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IS ROMANIAN RURAL TOURISM RESILIENT TO EXTERNAL SHOCKS? CASE STUDY: COVID-19 PANDEMIC LOCKDOWNS AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES

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Abstract: *This paper documents the short- and medium-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on Romanian rural and urban tourism by analyzing the growth patterns in terms of arrivals before and after the lockdown period. The results show that some rural touristic destinations recovered to a greater extent than urban ones in the period following the lockdowns, showing that this external shock affected businesses in this sector and possibly consumer behavior.*

• Introduction

The Romanian rural tourism sector has seen significant growth recently, attracting domestic and international visitors interested in the country's scenic countryside and authentic experiences. As such, rural tourism in Romania, celebrated for its landscapes, cultural heritage, and local community engagement, has grown as a sustainable alternative to mass tourism.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted global travel and imposed strict lockdowns, challenging the sector's resilience. This paper examines how Romanian rural tourism adapted to these disruptions from a touristic arrivals perspective, thus analyzing its capacity for resilience and future development potential.

• Material and method

This study utilized data from the TEMPO online database to analyze tourist arrivals in Romania across pre-pandemic, pandemic, and post-pandemic periods, focusing on rural and urban tourism trends. By aggregating monthly data by destination, the study identified fluctuations in tourism activity over time.

The pre-pandemic period ended with the WHO's March 2020 pandemic declaration, the pandemic period covered the ensuing months of lockdowns and travel restrictions, and the post-pandemic period began in March 2022 when restrictions were lifted.

Limitations of this approach include potential biases in the publicly available data and the lack of individual-level or qualitative insights.

• Results and discussions

Table 1: Arrivals structure and dynamics by destination

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Urban	10.911.055	4.993.872	7.862.986	9.880.820	10.941.265
Rural	2.357.701	1.341.529	2.167.841	2.474.317	2.706.002
% Urban	82,23	78,82	78,38	79,97	80,17
% Rural	17,76	21,17	21,61	20,02	19,82
% change urban		-61,61	-27,66	4,26	5,41
% change rural		-43,10	-8,05	4,94	14,77

Urban areas accounted for the majority of touristic arrivals throughout the period, though their share slightly decreased in 2020 and 2021, reflecting a relative shift towards rural destinations.

The percentage of arrivals to rural areas increased in 2020 and 2021, suggesting that more tourists were seeking rural destinations during these years, possibly due to pandemic-related preferences.

From 2022 onwards, the share of urban touristic arrivals began to rise again, indicating a return of tourists to urban areas as conditions normalized.

Recovery began in 2022 (+4.95%) and showed a significant increase in 2023 (+14.77%), indicating a strong rebound in rural tourism, possibly due to increased interest in less crowded and more nature-oriented destinations post-pandemic. Urban tourism maintained stable levels in 2022 and 2023 (+4,26% and 5,41%), showing limited growth compared to rural areas

• Conclusions

The data highlights the significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on touristic arrivals, with a marked decline in 2020 followed by a gradual recovery in subsequent years. The shift towards rural tourism during the height of the pandemic and the eventual return to urban tourism are notable trends.