (Chebli & Ben, 2020; Mandarić & Sekulić, 2021) and analyzes the impact of distance and popularity of the destination on the tourists' choice, their (non) avoidance of group travel, the degree of health and hygiene measures at the destination; the importance of choosing the appropriate travel insurance.

The questionnaire consisted of three parts. The first part is about the basic data of the respondents. The second part of the questionnaire explored tourists' attitudes towards travelling during and after the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. Using a 5-point Likert scale, respondents were asked to share their opinions with various statements, where 1 denoted completely disagree and 5 denoted totally agree. The third part explored the types of changes and improvements in tourism expected by the respondents after the pandemic. It included statements with 5-point Likert scale, questions with multiple answers and open-ended questions. The sample consisted of 178 respondents. The questionnaire was created via Google questionnaire and respondents were invited via social networks. This study used SPSS 23.0 for the descriptive statistics and significance tests ($\acute{a} = 0.05$, $p < 0.05$).

4. Findings and discussion

The following sample characteristics were analyzed: gender, level of education and their age (Table 2). Out of a total of 178 respondents, 154 (86.5%) are female and 24 (13.5%) are male. Concerning the respondents' the level of education, there were 54 respondents with middle school qualifications (30.4%), 24 with a college diploma (13.5%), 60 with a university degree (33.7%), 25 with a master's degree (14.0%) and 15 doctor of science qualification (8.4%).

Table 2: Sample characteristics

	Gender		Level of education*				
	Female	Male	1	2	3	4	5
Number	154	24	54	24	60	25	15
Percent	86.5	13.5	30.4	13.5	33.7	14	8.4

* 1 - middle school qualifications, 2 - a college diploma, 3 - a university degree, 4 - a master's degree, 5 - doctor of science qualification
Source: Author's research

The youngest respondent was 14 years old and the oldest 72 years old, the average age of the respondents was 42.76 years.

Table 3 shows that during the pandemic, the best rated claim is regarding accommodation facilities that take special care of the health and hygiene aspects of accommodation (Mean = 4.01). This means that it is necessary for all tourist entities to take care about public health challenge and to take measures to protect their tourists. The lowest rating refers to the choice of a lesser-known destination where there is less crowding (Mean = 3.32) and based on a low rating, it can be concluded that tourists will not avoid well-known destinations that are usually more visited.

Table 3: Impact of COVID-19 on tourist behaviour

Statements	During the COVID-19			After the COVID-19		
	Mean	SD	Median	Mean	SD	Median
S1. I choose a nearby destination.	3.39	1.39	4	2.70	1.46	3
S2. I choose a destination I have not visited before.	3.38	1.30	3	3.67	1.29	4
S3. I choose a lesser known destination, where there are fewer tourist crowds.	3.32	1.33	3	3.27	1.34	3
S4. I avoid group travel.	3.52	1.40	4	3.08	1.44	3
S5. Health information about destinations is important to me.	3.93	1.24	4	3.82	1.29	4
S6. I choose accommodation with special care regarding health conditions.	4.01	1.17	4	4,03	1.14	4
S7. I carefully choose travel insurance (health coverage, luggage insurance, travel cancellation, etc.).	3.95	1.29	4	4.04	1.22	5

Source: Author's research

In the period after the COVID-19 pandemic (Табле 3), the highest value of the arithmetic mean indicates that tourists will pay special attention to travel insurance (Mean = 4.04). This opens the perspective of the development of the insurance market, especially in the field of insurance of tourist services. The choice of destination near the area where tourists live will not affect the choice of travel in future (Mean = 2.70), meaning that even more tourists are expected to choose more distant destinations. The results of these descriptive statistics show that the choice of destination is significantly influenced by information regarding accommodation conditions related to hygiene and health and safety conditions.

By applying the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, it was determined that the data did not follow the normal distribution, and in order to obtain relevant conclusions based on statistical analysis, the Mann-Whitney test was applied (Table 4).

Table 4: Mann-Whitney test (tourist behaviour) – gender differences

Statements	During the COVID-19			After the COVID-19		
	p	Median		p	Median	
		Female	Male		Female	Male
S1	0.520	4	4	0.380	3	2
S2	0.564	3	3	0.481	4	4
S3	0.042*	4	3	0.292	3	3
S4	0.913	4	4	0.872	3	3
S5	0.490	4	4	0.026*	4	3
S6	0.020*	5	3.5	0.006*	4.5	3.5
S7	0.023*	5	3.5	0.890	5	4

*$p<0.05$
Source: Author's research

Based on the Mann-Whitney test, it was found that there are significant differences in attitudes between women and men during a pandemic: Firstly, when choosing destinations there are less known and fewer crowds (p = 0.042), with women (Median = 4) taking more care than men (Median=3); secondly, when choosing accommodation with higher hygiene (p = 0.020), with women (Median = 5) taking more care than men (Median = 3.5); and thirdly, when choosing travel insurance (p = 0.023), with women (Median = 5) taking greater care than men (Median = 3.5). After the COVID-19, it was found that there are significant differences in attitudes between women and men: regarding the health information of the destination itself (p = 0.026), it will be more important for women (Median = 4) to be informed in detail about the quality of health care at the destination than for men (Median = 3); when choosing accommodation with higher hygiene (p = 0.006), females (Median = 4.5) taking more care than male (Median = 3.5).

Using t test for paired samples (Table 5), there was analyzed the attitudes of respondents during and after the pandemic, especially in those younger than 43 years and older than 43 years (Median is 43 years, so the first group consists of respondents up to 43 years and the second of 43 and older).

Table 5: Pared Samples t test - age group differences

	Age group 18-42			Age group 43-72		
	t	df	p	t	df	p
S1	3.334	79	0.001*	4.202	99	0.000*
S2	2.731	79	0.008*	1.253	99	0.213
S3	0.136	79	0.892	0.782	99	0.436
S4	2.482	79	0.015*	2.928	99	0.004*
S5	0.000	79	1.000	1.933	99	0.056
S6	0.445	79	0.658	0.115	99	0.909
S7	1.143	79	0.257	0.445	99	0.657

*$p<0.05$
Source: Author's research

It was found (Table 5) that there is a statistically significant difference in relation to attitudes before and after the pandemic in younger respondents regarding: Firstly, the proximity of the destination becomes less important after the pandemic (during the pandemic Mean = 3.38, after pandemic Mean = 2.71); secondly, regarding the choice of new destinations, a younger group of respondents has a more positive attitude towards new destinations after the pandemic (during pandemic Mean = 3.27, after pandemic Mean = 3.72), third, regarding the avoidance

of group travel, this attitude is more pronounced during the pandemic (during the pandemic Mean= 3.58, after pandemic Mean = 3.09).

Through a one-factor ANOVA (Table 6), the difference in the attitudes of the respondents in relation to the level of education was analyzed.

Table 6: The results of the ANOVA (tourist behaviour) - differences in relation to education

Statements	Period 1			Period 2		
	F	**p**	**Note**	**F**	**p**	**Note**
S1	0.542	0.705		0.661	0.620	
S2	0.641	0.634		0.740	0.566	
S3	1.398	0.237		0.712	0.585	
S4	1.751	0.141		2.497	0.045	1-2* 0.018
S5	0.645	0.631		0.596	0.666	
S6	0.531	0.713		1.031	0.393	
S7	0.172	0.952		0.899	0.466	

* Period 1 - during COVID-19, * Period 2 - after COVID-19; *1 – secondary education; 2 – high and higher education
Source: Author's research

It was found that there is (Table 6) a statistical significance of the difference in attitudes between the respondents with secondary and high and higher education regarding group travel (p = 0.018). Namely, respondents with lower education will avoid group travel even after the pandemic (Mean = 3.46) while respondents with higher level of education will be less important (Mean = 2.38).

The attitudes of the respondents during and after the pandemic were compared with the help of the Wilcoxon test (Table 7).

Table 7: The results of the Wilcoxon test (tourist behaviour) – during and after COVID-19

Statements	p	Median	
		Period 1	**Period 2**
S1	0.000*	4	3
S2	0.006*	3	4
S3	0.573	3	3
S4	0.000*	4	3
S5	0.155	4	4
S6	0.669	4	4
S7	0.180	4	5

*p<0.05; * Period 1 - during COVID-19, * Period 2 - after COVID-19
Source: Author's research

The analysis found that there is (Table 7) a difference in the attitudes of the respondents regarding two factors - the proximity of the destination (p = 0.000) and travel in the group (p = 0.000), believing that both factors are more important during a pandemic than after. For the factor related to the popularity of the destination (p = 0.006), they believe that it will be more important after the pandemic than during.

The following Table 8 lists the statements that explore the expected changes in tourism in the coming period.

Table 8: Changes in tourism after the pandemic

Statements	Mean	SD	Median
S1a. The interest of domestic tourists in staying in domestic destinations will continue to grow.	3.31	1.29	3.5
S2a. Domestic tourists will show greater interest in going abroad.	3.83	1.18	4
S3a. Tourists will expect new facilities at old destinations.	3.81	1.11	4
S4a. It is necessary for the state to invest more in traffic infrastructure.	4.56	0.84	5
S5a. It is necessary for the state to support tourism service providers (through funds, training, etc.).	4.54	0.85	5
S6a. Educated and professional tourist staff will be a condition for the competitiveness of the tourist destination.	4.28	1.01	5

Source: Author's research

According to Table 8, respondents believe that it is necessary for the state to invest more in transport infrastructure (Mean = 4.56) in order to make domestic destinations more accessible. On the other hand, respondents are in least agreement with the statement that after the pandemic, interest in domestic tourism will continue to grow (Mean = 3.31).

The Man-Whitney test was used to analyze the relationship between difference in respondents' attitudes (women and men). There is (Table 9) a significant difference in attitudes between females and male: when expecting new content in old destinations (p = 0.002), where women (Median = 4) consider it more important than men (Median = 3); the need for the state to support tourism service providers (p = 0.036), with women (Median = 5) and men (Median = 5) considering it equally.

Table 9: Results of the Man-Whitney test (changes in tourism) – gender differences

Statements	p	F	M
S1a	0.960	3.5	3.5
S2a	0.607	4	4
S3a	0.002	4	3
S4a	0.206	5	5
S5a	0.036	5	5
S6a	0.111	5	4

Source: Author's research

Using the t test for independent samples, we analyzed the attitudes of the respondents in relation to their age, where they were divided into two groups, younger than 43 years and older than 43 years (Table 10).

Table 10: Independent sample t test – age group differences

	t	df	p	Mean (younger than 43	Mean (older than 43)
S1a	-0.100	178	0.920	3.30	3.32
S2a	-0.795	178	0.428	3.75	3.89
S3a	0.224	178	0.823	3.84	3.80
S4a	1.995	178	0.048*	4.70	4.44
S5a	1.957	178	0.052	4.68	4.43
S6a	0.038	178	0.970	4.28	4.27

*p<0.05

Source: Author's research

By applying the t test for independent samples (Table 10), it was determined that there is a statistically significant difference only related to statement about traffic infrastructure (p = 0.048), younger respondents are more likely to believe that the state's investment in traffic infrastructure (Mean = 4.70) is important for tourism development, compared to older respondents (Mean = 4.44).

Respondents were also asked questions about future interest in domestic tourism with multiple answers (Table 11).

Table 11: Reasons for greater interest in domestic tourism

Answers	Percent
Increasing the quality of services	20.9
Diversity of offer	20.9
Price reduction	41.3
State incentives through vouchers	16.9
Total	100

Source: Author's research

Table 11 shows that most respondents 41.3% believe that lower prices in domestic destinations will be a key factor for the origin of the domestic destination, 20.9% of respondents think that is crucial an increase in the quality of services and a variety of offers and 16.9% respondents gives preference to a state incentive through vouchers in order to keep domestic tourist and support the further development of domestic tourism.

Also, the Chi-square test found that there is a significantly percentage of respondents with completed secondary, high or higher education who believe that lower prices are an important factor for greater interest in domestic tourism, as there is a significant percentage of respondents with a doctorate who think that an increase in service quality is important (Chi square=25.047; df=12; p=0.015). In other words, respondents with a lower level of education, who are more likely to have lower incomes, state that an important factor is lower prices, while respondents with a greater level of education care much more about the quality of service.

6. Conclusion

Research of tourist behaviour will determine the directions of tourism development in the coming period. COVID-19 has left numerous consequences on the economy, but also on the psyche of the people. Health and safety concerns will mark future tourist travel. The paper investigates behavioural changes that affect the development of tourism. Also, the subject of research is ways to maintain the interest of domestic tourists in domestic destinations even after the pandemic. The paper analyzes trends in important tourism indicators during the pandemic period, both globally and nationally. Tourism is an important industry characterized

by extreme sensitivity to crises. The public health crisis has significantly affected the perception of travel and led to changes in the behaviour of tourists. An important determinant of tourist travel on a global level is the care of mental and physical health and it is clear that only those destinations that provide a safe stay for tourists in every sense of the word can be competitive in the long run. At the national level, during COVID-19 period, an increase in domestic tourist demand for destinations in Serbia was noticed and the question of long-term sustainability of domestic demand was raised.

The results of the research show that there are significant differences in the attitudes of the respondents in relation to gender, age and education towards key travel factors (travel in group, safety measures, travel insurance, etc.). The results of the research indicate the expectations of tourists regarding the competitiveness of domestic destinations. The paper provides an understanding of the current situation in tourism at the global and national levels. Conducted quantitative analysis provides guidelines for future tourism development strategies and new research.

The tourism industry can benefit from an understanding of medical and health issues, during and particularly after this pandemic. The key factor in the further tourism development of Serbia is the capacity to meet the high standards of health security. Improvement of infrastructure (traffic roads) and the price competitiveness of domestic destinations are also expected. The results of this research that indicate differences in the responses of respondents depending on gender, age and level of education can be useful guidelines for the development of the tourist offer.

Research has several limitations. While conducting research, collecting data and writing papers, the pandemic was still going on. Respondents responded to some of the contents of the survey based on planned travel-related behaviour, which may not correspond to actual behaviour in the future. So, further research could follow the actual behaviour of tourists after the pandemic. Also, the study analyzed tourism in general, so further research on a specific form of tourism (eg. increasing interest in rural tourism) would give more precise results and more detailed recommendations. In addition, it would be useful to compare the results of this research with research conducted in the surrounding countries in order to present a broader picture of post-pandemic trends in tourism. Also, study only partially investigates expected state support, but future research should consider key economic measures in support of the development of domestic tourist destinations.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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