

The potential of the Visegrad Cooperation (V4) for the safe restarting of tourism in the region following the COVID-19 epidemic

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Received: 27 September 2021; Accepted: 25 October 2021; Published online: 11 March 2022

Summary

The paradisiac boom that tourism meant for nation states came to an abrupt end by the spring of 2020, due to the emergence of a globally spread pathogen. Integrations across nation states have all played a role in addressing the epidemic and mitigating its negative effects on tourism. The most important aim of this study is to explore the extent to which V4 countries can build on each other's tourist flows during the COVID-19 relaunch. After a thorough elaboration of the literature, the number of bednights was analysed using the tourism statistical databases of the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), EuroStat and the European Travel Commission (ETC). The countries belonging to the Visegrád Cooperation are in a privileged position, as they had meaningful and safe tourism traffic with each other even before the epidemic, so all market participants have significant experience of "friendly" tourism in the region.

Keywords: V4, tourism, safety, restarting, Covid-19

A Visegrádi Együttműködésben (V4) rejlő potenciál a régió turizmusának Covid-19 járványt követő biztonságos újraindításában

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Összefoglalás

A turizmus 2010 óta töretlen globális konjunktúrája 2020 tavaszán a COVID-19 világjárvány miatt megszakadt és a legoptimistább becslések szerint sem tér egyhamar vissza. A járványhelyzet kezelésében és a turizmusra gyakorolt negatív hatásainak enyhítésében a nemzetállamok feletti integrációk, a különböző regionális együttműködések, valamint a kormányközi megállapodások egyaránt szerepet játszottak. A Visegrádi Együttműködés (V4), a kelet-közép-európai régió együttműködését, gazdasági-társadalmi felzárkózását elősegítő, 1991-ben létrehozott integráció kiemelt figyelmet szentel a COVID-19 járvány gazdasági-társadalmi következményeinek kooperatív orvoslására, kitüntetetten a biztonságos turistaáramlás feltételeinek megteremtésére. A jelen tanulmány célja kettős, egyrészt annak feltárása, hogy a V4 országok a COVID-19 járványt követő újraindítás során milyen mértékben építhetnek az

The manuscript was completed on 15 August 2021

egymás között megvalósuló turistaáramlásokra, másrészt a turizmusbiztonság és a geopolitika határmezsgyéjén húzódó elméleti tudás bővítése. Ennek érdekében a szakirodalom, valamint a téma napi szinten változó aktualitásaira való tekintettel a szakajtó feldolgozását követően a World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), az EuroStat és a European Travel Commission (ETC) turizmusstatisztikai adatbázisának felhasználásával elemezzük az érintett országokban realizálódó vendégéjszakák számát és a kölcsönös vendégforgalomban rejlő kibontakozási potenciált. A V4 országok együttműködése már a járványt megelőzően is a gazdaságfejlesztés területén bontakozott ki a legintenzívebben, így a normalitáshoz való visszatérés során is várható, hogy a tagállamok kihasználják a kelet-közép-európai integrációban rejlő előnyöket. A COVID-19 járvány miatt súlyos válságba került turizmus a gazdaságfejlesztés azon területe, ahol a Visegrádi Együttműködés több évtizedes tapasztalatokkal és eredményekkel rendelkezik, így a földrajzi és kulturális közelség, az országok közötti turistaforgalom rendszerváltás előtti időkre visszanyúló tradíciói, a turisztikai szolgáltatások kedvező ár-érték aránya tekinthetők azon versenyelőnyöknek, amelyekre az újraindítás eredményesen építhető. A közelséget akár a távolság, akár az idő dimenziójában értékeljük a V4 országok feltétlenül profitálhatnak a közelség nyújtotta előnyökből. A térség közbiztonsága kielégítő, a V4 országok állampolgárai – a „helyismeretük” okán is – a kevésbé veszélyeztetett utazók közé tartoznak. A kereskedelmi szálláshelyeken töltött vendégéjszakák 2019. évi mutatóit figyelembe véve kölcsönös érdeklődés mutatkozik egymás országainak turisztikai desztinációi és attrakciói iránt, amely potenciálra a normalitásba való visszatérés során, illetve azt követően is biztosan építhet a térség.

Kulcsszavak: V4, turizmus, biztonság, újraindítás, COVID-19

Introduction

The paradisiac boom that tourism meant for nation states came to an abrupt end by the spring of 2020, due to the emergence of a globally spread pathogen (Sars-CoV-2, a coronavirus that is otherwise easily killed by washing hands with soap) and because of the fear of the infection it causes. Even according to the most optimistic estimates, the pre-pandemic level of tourism boom is not expected to return anytime soon (Gössling–Scott–Hall 2020). Most nation states have reacted by introducing various measures such as isolation, quarantine, and other forms of mobility restriction, all in stark contrast to their previous policies of free movement.

Just as the primary strategy was to operate networks based on international cooperation and to address the challenges that come with tourism consumption more tolerantly on the way to achieve total tourism, the collapse generated by COVID-19 resulted in an inward turn and official rigor; never has the political sphere been so involved in the tourism industry and never had it affected day-to-day tourism operations to such extent. Government measures (such as the purchase and distribution of vaccines, the easing and lifting of travel restrictions) have often been influenced by geopolitical considerations, and their implications were reflected in the operation of domestic and international tourism.

Integrations across nation states, various regional collaborations, and intergovernmental agreements have all played a role in addressing the epidemic and mitigating its negative effects on tourism (Heisbourg 2020). Due to the media's role, the rise of geopolitics has become markedly apparent in everyday life through reflections on the economy, including the tourism industry (Mayer et al. 2021). Tourism has become the focus of geopolitics especially in areas where it functions as the engine of economic life, but quarantine, home office, and the various levels of mobility restrictions have, conversely, al-

most everywhere strengthened people's desire to travel (Seyfi–Hall–Shabani 2020). Therefore, in order to ensure and maintain the quality of life within society, governments sought to allow cross-border travel as soon as possible, utilizing available tools of international politics (Sharma–Thomas–Paul 2021).

The European Union initially wanted to play a role in coordinating prevention, later the procurement of vaccines came to the fore, and after the epidemic eased, facilitating the restart process, including making travel as safe as possible, became the number one task of Brussels' policy (Wolff–Ladi 2020). The epidemic affected the societies of Central and Eastern Europe as well, with 3074 deaths in Hungary (1), 2846 in the Czech Republic (2), 2300 in Slovakia (4) and 1983 in Poland (9) caused by COVID-19 infection, per million inhabitants (the numbers in parentheses indicate the given country's rank in the list of the 31 countries of the combined EEA-UK rankings of COVID-19-related deaths).¹ The Visegrad Group (V4), an integration established in 1991 to promote cooperation, and economic and social catching-up in the region, pays special attention to the cooperative treatment of the socio-economic consequences of the COVID-19 epidemic, especially to the creation of conditions for safe tourist flow (Antošová–Vogl–Schraud 2020, Kiss–Dobronyi–Fazekas–Pollitt 2021).

The aim of this study is twofold: on the one hand, to explore the extent to which V4 countries can build on each other's tourist flows during the COVID-19 relaunch, and on the other hand, to expand theoretical knowledge on the confines of tourism security and geopolitics. To this end, after a thorough analysis of the literature and, given the changing topicality of pandemic-related tourism on a daily basis, and closely following the

¹ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1104709/coronavirus-deaths-worldwide-per-million-inhabitants/> [Downloaded: 11 August 2021]

trade press, we analyze the number of bednights in the countries concerned and the potential for development in mutual guest traffic, using the tourism statistical databases of the UNWTO, EuroStat and the European Travel Commission (ETC).

Theoretical background

The public health status of a tourist destination is one of the basic conditions of tourism, the specific pillar of the system, whose lack or instability does not allow the development and competitiveness of the tourism industry from the beginning (Michalkó 2012; Richter 2003). Lack or inadequate purity of drinking water inherently carries risks that most travelers want to avoid (Cortés-Hargarten-Hennes 2006; Gössling 2006). Insects carrying deadly infectious diseases, especially the malaria-causing mosquitoes, should be mentioned as public health hazards that hinder the development of tourism as well (Martin et al. 2002). In destinations where the HIV virus is more prevalent, potential visitors becoming infected with AIDS is considered to be the number one public health risk factor (Cohen 1988).

Throughout history, travelers have contributed to the emergence and spread of epidemics, whether regional or global (Carmichael 1983; Connor et al. 2019), and the specific postmodern mobility of traveling to visit relatives has explicitly reinforced undesirable epidemiological phenomena (Ma-Heywood-MacIntyre 2015). Partly in connection with the totalization of tourism in the 21st century, a new virological challenge to mankind was presented in the form of a serious, often fatal respiratory disease: SARS, which was caused by a human coronavirus. The efforts to prevent its spreading led to a halt in international tourism in 2003, mainly in Asian areas (Cooper 2006; Zeng-Carter-De Lacy 2005).

The first decades of the third millennium have resulted in an unprecedented development of tourism, which the terrorist attacks in the United States on 11 September 2001 (Goodrich 2002), the SARS epidemic in 2002/2003 (McKercher-Chon 2004), the effects of the 2008/2009 global economic crisis (Papatheodorou-Rosselló-Xiao 2010) or the eruption of the volcano in Iceland (the one with the unpronounceable name: Eyjafjallajökull) in 2010 (Benediktsson-Lund-Huijbens 2011) could only slow down temporarily. However, the COVID-19 pandemic originating from China's city of Wuhan in December 2019 caused a tragic collapse in international tourism in 2020, with a current estimate of a 74% decline compared to the previous year (UNWTO 2021a). In the current phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism researchers aim to contribute to the expansion of relevant knowledge primarily by evaluating managerial implications and lessons learned from previous crises (Jászberényi et al. 2020), by formulating scenarios (Fotiadis-Polyzos-Huan 2021; Zhang et al. 2021)

or by assessing the new opportunity that opened up for tourism sustainability (Chaney-Seraphin 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly enhanced the role of geopolitics in terms of prevention, vaccine procurement, and return to normalcy. The responses to these challenges generated by the crisis markedly outlined the international political interests of the affected individual nation states (Cole-Dodds 2021). The most effective measures to control epidemics since the 14th century are quarantine, meaning isolation of the population, restriction of mobility, reduction of trade in goods, and strict official control. These measures proved to be useful during the COVID-19 pandemic as well (Crawshaw-Latin-Vongsathorn 2020).

The methods of the exercise of power to ensure the freer movement of goods, services, and people in relation to certain countries or groups of countries is an "imprint" of the role of geopolitics of the COVID-19 pandemic (Casaglia et al. 2020). Although certain international standards must be taken into account during the complete lockdown of a country, epidemic control is primarily a national competence (Adeel et al. 2020). However, the continuous supply of vaccines to the population and the resumption of economic and social life (including tourism) can only be successfully achieved within a sophisticated international coordinate system (Sun-Wandelt-Zhang 2021).

Established in 1991, the Visegrad Cooperation (V4), a regional integration of the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary and Slovakia within the European Union, is one of the typical instances of the geopolitics of the COVID-19 pandemic (Lebrner 2021). Even prior to the epidemic, the cooperation of the V4 countries was its most intensive in the fields of economic development, so even during the period of returning to normalcy, the member states are expected to reap the benefits of Central and Eastern European integration (Czech et al. 2020).

Due to the COVID-19 epidemic, tourism is an area in serious crisis within the field of economic development, in which the Visegrád Cooperation has decades of experience and results, because of the member states' geographical and cultural proximity, traditions of tourist traffic between them dating back to times even before the regime change [of 1990], and favorable value-for-money regarding tourism services; these can be considered the competitive advantages that the restart can be successfully built upon (Korinth 2021).

Methodology

The change in the nature of tourism (from global to total), the rapid diversification of market segments and tourism activities, and the unstoppable digitization of the tourism industry all contributed to the expansion of knowledge about tourism safety, which necessitated a fine-tuning of the methodological apparatus (Ling-Nair

2014). Empirical research involving victimized tourists has proved to be quite cumbersome (Adam-Adongo 2016; Brunt-Shepherd 2004), due to the difficulties of reaching such stakeholders, so investigators have turned to service providers, thus those working in the hotel industry and travel management have become the subjects of questionnaires and interviews that were conducted in order to expand knowledge about tourism safety (Bentley-Page-Edwards 2008; Jones-Groenenboom 2002).

Compared to the number of explorations of actual violations, research on the perceived risk of tourist destinations, services, events, etc. utilizing mathematical and statistical analyses based on scales is more popular and thus more significant in volume (Barker-Page-Meyer 2003; Cui et al. 2016; Sun 2014; Zou-Meng 2020). Digitization has not only expanded the range of infringements that can be committed against tourists, but has also driven the methodology of criminal detection and relevant scientific research as well as managerial implications, towards electronic platforms (Papathanassis-Katsios-Dinu 2017; Shrestha et al. 2020; Stratton-Powell-Cameron 2016).

In the course of our research, we performed both secondary and primary examinations. To process the literature, we used the most well-known online journal platforms (ScienceDirect, Ebsco, Emerald, Taylor and Francis, Wiley, SAGE), which were all utilized taking into account security, the COVID-19 pandemic, geopolitics, and tourism aspects of the V4 countries, primarily focusing on the nodes of subtopics with tourism and their common intersections with each other. In addition, due to the peculiarity of the problem that the events are undergoing daily changes, the Hungarian (turizmus.com) and international (tourism-review.com) tourism trade press were also processed (1 January 2020 and 15 August 2021); in this part of our research, we focused mainly on current news about the V4 countries.

The database of the present study is provided on the one hand by the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), and by TourMIS, operated in cooperation with the European Travel Commission, the Austrian National Tourist Office and Modul University Vienna on the other, and also by EuroStat's tourism statistics database. The database contains the 2019 visitor

data of the Visegrad Cooperation countries for bednights in all forms of paid accommodation, and according to it, 2019 was the most successful year in world tourism before the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. The processing of the database was performed using the methodology of descriptive statistics, during which we calculated with distribution ratios (Sajtos-Mitev 2007).

Results

In the tourism of the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary and Slovakia, which countries make up the Visegrad Cooperation (V4), the roots of tourist flows go back to the decades before the change of regime of 1990 (Czeplédi 1982); there are historical, political, ethnic and geographical reasons behind this. In the V4 countries, after the fall of the Iron Curtain (1990), the range of tourist mobility, which was catalyzed by the accession to the European Union (2004) and then to the Schengen Area (2007), expanded significantly. However, due to travel traditions, cultural proximity, kinship relations, and the accessibility of the Mediterranean, traffic between them can still be considered vivid.

The international tourism demand of the V4 countries is at the top of the European middle-rank; in 2019 Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary received more than 15 million foreign tourists each, while Slovakia's performance is much more modest (about 5 million foreign tourists visited the country). Capitals, spas, mountain areas, World Heritage sites and bathing lakes constitute the most sought-after tourist attractions in the area. When evaluating tourism in the V4 countries, we must not forget the very significant one-day cross-border and transit traffic, even though these trips take place under the auspices of "invisible tourism", generating spending (retail, health-industry, fuel, and toll) that contributes significantly to national economies.

Restrictive measures introduced to effectively control the COVID-19 pandemic caused an unprecedented decline in tourism in the region in 2020 (Table 1). As a result of the closure of national borders from passenger traffic, the strict conditionality of the use of hotels and restaurants, and the banning of events, the total number of bednights registered in commercial accommodation

Table 1 | Change of bednights in all forms of paid accommodation in V4 countries, 2019–2020

Countries	Domestic		Foreign		Total	
	2019	2020	2019	2020	2019	2020
Czech	29,844,276	23,666,097	27,180,563	7,379,865	57,024,839	31,045,962
Hungary	15,574,214	9,639,184	15,687,246	4,169,880	31,261,460	13,809,064
Poland	74,659,162	44,754,216	18,683,576	6,622,952	93,342,738	51,377,168
Slovakia	11,452,830	7,873,196	6,250,865	2,695,707	17,703,695	10,568,903
V4	131,530,482	85,932,693	67,802,250	20,868,404	199,332,732	106,801,097

Source: TourMis

Table 2 | V4 countries' tourism demand between each other (bednights in all forms of paid accommodation), 2019

Nationality	Czech Republic	Hungary	Poland	Slovakia*
Czech	–	981,878	340,201	1,963,028
Hungarian	361,156	–	170,894	313,935
Polish	1,408,947	776,026	–	605,782
Slovak	1,488,577	493,623	222,009	–
<i>V4 together</i>	<i>3,258,680</i>	<i>2,251,527</i>	<i>733,104</i>	<i>2,882,745</i>
German	5,977,924	2,021,311	6,179,001	525,036
Other foreign	17,943,959	11,414,408	11,771,461	2,843,084
Total foreign	27,180,563	15,687,246	18,683,576	6,250,865

Source: TourMis. *In the case of Slovakia the data of Czech, Hungarian, and Polish bednights are estimated

in the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary and Slovakia decreased by 46.4%, domestic demand decreased by 34.7% and foreign demand by 69.2%.

The decline was smallest in Slovakia (40.3%) and largest in Hungary (55.8%). Commercial accommodation establishments in Hungary lost 73.4% of their international turnover of 2019, while Poland (40.1%) suffered the largest loss in domestic terms. The overall indicators for the V4 region are undoubtedly more favorable than international trends, with *UNWTO (2021a)* showing a 74% decline in global tourist arrivals in 2020 and a 70% decline in Europe. The future of tourism depends on a number of factors, among which measures restricting mobility and consumption, population vaccination levels, consumer confidence, the economic environment and the tourism labour market are all important. Taking different scenarios into account, the recovery to the level of demand of 2019 can be projected for the period between 2022–2024 (*UNWTO 2021b*).

Experts agree that boosting domestic tourism may temporarily compensate for lost international demand, however, this presupposes the introduction of a new approach in destination management (*UNWTO 2020*). The V4 countries can definitely profit from the benefits of proximity, as proximity is valued in terms of both distance and time; the popular tourist destinations of the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary and Slovakia are easily accessible within a few hours of travel from any of the member states. The public security of the region is satisfactory, and the citizens of the V4 countries are also among the less endangered, due to their “understanding of local circumstances” (*Mátyás–Tokodi 2020*).

In the resumption of international tourism following the COVID-19 epidemic and in reaching the volume of demand of 2019, the turnover between the V4 countries can prove to be a stable basis. Taking into account the indicators of bednights spent in commercial accommodation in 2019, there is a mutual interest for the tourist destinations and attractions of each other's countries, on which the region can certainly build during and after the return to normalcy. Among the total international turnover of commercial accommodation establishments in

the countries belonging to the Visegrad Cooperation in 2019, the realized demand is 13.5%, which is the highest in Slovakia (46.1%) and the lowest in Poland (3.9%).

In Slovakia, the proportion of Czech (68.1%) bednights is extremely high, in terms of volume it is several times higher than that of the most significant demand in the region (German), but presumably due to the shared Czechoslovak common history, intensive Slovak (45.7%) traffic was also registered in the Czech Republic (*Table 2*). It can be stated that the Czech guests account for 36%, the Poles for 30.6%, the Slovaks for 24.2% and the Hungarians for only 9.3% of the tourist traffic between the V4 countries, which, taking into account the proportions of the resident population, indicates the lack of Polish and Hungarian demand, as well as the untapped potential inherent in them.

Conclusions

Measures taken to curb the spread of the COVID-19 epidemic, such as restricting mobility and access to many services, have reinforced the importance of security as a state-guaranteed need. The responsibility of individuals and communities came to the fore during the pandemic's protection period. Basic hygiene standards (mask wearing, hand disinfection) were accompanied by the acceptance of social distancing and travel-related limitations and restrictions as well. The fact that societies have not created any sort of creative alternatives to redeem the regression in tourism services has helped to eradicate the pandemic.

Over the last year and a half, tourism, and with it, tourism security has appreciated significantly; there were barely any news in the media that would not have included a report on the state of the sector and thus without drawing attention to key information about traveling. As in the case of the fear of the threat of terrorism, a pandemic can only temporarily delay tourism demand. If potential tourists appear on the travel market with awareness of vaccination (vaccine certificate) and the various levels of precautionary measures taken (state and service provider guarantees), the sector, due to its resil-

ient nature, may return to the record level of 2019 again. Experts who have created tourism scenarios also agree that it can take up to 2–3 years between restarting and returning to normalcy, and gradualism plays a particularly important role in this regard as well. Initially, the return of tourist traffic to the domestic, and later, to the surrounding countries, shall serve the principles of responsible tourism.

In this process, the countries belonging to the Visegrád Cooperation are in a privileged position, as they had meaningful and safe tourism traffic with each other even before the epidemic, so all market participants have significant experience of “friendly” tourism in the region. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Heads of Government, Ministers and Parliamentary Presidents of the V4 countries have been in constant discussions in person and online (on the telephone or via video conferences) on addressing the challenges posed by the crisis, remedying economic difficulties and coordinating tourism-related tasks. As a result, a number of measures have been taken to invigorate and make travel between their countries safer.

Acknowledgments

The research that served as a base for this paper has been supported by the OTKA (K 134877) project of the National Research, Development and Innovation Office (NRDIO). The authors would like to express their gratitude to Bay Zoltán Non-profit Ltd. for Applied Research for its support to Research Group on Safety and Security in Tourism.

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