

SOCIO-ECONOMIC ASSESSMENT OF TOURIST PREFERENCES BEFORE AND AFTER COVID-19 (BASED ON SOCIOLOGICAL SURVEY OF THE BORDER AREA)

Kristina Kudak¹, Olha Svitlynets², Ihor Nazarkevych³, Mariana Popyk⁴, Robert Bacho⁵, Mykhaylo Pityulych⁶, Ruslana Bilyk⁷, Oksana Kulyk⁸, Tetyana Nezveshchuk-Kohut⁹, Nazariy Popadynets¹⁰

¹ Senior Researcher, Transcarpathian Regional Centre for Socio-Economic and Humanities Research of the NAS of Ukraine, 21 University, Str., Uzhhorod, Ukraine, E-mail address: kristina.kudak@gmail.com

² Assoc., Prof., Uzhhorod National University, 3 Narodna Square, Uzhhorod, Ukraine, E-mail address: Olga.svitlynets@uzhnu.edu.ua

³ Assoc., Prof., Ivan Franko National University of Lviv, 1 Universytetska St., Lviv, Ukraine, E-mail address: nazarkevich@ukr.net

⁴ Assoc., Prof., Uzhhorod National University, 3 Narodna Square, Uzhhorod, Ukraine, E-mail address: mariana.popyk@gmail.com

⁵ Prof., Ferenc Rákóczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian Collage of Higher Education, 6 Kossuth sq., Beregovo, Ukraine, E-mail address: bacho.robert@kmf.org.ua

⁶ Prof., Uzhhorod National University, 3 Narodna Square, Uzhhorod, Ukraine, E-mail address: pitjuluch0311@gmail.com

⁷ Assoc., Prof., Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University, 2 Kotsiubynskoho St. Chernivtsi, Ukraine, E-mail address: ruslanaosadchuk21@gmail.com

⁸ A teacher, Ivan Boberskyi Lviv State University of Physical Culture, 11 Tadeusz Kostyushka Str., Lviv, Ukraine, E-mail address: oksana.m.kul@gmail.com

⁹ Assoc., Prof., Kyiv National University of Trade and Economics, 7 Central square, Chernivtsi, Ukraine, E-mail address: t.semenivna@gmail.com

¹⁰ Senior researcher, Lviv Polytechnic National University, 18 Horbachevskoho, Str., Lviv, Ukraine, E-mail address: popadynets.n@gmail.com

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Abstract

The article presents a comparative analysis and socio-economic assessment of the behavior of the population of border area (Transcarpathian region) in tourism industry and travel-related services before the crisis COVID-19 and in the post-crisis period. The purpose of the article is to define the changes in tourism preferences caused by the impact of COVID-19, in particular to analyze the impact of the crisis on the distribution of households' expenditures on recreation in the structure of their budgets, as well as post-crisis assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on tourists' choices, such as destination, type of recreation, transport, accommodation and other aspects related to the tourist preferences. The results of the study showed that in the conditions of COVID-19 there were some changes in consumer preferences in the market of tourism and travel-related services in the region, but during the downturn period the tourist's preferences and behavior have partially returned to the stage that was typical in the pre-crisis period. As a result of the impact of the crisis, there were some changes in the structure of households' budget, in particular, there was a partial reduction in the level of tourist's expenditures for recreation and travelling (for 72% of respondents). Objectively that in the post-crisis period has partially increased the number of tourists that started to prefer domestic tourism (by 5%). A lot of respondents chose to travel by their own cars (36%) and stay at hotels (36%), however, one third of respondents also prefer rural homestays (20,48%). The subjective assessment by the respondents of the factors that influencing their tourism choice in the post-crisis period showed that safety does not play a primary role for most of them and priority is given to living conditions, comfort and the level of prices. It is expected that the results of the study will provide an analytical basis for tourism industry managers to offer new services taking into account the preferences of tourists in the post-crisis period of COVID-19.

Keywords: *tourism, preferences, behavior, households, crisis, COVID-19.*

JEL Codes: *D10, R21.*

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Introduction

The crisis of COVID-19 has influenced all spheres of socio-economic life of society. The tourism sector has suffered almost the greatest losses compared to other economic activities, as the tourism preferences of the population have changed. During and after the pandemic, interaction with consumers and the study of consumer behavior in the travel services market become more important than ever, so the aim of this study is to reveal the travel preferences of the population of Transcarpathian region in the post-COVID-19 pandemics period. The main tasks of the study are:

- to conduct the systematic analysis of theoretical approaches to the study of tourism preferences and behavior;
- to analyze the changes of the expenditures for travelling and recreation in the structure of the households budget;
- to conduct a comparative assessment of the consumers' preferences between the domestic and international tourism before the COVID-19 and in the pandemic downturn period;
- to conduct a comparative assessment of the tourists' preferences before and after COVID-19 related to the type of accommodation, food, transport and etc.;
- to determine the subjective assessment by the respondents of the degree of influence of factors that determine their tourism preferences in pre-crisis and post-crisis period;
- to make conclusions and research proposals.

The article is structured in 3 parts. The first part comprises the literature review and analysis of the theoretical approaches of tourist preferences. The next chapter includes the presentation and analysis of the sociological survey results. The conclusions summarize the results of the study and their significance from the perspective of tourism sector development in terms of COVID-19 pre-crisis and post-crisis period.

Literature review

At the level of each country in tourism industry an important role is played by the formation of preferences, which takes into

account not only its potential, but also the competitiveness of the tourist destination (Gogonea, Săseanu, Ghiță, Toma, 2021). To identifying and characterize the tourists' behavior and preferences (Wu, 2013) and (Konstantakis, 2017) analyzed the level and structure of spending on tourist travel from a macroeconomic perspective. The study of (Hearne, Salinas, 2002) presents the use of choice experiments as a mechanism to analyze preferences of national and international tourists in relation to the development of Barva Volcano Area in Costa Rica. (Wang, Li, Zhen, Zhang, 2016) explore a methodological approach of assessing tourist preference of smart tourist attraction (STA), and the strengths and weaknesses of an STA accordingly. Taking a critical look at tourism research and literature (Budeanu, 2007; Yakymchuk et al. 2021) examines the interplay between reasons for tourists' choice of products and services, and environmental motivations.

(Chaminuka, Groeneveld, Selomane, Ierland, 2012) analyses the potential for development of ecotourism in rural communities in South Africa and determine preferences of tourists, according to origin and income levels, for ecotourism and their marginal willingness to pay for three ecotourism attributes: village accommodation, village tours and visits to crafts markets.

Due to (Albaladejo-Pina, Díaz-Delfa, 2009) to evaluate the tourists' preferences for effective attributes, a stated preference experiment was conducted in the Northwest area of the Region of Murcia and the data were analyzed using discrete choice modeling methodology. The study consistent specifications for multinomial logit and mixed logit models that consider variations in tastes within tourists' preferences are found.

In terms of COVID-19 crisis (Cuomo, Tortora, Danovi, Festa, Metallo, 2021) in the study aims to compare the factors that develop tourist preferences in terms of (1) what drives the favorability of tourist preferences?; (2) what relationship exists between tourist expectations, proximity, and favorable reputation?; and (3) what are the main influences of tourist preferences on hospitality system competitiveness in pre- and post-COVID-19 period? (Table 1).

Table 1. Theoretical approaches of tourists' preferences

Authors, main references	Key points of the study
Gogonea, Săseanu, Ghiță, Toma, 2021	formation of preferences takes into account its potential and the competitiveness of the tourist destination
Wu, 2013; Konstantakis, 2017	to identifying the tourists' preferences analyzed the level and structure of spending on tourist travel from a macroeconomic perspective
Hearne, Salinas, 2002	use of choice experiments as a mechanism to analyze preferences of national and international tourists
Wang, Li, Zhen, Zhang, 2016	explore a methodological approach of assessing tourist preference of smart tourist attraction (STA), and the strengths and weaknesses of an STA accordingly.
Budeanu, 2007	examines the interplay between reasons for tourists' choice of products and services, and environmental motivations
Chaminuka, Groeneveld, Selomane, Ierland, 2012	determine preferences of tourists, according to origin and income levels, for ecotourism and their marginal willingness to pay for ecotourism attributes
Albaladejo-Pina, Díaz-Delfa, 2009	based on stated preference experiment and using discrete choice modeling methodology, the study consider variations in tastes within tourists' preferences
Cuomo, Tortora, Danovi, Festa, Metallo, 2021	compare the factors that develop tourist preferences taking into account the drives of favorability of tourist preferences, relationship between tourist expectations, proximity, favorable reputation and the main influences of tourist preferences on hospitality system competitiveness in pre-crisis and post-crisis period

**Source: compiled by the author.*

Based on theoretical literature review this study focuses on determining the changes in the behavior and preferences of tourists, caused by the crisis of COVID-19 taking into account the amount of recreation costs in the structure of the households' budget, type of recreation, food and accommodation, also the determination of subjective assessment by consumers of tourist services of the degree of influence of factors that determine their tourist choice.

Methodical approach

The main research instrument is a self-administered survey which was distributed online using Google Form from June to September 2021 in Transcarpathian region (Ukraine). The survey link was disseminated through email, Viber and social media platforms (Facebook Messenger). The survey was conducted on the basis of the method of personal structured interviews according to a stochastic sample, which is representative for the population of Transcarpathia aged 18+. The survey includes 5 questions about the

demographic characteristics of the respondents and 16 closed-ended questions. The half of the questions required a single answer and another part of them permitted multiple answers. Two questions were measured on the ordinal scale, one question (age of the respondent) on the ratio scale and the rest of the variables were nominal. Data were processed using MS Excel for Windows, Version 17.0. The tabulations were presented in absolute values and percentages in order to provide the basis for further analysis and conclusions. As a result, 57 households were interviewed, such as 65.4% – female and 34.6% – male respondents. The majority of the respondents (76.2%) – population between 18 and 25 years old, 70.4% – respondents with higher education degree. The survey does not represent the population aged 65 years and older. The half of the respondents are representatives of households with the number of family members – 4 people and have 2 children. 50.9% of the respondents get vaccinated against COVID-19 (table 2).

Table 2. Sample characteristics of the respondents

<i>Age groups of the respondents</i>					
18-25	26-35	36-45	46-55	56-65	> 65
76.2%	12.7%	7.3%	2.0%	1.8%	0%
<i>Education level of the respondents</i>					
Primary		Secondary		Higher	
0%		22.2%		70.4%	
<i>Household size, number of members</i>					
1	2	3	4	≥ 5	
1.8%	16.4%	14.5%	43.7%	23.6%	
<i>Number of children in household (<16y)</i>					
1	2	3	4	≥ 5	
32%	56%	10%	2%	0%	

*Source: calculated by the author.

Beside the survey, data was obtained through literature studies using quantitative and qualitative descriptive analysis.

Results

Due to (Gogonea, Săseanu, Ghiță, Toma, 2021) the expenses made by tourists with tourist trips, their distribution by categories of accommodation, transport, food and relaxation influences the economy of the tourist destination region. Therefore, in our study, it was important to analyze the changes in the behavior of consumers of tourist services in relation to changes in respondents' spending on travelling and recreation in the structure of their households' budgets. According to the results of sociological monitoring in Transcarpathian region, it was determined that for the majority of respondents (56.4%) the expenditures for on travelling and recreation are 10-30%. 30.9% of respondents indicated that in the structure of

their households budget the analyzed expenses are less than 10%, while 12.7% of respondents spend for recreation nearly 30-50% of their budget.

For the question “How did your expenditures for travelling and recreation changed compared to the pre-crisis period?” the majority of respondents (72%) indicated the decrease in total recreation expenditures during the crisis period, in particular, for the majority of the respondents (43.9%) the analyzed costs decreased by 10%, for 29.2% of respondents – by 10-30%, for 9.75% – by 30-50% and only for the third of the respondents (17,1%) the analyzed expenditures decreased for more than 50%. Despite the COVID-19 crisis, 14% of respondents indicated an increase in their expenditures for recreation during the analyzed period. Also, for 14% of respondents during a pandemic the analyzed expenditure did not change (Figure 1).

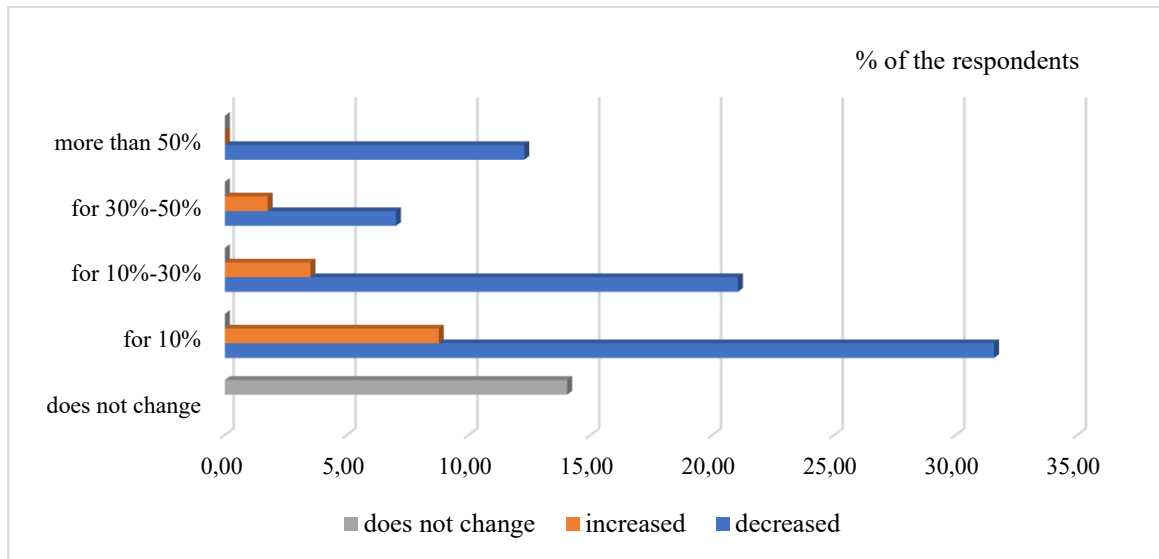


Figure 1. Distribution of the answers to the question “How did your expenditures for travelling and recreation changed compare to the pre-COVID-19 period?”

**Source: calculated by the author.*

During the survey it was important to define the populations’ propensity for savings due to the impact of the COVID-19 crisis. Analysis of the answers to the question “How did you invest your savings from reducing of the costs for recreation in terms of COVID-19?” showed that only 21.2% of respondents were invested in savings, while 32.3% of respondents used these costs for current family needs, 24.2% – for the purchase of households appliances and goods. This situation indicates a low level of investment potential of the population of the region. The positive fact is that 22.2% of respondents invested their savings to training, studying and self-development.

The analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on the tourists’ preferences showed that there are also a variety of external influences that can have a significant impact on traveler mobility. These potential external factors can be summarized in two main categories — the natural offer of the destination and the potential risk of crises based on the different environmental dimensions (Uğur, Akbiyik, 2020). Based on signaling, risk perception and prospect theory, (Li, Gong, Gao, Yuan, 2021) find that tourists avoid traveling to destinations with more confirmed cases of COVID-19 relative to their places of origin, and

prefer destinations close to home, especially local attractions. In our survey the answers to the question “Did you prefer domestic tourism after the COVID-19 crisis?” were distributed as follows: 34.09% of respondents prefer to rest within the country, 27.27% of respondents answered that they do not prefer this type of rest, while 38,63% indicated the answer “often”. Within the Transcarpathian region, the answers to this question were distributed as follows – 38.77% of respondents answered “yes”, 14.29% – “no” and 46.94% – “often”.

The results of sociological survey showed that after the COVID-19 compared to the pre-crisis period decreased the number of respondents that prefer to rest abroad – 36.9% and 32.9% respectively. At the same time, in the conditions of the crisis, decreased the number of tourists who travel abroad more than once time per year, while one-time trips become more popular compared to the pre-crisis period. During the analysed period increased the number of tourists that prefer to rest in the territory of their country (Ukraine) – respectively 28.5% before the crisis and 32.9% after the pandemic. Despite the impact of COVID-19, the number of vacationers within the Transcarpathian region remained unchanged – 34% (Figure 2, Figure 3).

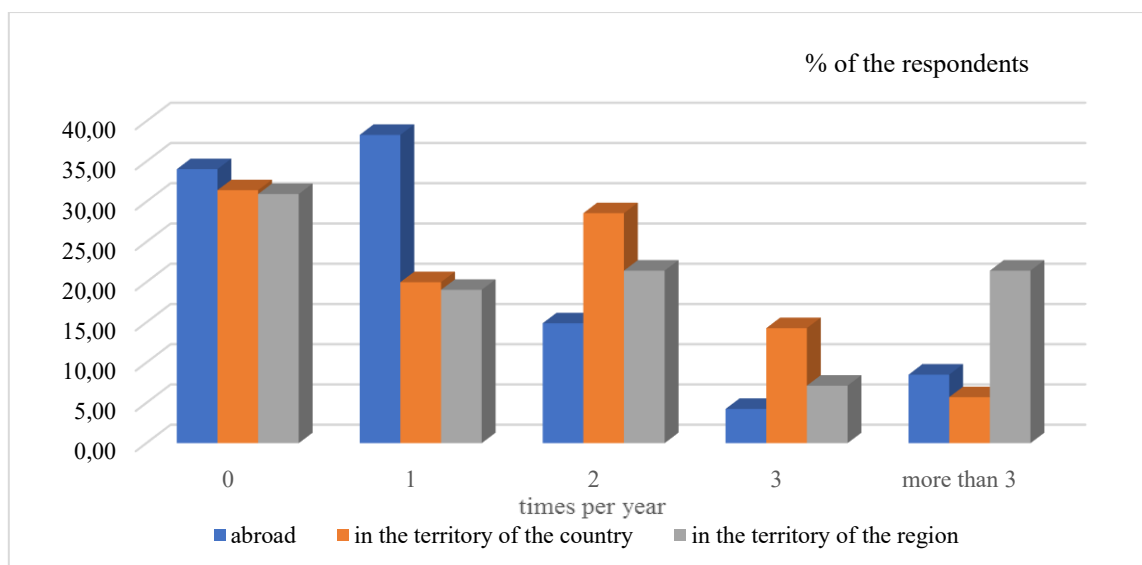


Figure 2. Distribution of the answers to the question “How many times per year did your family go on short-term vacation (during 7-14 days) before the COVID-19 crisis?”

**Source: calculated by the author.*

The further analysis showed that after the COVID-19 pandemic, there were not significant changes in the tourists’ preferences for recreation activities. In particular, didn’t change the preferences of tourists who choose mountain hiking (distribution of the answers are 9.47% before and 9.52% after the crisis), extreme recreation (before the crisis – 11.04%, after the crisis – 12.24%) and gastronomic tourism (before the crisis – 10%, after the crisis – 12.24%). After the pandemic the number of

respondents who prefer passive recreation and ski tourism increased by 4.93% and 2.68% respectively, while the number of tourists who prefer health and spa tourism decreased by 3.11% (before the crisis – 12.63%, after the crisis – 9.52%), city tours – by 3.94% (before the crisis – 12.10%, after the crisis – 8.16%), excursions to nature parks and reserves – by 2.14% (before the crisis – 8.94%, after the crisis – 6.80%), as well as sea tourism – by 1.9% (before the crisis – 12.10%, after the crisis – 10.20%).

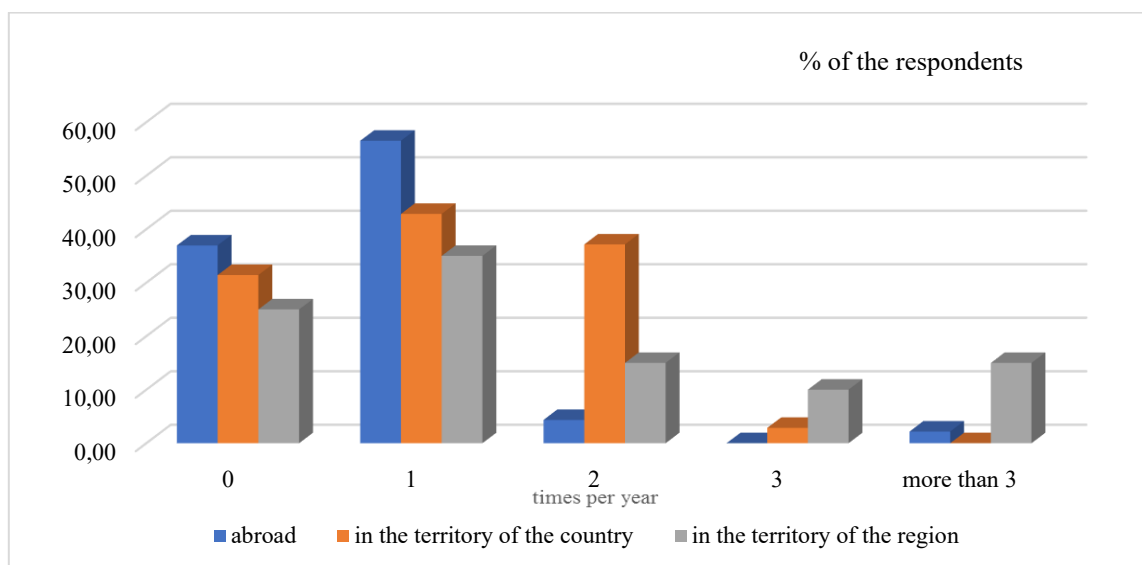


Figure 3. Distribution of the answers to the question “How many times per year did your family go on short-term vacation (during 7-14 days) after the COVID-19 crisis?”

**Source: calculated by the author.*

Also the COVID-19 crisis has affected the type of the transport use patterns in national and international level, it was important to determine which type of transport was preferred by the respondents in the pre-crisis and post-crisis period (Figure 4).

The diagram in figure 4 shows that in terms of the pandemic downturn period there were some changes in the respondents' preferences for the use of bicycles (before the crisis – 9.64%, after the crisis – 10.57%) and cars (before the crisis – 32.45%, after the crisis – 35.57%). Also decreased the number of people who want's to travel by train – by 3.54% (before the crisis – 13.15%, after the crisis – 9.61%) and public bus – by 2.11% (before the crisis – 28.07%, after the crisis – 25.96%). During the

analyzed period increased the number of respondents that prefer air travelling (before the crisis – 12.28%, after the crisis – 16.34%).

The analysis of the respondents' preferences in the type of food before and after the COVID-19 crisis showed that after the pandemic objectively increased the number of respondents who prefer to eat self-prepared food (before the crisis – 18.33%, after the crisis – 28.33%), also for 5% decreased the number of respondents preferred to eat in cafes, restaurants and other catering establishments (before the crisis – 16,66%, after the crisis –11.66%), while a significant number of respondents choose the both variants (before the crisis – 65%, after the crisis – 60%) (Figure 5).

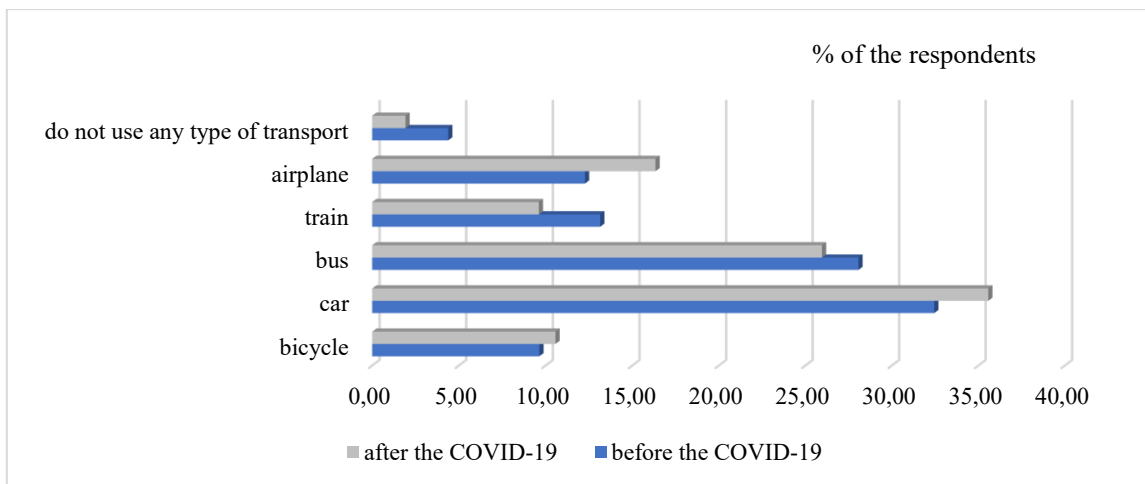


Figure 4. Distribution of the answers to the questions “What kind of transport do you prefer to use (before and after COVID-19)?”

*Source: calculated by the author.

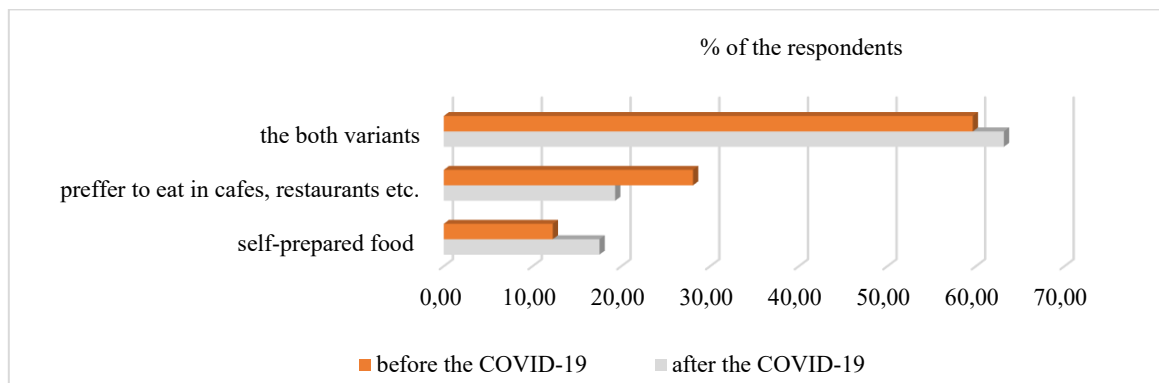


Figure 5. Distribution of the answers to the questions “What type of food do you prefer during the travelling and vacation time?”

*Source: calculated by the author.

The analysis shows that the impact of the COVID-19 crisis has partially changed the tourists' preferences regarding to the type of accommodation. Due to results of sociological survey of (Naumov, Varadzhakova, Naydenov, 2021) a relatively high percent of respondents have indicated that they would prefer the comfort of staying at a family-owned (second home) apartment for their forthcoming holidays. The results of that survey also indicate another potentially interesting finding: preference is given to guest houses than chain branded hotels (Naumov, Varadzhakova, Naydenov, 2021). According to our study, it was determined that after the COVID-19 period the number of respondents that prefer to stay in hotel decreased by 3.41% (38.29% of respondents before the crisis and 34.88% – after the crisis), as well as overnight stays in a mountain shelters (8.51% – before the crisis and 3.49% – after the crisis). For 1.13% decreased the number of the respondents that choose to stay in hostel (12.76% – before the crisis and 11.63% – after the crisis), 0.69% –

overnight in a tent (camping) (7.45% before the crisis and 8.14% – after the crisis). At the same time, the number of respondents that would like to stay in a rural guest houses has increased by 6.36% (30.84% – before the crisis and 37.2% – after the crisis), as well as those who choose to spend the night in their own car (trailer) – by 2.53% (2.12% – before the crisis and 4.65% – after the crisis).

Due to (Marques, Guedes, Bento, 2021) the limited and uneven recovery observed in the accommodation sector shows that specific rural areas, namely those with a more consistent TER (Tourism in Rural Areas) supply, were allowed to attract tourists who (temporarily?) shifted their preferences towards rural tourism. The results of our survey shows that 27.3% of the respondents choose the rural tourism as an alternative type of recreation and vacation, the half of the respondents uncertain in their choice, while 27.3% indicated that they don't prefer such type of the tourism (figure 6).

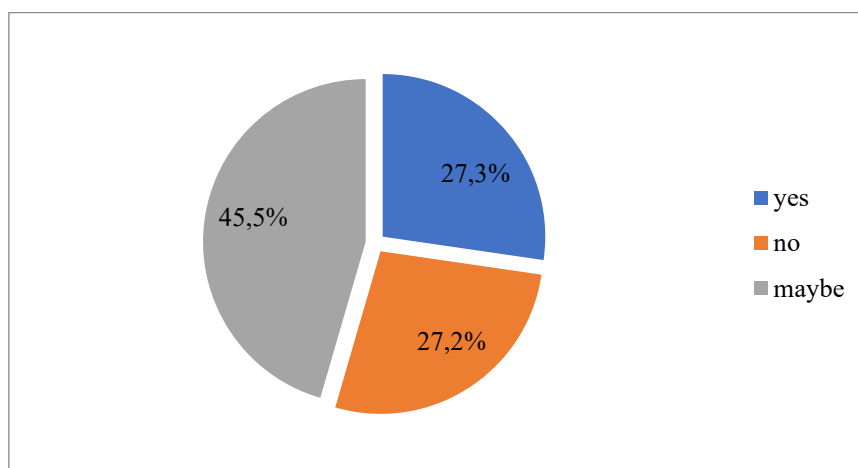


Figure 6. Distribution of the answers to the question “Would you prefer rural tourism as an alternative type of vacation and rest in this year?”

**Source: calculated by the author.*

The analysis of respondents' answers to the question “For what reasons would you choose rural tourism as an alternative type of vacation and rest?” showed that for the third part of the respondents this type of vacation is attractive due to the health effects of rural areas, opportunities to relax in peace and quiet, and competitive prices. Nearly 20% of the

respondents think that this type of recreation is safer than other in terms of the COVID-19 crisis.

Also it was important to conduct a subjective assessment by the respondents of the degree of influence of factors that may determine their behavior, including the choice of the place of destination, type of accommodation, food etc. (Naumov, Varadzhakova, Naydenov, 2021) also

indicate that in terms of COVID-19 the sanitation and cleanliness at the accommodation establishments are the key point of the tourists' preferences. In our study, the analysis of the answers for the question "What is the most important for you during the travelling and vacation time?" has showed that for a significant part of the respondents in the downturn period

safety play an important, but not the primary role (5 points were given by 13.28% of respondents) and priority is given to comfort, living conditions and service (5 points were given by 21.09% of respondents), type of food (5 points – by 17.96% of respondents) and the level of prices (5 points – by 17.19% of respondents) (table 3).

Table 3. Distribution of the answers to the questions "What is the most important thing for you during the travelling and vacation time?"

<i>What is the most important thing for you during the travelling and vacation time?, % of the answers</i>	<i>Score, 0-5</i>				
	1	2	3	4	5
The level of prices	3.13	14.29	24.44	9.52	17.19
High level of comfort and service	6.25	14.29	20,00	14.29	21.09
The quality of food	3.13	19.05	11.11	23.81	17.97
Safety (such as sanitary and epidemiological safety)	3.13	21.43	13.33	30.95	13.28
The additional services to rest and travel with children	35.94	11.90	8.89	2.38	5.47
The possibility to bring a pet	40.63	7.14	2.22	2.38	4.69
Interesting tour program, the opportunity to visit new places	4.69	9.52	20.00	14.29	14.84
Other	3.13	2.38	0.00	2.38	5.47

*Source: calculated by the author.

Conclusions

Due to the results of sociological survey the COVID-19 crisis objectively changed the tourists' behavior and preferences, but in the downturn period they have partially returned to the pre-crisis stage. People have reduced the recreation expenditures and started to prefer domestic tourism, also decreased the number of respondents wishing to rest abroad. Despite the fact that most people prefer traveling by cars and stay in rural homestays, in post-crisis period increased the number of people wishing to stay in hotels and travel by plane. Analysis of the tourists' preferences on the type of food showed that significant number of them choose to eat self-prepared food as well as eating and ordering food in cafes, restaurants and other catering establishments. For the majority of the respondents during the vacation time priority is given to living conditions, comfort and prices. These results should be taken into account by the

local authorities in supporting of tourism sector functioning in the region, as well as rural tourism development. Also, the managers of tourism companies and owners of hotels and rural tourist estates should take into account the changes in consumers' preferences to ensure the effective development of their business in terms of crisis as well as in post-crisis period. Discussion. It is complicated to determine the degree of COVID-19 influence the tourists' preferences because along with the objective effects there are many subjective factors that determine the behavior of the consumers in tourism and travel-related services. According to this, in the further studies the empirical and mathematical models development is needed to explore the level of influencing the external and internal factors on the behavior of different groups of tourists, also identifying the differences in behavior and tourists' preferences of vaccinated and unvaccinated respondents in short-term and long-term period.

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