

Pandemic impacts in Natal, one of the main tourist destinations in Brazil

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Abstract

The coronavirus has impacted different sectors of society. The national and regional economy were highly weakened. In the state capital alone, around 300 companies closed in 2020. More than 87% of events in the same year were cancelled. Tourists visiting Natal / RN decreased sharply and this meant that hotels, bars, restaurants, and other activities had to suffer losses that had never occurred. This scientific article was carried out from studies that showed the impacts of the pandemic period on the Natal economy, found in statistical data from research institutes that demonstrated, in numbers, the economic losses of the tourism sector. These data served as the basis for the theoretical foundation of the analysis of several authors on the subject that, in this bibliographical, documentary and quali-quantitative research, showed different results. Among them, the need for solid and robust public policies for the reheating of the sector in 2021, when the prospects are for a decrease in the unemployment rate and an increase in financial assets, both fundamental for Brazil's GDP.

Key Words: Tourism; Economy; Crisis.

PREAMBLE

Natal was among the top 10 destinations in the world, according to Tripadvisor. Ranked in 7th place, Natal received the Travellers' Choice Awards 2022, an award that gathers the places that received the best evaluation by the users of the site. Natal is the only Latin American city in the top 10.

It is no exaggeration to say that the Covid-19 Pandemic has presented itself as the most impactful event in recent decades. Although the genetic sequence of the virus was released early in January 2020, a vaccine against the disease was announced only at the end of this same year (LIMA, 2021). Meanwhile, millions of people have died, an infinitely greater number have fallen ill, and virtually every inhabitant on Earth has suffered the political, social, and economic consequences of the coronavirus.

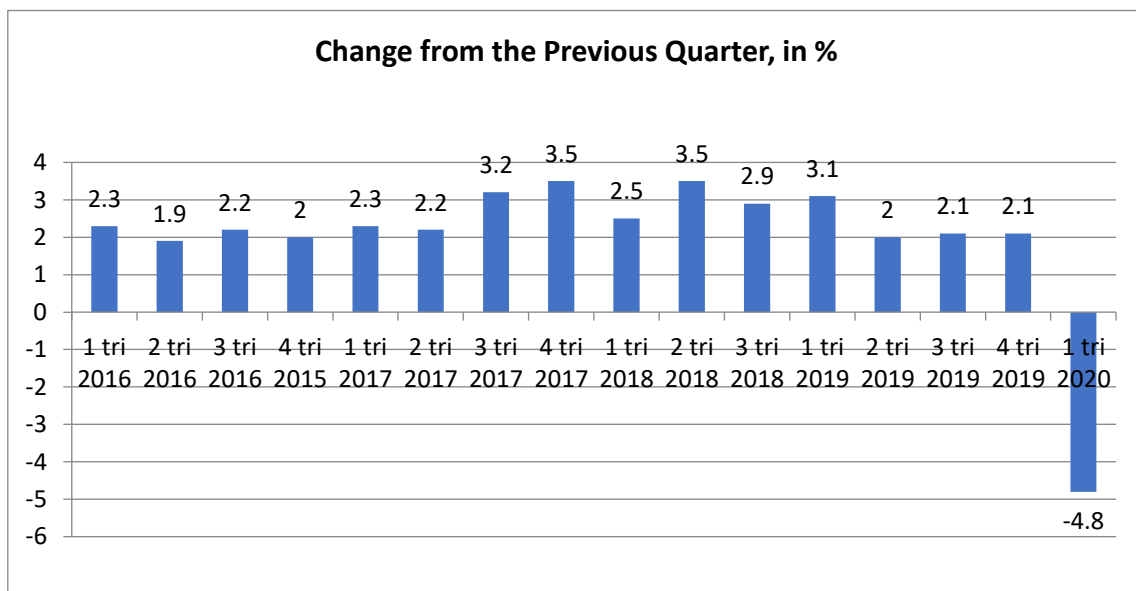
For Levy (2020), the Covid-19 pandemic not only shook health systems around the world, but also weakened the global economic market. This is because the movement of this sector suffered a strong retraction driven by social isolation. People began to consume less, labor relations and all production chains suffered strong disruptions, supply and demand for goods and services suffered imbalances and all financial markets had to react to these new pressures and declines.

The author emphasizes:

The first data from the post-Covid-19 period already show that the impact was great: the general purchasing indices (PMIs) collapsed, mainly affecting services. The only exception was China, where the pandemic cycle is already more advanced and the index recovered in March. In the United States, industrial production, retail sales and residential construction indicators fell sharply. In the labor market, the outlook is for a strong increase in unemployment. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) forecasts that the world’s gross domestic product (GDP) fell by 3.0% in 2020 – the biggest drop since the great depression of the 1930s – but that it should recover and grow. 5.8% in 2021 (LEVY, 2020).

In line with what Levy (2020) reports on the world economy, a clear example of the scope of the negative impact of the virus on the economy of each country can be seen in Graph 01. From it, it is possible to infer that only in the first quarter of 2020 the economy American market had a retraction of -4.8%. Otherwise let's see:

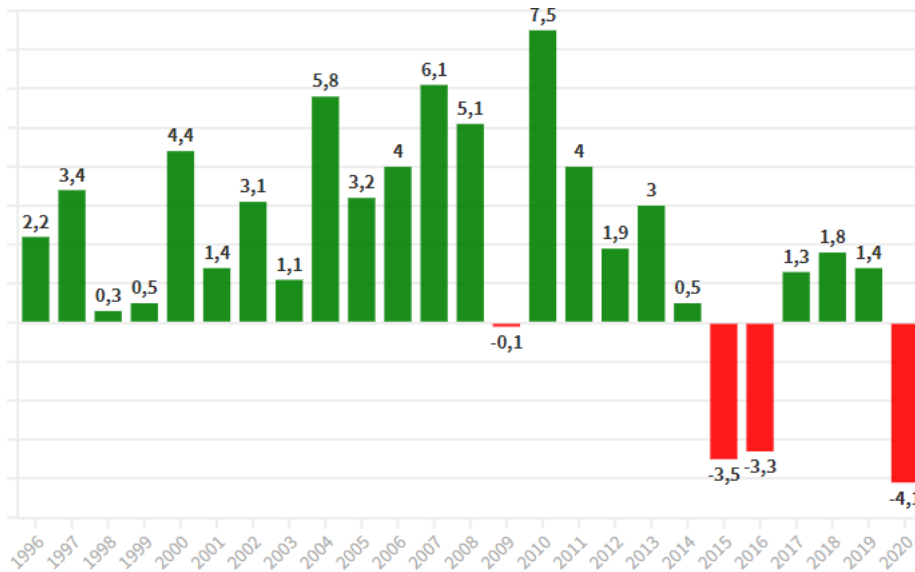
Graph 01 - Quarterly GDP of the United States in 2020



SOURCE: Portal G1 Noticias (2020)

Data such as this are important to understand the world economy, given that economic chains are intrinsically interconnected, which means that the reflection of the crisis affects everyone.

Graph 2 - Gross Domestic Product Brazil - 1996 to 2020

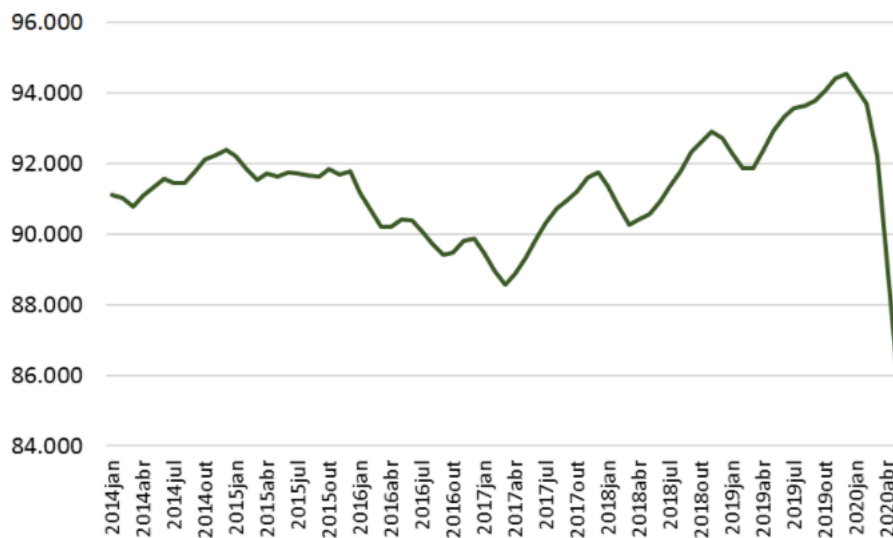


SOURCE: Uol Economia (2021)

According to Agência Brasil (2020), the pandemic caused by the coronavirus would reduce Latin America’s GDP by around 5.2% and, in the face of such an alarming scenario, the United Nations predicted, in Latin America, a substantial increase in unemployment, so that governments began to manage not only economic crises, but also social crises with unpredictable consequences.

Regarding unemployment, Horn and Donoso (2020) showed, as seen in Graph 03, how the crisis generated by COVID-19 could worryingly increase the number of unemployed people in Brazil, thus, a cascading effect in several economic sectors, slowing down the local economy and demanding from the Brazilian government measures to reduce the negative impacts arising from a significant increase in unemployment and an increase in public expenditure inherent to the social crisis generated.

Graph 3 - Level of Unemployment in Brazil from 2014 to April 2020



Source: Horn e Donoso (2020)

Cruz and Roubicek (2020), citing the Minister of Economy Paulo Guedes, say that, in terms of economy, in the first quarter of 2020, the country reached rock bottom. The investment losses and the drop in the various economic indicators, indicated, over the coming months, for heated debates on the subject and for the demand for new economic guidelines that would make possible the financial reorganization of the country.

Faced with an economic crisis that affected all national sectors, the forecast was for a generalized decrease in financial resources and, for the tourism sector, which closed the year 2020 at worrying negative financial levels, it could not be different.

Corbari and Grimm (2020) establish that the tourism sector has always been one of the segments that are most fragile with the advent of any crisis. Both in the environmental area and in climate change or in the health crises that the world is experiencing, this presents itself as one of the sectors that most loses production capacity or economic development.

With the arrival of the SARS-COV-2 pandemic, health authorities had to take urgent measures, including social distancing. As a result, people found themselves unable to travel and get to know places around Brazil and the world. This meant that all tourist activities had to adjust to a new reality and restrictions that were unusual until then. Unfortunately, sectors that until then lived off tourism had to suffer an unprecedented crisis in the country's history (CORBARI, GRIMM, 2020).

Domestic tourism, according to Corbari and Grimm (2020), suffered, in 2020, as well as international tourism, significant revenue losses. In places where people live exclusively from the tourism sector, economic-financial losses occurred on a large scale and the interdependent tourism sectors absorbed the crisis in a cascade effect.

Given the situation presented by the systemic crisis engendered by the Covid-19 pandemic and which reached its highest numbers in 2020, the present study proposes to analyze how the statistical data behaved in the following year - 2021, allowing for a predictability of the context national economic growth for the following years and proposing strategies to reheat the domestic tourism sector, more specifically in Natal

1. DEVELOPMENTS OF THE PANDEMIC AND NATAL/RN

The world, after the 1980s and with the processes brought about by globalization and the advancement of technology, has changed in a way that has made many countries have to restructure their production chains. One of them was the tourism sector.

However, it was only in 1990 that the Brazilian government began to plan development and promotion of national tourism (FONSECA, 2007):

It is in this context that, from the 1990s onwards, the Brazilian government began to develop continued efforts to promote tourism in the country. The federal government's actions to capture international demand have been successful, since in the interval of approximately ten years the international receptive flow grew by about 100%: in 1996 this flow was 2.7 million, while in 2005 it increased to 5.4 million (FONSECA, 2007, p. 03).

For the author, the Brazilian northeast would be one of the areas with the greatest investment by the Federal Government. The large coastline, the diversity of culture and the heat were points used in favor of the argument that they would add greater interest to both international and national visitors. Since then, the tourism sector has shown an increase in economic potential that has strengthened the network of hotels, restaurants, bars and other economic activities.

According to Araújo et al. (2016) the state of Rio Grande do Norte has about 3 million people. Natal is the state capital and concentrates its largest flow of economic activity; With a territory of 167,263 km², the capital has 896,708 inhabitants, according to IBGE data for the year 2021.

The hotel chain in the so-called “Cidade do Sol” has a capacity of 28 thousand beds and the potiguar vocation for tourism is notorious and, not by chance, the pandemic brought about by the coronavirus was extremely impacting on the economy of the State and the capital, causing trade had to reorganize itself to mitigate the numerous losses of the crisis.

According to SEBRAE (2021), 62.4% of the companies adapted with different working hours and reduction of staff, but the most worrying data is what shows that 12.3% of activities were temporarily interrupted and 9.9% of activities were temporarily interrupted. commercials closed permanently during the pandemic.

The data brought by SEBRAE (2021) showed how much the pandemic impacted commercial activities and, consequently, the decrease in revenue generated by tourism in the place. The revenue of local companies fell by 95.2% and only for 2.4% of entrepreneurs did the crisis bring profit or remained stable.

This made companies have to resort to loans so that they do not suffer greater losses, as pointed out by SEBRAE (2021). However, only 53.2% obtained the financial resource; more than 34% have not had the same success and 12.6% of requests are awaiting analysis or have not been answered.

Fecomércio points to the fact that about 300 establishments have permanently closed their doors and the income that was no longer generated in the state of Rio Grande do Norte would reach close to 1.5 billion reais (AGORARN, 2021).

The Panrotas Portal, specializing in Tourism, highlights that the layoffs throughout 2020, largely motivated by the Covid-19 pandemic, affected many sectors of the economy, but none like the Tourism sector. This is what the “Monitora Turismo” indicates, research carried out by Dr. Mariana Aldrigui (ALDRIGUI, Mariana – Monitora Turismo), from USP, a specialist in Tourism and President of the Tourism Board at Fecomércio - SP.

Monitora Turismo has considerable depth in its methodology, because Aldrigui mapped the impacts on employment in 571 activities linked to the sector, directly and indirectly, considering only the formal links. In 2020, while the overall balance of jobs in Brazil was positive, with almost 143,000 jobs, driven by Civil Construction and Industry, Tourism closed 110,833 jobs.

When considering the 20 most relevant tourist destinations in the country, Monitora Turismo found that 39% of the job vacancies closed in Natal were in the tourism sector.

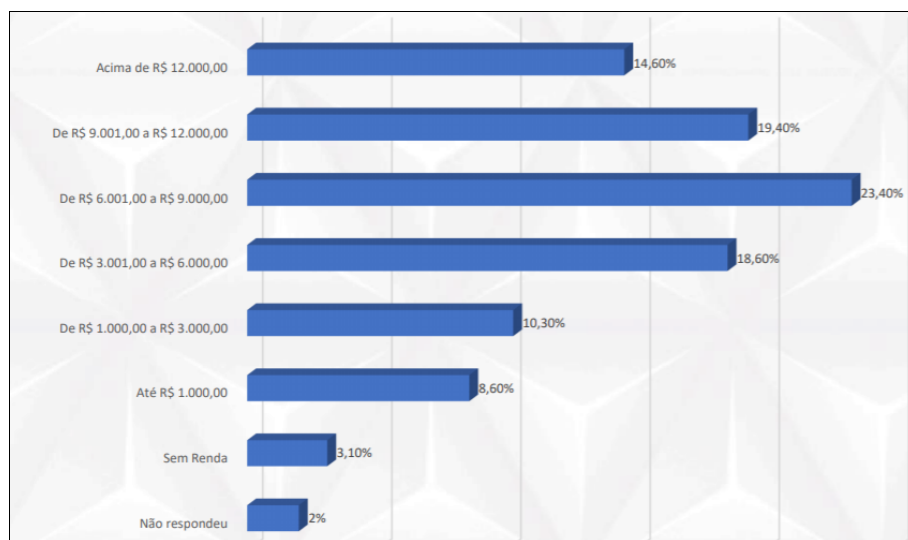
According to CAGED data, Natal lost 3,196 formal jobs in 2020. Of these, Monitora Turismo identified that 1,246 were people linked to one of the capital's main economic activities, tourism.

In the comparison of unemployment in the tourism sector with cities of similar size, Natal (39%) was ahead of Maceió (34%) and João Pessoa, where layoffs in the sector corresponded to 27% of general dismissals (Blog do Dina, 2020).

In relation to the year 2020, the city of Natal lost, in all, 48.7% of its tourist movement (TRIBUNA DO NORTE, 2021). According to data from Fecomércio, in 2020, the paralyzed events represented an immense economic loss for Natal.

Of all the events scheduled for the years 2020 and 2021, 84% were canceled and about 67,000 tourists stopped circulating in the Potiguar capital. It is estimated that an average of 370 thousand accommodations (Room Nights) are lost. The average expenses of each event tourist are R\$ 516.38, as shown in the chart below.

Graph 4 - The economic profile of tourists in 2019



Source: Fecomércio (2020)

The economic profile shown in the graph above shows that, on average, the tourist has an income of R\$ 6,673.22, with the public varying between people from social classes of different income levels.

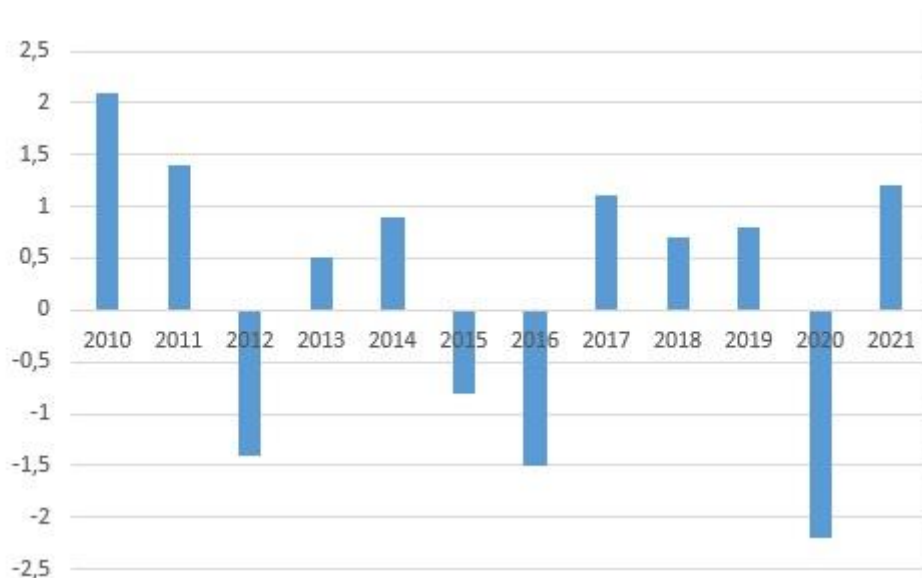
Due to the impossibility of movement of these people, the entire local commerce tourism sector in Natal was highly affected, so that the estimate of the total value lost only with the stoppage of events is 317 million reais, in addition to the volume of loss of taxes for the public power, which is around 50 million reais (NATAL CONVENTION BUREAU, 2021).

Despite the alarming numbers, the unfolding of the pandemic seems to take another course from the year 2021.

According to the G1 Notícias Portal (2021), the United States' Gross Domestic Product (GDP) grew 6.7% in the second quarter of 2021, in annualized data revised by the official statistics office (BEA) of the Department of Commerce of the country. The number represents a return to pre-pandemic level.

On the other hand, the revisions of projections made for the growth of the world GDP and the Brazilian GDP are, respectively, between 5.9% and 5.2%, so that the national indicator shows significant increases, especially when compared to the rates of the immediately previous quarter (IBGE, 2021):

Graph 5 - Brazilian GDP in % and compared to the immediately previous quarter



Source: IBGE (2021)

The investment rate in Brazil, in the first quarter of 2021, was 19.4% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), being almost four points above the one observed in the same period of 2020 (15.9%), according to data from the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE, 2021), and the IMF projects that the Brazilian unemployment rate will remain at 13.8% for the same year and 13.1% in the following year, in 2022, which represents an improvement compared to the estimated rates in April of 14.5% and 13.2%.

According to Tadros (2021), Brazilian tourism, in January 2021, had a loss of 13.5 billion reais, a value much lower than the losses compared to May 2020, which stood at 37.47 billion reais, representing a 9.7% shrinkage compared to the same period in January 2020.

Although the forecast is that the damages of the pandemic crisis will only be reversed in 2023, according to the Brazilian Association of the Hotel Industry - ABIH, the year 2021 proves to be challenging for the resumption of the sector, since all the activities that come together tourism must rethink new strategies to effectively return to this market.

Thus, if the efforts and policies to be adopted by the responsible governments are not consolidated to save companies and jobs, the tourism sector, in general, and that of Natal, in particular, can accumulate losses that, consequently, will reflect on the local economy and, in the case of Potiguar, on the entire state of Rio Grande do Norte. Therefore, it is necessary that planning and financial support from governments restore optimism to the business sector, so that tourism returns to the levels of 2019 (TRIBUNA DO NORTE, 2021).

The measures that the government of Rio Grande do Norte has taken so far to help the events sector have been limited to a promotion credit to tourist companies in the amount of R\$ 10 million reais. In relation to the municipal government, there was only the extension of the payment of the Tax on Services (ISS) and the collection of the Simples Nacional fees for a period of ninety days.

According to Silva et al. (2020):

To manage the amounts of investment and tourism infrastructure, a governmental structure with institutional partnerships that are capable of planning and promoting tourism in an economically, socially, environmentally and culturally sustainable way is necessary. It is essential to monitor data on market behavior so that resources can be better allocated (SILVA, et al. 2020, p. 07).

For Silva et al. (2020) important programs directed by the spheres of government can evolve into a scenario of resumption of the tourism sector. However, what can be seen is that this financial support should have already been allocated, at the same pace in which the State and municipalities decreed more drastic measures to paralyze the economy and the transit of people.

2. METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

The present study had, as its source of research, authors with publications in the last ten years that were obtained from digital research platforms such as Google Scholar, Scielo and other search tools. All the materials used are based on scientific publications or were researched in information from institutions of national scope, as is the case of the Brazilian Service of Support to Micro and Small Enterprises - SEBRAE, which contributed much of the statistical data of the local economy of Natal, RN.

The researches followed the documentary bibliographic methodology and with the qualitative approach. For Nascimento (2016), qualitative research

[...] is based on the interpretation of the observed phenomena and the meaning they carry, or the meaning attributed by the researcher, given the reality in which the phenomena are inserted. It considers the reality and the particularity of each subject object of the research. The process is descriptive, inductive, of observation that considers the singularity of the subject and the subjectivity of the phenomenon, without taking into account already established principles. It allows generalizations in a moderate way, considering that it starts from particular cases (NASCIMENTO, 2016, p. 03).

The author states that bibliographic research seeks to reference authors who have composed an in-depth study on a given topic and have already had scientific scrutiny; the documentary revolves around the exhibition of highly regarded documents by public institutions or scientific journals of high value and relevance to society.

The years 2020 and 2021 were the research cutout as they encompass the period in which COVID-19 manifested itself as a pandemic, so far, and made authorities around the world take sanitary isolation measures, which, consequently, affected the economy. of tourism in all parts of the world, including the city of Natal, object of research of this work.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research followed several paths to determine data and situations that presented the impacts of the pandemic brought by COVID-19 in a global scenario, in Brazil and in the capital of Rio Grande do

Norte. This scope was important to understand how these economies have behaved with the crises caused by the lack of movement of people, what is the forecast of the economy and its impacts on the tourism sector in subsequent years, as well as how governments have presented support programs to entrepreneurs who live off tourism.

It is important to note that, at the end of December 2019, when the emergence of SARS-COV-2 was announced in the world, the scientific community still did not have an exact notion of the behavior of the virus. This uncertainty would show, already in the first months of 2020, that the lack of assistance to reduce the economic impacts of the crisis through policies to support the tourism sector, which was one of the areas that suffered most from the pandemic crisis, would cost dearly to governments and Society.

In an analysis of Graph 0, it is possible to see that the economic retraction of Brazil's Gross Domestic Product was -4.1%, the worst in decades. This shows that more people stopped consuming and the national economy was unable to produce enough goods and services to reverse this situation and start a process of economic recovery even in the pandemic crisis.

The 2020 data also show that GDP losses of around 4.1% were mainly caused by health measures that closed several economic sectors considered non-essential. With this, tourism was also framed in this scenario and, according to Fecomércio (2020), in the Potiguar capital, social isolation measures generated a loss of revenue above R\$ 300 million reais.

Observing Graph 1, it is possible to verify that the economic behavior of the United States, which has a more solid and robust economy than that of Brazil, shows, in the same period of analysis, that the great world economic power was also weakened by the crisis brought on by COVID-19.

The economic losses between the economic superpower (USA) and Brazil reveal a similar behavior that is immediately reflected in protective measures on the part of entrepreneurs: cutting costs. In these cuts, one of the most penalized was the Brazilian worker. Never in the history of Brazil has the drop in employment been so high as shown in Graph 3.

According to data from Fecomércio, brought by AgoraRN (2021), the unemployment observed in the capital was also similar in other parts of the country. In Natal alone, in 2020, more than 300 commercial establishments, including bars, restaurants and hotels, had to close. This showed that the lack of tourists in the city has negative effects on all activities that interact with the tourism industry, directly or indirectly.

Another factor that strongly impacted the drop in revenue from hotels, bars, restaurants and other commercial activities was the establishment of decrees restricting the movement of people, as data from Fecomércio 2020 pointed out.

Faced with this, people with the potential for spending that would move the economy of Natal stopped doing so. The 87% of canceled events in 2020 caused more than 60,000 tourists to stop promoting Natal's trade. These people, who belong to different social classes, as shown in Graph 4, would be essential for the resumption of economic activities in the location.

However, the unfolding of the pandemic in the year 2021 presents data that point to a growth in world GDP, in the GDP of the United States and in the GDP of Brazil, as shown in Graph 5. The growth is also economically reflected in the rate of investment in the Brazil and the Brazilian unemployment rate.

The data for the year 2021 represents a hopeful statistical improvement for the tourism industry, with lower rates of shrinkage and economic loss in the sector.

Despite the fact that the sector's full recovery is expected, according to the specialized literature on the subject, for mid-2023, it is certain that the pessimistic forecasts for the year 2020 did not materialize and, despite being challenging, the subsequent years tend to show improvements. considerable for domestic and international tourism.

For that, it is necessary that there is public investment for the reheating of the sector, and the resumption should represent a change in the concept of strategies for the effectiveness of the tourist market. It will be necessary, so that there is no accumulation of losses, government financial support through public policies that propose to recover tourism to the same extent, speed and effectiveness with which stoppages were decreed in the sector.

4. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Since the beginning of the pandemic, tourism has been one of the segments hardest hit by the crisis, which has directly affected millions of lives and the global economy. According to a study by the National Confederation of Commerce in Goods and Services, the tourism sector accumulates losses of R\$ 62.5 billion, in addition, the entity calculates that the current crisis should eliminate 300 thousand jobs. According to a survey carried out by Sebrae (2021) on the impacts of vaccination on the resumption of small business activities, this segment should return to the pre-pandemic revenue level in 2022, even if 100% of the population were vaccinated by December 2021.

In addition to depending on the mass vaccination of the population, entrepreneurs in this segment will have to adapt to the new desires and needs of customers. To better understand this context and map the opportunities that arise with the return of normality, Sebrae Intelligence Setorial (2020) prepared a study that punctually shows the main trends in tourism to Brazil in a post-pandemic reality.

According to the study, for companies in the sector to return to pre-pandemic billing levels, they will have to rigidly adopt security protocols and adhere to new technologies in order to guarantee customers more confidence in the consumption of services. As innovations suggested by the Sebrae study, are the inclusion of digital check in and check out, digital identification, payment by approximation, internet of things, virtual reality and artificial intelligence. The Sebrae survey also points out some niches to be explored: luxury tourism, gastronomic tourism, provision of exclusive services, personalized tours, charming tourism, proximity tourism and ecotourism are some of the options pointed out.

Despite all these challenges, there are a number of good indications that emerge to liven up this segment. A campaign by the operator CVC launched in August 2020 points to Natal as the beach destination with the best sales performance in the Northeast, occupying the top of the ranking. This demonstrates the tourist's desire and a strong pent-up demand, caused by the restrictions of the pandemic.

For now, while anxiously awaiting the moment of resumption, entrepreneurs struggle to keep their businesses on their feet. It is known that more than 35% of companies will have difficulty reopening after the easing of isolation measures (Sebrae 2021) and will have to work with 02 fronts: (1) Seek solutions in order to maintain a minimum of working capital in companies and , for this it is important credit, tax reduction, tax and debt payment in installments; (2) Generate a financial balance in order to pay off the debt absorbed during the crisis, upon return to normal activity, and for this, a tax exemption is essential.

Anyway, better days are ahead. Studies on the tourism sector, even if carried out on a relatively compulsory basis, will serve as a basis for the reheating of the sector in a predictable way and based on specialized scientific opinion.

In addition, although the studies point to the improvement of the national economic scenario, in general, it is up to the government to provide the necessary partnership to support this economic segment, which is so important for the development of our city, the State and the country.

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