

APPLICABILITY OF ANTI-COVID-19 MEASURES AND THEIR IMPACT UPON THE PERCEPTIONS ON THE SAFETY AND IMAGE OF THE STRUCTURE OF TOURISM CASE STUDY; ALBANIA

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Abstract: At present, Albania lacks original studies that examine the role of safety and security as an important factor in the competitiveness of a tourist destination. In order to fill this gap, the article aims to measure the perception level regarding the recognition of the Safety and Security pillar and its standards, to assess the role of the image of Albania as a significant component in tourism development and to analyse the relationship of the image of Albania to security and performance of the state institutions. The methodology used combines information collected from interviews of the actors contributing to the Albanian tourism sector with the related official documentation and literature reviews. The paper supports application of the factor analysis method regarding perception of the actors and interest groups involved in the tourism sector. The findings indicate that the Safety and Security pillar standards are not familiar to the actors contributing to the sector of tourism in Albania. The main performance components in the tourism sector are the security and performance of the state institutions.

Key words: safety and security, Albania, tourism development, Anti-Covid-19 measures, state institutions

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INTRODUCTION

Peace, safety, and security are the primary conditions for successful tourism development (Mansfeld and Pizam, 2006). Studies related to these aspects highlight the fact that: "tourists spend money and time to have comfort, fun and peace" (Bayar and Yener, 2019), thus security is considered a prerequisite for tourism (Kóvári and Zimányi, 2010). Researcher Peter E. Tarlow described the modern-day tourism as "... the world's largest peacetime industry", but once tranquillity/peace is broken, tourism is the first fragile industry to be affected by insecurity (Tarlow, 2014:1).

Various studies attest the importance of security in terms of "safety destination", especially the role of authorities and institutions regarding safety in pandemic for a tourism destination (Sigala, 2020; Gössling et al., 2020; Hall et al., 2020). The tourism industry has suffered from the pandemic mainly as a consequence of actions implemented by governments to mitigate the virus spread (Preko and Gyepi-Garbrah, 2021). The issue of safety and security is also important to the image of a tourist destination and for visitor satisfaction (Hamarnah and Jeřábek, 2018). The perception that a tourist destination is safe has been seen by researchers as a tool for tourism marketing as well. This is about trust, whether a place is safe or not (Tarlow, 2014). Considering the ambiguity of the terms "tourism" and "travel and tourism", we should not be surprised that in a complex industry, such as tourism, the expression "tourism security" also suffers from the lack of a precise definition as stated by David Beirman.

The lack of a clear definition as regards terminology does not mean that tourism security practitioners are not aware of their primary responsibility, which is Safety and Security. What he means is that often there are questions about who makes what and determination of the boundaries of different roles (Tarlow, 2014).

According to Beirman, "The holistic approach to tourism security starts with development of the sense of consciousness concerning tourist security during the travel" (Tarlow, 2014). Further on, it extends to every link of the tourist industry chain, starting with those providing services of accommodation, food, transport, events, tourist areas and tourist etiquette and manners (Tarlow, 2014); (Tasnim et al., 2022). Technically, the term 'Safety and Security' covers the main threats to tourists. Very often in the travel and tourism literature, it is divided between health, security and protection. This division mainly reflects the background and orientation of the various disciplines operating in this field (Mastroianni, 2013: 6). Given that the definition of tourism security is similar to the lexicon of the Albanian language, we referred to this definition in our paper.

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The appearance of the world pandemic COVID-19 has raised sharp and urgent issues that are directly related to life safety and world security in general. The violation of security is also reflected in the performance of the economy and its sectors. Despite the measures taken to deal with the pandemic as an international and national response, the tourism sector turns out to be the most affected by this pandemic. In these circumstances, in front of Albania as a new tourist destination and under development is the necessity of preserving, strengthening and increasing competitiveness in tourism to face the strong regional and global competition, while maintaining the image of a safe destination. Promoting an image of a safe destination for health has a different effect on the psychology of local and incoming tourists (Metaxas et al., 2022).

During the pandemic (Caber et al., 2020) found that the safety image of Greece positively influenced tourists' choices. It is precisely the relationship between the perception and the trust of tourists that has recently attracted the attention of researchers (Metaxas et al., 2022). According to (Artigas et al., 2017), trust is a multidimensional construct that includes tourists, locals, and public and private institutions of a destination that are expected to be honest, benevolent, and competent. Thus, different methods are required to approach these two market segments (Metaxas et al., 2022) and to measure the critical impact of tourists' safety perceptions regarding the destination on their travel intention and their health protective behavior. Our findings highlight the critical impact of tourists' safety perceptions regarding the destination on their travel intention and their health protective behavior.

There is a gap in the tourism literature due to the limited studies related to the impact of safety and security on the image of a tourist destination during the development of the global COVID-19 pandemic, and even less for new tourist destinations such as Albania. Even the few studies that have been developed during the pandemic focus on historical tourist destinations. Based on the above, in the conditions when the development of the pandemic was at its peak and social distancing made contact with international tourists impossible, we found it appropriate to measure the level of perceptions of employees of all job categories in the tourism sector that simultaneously are potential domestic tourists, related to the role of security as an important factor in the performance of the tourism sector and the impact that the security and performance of state institutions in the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic has on strengthening the image of Albania as a country with security in tourism .

Our effort is focused on finding the links between the applicability of anti-Covid-19 measures and the impact they have on perceptions of safety and the image of the tourist structure, keeping in mind that the effective management of the pandemic by the government significantly affects the travel intentions of tourists (Zheng et al., 2021) and tourists do not hesitate to visit crowded events or places as long as health protocols are respected (Rončák et al., 2021).

The analysis of these events is correlated with security aspects, which is a contemporary and current approach and have dominated research designs over the past few decades (Spencer and Tarlow, 2021; Wang et al., 2019). Furthermore, the International Association of Tourism Safety and Security (IATSS) reports on a lot of uncertainties about safety and security in tourism destinations (IATSS, 2020). Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to understand the importance of the perception of the "safety and security" component in creating credibility, increasing the image as a reliable destination and the performance of the tourism sector in Albania under the conditions of the development of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is in the same line with the argument that researchers give that the trust in the effective management of the pandemic by the government significantly affects the travel intentions of tourists (Zheng et al., 2021).

Likewise, (Jensen and Svendsen, 2016) asserted that social trust motivates tourists' visit intentions to destinations and contributes to perceptions of destination safety. Independent of this argument, there are also attitudes like that of (Abraham et al., 2020) who argue that local tourists may lose their confidence and avoid local destinations if their government fails to manage the pandemic. Health protective measures mitigate reduced travel intentions during health crises (Lee et al., 2012).

The objectives that guide this study are:

1. To distinguish the degree of recognition of technical safety and security and its standards by employees in the tourism sector.
2. The reliability of foreign tourist operators compared to the information conveyed by Albanian tourist operators on the safety of tourism in Albania.
3. To analyze the degree of influence of variables such as political instability/inter-institutional conflicts/crime rate/road accident rate/the role of the media in the image of Albania/and political choices that affect the increase of the image for tourist safety in Albania.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Considering that, in general, security is about preventing injury or harm to people and / or groups (Wilks, 2003a) and knowing that terms used in the field of security and protection can have different meanings in different countries, then we first defined the term "Safety and Security" according to the lexicon of the Albanian language. According to the English-Albanian dictionary, the word "safety" is translated "siguri" (Stefanllari, 1999). According to the lexicon of the Albanian language (Thomai et al., 2006), for the name "security" there is an easy answer; the name security indicates a situation without any sudden danger or harm, absence of any doubt, to be safe, without any hesitation, and the term "security" according to the dictionary of the Albanian language is translated "safety", the name safety in the Albanian language means the set of measures taken to protect against the dangers and accidents at work. Regarding the meaning of the concept "Image", according to the dictionary of the Albanian language (Thomai et al., 2006), it is about the opinion or imagination created for something, in this case the imagination related to the image of Albania as a safe destination tourist. This concept is inevitably associated with the good name / reputation that produces "safety" for tourism in Albania. This concept is inevitably associated with the good name / reputation that produces "safety" for tourism in Albania.

In many communities, tourism serves as an important contributor to local, regional and national economies, and in some cases, it is the main contributor to the foreign exchange earnings (Mayer and Vogt, 2016). Due to the fact that security incidents can have a huge impact on the economy, they are considered to be of great concern to local, regional and national governments. Such a concern may affect the change of government policies in the tourism sector, its relative role in the economy and the level of involvement that governments wish to exercise after realizing the fragility and potential instability of this economic sector. Host governments at affected destinations typically monitor and assess the impact of security incidents on a dynamic basis. In addition, these governments:

- (a) begin implementing new and / or improved security measures aimed at preventing and / or reducing the occurrence of future security incidents occurring in tourist areas;
- (b) assist in the damage control process, when the security situation deteriorates;
- (c) provide ad hoc financial assistance to cope with all major negative consequences of safety-induced tourism crises.

Taking into account that “the phenomenon of tourism has to do with unique perceived experiences, and “Safety and Security” has more to do with our perceptions of them rather than with concrete data (Tarlow, 2014), the paper was based on the application of the factor analysis method in respect of the perception of the actors or interest groups involved in the tourism sector. Below are given the steps followed on the realization of this paper as in Figure 1.



Figure 1. The flowchart method

The data collection method for this research was: Online questionnaire for reasons of application of anti-COVID measures, such as social distancing as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic; Review of existing literature; Data obtained from state institutions, reports, studies; The sampling determination was based on Cochran formula

$$n = \frac{P(1 - P) z^2}{(e)^2} \text{ (Cochran, 1977)}$$

This formula is used when the population is large and unknown (Uakarn et al., 2021). Assuming the maximum variability, which is equal to 50% (p =0.5) and the different confidence level, described in Table 1, precision sample sizes can be different.

According to the last official data on 2017, the number of employees in the tourism industry was 93.500 (MTE, 2019). Due to factors such as migration, informality, Covid-19 and others, this figure may have changed. The size of the sample (n) received and analyzed was 200 questionnaires, deemed acceptable for the study. The target population for the study / survey / questionnaire are employees of all categories of work in the tourism sector as: a) waiter, (front line employees), b) bartender, c) hall manager, d) guide, e) entrepreneurs in the tourism sector, f) officials of public administration of tourism sector, g) local administration employees, h) CSO, and i) academic staff. For the data processing, the SPSS Version 2020 program and model “Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method; with Kaiser Normalization” were used. The structure of the questionnaire is organized in four parts:

Table 1. Sample Size Calculation (Source: Sarmah and Hazarika, 2012)

Confidence level	Sample size (n)		
	e =.03	e =.05	e =.1
95%	1067	384	96
99%	1849	666	166

The first part comprises the data on the gender and age of respondents, because the INSTAT data show that the number of women employed in the tourism chain has increased in recent years, and a substantial part of the persons employed as supporting staff in the tourism sector in Albania are students from the vocational high schools of hotel and tourism management belonging to the age group over 15 years. In addition to age and gender information, there was also collected information on the educational level of the respondents in relation to the job they perform within the structure of the tourism sector and the degree of the position they hold in the tourist chain.

The second part of the questionnaire aims to collect data on the level of perception by all stakeholders regarding the recognition of the "Safety and security" pillar and its standards. To measure the perception degree the Likert scale with seven points was used, which includes options like; strongly disagree, disagree, somewhat disagree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat agree, agree and strongly agree. The seven-point whipping was chosen because its use ensured ease of use, more accuracy in response, and getting a better reflection of respondents’ true evaluation.

The use of the Likert scale aims to measure the degree of perception of respondents regarding the extent of the impact of variables, such as political instability / inter-institutional conflicts / crime rate / road accident rate / role of media in the image of Albania / and political elections, held in April, which coincides with the preparations for the opening of the new summer tourist season and the signing of contracts with foreign operators who bring tourists from different European countries during the summer season in Albania. The Likert scale also measures the degree of perception of stakeholders regarding natural disaster variables, such as the November 26, 2019 earthquake and the global COVID-19 pandemic and their economic impact on tourism enterprises.

In the third part of the questionnaire, using the same measurement scale, they are asked about their perception of the drafting of the anti-covid protocol package and the impact of its application on tourism services, on strengthening the image of Albania as a safe country in tourism, as well as on the costs incurred by tourism enterprises.

In the fourth part, the questionnaire, again through the Likert scale, collects data from the perception of foreign tour operators regarding the implementation of "Safety and Security" standards in Albania and the impact of the national political climate, road safety, crime rate and corruption on the conclusion of contracts for the foreign tourist flows in Albania as well as on the extent these variables affect the image of Albania in relation to tourism security.

The questionnaire was completed during an eight-week period, which corresponded to:

first - holding of the general political elections;

second - at the height of the pandemic development in the country;

third - the time when all the segments of the tourism sector are preparing for the opening of the new tourist season, especially the time when travel agencies enter into contracts and close bookings for the arrival of foreign tourists in Albania for the summer season. To cover the entire target group with a questionnaire, we contacted the selected sample via e-mail.

Sample Characteristics

The respondents' answers indicate that in the Albanian tourism sector the most active part of the working population is employed, since 56.1% belong to the age group 15-30 years and 29.9% to the age group 30-45 years. 85% of the employed live in the urban areas, and out of these 64.7% are women. Less than half of the respondents, 46.2% hold a Bachelor's degree, while the respondents holding a Master's degree of the second level have an equal share of 17.7% in both the Professional Master and the Master of Science. About 30.2% the respondents turn out to have work experience in tourist enterprises from one to 5 years of work, while 25.8% of the respondents turn out to have over 10 years of work experience, and 23.6% less than one year of work. These data show that about 60% of the sample has considerable experience in the tourism sector making their perception take value in the study output. Referring to employment categories, it results that about 75% of the sample are directly associated to the tourism sector. Specifically, about 25.3% of them are managers of tourist companies; 22.5% are supporting staff in the tourism sector (waiter, bartender, hall manager, sanitary, tour guide, etc.); 13.2% are entrepreneurs in the tourism sector; about 25% of the sample represent others, for whom we have no knowledge of the job position they perform or their connection to the tourism sector.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Recognition of the term "Safety and Security"

Regarding the question: Do you know the term "Safety and Security" in tourism, 47% of the respondents say they do not know, of which 20.5% do not know at all, whereas 26.5% are not sure. Of the 53% of the respondents who state that they know the term, about 30.9% of them are not familiar with the standards ISO 9001 (Quality Management Systems), ISO 14001 (Environmental Management), HACCP (Risk Analysis), ISO 22000 (Food Safety Management), ISO 27001 (Information Security) contained in this pillar. While 28.4% recognize only ISO 9001 (Quality Management Systems) standard, 11.7% ISO 14001 (Environmental Management), 13% HACCP (Risk Analysis), and standards ISO 22000 (Food Safety Management), ISO 27001 (Information Security) contained in this pillar are recognized by 8% of the respondents for each. The findings show that about 80% of the samples do not know the standards of the "Safety and Security" pillar. Referring to the characteristics of the sample the results indicate that at least 50% of the employed in the tourism sector are not aware of the standards. From the data analysis, it is noticed that 28.4 of the respondents know ISO 9001 standard that relates to Quality Management Systems. The small-scale knowledge of the two standards that are closely related to tourism sector, such as Environmental Management and Food Safety Management, seems to be problematic, where the data are extremely low 11.7% and 8%. From the findings, it turns out that the connoisseurs of the standards belong to the category of tourism venture entrepreneurs and managers.

1.1. The level of the request for information from foreign tour operators regarding the fulfillment of the "Safety and Security" pillar in tourism, in Albania.

From the data processing (Figure 2) it is ascertained that 60.5% of respondents state that before concluding contracts for the new tourist season with foreign operators, they are required to provide information regarding the level of fulfillment of the Safety and Security standards in Albania, and 19.5% of them affirm that they have no request in this regard, while 20% don't have information regarding the question.

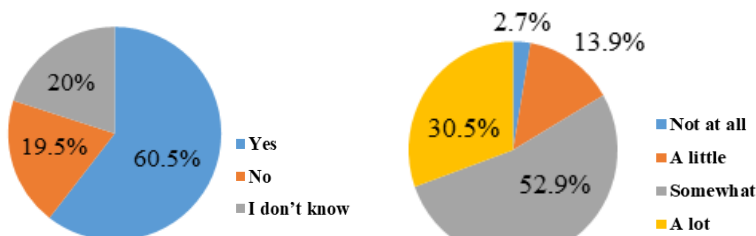


Figure 2. The level of the request for information from foreign tour operators regarding the fulfillment of the "Safety and Security" pillar in tourism

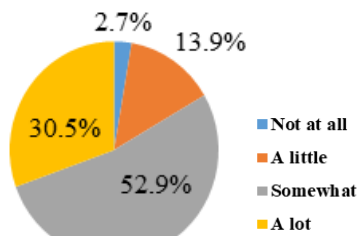


Figure 3. Trustfulness of foreign tour operators versus the information provided by the Albanian tour operators on tourism safety and security in Albania

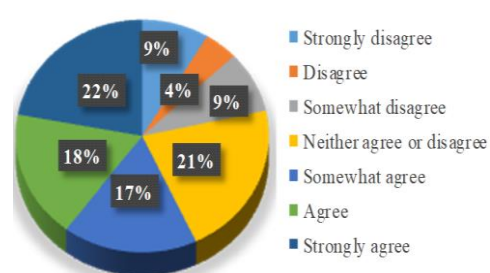


Figure 4. The impact of pandemic management perception on improving Albania's image. Respondents in %

1.2. Trustfulness of foreign tour operators versus the information provided by the Albanian tour operators on tourism safety and security in Albania Regarding the question:

Do foreign tour operators trust the information you convey on tourism safety in Albania? 52.9% of the respondents express themselves “somewhat”, 35% say they trust them “a lot”, and 13% of the respondents affirm “a little”, as in Figure 3.

1.3. The impact of pandemic management on improving Albania's image as a safe haven for tourism.

From the survey data processing (Figure 4), it is noticed that 22% of the respondents think that it is absolutely true that management of the pandemic has affected improvement of the image of Albania as a safe country in tourism, 17.7% think that it is mostly true, 17.2 % think it's true to some extent. But there are also others making up 21.5% of the respondents who think they cannot say right or wrong. Whereas 8.6% of the respondents think it is absolutely untrue.

1.4. The drafting of the anti-COVID protocol and its application in tourism services influenced the strengthening of Albania's image as reinforce of the idea that Albania is a safe country in tourism.

The perception of the respondents (Figure 5) that: The drafting of the anti-COVID protocol and its application in tourism services strengthened the image of Albania as a reinforce of the idea that Albania is a safe country for tourism, shows that 25% of them think it is somewhat true, 19.8% mostly true and 16.6% absolutely true, but 17.1% cannot say whether this is true or false, while 9.6% of the respondents perceive it as somewhat untrue.

1.5. Increased financial costs from implementation of the anti-COVID package in tourism enterprises.

Regarding the perception of the increased costs of tourist enterprises because of implementation of the anti-COVID package, 26.1% of the respondents think that their costs have increased by 5% -10%, 18.3% think they have increased by 20%, 17.8% consider an increase by 10-20%, but 18.9% think the increase to be less than 5%, and the same percentage, i. e 8.9% think that application of the protocol has had no costs at all (Figure 6).

1.6. Assessment of revenue losses from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Pandemic losses for 44.9% of the respondents are estimated to be at over 40%, 12.8% of the respondents estimate it at 30-40% and 17.6% estimate it at 20-30%, while 8% of the respondents consider it 10-20%. There is a category of the respondents, 7.5% of them, who estimate the extent of losses to have another value, but they cannot determine it (Figure 7).

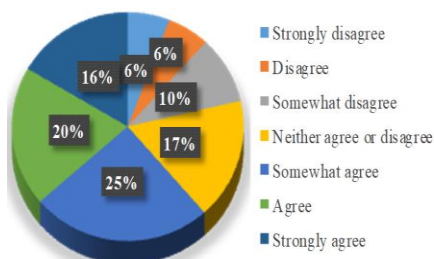


Figure 5. The Anti -COVID Protocol as a tool for strengthening Albania's image as a safe country in tourism. Respondents in %

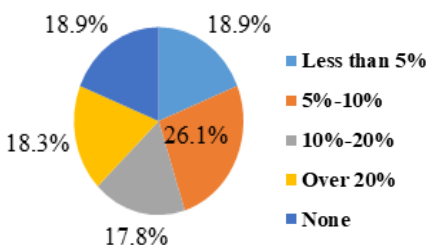


Figure 6. Increased financial costs from implementation of the anti-Covid package in tourism enterprises

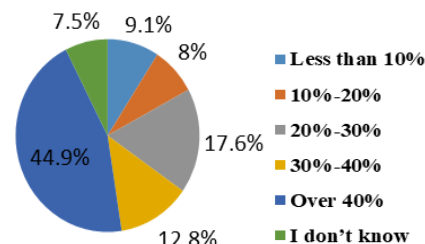


Figure 7. Assesment of revenue losses from the Covid 19 pandemic

2. Factor analysis of research data

We have used SPSS; as a statistical software suite developed by IBM for data management, advanced analytics, multivariate analysis, ‘IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, version XX (IBM Corp., Armonk, N.Y., USA) (Gouda, 2015) “Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method; with Kaiser Normalization, through the "Eigen-value" method, it turns out that there are two main components of performance in the tourism sector: Security and performance of the state institutions. Table 5 in the following presents the groups of variables where it is possible to identify these two most important components. The first set of questions identifies security as the main component with the most significant weight in the performance of the tourism sector.

Table 5. Structure matrix -variance explanation questionnaire variables on the safety and image of the structure of tourism case study: Albania

Structure matrix -variance explanation questionnaire variables on the safety and image of the structure of tourism case study: Albania	Component	
	1	2
Drafting anti-COVID protocol and its implementation in tourism services influenced on strengthening the image of Albania as a reinforcer of the idea that Albania is a safe country in tourism	.863	.298
Has the pandemic management had an impact on improving Albania's image as a safe haven for tourism	.817	.260
The support provided by the Albanian government for the recovery of the damages from the November 26 earthquake and the measures taken affected promotion of the country's image as a place with a safe tourism.	.780	.288
Albanian media has played a positive role in the image of Albania as a safe place for tourism.	.650	.325
How do you evaluate the impact of the political climate in Albania as an important factor for tourism security.	.602	.391
The ongoing conflicts between the executive and the presidency have shaken Albania's image as a safe destination in the last three years.	.331	.817
The lack of cooperation among state institutions has shaken the image of Albania as a safe destination in the world.	.280	.750
Holding general elections one month before the opening of the summer tourist season affects the tourist image of Albania as a safe destination.	.443	.657
Has the earthquake of November 26 affected the image of Albania as a safe tourist place	.165	.501

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Oblimin with Kaiser Normalization.

While in the second group of questions, another important factor is identified, that affects the success or performance in the sector of tourism. Referring to Table 3, both factors: security and political stability (performance of state

institutions) explain 53.3% of performance in the tourism sector (39.072% of performance in tourism is determined by safety and security and 14.3% by performance of state institutions).

Table 3. Total Variance Explained

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings ^a
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total
1	3.517	39.072	39.072	3.517	39.072	39.072	3.216
2	1.282	14.247	53.319	1.282	14.247	53.319	2.411
3	.914	10.159	63.478				
4	.756	8.399	71.877				
5	.657	7.300	79.176				
6	.588	6.534	85.711				
7	.528	5.867	91.578				
8	.451	5.007	96.585				
9	.307	3.415	100.000				

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis

a. When components are correlated, sums of squared loadings cannot be added to obtain a total variance

Confirmed by "KMO and Bartlett's Test", the results provided in Table 4 are considered important. This indicates that the respondents' answers to the questionnaire content were approximate.

DISCUSSIONS

Albania is a very new tourist destination compared to other countries in the Mediterranean tourist region that have a tradition, such as Spain, France, Italy, Greece and Turkey, as well as other countries in the Balkan region, such as Croatia and Montenegro. Referring to the data provided by the World

Economic Forum in the Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index, 2019, all Albania indicators related to competitiveness in the field of tourism show improvement (WEF, 2019). The report displays an increase in performance measurement parameters from 3.2 points in 2015 and 3.4 points in 2017 to 3.6 points in 2019 (WEF, 2019). Of the 14 indicators measured, the Safety and Security pillar has the highest performance with 5.8 points out of 7 points which is the maximum rating (WEF, 2019). Regarding the Safety & Security pillar, Albania has performed very well compared to countries in the region, increasing competitiveness with highly developed tourism countries, such as Italy or Greece, as in Figure 8.

Table 4. KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy		.832
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	442.627
	df	36
	Sig.	.000

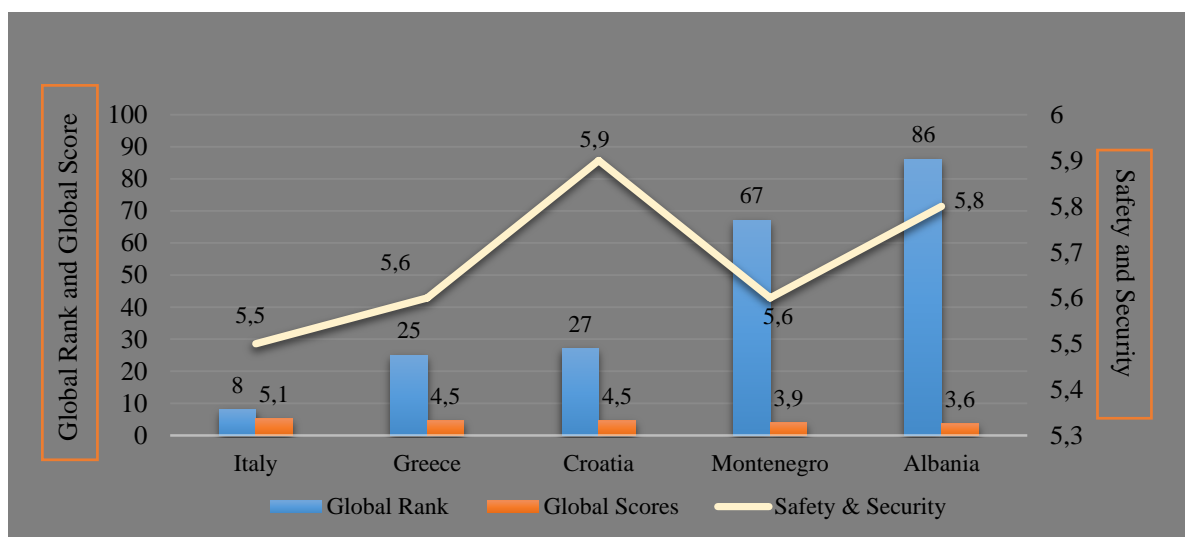


Figure 8. The Safety & Security Pillar Performance

(Source: Built by the authors according to Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index 2019 data; World Economic Forum, 2019)

Data obtained from INSTAT show a substantial increase in the number of visitors from European countries, and in particular from the region during the last decade. In the period 2014-2018, the number of foreign visitors with overnight stays (including visitors who stay at least one night in a hotel or other accommodation facilities, at their relatives' homes, etc.) reached about 21 million, with an increase of 10.7% in 2018. Whereas, the number of daily visitors for the period 2014-2018 reached about 1.7 million. Only during 2018, the inflows of foreign citizens were 15.8% more than in 2017 and in this regard, the local tourism entrepreneurs state that this year is considered the best one for Albanian tourism in the last three decades (INSTAT, 2019). Tourism contributes to the economic development of the country with a direct contribution of 8.5% to GDP and an indirect added value of 26.2%. Tourism is also the sector with the highest employment potential, where 93,000 were directly employed and over 291,000 were the total employees in the sector

during 2017 (MTE, 2019). In some areas of Albania, economic development is deeply dependent on the tourism sector. The actors that influenced on the growth of Albania's image as a favourite tourist destination are:

1. The 2013 elections marked a turning point in the country's political image, because of the normal transfer of the country's administration from one political force to another. Referring to the political stability index for 2014, Albania reached a maximum of 0.49 points, thus reflecting political stability. Monitoring of this indicator shows that the maximum score obtained in relation to political stability was achieved in 2014, considering that the average for the whole period is -0.1 points¹.

2. In 2014, Albania gained the status of a candidate country for the achievements in the undertaken reforms (EC, 2019).

3. From 2015 onwards, incentive policies have been implemented accompanied by "promotional campaigns with foreign tour operators and foreign media" (Anadolu Agency, 2015), as a result of announcing tourism a strategic target for the economic development of the country on the part of the government.

The above-mentioned factors contributed to improvement of Albania's image as a safe and stable destination up to the threshold of the COVID-19 spread, which was a fatal threat to billions of people in the world, severely shaking public safety. During the pandemic, governments often concluded that the preventive and mitigation action programs they had adopted were ineffective, prompting a change in approach to ensuring public safety (Kowalski, 2020). Matilda Hellman's doctrine, states that it is necessary to update the measures taken, writing that "the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed a demand for an updated overview of the nature, functions and limitations of social control policies in the 2020s" (Hellman, 2020). This doctrine finds application in the case of Albania, when the Albanian government drafts the protocol to be followed by the travelers entering the territory of Albania during COVID-19 (MEFA, June 2020) after the three-month period March-May of total closure. According to the protocol "Albania has opened the borders on June 1, 2020" and notifies all citizens crossing the territory of the Republic of Albania by land that:

The obligation of 14-day quarantine is not applied, except in special cases by order of health authorities;

- No specific documents are required at the entry border points to enter the Albanian territory;
- At the entry border points, it will be measured only the temperature, which should not exceed 37.5 degrees. If this figure is exceeded, then it will not be possible to continue the journey;
- In case of entry into Albania from the land borders, information on the regulations of other countries, where it will be crossed during the trip, should be taken into account, as they vary from country to country.
- Citizens traveling by land to Albania should obtain prior information at the Embassies of the countries through which they will transit, to be clear on the rules set by these countries in the context of the pandemic;
- Individuals must be equipped with masks to enter the Mother Teresa Airport terminal;

Children under 6 years of age and persons, who for health reasons cannot wear a mask, are exempt from this rule; The opening of the borders by the Albanian state took place at a time when countries in the region, such as Montenegro, required for the entry of passengers to submit a negative PCR test not older than 48 hours, Greece and Croatia required the fulfillment of self-quarantine for 14 days. Travelers entering Croatia for tourist reasons were required to submit a confirmation of accommodation, with payment at one of the accommodation facilities in that country or fees and contracts for permanent stay at a seaport. Undoubtedly, the protocol of June 1, 2020 was an advantageous measure aimed at stimulating Albanian tourism compared to countries in the region in order to minimize the damage caused by COVID-19 pandemic. These measures confirm the finding of the questionnaire that the performance of institutions in pandemic management impacted improvement of Albania's image as a safe country in tourism together with the drafting of the protocol of Anti COVID-19 measures dedicated to tourism industry.

Drafting the protocol of antiCOVID-19 measures for tourism industry

According to Kowalski, "it is the national governments that bear the main burden of fighting the epidemiological threat and not international organizations, such as the WHO" (Kowalski, 2020). This is confirmed in the case of the Albanian government that committed to health insurance at the national level. The Albanian government, faced with the constant and growing demand from the representatives of Albanian tourism enterprises for the reduction or minimization of the economic damages caused to them during the lockdown period, and which would continue during the tourist season May-September 2020, drafted the protocol of anti-COVID-19 measures and its application in tourist services.

The findings indicate that this protocol is considered as the variable that has had the greatest impact on consolidation of Albania image alongside with promotion of the idea that Albania is a safe country for tourism. The package of measures was drafted through cooperation between the two state institutions (MTE and MHSP, 2020) and representatives of the interest groups. It is a public document that was made available to all tourism enterprises, enterprises that provide accommodation, food / beverage, beaches, recreational activities, transportation of domestic and / or foreign tourists, tourist guides, etc., including all their staff, full-time and / or part-time.

Its implementation was mandatory not only for tourism enterprises, but also for tourists, visitors and vacationers since the beginning of the 2020 tourist season. The primary goal was to ensure the protection of public health of employees and tourists from the risk of COVID-19 infection, to prevent its spread and secondly, to guarantee the successful running of the allowed tourist activity. It contains the preconditions, conditions and rules to orient and recommend the tourism industry for the necessary measures to be taken during the period of presence of COVID-19.

Some of the innovations of this protocol were: Appointment of an administrator in the accommodation unit, who would monitor the process and staff regarding the observance of hygiene measures and physical distance. The

¹ The index margin of the political stability is -2.5 (weak) and 2.5 (strong) www.theglobaleconomy.com/rankings/wb_political_stability/

administrator is considered the person who would link the suspected case in the structure with the National Emergency 127 and the local government employees of the respective local unit, which the tourist enterprise belongs to; Hygienic-sanitary measures during the registration process in the accommodation structure; The management of tourism enterprise should promote food safety and hygiene for the persons who prepare and distribute food.

The service rules in bars and restaurants included determination of customers' movement corridors and the 1-2 distances between the backs of two chairs. The employees of bars and restaurants were required to know and follow the rules of personal hygiene set by the Ministry of Health and Social Protection.

The protocol was implemented in connection to and in compliance with the protocols issued by the Ministry of Health and Social Protection. It was open to any change depending on the development dynamics of COVID-19 infection. The above case supports the theoretical basis that changes and amelioration of the security measures level enhance the reputation of security in the tourist destinations. The fact that the protocol played the role of guarantor of security in tourism is confirmed by another survey output. 60.5% of respondents say "yes" when asked "whether before conclusion of contracts between Albanian and foreign tour operators on arrival of foreign tourists in Albania, information on the degree of implementation of "Safety and Security" standards in tourism is required. The need for security arose not only from the demands for tourist security from the domestic tourism market, but also from the foreign tour operators, who local operators cooperate with. The latter, in turn, were under the pressure of tourist demands from tourist groups that had expressed their desire and interest to have holidays in Albania during the 2020 summer tourist season.

The impact of security was reflected in the number of the tourists who visited Albania in the summer tourist season 2020 and 2021. According to the INSTAT data, only during August 2020, the number of foreign nationals who entered Albania was 575,559, around 41 % of the entries made in the period January-August 2020 in Albania (INSTAT, 2020). The data on the foreign citizens' entries showed that even in the conditions of COVID-19 pandemic, during the summer tourist season the tourists who visited Albania came mostly from the neighboring countries. Such a fact indicates that the origin of tourists in Albania preserved the historical trends, where the major weight in Albanian tourism is held by tourists from the neighboring countries. Of the foreign tourists, who entered Albania in August 2020, 61% were from Kosovo, 15% from the Northern Macedonia, 3.6% from Greece, 3.3% from Italy and 1.8% from Poland.

According to INSTAT publications, 96.9% of them declare that they have entered for the purpose of vacation, visit to relatives, health treatment, etc. Vacationers from Kosovo played a key role in supplying the tourist market during the tourist season 2020 and 2021 (INSTAT, 2020). The presence of the tourists coming from Kosovo can be explained by the relaxation of the measures for border crossings. As the highest representative of the hoteliers' association, its chairman Mr. Topuzi states that "The main reason that has driven the increase in the number of foreign tourists is related to the fact that Albania applied an open door policy "COVID Free" during 2021 for all those who wanted to visit it, while the world was closed and EU countries set additional rules for entry or exit to their countries, going to extreme measures, such as the mandatory quarantine in return (Maho, 2021). Compared to 2019, which is also the best historical year of tourism, the figure for 9 months of 2021 is 10.7% less, while in August this difference was only 1.3%, clearly reflecting the recovery of tourism in the first post-pandemic year (Maho, 2021).

Tourism managed to overcome the effect of the pandemic in 2021, approaching the figures to the best historical year that was 2019. Tour operators and experts in the field point out that this increase is related to the open door policy, which meant no restrictions at all for the tourists. In terms of the organized tourism, what stood out was the growing interest of Poles, Belarusians and Ukrainians, while Italians, Germans and French came individually and independently. The novelty of the season was the market from the Middle East (Maho, 2021).

Direct involvement of the Albanian government in tourism marketing

Tourism is more about perceptions than realities (Tarlow, 2014). In general, negative events that occur as a result of natural disasters tend to be forgotten fairly quickly. For this reason, risk management in tourism should always consider negative publicity as a risk factor (Tarlow, 2014). This can justify the direct involvement of the Albanian state in tourism marketing during the summer tourist season of 2020. In cooperation with the state of Kosovo, initiatives were taken for advertising campaigns with the slogan "Pusho Shqip # unerrinëshqipëri" – "Have Albanian holidays # istayinalbania" (Ballkanweb, 2020). The day when the publicity campaign was launched coincides with the application of the protocol for the entry of passengers in the Republic of Albania and the opening of the summer tourist season, on July 1, 2020. Albania was the first country in the region to open its borders and did so exactly by the border of the Republic of Kosovo. The symbolism of the opening and the content of the slogan clearly show the involvement of the Albanian state in concrete actions to help the national tourism economy in order to promote domestic tourism demand, promote rural tourism in Albania as the best alternative form in terms of COVID-19 infection. The period July-August 2020 coincides with the lowest number of infections in Albania. This indicator is assessed by respondents as an act of good pandemic management, which undoubtedly leads to security. Such an initiative has been in line with the directives proposed by the OECD for the promotion of domestic tourism for tourism development (OECD, 2020).

CONCLUSION

The results of this paper show the lack of knowledge of the term "Safety and Security" by employees working in the first line of the tourism industry in Albania in terms of the development of the COVID-19 pandemic. The actors that contribute to this sector reflect the low level of the vocational education, while the results of the questionnaire show a constant demand of foreign tour operators to meet the standards of tourism safety. Therefore, it is urgent to train the

staff working in the structures of accommodation, food, and transport with the concepts of safety and security and the standards that belong to this pillar. Contrary to the low level of staff qualifications, the management of the COVID-19 pandemic and the drafting and implementation of the anti-COVID measures protocol highlight the Albanian government's commitment in the field of public safety and health protection as an important factor in tourism safety, strengthening the idea that the image of Albania as a safe destination is an important factor in the development of tourism. Through law enforcement institutions, measures were taken which increased / strengthened the trust of the actors in the tourism industry to ensure security. The involvement of the state in concrete actions to promote domestic tourism demand, in order to provide assistance to the tourism economy, strengthened the perception that Albania is a safe destination for tourism. Health safety and the implementation of the 'COVID Free' open door policy during the tourist season 2020 and 2021 ensured a successful tourist season in the conditions of the development of the COVID-19 pandemic. In conclusion, we can say that in the field of tourism security in Albania there is an imbalance between the level of qualification and engagement of actors that contribute to the development of Albanian tourism.

The limitations of the study are:

1. In the Albanian scientific studies related to tourism sector the literature on safety and security field is missing. Such a fact has limited our work while making the comparative analysis of our findings to similar studies. In the future, this paper would contribute to deepening related studies.

2. Literature and other sources of information referring to issues of safety and security and health security in particular, in the tourism industry, are very few for developing countries.

3. The lack of support from the institution and the missing of financial funds for the conducted research have influenced the limitation of the sample size.

4. Distribution of the questionnaires by the authors has been accomplished in compliance with the social distance rules. This affected the time extension in regard of questionnaire fulfilment, and as a consequence affected reduction of the number of respondents during the accomplishment period.

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