



Creation of Safe Space in COVID-19 Pandemic – A Case Study of Republic of Croatia

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Received: February 22, 2022 Accepted: May 25, 2022 Online Published: May 30, 2022

Abstract

COVID-19 changed our cotemporary world, the way we work and the way we travel. The latter is a major challenge for countries that are heavily dependent on tourism, and Croatia is one of those countries with the largest tourism share of the total gross domestic product (GDP) in Europe - 25% in pre-pandemic times (2019 data). In the last two years, travel for tourism has decreased - both due to restrictions and due to people's fear of coronavirus infection. Therefore, under the influence of the health crisis posed by pandemic, there is an increasingly relevant sense of health safety that can be considered as a prerequisite for the success of tourism destination. This paper aims to research and analyze the concept of "safe space" and its creation in pandemic conditions where the application of health and security protocols is expected, and on the example of the Republic of Croatia to evaluate the efforts and possible effect of undertaken measures. The research design is based on quantitative-qualitative desktop analysis of pandemic-related processes and key data which evaluate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism sector from several stakeholders' perspectives - consumer and service provider. The result of this research shows that the perception of a safe space has a positive impact on the tourist interest in the COVID-19 pandemic, which confirms the need for the tourism sector to adapt to the new security risks posed by the pandemic.

Keywords: covid-19, croatia, pandemic, safety, security, safe space, tourism

1. Introduction

The pandemic has globally brought a number of restrictive epidemiological measures, including the limitation of the free movement of people between the countries. Forasmuch, domestic tourism is not as present in some countries as international tourism, so despite some of the measures taken to strengthen domestic tourism (in Croatia it was in form of offered discounts on travel arrangements for domestic guests), the focus remained to adapt to the new global situation according to the easing of the measures and opening of international travel opportunities.

Having in mind that the pandemic changed sociological perspective, the research problem is that insufficient engagement in the development of security preconditions can have implications not only for the development and normal functioning of the community but also for the state's economy if security is one of the factors enabling the regular operation/function of the tourism sector which is fundamental source of the state economy income (which is the case in Croatia and Indonesia). Therefore, the subject of the research is the level of involvement of stakeholders - the state (institutions) and service providers (tourism workers) in the activities of raising the level of security and creating a safe space. The pandemic has an impact with both positive and negative consequences - like any other crisis, a pandemic can also be an opportunity. In this case, it is primarily an opportunity to include local people in the development of the new approach to tourism, having in mind that they are in many cases providers of services, and have primary interaction with tourists. Mass tourism (which is a challenge in Croatia as well in other attractive tourist destinations such as Indonesia) also has an impact on the quality of the population, and that should be (alongside the satisfaction of tourists) especially considered in a pandemic context (as an impact on the safety of residents). Therefore, it is relevantly to explore stakeholder participation models and offer with this case study insight into a practice that may be applicable to other tourist countries, especially since for most countries there is no indication of an end to the pandemic and tourists needs to be provided with some form of guarantee that health and security protocols are applied.

World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) defines five groups of stakeholders at the destination, of which, each has its own interests: 1. Residents and other local users of the destination (permanent population, occasional population, and persons in transit); 2. Domestic and foreign visitors (international and domestic tourists and excursionists); 3. Business entities (private companies, carriers, employees of companies at the service of tourists); 4. Strategies makers and destination management organizations (makers of strategies in tourism, other public institutions); 5. Stakeholders in a broader context (non-tourism companies, citizens associations, associations focused on the protection of natural and cultural heritage) (UNWTO 2018:19). In the first three groups, the most dominant interests differ, but what is relevant to highlight and what the UNWTO identifies as the common dominant interest is protection and security, which we can link to the COVID-19 pandemic and the preconditions that must be met for these target groups. Due to the pandemic, it is noticeable that the remaining two groups focus on protection and security, especially the strategic level responsible to manage the pandemic crisis, but also other stakeholders affected by the consequences of the pandemic.

The subject of the research is, as mentioned earlier, the involvement of the stakeholders in solving the challenge of reduced interest for tourist travel in pandemic which affects the number of arrivals, and in the analysis, we will rely on the research hypothesis that there is a positive connection between the perception of safe space and the number of arrival of foreign tourists in COVID-19 pandemic. To test the research hypothesis, three research questions will be asked:

- a. What was the touristic interest and number of visitors during the pandemic (for the period - February 2020 to January 2022)?
- b. Which was the marketing messages and models during the pandemic?
- c. What is the level of satisfaction of tourists with the element of personal safety?

The aim of the research is to investigate the success of creating a safe space. Several theories will be tested through the aim of the research. The first is social constructivism, i.e. the theory of the social construction of reality where individuals in interaction with the environment construct and give meaning to tourism. In this part, constructivism is associated with security culture and decision-making at the national level that has security implications. In general, the security of individuals and the state are social constructs (Kolodziej, 2011: 206) that adapt and change over time, which is also visible in the context of a pandemic and adaptation to new conditions. The risk of a pandemic is bringing human values (in this segment it refers to safety and health) into a state of uncertainty, which has an impact on individuals. Therefore, as another reference theory in considering the motivation of the individual as a tourist, we can take the theory of motivation, that is, Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of (five) needs which presents various human needs starting from the most basic (physiological needs) to the most important (self-actualization) whose realization occurs when basic needs are met. The need for safety is among the first basic needs, just above the physiological ones. A pandemic certainly affects the fulfillment of the need for safety and the overall hierarchical order of meeting the needs. If an individual can be offered the option of a higher level of security, then his motivation could be higher for an activity (in this case a safe destination = higher visitation). This can be explained in more detail by the following figure (Figure 1).

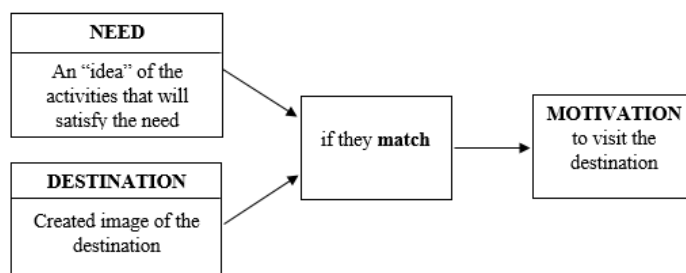


Figure 1. The Process of the Motivation to visit the Destination
 Source: Weber, S. & Mikačić, V. (2004). Fundamentals of Tourism (p.68)

Here it should be emphasized that in this research, both terms – “safety” and “security” will be used as they differ in their meaning but they are equally relevant. The definition of safety according to the Oxford Dictionary is a state of being safe and protected from danger or harm; and security is defined as the activities involved in protecting a country, building, or person against attack, danger, etc. The safety will be linked to the personal/subjective feeling of individuals and the security of the regulation/procedures/standards and other (mostly) organizational frameworks.

Third, risk society theory should also be taken into consideration. According to Čaldarović (1994), the interpretation of risk depends on the social context, specific situations of risk framing, the values, and interests of individual social groups. Regardless of the actual events (objective situation), individuals may have different, subjective interpretations and, accordingly, reduce or increase the hazard, or perceive the risk. Each individual chooses how they will react to risks/threats in this pandemic age, i.e. which measures they will take into account and how much they will be exposed to risk, and this is influenced by, among other things, social and contextual factors, perception and objective health risks.

These theories are applicable to the context of the “consumer”, i.e. users of tourism services and their personal choice. It is also necessary to give a theoretical foundation that applies to the service provider, i.e. the group of stakeholders who are providing tourists an offer that will be the ultimate choice of users due to the certain quality of that offer. For that, we will consider the theory of tourism.

Tourism theory, more specifically, destination management – is an integrated destination management process and includes four elements: destination offering, visitors, marketing communication, and organizational responsibility (Anderson, 2001: 146). Each of these elements is important when considering a pandemic context as it relates to key decisions, processes, and strategies for adapting to tourism. Magaš (2000) states that the destination is an optimally combined and market-oriented space that, by developing important and dominant capabilities, creates conditions that will be of sufficient quality compared to the competition to achieve good tourism results in the long run. The same author attributes to the destination the production function (creation and design) of the holiday offer, which through the optimal combination of fixed and variable factors “produces” the destination tourist product. Tourist interest and competitiveness of a tourism destination even more precisely define the UNWTO according to which it represents the “ability of the destination to use its natural, cultural, human, man-made and capital resources efficiently to develop and deliver quality, innovative, ethical and attractive tourism products and services in order to achieve a sustainable growth within its overall vision and strategic goals, increase the added value of the tourism sector, improve and diversify its market components and optimize its attractiveness and benefits both for visitors and the local community in a sustainable perspective” (UNWTO, 2016: 13, in Zorko, Jakopović & Cesarec, 2021: 169). Among the listed definitions, we can derive that one of the benefits for destination can be the achievement of the perception of health safety and it can be realized by using “tools” and services which will be analyzed in later subsections of this paper.

In Croatia, as well as globally, a significant number of research papers were published on the effects of COVID-19 on tourism, but there is insufficient research in the segment related to the creation of a safe space and the positive effects of its creation on tourism. Therefore, this paper is a contribution to the examination of this very important segment in the analysis of the impact of the pandemic. Consulting the Croatian online scientific bibliography databases (due to the great number of global research we will focus on Croatian authors to have more focused analysis), it was noticed that so far in the context of tourism it was researched: implementation of security measures in the phases of crisis management (from preventive measures to reactive measures) and analysis of the process of managing the COVID-19 crisis in Croatia (Mataković, 2020; Mikac & Kravaršćan, 2021); analysis of the impact of the spread of coronavirus in the world on Croatian tourism (Klarić, 2020; Stić, Grgić, & Zrakić Sušac, 2021; Gržinić & Sučić Čevra, 2021); analysis of crisis financial management in the tourism sector during the COVID-19 pandemic (Poljak, 2021), etc. Listed literature that analyses the impact of the pandemic on tourism, as we can notice, comes from various scientific and professional fields: tourism studies, geography, economics, political science, etc. We have also noticed, that there are several perspectives in research, wherein some, COVID-19 is perceived as a cause of challenges in the tourism sector and it is considered how to “help” the tourism to cope, and on the other side, the subject of analysis is the possible measures which in some way “restrict” tourism in order to prevent further spread of the coronavirus which is enabled with tourism activities. To a lesser extent (e.g. Čorak, Boranić Živoder & Marušić 2020), the researches are focused on resolving the crisis, i.e. on measures that will improve the situation in the tourism sector, primarily because the pandemic is still ongoing and we cannot predict the extent of its impact, nor how the society will function when a pandemic reaches its final stage, that is, how we will live in the post-pandemic era.

2. Method

The research design is based on quantitative-qualitative desktop analysis of pandemic-related processes and key data, mostly from secondary sources. The achievement of creating a safe space is investigated through several phases: 1. From the theoretical basis and existing research, the definition of safe space will be derived, presented, and used for the purposes of this analysis; 2. Qualitative research of publicly available sources and information will be conducted, chronologically from the first case of COVID-19 in the Republic of Croatia (February 2020,

through the adoption of the first COVID-19 measures, their adjustment, till current situation (February 2022 when this paper was drafted) - focused on tourism; 3. In the Discussion section, the potential effects on the tourism of the taken (analyzed) measures will be considered. Through the research, the intention is to find out how it created the perception of a safe space, i.e. which tools are used in Croatia to increase tourist interest through the offer of (health) safety. In the section "Introduction", the problem, subject, and aim of the research have already been presented, as well as the hypothesis and the questions with which it will be tested. In order to gain scientific insights relevant for this research, the methodological approach we have chosen is the case study analysis. According to Yin (2007), it is a research strategy that contributes to the knowledge on individual, group, organizational, and complex social phenomena, which the COVID-19 pandemic truly represents. To further specify, the case study is used in this research to analyze the safe space indicators in Croatia (the case unit) as a tourist destination and to highlight the key challenges that emerged by the COVID-19 pandemic. The case study allows us to examine the processes in more detail through focused analysis. At the same time, it gives us the possibility to identify good practices, which can be taken into the consideration and used to improve the image of a safe space not only for Croatia but among other tourist countries.

3. Results

This chapter will present the collected data and analysis in three sections: 1. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism sector in Croatia (which includes the course/dynamics of the pandemic since its beginning and its effects on tourism as the most important industry in the country); 2. The Republic of Croatia as a safe space in a pandemic – an international perspective (where we determine what is a safe space for the context of this research and how Croatia was perceived before the pandemic in terms of safe space, as well as whether it is considered a safe space during COVID-19); 3. The ways of creating the perception of a safe space (which analyzes which tools, means, solutions, etc. Croatia is using to offer tourists safety as a product).

3.1 *The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism sector in Croatia*

In Croatia, the first case of infection was confirmed on February 25th, 2020, and in April 2020, the number of infections began to grow significantly, i.e. a significant scale of the COVID-19 pandemic emerged – despite the measures against the spread of the infection (e.g. Decision on the temporary ban and restriction on crossing the state border of the Republic of Croatia adopted by the National Civil Protection Headquarters in the mid-March). In March 2020, after a globally declared pandemic (on March 11, 2020, by the World Health Organization), there were cancellations of travel arrangements booked in advance through tour operators, agencies, or individually (e.g. Booking, Airbnb, etc.) which has consequently affected tourism sector liquidity just before the new tourist season. A period of uncertainty ensued, caused by the further development of the pandemic. In the first months of the pandemic, all traffic (air, road, sea) was stopped and restrictive border entry and exit regimes were introduced, which completely prevented tourists from accessing other countries. The gradual "opening" (by the end of June 2020 the borders within the EU and between the Member States, and then on July 1, 2020, the gradual opening of the EU's external borders) gave the indication of "return to normal". The strictest restrictions were in the first wave of pandemics, and through the later waves, the borders were closed and opened by various assessments and decisions influenced by the health sector.

In the context of the arrival of foreign tourists in a pandemic, it should be emphasized that Croatia is at a disadvantage due to low domestic demand, but on the other hand has an advantage due to its location close to major European markets easily accessible by car, which is particularly important given that air transport is exposed to a number of restrictions having in mind the risks of the spread of the virus at airports and inside aircraft, as well as restrictions on movement between countries (Klarić, 2020: 3-4). On that note, Čorak et al. (2020: 435) state, Croatia as a tourist destination is one of the few European countries that had almost no infected persons in June 2020, and given the fact it is accessible by car, in the three summer months of 2020 Croatia had about 50% of the overnights realized in the same period of 2019. Despite the successful perception of Croatia as a safe country in June and July 2020, in August 2020, due to the beginning of growth in the number of infected in Croatia (which is partly caused by opening borders, partly by organizing festivals, work of nightclubs, fewer restrictions on the number of people at private gatherings, etc.) Croatia's perception as a suitable travel destination was changing (some of the countries have put Croatia on the "red list" which conditioned quarantine for their citizens upon return home). However, this did not have a significant impact on the flow of tourism. As noticed, "according to tourism flows in July and August 2020, the summer season in Croatia showed that the tourist market is more resilient to the COVID-19 crisis than was previously assumed. Moreover, some of the segments – such as younger tourists, nautical tourists, and those who chose to stay in camps and villas outside the destinations – are not ready to give up their "holiday time", even despite recommendations from their own governments" (Čorak et al., 2020: 443).

In Figure 2. it can be seen that in 2021, compared to 2020, there is a significant increase in tourist arrivals (red color is domestic and blue color foreign tourists), although the number of arrivals is noticeably lower than in 2019. The largest numbers of the visit are in the summer months, and the graph confirms that August 2020, despite the rise of the numbers of infected, is even more successful than the other summer months of that year.

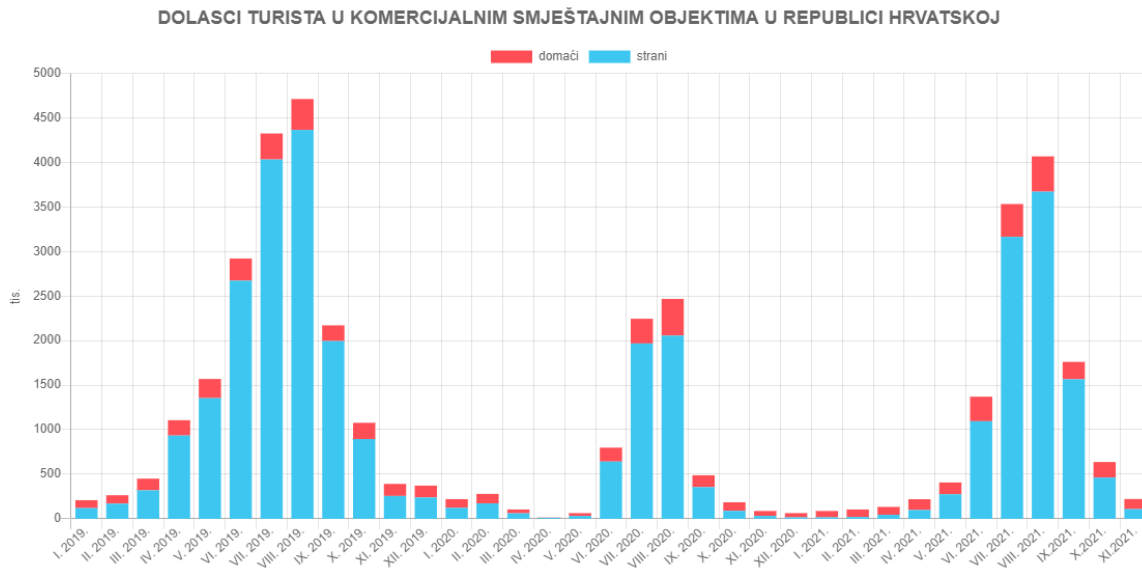


Figure 2. Tourist Arrivals in Commercial Accommodation in Croatia
Source: Croatian Bureau of Statistics (2021)

If we analyze the initial reaction of stakeholders in the tourism sector in Croatia to the COVID-19 pandemic, a special challenge is the fact that there was no adequate preparedness for the crisis and there are few positive examples, such as “Association of Croatian Travel Agencies which has defined action plans, crisis teams and contacts for communication in crises in detail, and can certainly serve as an example to other institutions in the sector” (Kravaršćan, 2020: 33, in Mikac & Kravaršćan 2021: 619). Later on, all stakeholders (from the Croatian Tourist Board, various Chambers, travel agencies to hoteliers) gathered at the initiative of the Ministry of Tourism and Sports to agree on further activities and information exchange for the beginning of the coronavirus spread and continued to cooperate systematically in order to have the best possible response to the crisis.

Regarding the further phases of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, it is important to point out that in Croatia, through the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, about 133 million euros are earmarked for tourism, which is an opportunity to address the challenges identified by the Ministry of Tourism and Sports, in establishing an effective framework for managing the development of sustainable tourism: economic decline due to the global COVID-19 pandemic; lack of strategic management of tourism development; excessive tourism and seasonality; suboptimal structure of accommodation capacities; and insufficient human capacities (Poljak, 2021: 97). These funds will ensure the preservation of the economy given the importance of the tourism sector for the Republic of Croatia. In addition, state aid and job preservation measures to help overcome the effects of the crisis have been shown to be of great importance in tackling the pandemic.

This sub-chapter is just the summary from a broader perspective (since the COVID-19 impact on the tourist sector from an economic aspect is not of interest in this research) and such an overview of the tourist sector characteristic in pandemic and stakeholders involved in crisis management cycle (prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery) is important to introduce us to a further segment of the analysis – a creation of a safe space.

3.2 The Republic of Croatia as a safe space in a pandemic – an international perspective

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, security was one of the key elements in choosing a destination. Although a great number of researchers have tried to conceptualize security, there is no unified definition, and of those various definitions, for the need of this research, we will use the one which states that security is in an objective sense the absence of threats to acquired values and in the subjective sense the absence of fear that such values will be endangered (Wolfers, 1952). The same case is with the “safe space” which as a term does not have a clear,

unique, and generally accepted definition, therefore it represents a research interest to define the concept. For the need of their own research, some of the researchers have offered their own definition, for example, Mikac and Darmastuti define a safe space as “a positive and comfortable environment in which a person feels maximally protected from external dangers; an environment that is desirable for visiting and acquaint; an environment where you want to spend time exploring it and getting to know the culture, customs, and people”. Creation of safe space, they define as the “process of developing, modeling and designing different types of products and services that provide key information about the specific location” (Mikac & Darmastuti 2021:106).

For the purpose of this research, taking into account this definition, but also the theoretical considerations from the Introduction, we can formulate our own definition of a safe space – safe space is a space where there is an overall sense of safety in terms of person’s subjective feeling and objective level of security preconditions (e.g. existing security protocols, low crime rate, etc.). The creation of a safe space is influenced by external risk factors (in this case, pandemic) as well as internal factors: political (political decisions on COVID-19 measures/restrictions) social or culture (e.g. existing security culture) factors. As an additional factor, if we view the pandemic in the context of safe space, we can also consider the absence of restrictions in the consumption of space.

COVID-19 has additionally highlighted the importance of spatial dimensions, especially the socio-spatial perspective, which according to Gottdiener “connects the dual relationship between people and space with social factors underlying individual behavior” (Gottdiener, 2019: 105-106), and this perspective can also be linked to safe space and tourist interest (choosing of the destination as a behavior). Here is also important to point out that “security is socially constructed and has different meanings for different actors, where the content of the concept of security is changing in a historical and social context” (Djurkin-König, DeliĆ, Mihaljević & Ostojić, 2020: 15–16). Therefore, we should consider how Croatia was perceived before the pandemic.

In analyzing whether the Republic of Croatia was considered a safe destination before the pandemic, we will rely on research within the TOMAS survey on the attitudes and consumption of tourists in Croatia, according to which one of the 27 elements of the tourist offer is personal safety, which is one of the top 5 best-ranked elements of the Croatian tourist offer, listed according to their importance. In the latest survey covering 2019 (the last year before the changed security landscape due to the pandemic crisis), personal safety was ranked equally high. For our research, particularly relevant is the TOMAS 2017 research, which gives the comparison of the perception of safety in Croatia, compared to competitor counties (Figure 3).

Croatia is perceived as safer than Portugal, Spain, France, Italy, Slovenia, Montenegro, Greece, and Turkey, which are tourist competitors on the European part of the Mediterranean, and therefore relevant for the comparison. Safety is a competitive advantage because some of those countries offer coastal and maritime tourism, which brings the biggest profit for Croatia.

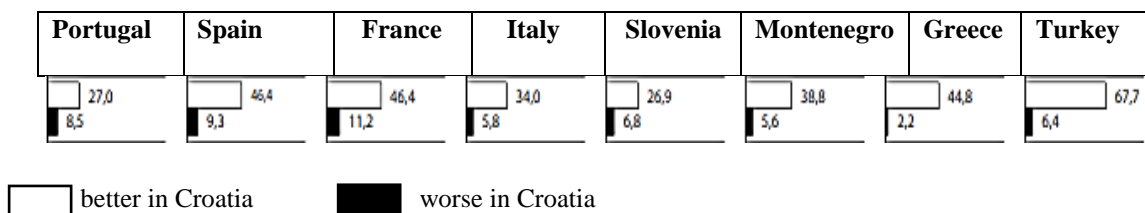


Figure 3. Evaluation of Elements of Offer in Relation to Competing Countries (in %) – Personal Safety
Source: Institute for Tourism (2017)

Referable is also the Global Peace Index study (2019) which ranked Croatia as the 27th safest country among 163 countries in the world. This fact becomes even more relevant if we take into account that Croatia is going through the COVID-19 crisis much more easily than tourist superpowers such as Italy, Spain, or Austria, which can be used as a comparative advantage in Croatia’s future promotion as a safe destination (Mataković, 2020:5). In the pandemic year, 2020 Croatia registered more than 54 million overnight stays, around 50% of the record year 2019 (Hina, 2021). If we take the same countries that were analyzed in the Mataković research (2020), we can see that in 2020, Spain had a drop of 77.3% for international arrivals. Austria recorded one of the smallest drops in international overnights (41%), followed by Italy (54.2%) and Germany (54.7%). In 2021, Croatia recorded

growth in the number of tourist arrivals of 23% in Q2 2021 in comparison to Q2 2020, while Austria and Spain were recording a drop of 97% and 82.6% in Q2 2021 in comparison to Q2 2020 (Rodrigues et.al., 2021: 13). Another indicator of Croatian success, in the first 11 months of 2021, there was 12.5 million arrivals and 69.6 million nights in commercial accommodation establishments, which was 80.7% more arrivals and 71.5% more tourist nights compared to the same period of 2020 (Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2022).

For the purposes of this analysis, we have also conducted verification of tourist interest by using a data exploration tool – Google Trends. The reference is Gunter and Önder’s (2016) research, where they use Google Trends index to predict tourist demand in major European cities, and on basis of this research, we use Google Trends (assuming the Google is the “first point” from which tourists want to inform themselves about the place they would potentially visit) to check the interest in Croatia as a potential vacation destination. The additional validity of this analysis tool is visible in the fact that “the search traffic provided by Google Trends is useful to promptly detect a certain phenomenon and is, therefore, an excellent monitoring tool. It is representative, as more than 5.5 billion searches are run on Google every day. Its search traffic exhibits high correlation with social phenomena, which is indicative of its high potential to be applied in a wide range of areas” (Seung-Pyo et al., 2018, in Zorko, Jakopović & Cesarec, 2021: 172). We took the period from February 2020 - just before the beginning of the crisis, while despite precautionary measures due to the emergence and spread of coronavirus, Croatia was considered a safe tourist destination and there were no infected people in the country, to January 2022 as a time of this research and still an ongoing crisis. According to Google Trends, the interest over time for Croatia as a tourist destination/vacation location is visible in the following graph:



Source: Author

Typically, the greatest interest is in the summer months, and in line with all the previously shown numbers in tourism, there is a noticeable rise in August 2021, which surpassed the Year 2020. Later in the research, tourism campaigns and other activities carried out in the last two pandemic years will be presented, to which such results could be partly attributed.

Additionally, the Agreement of the Croatian Tourist Board with The European Travel Agents’ and Tour Operators’ Associations (ECTAA), gave Croatia the status of “Preferred Destination” within the program of promotional activities aimed at positioning Croatia as an attractive and safe tourist destination, according to 70,000 travel agents and tour operators across Europe (Karantzavelou, 2022), definitely had a great impact on the perception of Croatia as a safe space.

Furthermore, we can point out, that despite the pandemic, low-cost carrier airline Ryanair introduced lines from the Croatian capital, Zagreb, connecting Zagreb with 24 lines from European destinations, by September 2021 (Index, 2021). Also, new railway lines of the Czech carrier RegioJet (for Czechs, Slovaks, and Hungarians as the most frequent tourists in Croatia) were introduced, which run directly to the Adriatic coast – in 2020 more than 60,000 passengers were transported by train from the Czech Republic to Croatia with 90% occupancy of lines (Croatian Radio Television: 2021). This shows how much interest there is in Croatia as a destination.

As already mentioned, in the first wave of the pandemic in Croatia (which lasted from February 29 to September 30, 2020), there was a greater concern among tourists that their country will introduce mandatory quarantine (some of the tourists ended their vacation earlier because their media reported on the obligation of self-isolation

upon of the arrival to home country) than because of the epidemiological situation. In this case, we can see the factor of state influence (from the UNWTO definition of the five groups of stakeholders that we presented in the Introduction), where the strategic level affects the realization of (tourism) interest. The next subsection will examine in more detail how other stakeholders are involved – the private and public sectors, which together influence the transformation of spaces (as space which can provide security/safety in the first place, and then also provide all other additional contents that make it the destination of interest).

3.3 The ways of creating the perception of a safe space

According to Tatalović and Malnar (2021: 133) “when it comes to threats such as health threat, for the behavior of different entities, from individuals to states, their subjective sense of security is more important than the objective situation”. To verify this thesis, we will first begin from the strategic level observation, as the “objective one”. According to Mikac and Kravaršćan (2021), Croatia does not have a national strategy for security in tourism which is recommended to every tourism-oriented country by the UNWTO’s “Recommended Measures for Security in Tourism”, although it is very relevant for the country which is so highly dependent on tourism which also encompasses the maintaining the security (life and health) of tourists visiting Croatia. The importance of the strategy as a document lies in the fact that it provides guidance for efforts and a clear framework on how best to make use of resources that already exist or need to be acquired. It prescribes objectives, key performance indicators and directs stakeholders to achieve these objectives. That is why, at the level of decision-makers, an initiative should be launched to set such a strategic framework, in order to ensure a clear vision of what Croatia needs to be an (objectively) safe tourist country. In addition to strategic consideration, we can additionally highlight measures and activities during and after the pandemic brought by Rahimić (2021) in the research focused on the contribution of strategic management to sustainable competitive advantage, having in mind achieving the tourists’ expectations, as follows:

Table 1. Suggestions of measures and activities during and post-pandemic

Expectations of tourists (guests, clients)	Necessary measures and activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the pandemic changes tourist behavior; • greater sensitivity to health and security standards; • greater emphasis on security in the destination; • personalized approach; • availability of the service; • quality-price ratio (value for money); • experience, sensation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • redesign health and security protocols to reduce the likelihood of the virus spreading; • work with reduced capacity, to ensure the physical distance between guests and employees; • change in the way of providing the service (physically remote service, service by employees, hybrid service system); • Adoption of technological innovations due to the potential of enriching the guest’s experience; • automation and robotics; • recognizing the strategic role of information and communication technologies; • encouraging innovation in the design of an unforgettable experience (the concept of “security” becomes the concept of “security + experience”)

Source: Rahimić, Z. (2021) The Contribution of Strategic Management to the Sustainable Competitive Advantage of a Tourist Destination (p.105)

These can be good guidelines to what is important to tourists and how to achieve that, and here we can offer them as recommendations for all stakeholders in the tourism sector in the Republic of Croatia, but also globally. The pandemics have affected the tourism workers in the way that if they want to adjust to the market, they should focus more on four main components: (1) coordinated and transparent approach to the stakeholders in the destination; (2) respecting the security and compliance protocols as well as affirming trust through the consistency of their implementation and invoking international institutions; (3) communication with clients and marketing, (4) advocating for policies that contribute to recovery and support of Government recovery measures (Gržinić, Sučić-Čevra, 2021: 175). We will especially emphasize component (2) and component (3), as they were used in the Republic of Croatia as tools for creating a safe space.

Regarding the use of digital tools to enhance safe mobility, one of the tools used by the Republic of Croatia is the “Enter Croatia” platform of the Ministry of the Interior. In order to facilitate the entry of tourists into Croatia (shorten waiting times at border crossings), a website - enter Croatia.up.hr was launched via tourists can (by filling out the form) receive announcement certificate, and also informs the visitors on the epidemiological situation. From May 28, 2020, when the website was launched, until the beginning of July 2020, almost 1.1 million foreign passengers were announced through this system (Government of the Republic of Croatia, 2020) which shows that it is a purposeful tool. The website www.croatiacovid19.info, launched by the Croatian Tourism Association in 2020, is also used to provide timely and accurate information to potential tourists about COVID-19 in Croatian counties (continental parts and coast) and islands. It shows the map which is daily published and based on data reported by the Croatian Institute of Public Health, which can assist tourists to plan their vacation in the destination of interest. In the first four days of the launch, www.croatiacovid19.info was visited by over 30,000 unique users from Germany, Hungary, Slovenia, Austria, Netherlands, UK, Switzerland, Italy, and Belgium (Rogulj, 2020). With these examples, we can validate that “the Internet is thus becoming a key medium of communication with a continuously growing number of users around the world, but also a tool for achieving the goals of end-users who use the Internet not only to book accommodation or buy airline tickets, but also to collect all relevant and easily accessible information for their travel and selected tourist destination” (Baldigara, 2020: 33), and in this case the monitoring information in/on the pandemic.

In addition to this Web sites launched by mentioned organizations, we should mention a Google tool, which was given for use to all interested stakeholders (especially in the tourism sector) – “Travel Insights with Google”, the platform which is part of UNWTO & Google Acceleration Program to support the recovery of the tourism sector and help it adapt to the current search trends and trends in travel conditions. The platform assists the tourism sector in making decisions based on data on demand. In June 2021, Croatia became a part of that program, with Greece, Portugal, and Italy (Ministry of Tourism and Sport, 2021a).

In further analysis, how the tourism sector was supported, the efforts to reduce the risk for tourism workers, as well as potential visitors will be presented. One of the supports was the provision of vaccination. At the end of December 2020, the first vaccine doses came to Croatia, primary for the most endangered (the elderly, the infirm, workers in health and social institutions), then all other groups in society, depending on the arrival of doses. In January 2021, a survey was carried out by the Croatian Chamber of Commerce and the Croatian Tourism Association at the initiative of the Council for the Recovery and Development of Tourism and around 70% of surveyed tourism workers (2/3 of total tourism workers) expressed interest to receive the vaccine (Ministry of Tourism and Sport, 2021b). Based on this interest, the tourism sector was placed in the priority group of vaccination recipients and vaccinations began in April 2021, making Croatia one of the first to vaccinate tourism professionals in order to position itself as a safe destination. Since the larger availability of vaccine doses (vaccination with booster (third) dose in Croatia started in November 2021), the possibility is given for visitors (EU and non-EU foreign citizens) to be vaccinated against COVID-19 in Croatian Capital Zagreb (free of charge), regardless of not having Croatian health insurance. Which also contributes to the increase of safety. The relevance is also seen in Allianz research on expectations, attitudes, and traveler behavior, according to which, 3,500 surveyed people highlighted the importance of advanced sanitizing efforts at airports and hotels (58%) and of the percentage of vaccinated people at the destination (47% of respondents said other people receiving a COVID-19 vaccine would make them feel safer to resume traveling) (Rodrigues et al., 2021:20).

Alongside vaccination as a health measure and other measures that have increased the image of Croatia as a safe space, we must point out “Safe Stay in Croatia” - designation and protocols for tourists, concept/campaign, and label presented in February 2021 by the Ministry of Tourism and Sports. It is the upgrade of the “Safe Travels” certificate established by the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) to facilitate the recognition of destinations and companies that adhere to globally standardized protocols for health and hygiene. Compliance with the measures included in the protocols is monitored through the system of the Ministry of Tourism and Sports, professional associations in tourism, and the users themselves. In case of irregularities, the assigned “Safe stay in Croatia” labels are revoked - which further adds to the control of security. Apart from tourist objects, the “Safe Stay in Croatia” label can be used by other stakeholders linked to the tourism sector, in seven categories: nautical; sports, recreation, and health; attractions; tourist guides, agencies and information centers; traffic/transport; catering; accommodation. According to data from June 2021, the national label “Safe stay” has 16,000 users, and the site www.safestayincroatia.hr was visited by more than 700 thousand people - mostly from Germany, Croatia, Poland, Czech Republic, Austria, and Italy (Goreta, 2021).

In addition to the “Safe stay in Croatia” campaign, we will highlight a number of campaigns launched by the Ministry of Tourism and Sports and the Croatian National Tourist Board, with a focus on pandemic challenges. Those are:

- a. “The Vacation You Deserve Is Closer Than You Think” – launched in May 2020, for neighboring markets which will be most likely able to visit Croatia after opening the borders in the first wave of pandemics, and in parallel the platform “Enjoy The View From Croatia” was launched for markets not able to travel to Croatia in the near term. This is a good example of targeted marketing that aims at individual countries that will most likely visit the country, and still maintains a “connection” with countries that are not expected to be consumers in that period but will be in the future when better conditions are created.
- b. “Thank you for visiting” online campaign launched in September 2020, on 13 foreign markets with greater attention to the German, Slovenian, Polish and Czech markets from which the largest number of tourists came, despite epidemiological measures and travel protocols.
- c. “Croatia Full of New Beginnings”, for January – February 2021, with hashtag #CroatiaWishList2021 which targets 15 markets to maintain Croatia's visibility. Visibility is a very important item in times when priorities change and safety has become primary over pleasure (in this case pleasure of travel). Although the number of visits has been decreased, Croatia invested efforts to remain “visible” to consumers for future times.
- d. “Croatia, your new office!” – launched in March 2021, targeting digital nomads who are a growing trend in the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on the United States, Canadian, and United Kingdom markets. The campaign represents an adjustment to trends and new markets, which is also an important item recognized by the Republic of Croatia.
- e. “Croatian islands - COVID-free zones” launched in April 2021, providing tourists the accurate information on the epidemiological situation in the country’s islands which had a much lower incidence than in other parts of Croatia. This could also be an example of good practice for Indonesia, which is the world's largest island country and can offer such a “pandemic refuge” on its smaller islands.
- f. “Trust me I ve been there” was launched for the period May - July 2021, which aims to present Croatia as a safe destination and focuses on 12 key markets (Germany, Slovenia, Austria, Italy, Poland, the United Kingdom, the Czech Republic, Hungary, France, the Netherlands, Slovakia, and Russia) with 12 promotional videos, one for each market. This is the first campaign in Croatia adapted to the preferences of individual markets and the actors are satisfied guests who invite their compatriots to Croatia as an ideal and safe holiday destination.
- g. “Thank you for your trust” following July’s campaign and aimed at ten key markets with the highest number of visitors to Croatia in 2021 – October 2021.

As it is visible, through various tools and activities to adapt to the pandemic, Croatia has systematically worked to improve the image of Croatia as a safe country that respects health/security protocols and requirements. Through the Discussion and Conclusion section, we will evaluate the analyzed Results to test the hypothesis set out in the Introduction of this paper.

4. Discussion

Through the research, we wanted to test the hypothesis that there is a positive relationship between the perception of a safe space and the number of arrivals of foreign tourists to the Republic of Croatia in the COVID-19 pandemic. To test this hypothesis, we asked three research questions to support the original hypothesis: what was the interest and number of visitors during the pandemic (from its beginning in Croatia in February 2020 till the time of this research); what was the marketing messages and models during pandemics; what is the degree of satisfaction of tourists with the element of personal safety.

For the first and second questions, using secondary sources and our own analysis by Google Trends, we gained the required insight and through clear numerical indicators, we can confirm the significant interest and the large number of tourists who visited Croatia despite the pandemic. However, answering the third question was challenging, because although there are numerical indicators and surveys for the period before the pandemic (quite recent - from 2019), there is no specific data available on what is the degree of satisfaction of tourists with the element of personal safety in Croatia for the pandemic period (for 2020 and 2021), and this is the limitation of this research. However, what is possible, and what research freedom allows us, is to draw conclusions based on certain premises, and we will do that with the interpretation of research results.

What can be seen in the case of Croatia, the trust gained before the pandemic time - where tourists consider and believe that Croatia is a safe space, is also present in the pandemic since are offered additional factors for a higher level of security, as that is crucial for the tourist interest. Although it is very challenging to assess how much risk

perception actually influences the decision to visit countries (tourist destinations) during the COVID-19 pandemic, our case study shows that despite the clearly communicated existence of risks in August 2020, tourists have still chosen to stay and to come to the country and thus it is shown that it is truly a subjective matter of each individual (tourist).

All stakeholders in Croatia (from the Government to the Croatian National Tourist Board) have been proactive since the beginning of the pandemic and worked to promote the country as a safe destination that respects all protocols and high-security standards - an example presented in this research which shows these efforts most clearly is “Safe stay in Croatia” label from 2020, the same year when most countries recorded a decline in tourist arrivals, but Croatia recorded the growth. Considering a large number of visitors to the “Safe stay in Croatia” website, we can undoubtedly conclude that the label had an impact on the perception of Croatia as a safe space, and thus confirm our hypothesis.

By introducing COVID certificates, facilitating the entry of foreign nationals into the country (“Enter Croatia”), entry without quarantine for holders of COVID pass or negative PCR tests, sanitizing prescribed by the security protocols as well as Government decision on priority vaccination for tourism industry employees, Croatia has become a “location of interest” that guarantees (health) safety and is also open to all tourists who meet the required security preconditions. And some global research (like the aforementioned Allianz research) confirms that this is what tourists are looking for.

What is additionally important and was enabled to everyone (both the local population which in pandemic used the favorable tourism offers that Croatia offered to its residents as part of measures for the revivification of the tourism and to the foreign nationals) was the ability to monitor publicly available pandemic data through a sufficient number of digital platforms, but also other tools to make it easier for tourists (domestic, foreign) to choose a destination and check whether it meets their security requirements.

What COVID-19 pandemic has shown (and not only in the tourism sector), data harmonization is needed, as well as better stakeholders interconnection that includes collaboration between practitioners and policymakers, and hints of such efforts can be recognized in Croatia. A large number of tourism workers accepted and implemented the proposed measures and activities that came from the sectoral level (competent Ministry of Tourism and Sports), but also from the governmental level (recommendations of the National Civil Protection Headquarters which coordinate all activities and services in suppressing the COVID-19 in Croatia). This helped to create a complete image of the safe space, because measures and activities were implemented regionally, in all parts of Croatia.

5. Conclusions

This research, which consolidates the national efforts in the creation of safe space, is a contribution to destination management in the COVID-19 era, by sharing the perspective of the Republic of Croatia as an example of good practice with other countries, especially those whose economies depend significantly on the tourism sector (such as Indonesia). It also contributes to understanding the factors that affect the dynamics of tourism destination selection, from which we can extract findings that will help to develop tourism sustainability (as well as economic sustainability) – from strengthening the local community participation, ensuring visitors satisfaction, efficient use of resources, etc. Change of demand factors, changes in the businesses of tourism and travel-related service providers, as well as the change in travel habits, give us the verification that “the change” in its essence is - the direct impact of the pandemic.

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