

THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON TOURISM IN THE CITY OF SARAJEVO (BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA)

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Abstract. This paper examines the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on tourism in the city of Sarajevo and presents all relevant facts related to the subject. The analysis was conducted for the purpose of assessing the pandemic impact on Sarajevo as a tourist destination. The study was conducted in a timely and correct manner, and is described in all its stages, from the state of the tourist offer prior to the coronavirus pandemic to the impact itself and the consequences of the coronavirus. Based on the conducted research, it was concluded that tourism is among the most vulnerable sectors and that the impact of the pandemic on the tourist offer of Sarajevo was intensely felt, not only in economic terms, but also on the psychological state and behaviour of people working in the tourism sector. The main objective of this paper was to prove that the coronavirus pandemic has affected negatively the tourist traffic of Sarajevo.

1. INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 is a viral respiratory disease caused by the new coronavirus SARS-CoV-2.¹ The identity of the first person infected with the virus has not been officially confirmed, but it is suspected that the virus was present among the population of the Chinese city of Wuhan in November 2019. The first case in Bosnia and Herzegovina was reported on March 5, 2020.² The COVID-19 pandemic still takes a toll on all aspects of human life and on all sectors of the global economy without exception. Tourism has been among the hardest hit of all the economic sectors affected by the pandemic (International Labour Organization, 2022). Perhaps among its most notable effects is the impact on the tourism sector, such as travel bans and lockdowns in order to implement social exclusion measures in all efforts to prevent the further rapid spread of disease, and increase the efficiency of national health systems. By 2022, multiple highly effective vaccines had become available and had been used in countries around the world, as SARS-CoV-2 has undoubtedly become the most thoroughly studied virus in history. However, with progress, unforeseen problems have also arisen - disinformation, the anti-vaxxer movement, the refusal to wear protective masks, and the politically motivated interference disguised as knowledge (Alexandridi *et al.*, 2022). According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), the global pandemic, the first of its kind in a new era of interconnectedness, has jeopardised 100 million jobs worldwide. Tourism-dependent countries are likely to feel the

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¹ https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/your-health/about-covid-19/basics-covid-19.html?fbclid=IwAR17Jw-A87ZisdM5326W3Lxd_3QFRaruOz2P_9X1F_gdSdwIuecCzk_R1JU

² <https://ba.n1info.com/english/news/a414110-bosnia-confirms-its-first-case-of-coronavirus/>

negative effects of the crisis much longer than other economies. The pandemic has disproportionately affected direct contact services that are crucial to the tourism sector; these services will continue to be affected for a long term (Beshudi, 2020).

The main question for this paper is what impact has the coronavirus pandemic had on the tourism sector of the City of Sarajevo? Sarajevo is the main urban, demographic and economic-geographical centre of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Administratively and territorially, it consists of four municipalities: Stari Grad, Centar, Novi Grad and Novo Sarajevo.

It lies in the central part of the Sarajevo valley, which is a naturally isolated geomorphological unit in the southeast of the Sarajevo-Zenica valley. The city of Sarajevo is located in the central part of the northern temperate zone and covers an area of 141 km².³ The importance of tourism in Sarajevo is manifested through various types of factors such as economic, socio-cultural and environmental. The diversity of attractions, be they environmental resources, cultural or historical monuments, contribute the most value to tourism in Sarajevo.

Visiting these sites brings in significant capital to the budget of Sarajevo, thus enhancing the role of Sarajevo as a tourist destination (Brkić, Klopčić, Goga, 2014). COVID-19 has had a limited effect on tourism in Bosnia and Herzegovina, due to its relatively limited economic relevance as compared to some other Western Balkan economies (European Commission, 2020a). "...the drop in economic activity was mainly the result of a lower output in the trading an" (European Commission, 2020b).

In December 2020, the Government of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina assigned 30,000,000 KM (15,268,538.56 €) to the support of the tourism and catering sector in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁴ In September 2021, following the proposal of the Federal Ministry of the Environment and Tourism, they adopted a 500,000 KM (254,475.64 €) expenditure program based on a criteria for the allocation of funds around the idea of "Current transfers to other levels of government and funds – Transfer for the development of tourism in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina".⁵ In May 2020, the Tourism Association of the Canton of Sarajevo published a public call for the distribution of funds to hoteliers/accommodation facilities (800,000 KM/407,161.03 €), incoming travel agencies (150,000 KM/76,342.69 €) and tour guides (50,000 KM/25,447.56 €).⁶ In December 2021, the Tourism Association of the Canton of Sarajevo announced two public calls for co-financing and supporting projects that would contribute to the development and improvement of the tourist offer and potential, provide additional content for the local community, tourists and citizens, and ensure the extension of the winter tourism season in the Canton of Sarajevo. The total value of funds reached 807,000 KM (410,723.69).⁷

Many countries and their economic development are marked by different crises, but for the first time in decades, they are facing a common foe – the "COVID-19 crisis". This kind of crisis has taken the entire world by storm, precisely because it has been a global event. So far, pandemics have usually been regional and of a predicted duration.⁸ Therefore, many questions remain unanswered about the survival of certain sectors and activities, their recovery, sustainable development, the transformation of the economy and society, and all possible development scenarios.

³ <http://geografija.pmf.unsa.ba/o-odsjeku/o-sarajevu/>

⁴ <https://radiosarajevo.ba/vijesti/bosna-i-hercegovina/vlada-fbih-saopcila-kada/398546>

⁵ <https://www.federalna.ba/vlada-fbih-za-pomoc-oporavku-turizma-500-hiljada-km-5h4up>

⁶ <https://mp.ks.gov.ba/sites/mp.ks.gov.ba/files/javni-poziv.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.klix.ba/biznis/privreda/turisticka-zajednica-ks-osigurala-vise-od-800-000-km-za-oporavak-turizma/211203129>

⁸ <https://www.publichealth.columbia.edu/public-health-now/news/epidemic-endemic-pandemic-what-are-differences>

2. METHODOLOGY

For the purposes of this analysis, exploratory research was conducted aimed at business entities – tourism workers in the city of Sarajevo in the August 27 – September 10, 2021 period. The research was conducted through an online survey and a structured questionnaire created by the authors. The advantages of the online survey are reflected in a wide geographical coverage (whereas in this research the survey is limited only to city limits), fast accessibility, the possibility of respondents remaining anonymous, the speed of implementation, the unification of procedures for collecting, entering, controlling, correcting data, and cost rationalisation. The purpose of the survey is to better understand how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected tourism and the touristic offer of Sarajevo. In addition to the survey, annual and monthly tourist arrivals and overnight stays were analysed in the pre- and post-COVID-19 era. A comparison of arrivals and overnight stays of foreign tourists was also done for the Canton of Sarajevo (the city of Sarajevo and the municipalities of Hadžići, Ilidža, Ilijaš, Trnovo and Vogošća). Employers and executives in the tourism industry in Sarajevo were interviewed. Twenty tourism facilities were chosen as respondents, as they can provide the clearest picture of tourist traffic in Sarajevo.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

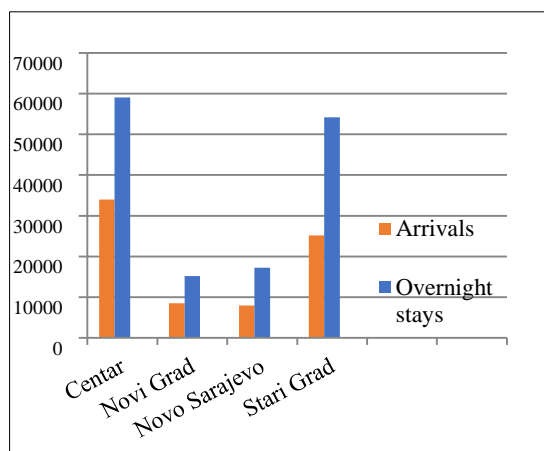
Tourist traffic, as an unavoidable component of tourism development, provides data on the movement of tourists within an area (Omerović, 2014). For the processing of tourist traffic and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on tourism in Sarajevo, pre-crisis statistical data was first considered. In 2019, Sarajevo was visited by 395,845 tourists, while the total number of overnight stays was 770,472. This year was a record year in terms of tourist traffic, when the largest number of tourist arrivals and overnight stays was confirmed. Sarajevo experienced the greatest increase during the monitored period from 2016 to 2019. Compared to 2018, the arrival of tourists increased by 16.8%, and the number of overnight stays by 22.8% (*Zavod za planiranje razvoja Kantona Sarajevo*, 2019). In terms of monthly analysis, April was the least populated month, when only 168 tourist arrivals in City of Sarajevo were recorded (Table 1). This situation is related to the beginning of the pandemic when the first cases of COVID-19 appeared in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Table 1

Monthly total tourist traffic in the city of Sarajevo for 2019 and 2020

Month	2019		2020	
	Arrivals	Overnight stays	Arrivals	Overnight stays
January	12,493	26,308	16,670	33,325
February	16,028	30,808	21,239	29,607
March	21,572	43,067	6,546	12,931
April	34,628	68,651	168	1,390
May	34,674	62,062	410	1,012
June	40,312	75,863	2,595	4,104
July	53,697	109,014	3,046	4,920
August	55,645	118,318	6,101	10,422
September	40,971	75,974	6,550	12,099
October	39,932	75,619	7,067	12,996
November	22,581	41,201	4,667	9,138
December	23,312	43,587	6,756	13,616
Total:	395,845	770,472	81,815	145,560

(Source: *Zavod za informatiku i statistiku Kantona Sarajevo*, 2021a).



As for tourist traffic, according to the municipalities of the city of Sarajevo, most arrivals and overnight stays were recorded in the Municipality of Centar. The total number of tourist arrivals was 33,944, while the number of overnight stays was 59,046. The municipality of Stari Grad was the second-most visited, with 25,157 total tourist arrivals and 54,154 overnight stays. Novi Grad was visited by 8,484 tourists who spent 15,154 nights there. Novo Sarajevo was visited by 7,968 who spent there 17,233 nights (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1 – Tourist traffic by municipality in 2020 (Source: *Zavod za informatiku i statistiku Kantona Sarajevo, 2021a*).

Due to epidemiological decisions, a higher number of tourist arrivals from neighbouring countries was recorded in contrast to distant countries. For comparison purposes, we took the arrivals and overnight stays of tourists from China, which in 2019 (before the pandemic) ranked first, with the highest number of arrivals (63,627), while in 2020 they ranked fifth, with 3,318 arrivals (Table 2). There was also an extreme decline in the total number of tourist arrivals and overnight stays compared to previous years. Foreign visitors accounted for 85,518 arrivals and 188,610 overnight stays in the total tourist traffic of the Canton of Sarajevo.

Table 2

Tourist traffic by the arrival of foreign visitors to the Canton of Sarajevo

	2019	Overnight stays	Arrivals	Overnight stays
	2019	2019	2020	2020
Croatia	59,161	104,312	18,590	37,669
Serbia	25,507	45,845	12,503	23,863
U.A.E.	26,158	83,960	8,750	24,643
Turkey	47,080	80,440	4,984	9,802
China	63,627	78,732	3,318	5,603
Montenegro	9,226	16,073	3,289	6,123
USA	23,484	50,388	3,163	6,217
Slovenia	26,767	44,850	3,057	6,009
Germany	23,566	48,644	2,758	5,732
Austria	12,037	22,356	1,612	3,342
Kuwait	7,216	26,904	1,450	6,719
Saudi Arabia	47,538	124,662	1,306	4,444
Italia	16,679	39,132	1,229	2,564
Great Britain	9,550	22,438	1,198	3,005
Netherlands	7,004	14,812	1,193	2,608
Sweden	7,415	16,717	947	2,130
France	6,222	12,822	829	1,976
Oman	7,441	19,644	584	1,543
Hungary	8,592	14,388	429	835
Poland	7,886	12,551	375	998
Spain	7,736	12,692	368	888
Japan	3,950	5,532	351	605
South Korea	3,198	3,703	64	116
Rest of the world	120,798	259,707	13,171	31,176
TOTAL	577,838	1,161,304	85,518	188,610

(Source: *Zavod za informatiku i statistiku Kantona Sarajevo, 2021b*).

With the spread of the coronavirus on a global level, the Crisis Staff of the Federal Ministry of Health issued orders and decisions in accordance with the epidemiological situation we were faced with. In order to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, they implemented important decisions for the benefit of human health in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which negatively affected the tourist traffic of the state and the city of Sarajevo for the past two years, as shown in Figure 2.

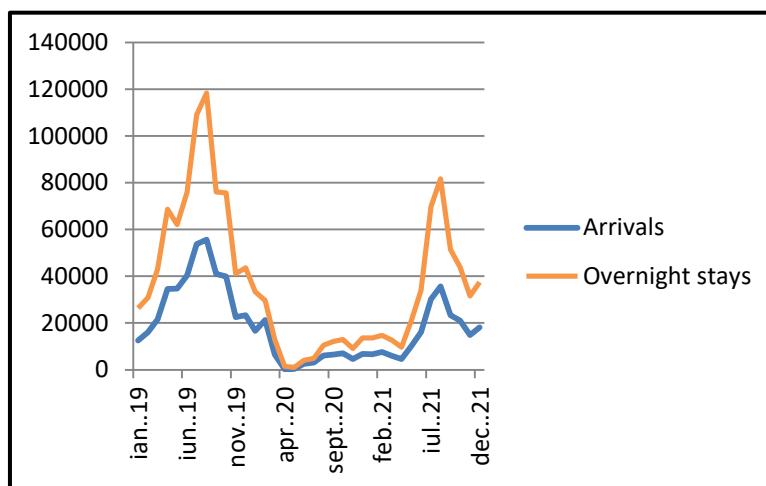


Fig. 2 – Tourist arrivals and overnight stays in the City of Sarajevo for 2019, 2020 and 2021
(Source: authors adapted according to the *Zavod za informatiku i statistiku Kantona Sarajevo*).

Some of these decisions were: a mandatory 14-day quarantine for all people wishing to enter the country, suspended public transport, meaning no trams, trolleybuses and buses, no outdoor movement for people under 18 and over 65 years of age.

With the introduction of the “curfew”, the movement of all people was prohibited and foreign citizens were forbidden from entering the country through the Sarajevo International Airport (Federalno ministarstvo zdravstva, 2021).

During July, citizens of EU member states and Schengen member states, as well as foreigners who had a multiple Schengen visa or a visa of the European Union, or a corresponding residence permit in the European Union and the Schengen area, were allowed to enter and stay in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The only condition was to have a negative coronavirus test, no older than 48 hours at the moment of entry into Bosnia and Herzegovina. Only citizens of the Republic of Croatia, the Republic of Serbia and Montenegro were able to enter Bosnia and Herzegovina just with their passports, without any additional testing, since May 2020.⁹

These decisions affected tourism workers, restaurants, cafes, nightclubs and discos the most, and their working hours were shortened because of the limited number of guests, and some were completely shut down during this problematic period. Wearing masks has been mandatory since the start of the pandemic, both in closed public spaces, and in the open if maintaining a distance of 2 meters between people is not possible (Krizni stožer/štab Federalnog ministarstva zdravstva, 2021). In 2021, the distribution of the COVID-19 vaccine began to combat the spread of the virus and reduce the mortality rate in infected people. The mass vaccination of the population in Bosnia and Herzegovina began on April 21, 2021¹⁰. The VTO rule (vaccinated, tested, overcome) was introduced, with the help of institutions in various sectors, mostly in the tourism industry. For the tourism industry, vaccines have been one of the most important aids for easier and safer travel.

⁹ <https://granpol.gov.ba/Content/Read/74?title=Covid-19>

¹⁰ <https://vlada.ks.gov.ba/aktuelnosti/novosti/od-srijede-u-zetri-pocinje-vakcinacija-stanovnika>

The recovery of tourism in Sarajevo occurred in early 2021. There is a noticeable increase in the number of tourists in the first three months with a small decline in April. The largest number of visitors since the beginning of the pandemic was recorded during the summer months. In August, Sarajevo was visited by 81,695 tourists. The biggest contribution to that was made by the Sarajevo Film Festival, when the accommodation capacities were overbooked. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a large increase in the index in August 2021, compared to August 2020, when most accommodation facilities were closed.

The survey was created on the Google Docs platform and distributed via email and social media profiles. It was sent to tour operators in Sarajevo via e-mail, together with a request for further distribution and sharing of the survey. The answers from the survey were used exclusively for scientific purposes. Anonymity was guaranteed, unless the respondent chose otherwise. Respondents were asked to answer the questions by circling the answer provided, writing in the blank field or answering the question asked. The survey took approximately five minutes to complete.

The key questions for this research were: “Did you register a reduced number of reservations and cancelled reservations?”, “Did you suffer financial damage to your business since the emergence of COVID-19?”, “Did the authorities help you in any way during the COVID-19 pandemic?”, “How much has the number of employees in your company decreased?” and “During the COVID-19 period, did you lower the prices of services compared to the previous season, and by how much (%)”. With the help of the answers to these questions, one may have concluded how much the pandemic negatively impacted tourism and the work of tourism entities in Sarajevo. The tourism entities surveyed through this questionnaire were hotels, hostels, travel agencies, boarding houses and Air B&B rooms/apartments/studio apartments. Of the twenty respondents, eight were travel agencies, six were hotels, three were hostels and four were landlords of rooms/apartments/studio apartments. No answers were recorded for boarding houses (Fig. 3).

Tourism is an industry that reacts quickly to crisis events, and the pandemic triggered a decrease in tourism activities after 10 years of consistent growth. Some tourism entities managed to overcome the obstacles posed by the pandemic, such as staff reductions, price decreases and the like, while others failed to cope with the pressure and had to close their branches. In the next segment of this paper, a survey is presented that contains the survey questions, as well as the answers provided by the people involved in the tourism industry.

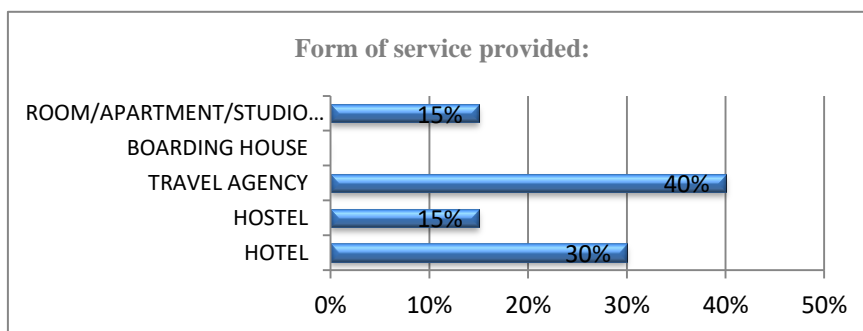
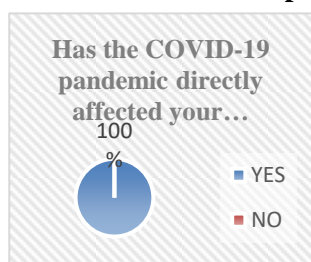


Fig. 3 – Tourism entities surveyed through the questionnaire (%).

1. Has the COVID-19 pandemic directly affected your business?



The same answer to this question was received from all respondents, namely "YES". The COVID-19 pandemic has affected all spheres of our lives, not just the tourism industry.

Fig. 4 – The direct impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the business of tourism entities (%).

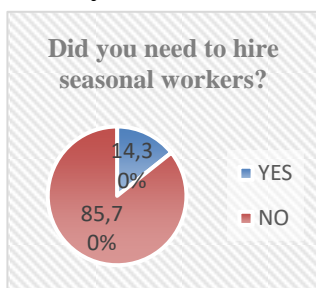
2. How has this affected your finances?

Regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, some of the answers were:

- ✓ "Tourism has completely stopped with the beginning of coronavirus"
- ✓ "The drop in revenue in 2020 was 90%"
- ✓ "The drop in traffic was 98%"
- ✓ "Loss of jobs and the closure of the agency"

As expected, respondents did not have positive answers to this question. With the restrictions came the significant devaluation of interest, inquiries, and the volume of work itself. Most respondents faced crippling financial losses, causing them to lay off their workers and eventually even close down their businesses.

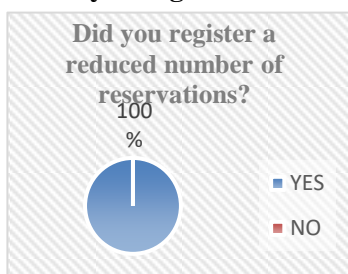
3. Did you need to hire seasonal workers?



The vast majority of surveyed tourism workers did not need to hire additional labour, which is a negative consequence of the pandemic – 85.7% of answers were NO, while 14.3% of answers were YES.

Fig. 5 – Employment of seasonal workers (%).

4. Did you register a reduced number of reservations?



The expected answers were obtained. The same answer to this question was received from all respondents, namely "YES". In 2021, the number of tourist reservations dropped two-fold.

Fig. 6 – A reduced number of reservations (%).

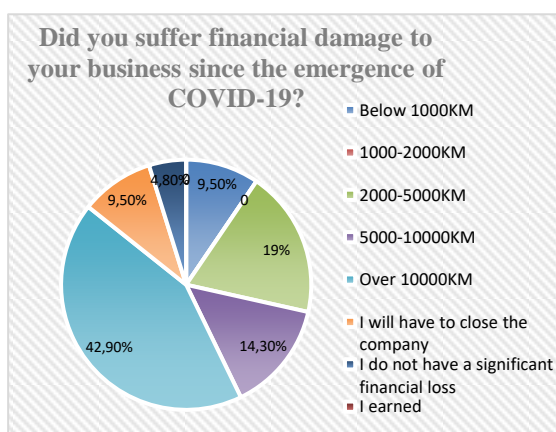
5. Did you register cancelled reservations?



The cancellation of reservations was registered by 95.2% of respondents, while 4.8% of respondents did not register cancelled reservations. This year's holidays were booked "last minute", because people were probably deciding whether or not to go on vacation at the last minute and depending on the epidemiological situation.

Fig. 7 – Cancelled reservations (%).

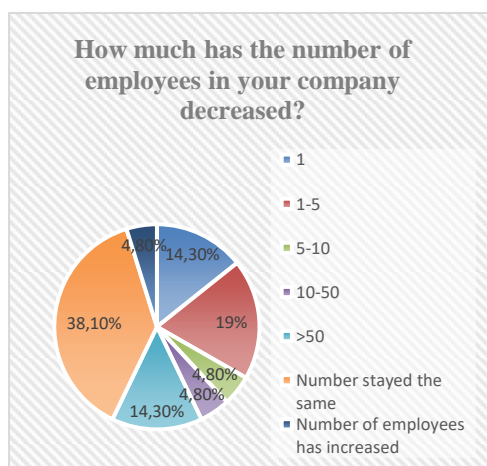
6. Did you suffer financial damage to your business since the emergence of COVID-19?



Different answers were obtained. The degree of financial loss ranged from under 1,000 KM (508.95€) to over 10,000 KM (5,089.51€). The highest percentage of responses was "more than 10,000 KM" (42.9%). None of the respondents answered that they earned more. However, 4.8% of them reported that they didn't have a significant financial loss.

Fig. 8 – Financial damage to business (%).

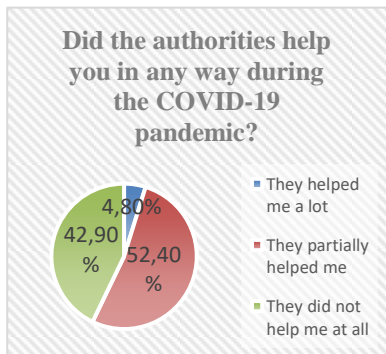
7. How much has the number of employees in your company decreased?



According to 38.10% of the answers, the number of workers remained the same. On the other hand, 4.8% of respondents said that their number of employees had increased. Due to the diversity of tourism entities and their volume of work, varying responses were registered.

Fig. 9 – The decrease in employed workers (%).

8. Did the authorities help you in any way during the COVID-19 pandemic?



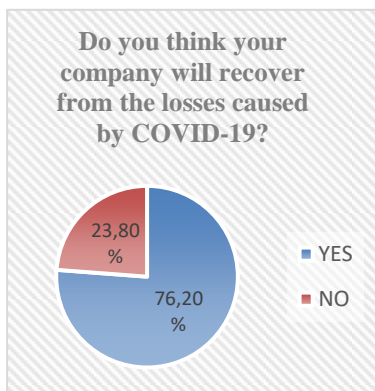
The graph shows that 52.4% of respondents answered that the authorities partially helped them, 42.9% of respondents answered that the authorities did not help them at all, while 4.8% of respondents answered that the authorities helped them significantly.

Fig. 10 – Government assistance for tourism entities during the pandemic period (%).

9. During the COVID-19 period, did you lower the prices of services compared to the previous season, and by how much (%)?

The query shows that 28.6% of respondents lowered their prices by 30 to 40%, 23.8% of respondents lowered said prices by 10 to 20%, 23.8% of respondents did not lower their prices, 19% of respondents lowered their prices by 20 to 30%, 4.8% of respondents dropped their prices by 40 to 50%. No response was recorded for “10%”, or for “We increased them”. Given these lower prices, some tourism workers have not been able to sell travel arrangements or rent out accommodation units.

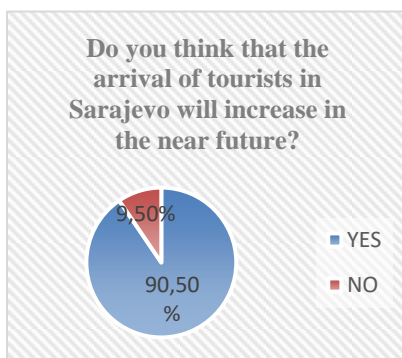
10. Do you think your company will recover from the losses caused by COVID-19?



The vast majority, 76.2% of respondents, believe that their company will recover from the losses caused by COVID-19, while 23.8% disagree.

Fig. 11 – Recovery (or lack thereof) from the losses caused by the pandemic (%).

11. Do you think that the arrival of tourists in Sarajevo will increase in the near future?



The majority of respondents, 90.5%, believe that the situation will improve, while 9.5% of respondents disagree.

Fig. 12 – Tourist arrival in Sarajevo (%).

Once the analysis was performed, the following conclusion may be reached: the coronavirus pandemic directly affected the business of tourism workers. This can be attested by the employment of seasonal workers where only 14.3% of respondents answered they needed to hire seasonal workers, while the other 87.5% did not. The cancellation of reservations and their decrease in numbers was registered by 95.2% of respondents. Additionally, 42.9% of respondents suffered financial damage in the amount of over 10,000 KM, while a large number of respondents said that they did not receive any help from the authorities, with some owners having to close down their company. The majority of respondents, 76.2% to be exact, lowered their prices compared to the previous season, prior to COVID-19. Although the data is not promising, 90.5% of respondents have hope for the improvement of the tourism sector. In order for it to bounce back, it is necessary to adopt sectoral development strategies and thus create the conditions for the most urgent start of economic recovery.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the overall analysis, the authors conclude that the impact of the pandemic on the tourist offer of Sarajevo was very much felt, not only in economic terms, but also when it comes to the psychological state and the behaviour of people working in the tourism sector. The implications of the pandemic are not limited to only human life and health, as it also affects people's livelihoods, causing the loss of jobs, as seen throughout the research, sparking enormous damage to all the sectors of the global economy, among which tourism is the most vulnerable. The reason for this is the measures taken to suppress the spread of the virus by banning flights, closing hotels almost all over the world and restricting the travel of non-fully vaccinated persons. This sector has encountered an incomparable number of cancellations and a sharp drop in demand due to government instructions to implement social distancing and quarantine.

There are many variants of the COVID-19 virus. The Alpha, Beta and Delta variants are the most well-known. However, according to the latest information, this may not be the end. That is, in December 2021, much time was dedicated to identifying whether the Omicron strain had reached Bosnia and Herzegovina, which was subsequently confirmed. Therefore, the following question arises: is the pandemic coming to an end? Experts predict that the mass vaccination of the population will reduce mortality and the spread of the pandemic. Already in some parts of the world, as well as in Bosnia and Herzegovina, there is an improvement in the tourism sector where the number of tourists visiting the capital is increasing every day, and their participation in tourist traffic increases the budget of the Canton of Sarajevo. This research identified the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the tourism sector taking as example the City of Sarajevo, where it was concluded that the spread of COVID-19 had substantial, possibly long-term consequences. The data in this scientific paper were obtained directly from the subjects most affected by the current global situation. Taking into account the example of positive world practice, Sarajevo should implement similar activities in order to revive cultural, entertainment and sports life, as well as tourism in general. Tourism in Bosnia and Herzegovina has the potential to alter the entire narrative when it comes to the country's economy. Sarajevo, as the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina that has a large tourist offer and ranks high in terms of providing tourist services, can significantly contribute to strengthening the country's tourism sector.

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