

Journal of Geography, Politics and Society

2023, 13(1), 55–65

<https://doi.org/10.26881/jpgs.2023.1.06>



THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON TOURISM IN THE TATRA COUNTY (POLAND)

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Citation

Druet P., 2023, The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Tourism in the Tatra County (Poland), *Journal of Geography, Politics and Society*, 13(1), 55-65.

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic and the numerous restrictions implemented because of it have had a huge impact on the tourism sector around the world. The aim of this study is to identify and assess their effects on tourism in the Tatra County, the area in which there are some of the most popular tourist places in Poland – the Tatra National Park and the town of Zakopane. The study showed that the COVID-19 pandemic caused a significant decrease in the tourist traffic in this area in 2020, and as a result, a smaller number of incidents requiring the intervention of the Tatra Volunteer Search and Rescue, less demand for accommodation or fewer foreign tourists. In addition, entrepreneurs directly or indirectly involved in the tourism industry recorded lower revenues or losses. Smaller revenues were also recorded in the mentioned town of Zakopane.

Key words

SARS-CoV-2, COVID-19, pandemic, tourism, Tatra County.

Received: 03 February 2023

Accepted: 10 March 2023

Published: 31 March 2023

1. Introduction

COVID-19 is an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus. The first case was reported in China in December 2019. In the following months, the disease rapidly spread around the world, and the number of infections soared. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared a pandemic (Coronavirus..., n.d.). More than 3 years after the first case was detected, the total global number of recorded infections exceeds 662,000,000, while the total global number of deaths caused by COVID-19 exceeds 6,700,000 (WHO Coronavirus..., n.d.).

In order to combat the pandemic, many restrictions were introduced in most countries

around the world covering many sectors of the economy and social life. Tourism was one of the factors causing the global spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus on a large scale (Farzanegan et al., 2020). Therefore, it was also one of the industries most affected by the restrictions. In addition, the pandemic situation resulted in giving up travel by many tourists. According to data from the United Nations World Tourism Organization, in 2020 there was a significantly lower number of trips worldwide compared to 2019. In consequence, very negative effects in the tourism sector occurred around the world (International..., n.d.). The United Nations World Tourism Organization indicates that, in 2020 alone, global losses in the tourism sector amounted

to 1.3 trillion US dollars, and 100–120 million jobs directly related to tourism were or are at risk. In turn, the global Gross Domestic Product in 2020 lost more than 2 trillion US dollars. Worldwide, losses in the tourism sector caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 were 11 times greater than those related to the economic crisis in 2009 (COVID-19 and Tourism..., 2021). It should be emphasized that these are data for 2020 only, and the pandemic situation, along with the resulting numerous restrictions, continued in many countries in the following years.

The aim of this work is to identify and assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on tourism in one of the most popular tourist regions in Poland – the Tatra County.

2. Research area

The area of research is the Tatra County, which is located in southern Poland, specifically in the southern part of the Małopolskie Voivodeship. Its western, southern and eastern borders constitute the state border between Poland and Slovakia. The county consists of five communes: one municipal – Zakopane (seat of the county authorities) – and four rural ones: Kościelisko, Poronin, Biały Dunajec

and Bukowina Tatrzańska. It has an area of 472 km², while the population in 2021 was 66,700 people (Bank Danych Lokalnych, n.d.).

In its area, there is the Tatra National Park, covering the Polish part of the Tatra Mountains, the highest mountain range of the Carpathian chain (Fig. 1).

This is one of the most popular tourist regions in Poland. The annual number of tourists visiting the Tatra National Park in recent years has surpassed 3 million, and in 2021 it significantly exceeded 4 million (Statistics of the Tatra National Park, n.d.). The town of Zakopane, located at the foot of the northern slope of the Tatra Mountains, is one of the places most visited by tourists in the country. The contributing factors include the fact that the Tatras are the highest mountain range in Poland and the only one representing the alpine mountain sculpture, unique landscape values, rare natural biotic and abiotic values of the Tatras, a possibility to practice many forms of summer and winter mountain tourism, as well as a distinctive local culture or a wide cultural and entertainment offer present throughout the research area (Official website of the Tatra National Park, n.d.). These values are accompanied by a highly developed accommodation and gastronomic base (Bank Danych Lokalnych, n.d.).

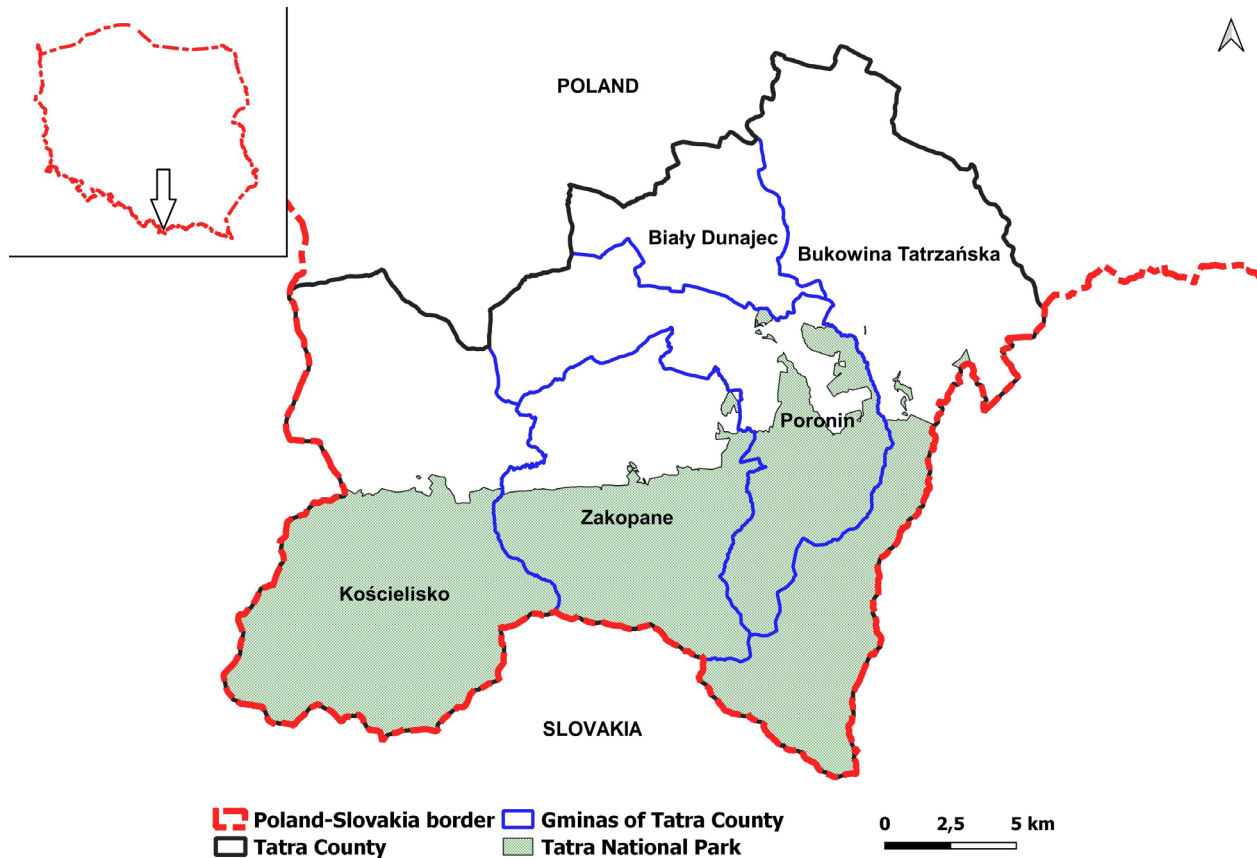


Fig. 1. Location of the research area.

Source: own elaboration.

3. Literature review

Extensive research has been published on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on tourism. People's decisions and preferences regarding travel during the pandemic have been analyzed. This type of research was conducted by B. Korinth (2020), M.M. Wojcieszak-Zbierska et al. (2020), A. Balińska, W. Olejniczak (2021), J. Uglis et al. (2021) and J. Zawadka et al. (2021) for Poland, by Y. Elsayed et al. (2021) among Egyptian and Jordanian citizens, and in the case of China by S. Huang et al. (2021). There have also been numerous works devoted to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourist traffic, as well as its economic effects. Some of them describe this issue on an international scale, e.g. B. Korinth and J. Wendt (2021) and B. Korinth (2022). Many of them concern the national scale in various countries, mainly in Europe and Asia, including S.K. Deb and S. Nafi (2020) for Bangladesh, N. Kvirkvelia and M. Tsitsaga (2021) for Georgia, L-P. Foo et al. (2021) for Malaysia, S. Jaipuria et al. (2021) for India, S. Naidu et al. (2021) for Fiji, the Solomon Islands and Samoa, J.E. Payne et al. (2021) for Croatia. Studies have also been conducted on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Chinese tourism sector, among others by A. Hoque et al. (2020). Much less research has been done on individual places of major tourist importance. This type of research was conducted by D. Dinarto et al. (2020) for the Indonesian island of Bintan and by M. Rutynsky and H. Kushniruk (2020) for the Ukrainian city of Lviv. In the case of literature describing the issue of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism sector in Poland in the context of tourist traffic, economic effects, etc., publications on a national scale are present, such as the aforementioned one by B. Korinth and R. Ranasinghe (2020), B. Korinth (2021) or the report "Tourism in 2020" issued by the Statistics Poland in 2021. However, there have been no studies yet devoted to individual most popular Polish regions, cities, etc. So far, no scientific work has been published on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on tourism in the Tatra County.

4. Data and research methods

This study was conducted using indirect methods. A broad query of international literature related to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on tourism around the world was run. Then, based on the review of works published so far in this field, as well as on the author's analysis of the characteristics of the research area, a methodology was adopted that includes a statistical analysis of the volume

of tourist traffic in the Tatra County in terms of the annual and monthly number of people entering the Tatra National Park, monthly and annual data on the interventions of mountain rescue services operating in the studied area, i.e. the Tatra Volunteer Search and Rescue, the annual number of foreign tourists (non-residents) visiting the Tatra County, data on overnight stays (a total in all accommodation facilities in the Tatra County) and the revenues to the budget of the largest town of the research area – the town of Zakopane – on account of the local tax collected there for accommodation services.

The data necessary to conduct this analysis were obtained from various sources. Annual and monthly data on the sale of admission tickets to the Tatra National Park were retrieved from the statistics published on its official website – <https://tpn.pl/zwiedzaj/turystyka/statystyka>. The number of interventions of the Tatra Volunteer Search and Rescue in selected periods were obtained from a review of the archives containing chronicles of interventions and from statistics available at the official Tatra Volunteer Search and Rescue website (Archive..., n.d.; Statistics..., n.d.). Data on overnight stays in all accommodation facilities in the Tatra County, as well as the annual numbers of foreign tourists (non-residents) who visited the Tatra County, were obtained from the Local Data Bank of Statistics Poland. In turn, information on the revenues to the Zakopane budget from the local tax comes from the Town Hall of Zakopane. To describe the economic effects of the pandemic, an interview with the president of the Tatra Chamber of Commerce for the Local Government Service of the Polish Press Agency was also used.

The obtained data were subjected to quantitative and qualitative analysis. The figures contained in this paper have been generated a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, and a location map of the research area in QGIS.

5. Results and discussion

On March 13, 2020, the state of epidemic emergency was declared in Poland, and already on March 20, an epidemic state was announced, which was in force until May 16, 2022 (Rozporządzenie..., 2020a, 2020b, 2022). The most important restrictions in force in 2020 and 2021 due to the pandemic from the point of view of the tourism industry included temporary closures or restrictions in the functioning of accommodation and catering facilities, museums, ski slopes, cancellation of cultural, entertainment and sports events or the obligation to quarantine

or perform a covid test after arriving in the country from another country (Podsumowanie..., 2020; Od 20 marca..., 2021). In addition, the following measures were implemented in 2020: a temporary closure of the state border, a ban on movement, except for certain reasons, lasting from March 25 to April 11, 2020, as well as a ban on the use of green areas and beaches in force from March 31 to April 16, 2020 (Podsumowanie..., 2020).

The outbreak of the pandemic also caused changes in tourists' travel decisions. Many of them did not decide to travel for fear of contracting SARS-CoV-2 or quarantine. The importance of this factor in decisions regarding travel among Polish tourists is demonstrated by studies by M.M. Wojcieszak-Zbierska et al. (2020), J. Uglis et al. (2021), and J. Zawadka et al. (2021). The above-mentioned works also indicate that the lack of financial resources, which in many cases resulted from the negative effects of the pandemic situation in many sectors of the economy, was the factor affecting a decision not to travel among some tourists.

The above factors caused a significant decrease in the tourist traffic throughout the country, including in the Tatra County, especially in 2020. In the context of the decline in the tourist traffic in the Tatra County, the temporary restriction of admission to the Tatra National Park and its subsequent closure were also of great importance. Due to the state of epidemic

emergency, and then the state of epidemic in Poland, the area of the Tatra National Park was completely off limits to tourists from outside the Tatra County in the period from March 12 to April 20, 2020 following the decision of the Tatra National Park director. Until 3 April inclusive, entering its territory was possible only for persons residing in the Tatra County. The ban on entry was extended also to include them on 4 April, and from that date the area remained completely closed until 20 April. It is worth mentioning that on April 4, all Polish national parks were off limits. On April 21, a partial opening of the Tatra National Park took place, including only a possibility to visit four montane valleys: Białego, za Bramką, ku Dziurze and Strążyska. This situation lasted until May 4, when all the trails were opened (Official..., n.d.). It should be noted that the turn of March and April, as well as most of April, is the period in which the research area is usually visited by many tourists due to the blossoming of *Crocus scepusiensis*, commonly called crocus, which then creates annually unique landscape values (Krokusowy..., 2016).

Restricting the Tatra National Park, and then opening its area only to a small extent, resulted in significantly smaller monthly numbers of visits to the park in March and April 2020 compared to previous years and to 2021 (Fig. 2).

Tatra National Park statistics on the sale of admission tickets to its area show that in March

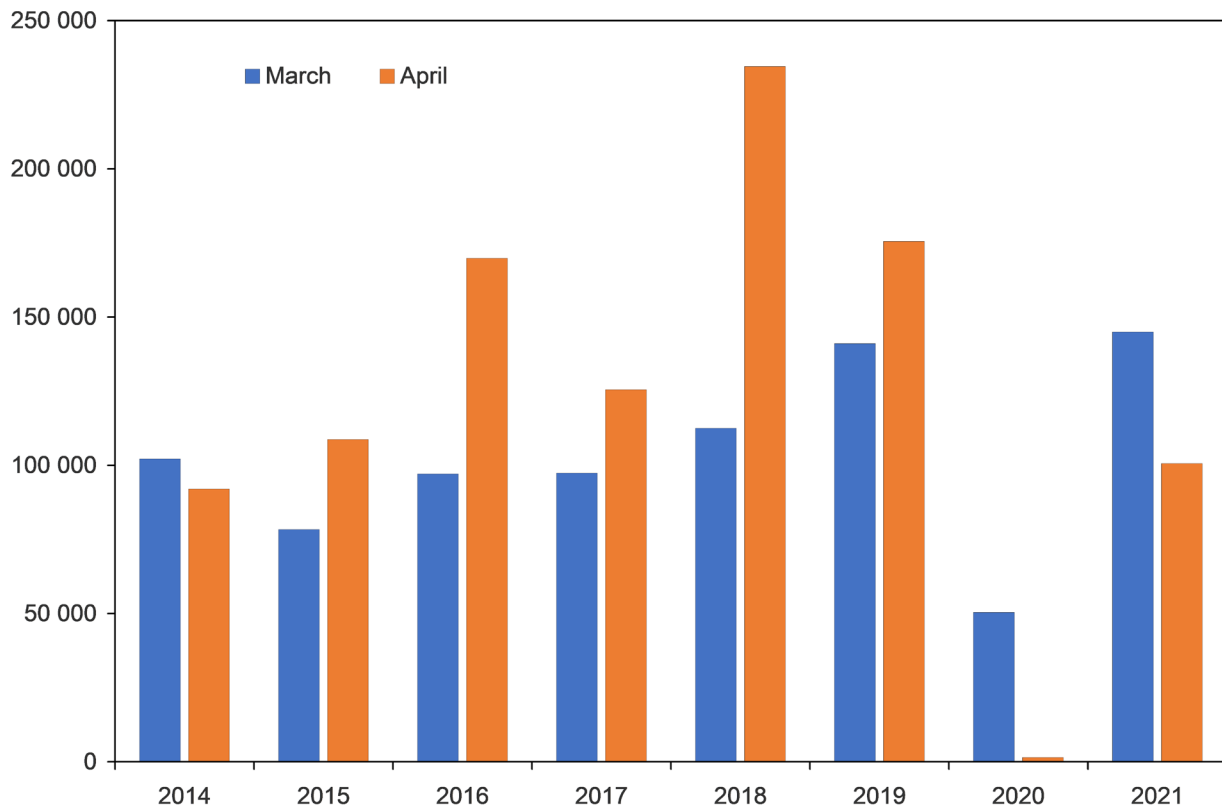


Fig. 2. Monthly number of tickets sold to the Tatra National Park in March and April 2014–2021.

Source: own study based on data from the Tatra National Park.

2020 the number of visitors to the area in question amounted to just over 50,000 (entries before 12 March), while in the years 2014–2019 and 2021, 78,366 to 144,995 admission tickets were sold. In turn, in April 2020, only 1,493 tickets were sold (to the open four montane valleys mentioned above). In the years 2014–2019 and 2021, this number ranged from 92,047 to even 234,557.

The analysis of statistical data on the sale of admission tickets to the Tatra National Park also showed that the restrictions on admission to its territory described above, national restrictions related to tourism and the impact of the pandemic on tourists' travel decisions were reflected in the annual number of tourists visiting the area. In the years 2013–2019, the annual number of tickets sold to the Tatra National Park steadily increased, exceeding 3,000,000 in 2014, 3,500,000 in 2016, and reaching almost 4,000,000 in 2018 and 2019 (Fig. 3). In 2020, when the pandemic situation with its consequences occurred, this number was about half a million less than in the previous two years. This was a decrease of more than 12% compared to 2019. In turn, in 2021, almost 4,800,000 tickets were sold, which was an increase of about 38% compared to the previous year, and by over 12% compared to 2019. In addition to the significant factor of the growing tourist popularity of the area every year, such a high annual number of entries to the Tatra National Park in 2021 also resulted from an increase in the number

of people opting for domestic tourism due to the pandemic. Many people did not decide to go abroad due to restrictions related to the epidemic situation in other countries, as well as concerns related to contracting COVID-19 during the travel (Wojcieszak-Zbierska et al., 2020; Balińska, Olejniczak, 2021; Uglis et al., 2021; Szlachciuk et al., 2022). Among people who did not want to completely give up tourist trips, many chose domestic destinations. Works by N. Korinth (2020), M.M. Wojcieszak-Zbierska et al. (2020), A. Balińska, W. Olejniczak (2021), J. Uglis et al. (2021) and J. Zawadka et al. (2021) demonstrate a decrease in interest in foreign travel and an increase in interest in domestic travel during the COVID-19 pandemic in the case of Poland. The occurrence of the same phenomenon in other countries is indicated by the research of Y. Elsayed et al. (2021) regarding the inhabitants of Egypt and Jordan, as well as S. Huang et al. (2021) in China. The decrease in the number of foreign trips and the increase in domestic trips in 2020 compared to 2019 in Poland, as well as in the countries of the European Union and Switzerland, is also visible in the data of the European Statistical Office (Tourism statistics..., 2022). Abolishing or reducing the extent of some restrictions in 2021, as well as becoming accustomed by many people to the pandemic situation and willingness to fulfill their plans despite the pandemic, was also important.

The impact of the pandemic is also visible in the number of interventions of the Tatra Volunteer

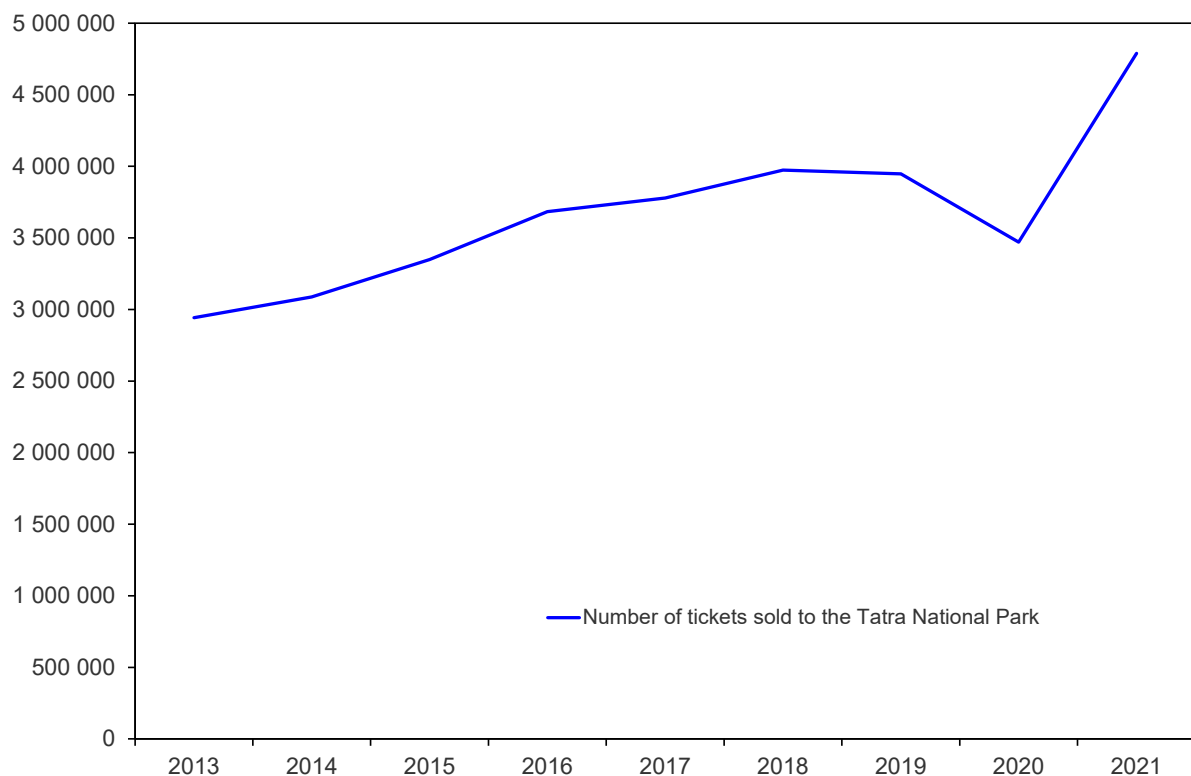


Fig. 3. Number of tickets sold to the Tatra National Park.

Source: own study based on data from the Tatra National Park.

Search and Rescue, an organization dealing with rescue activities primarily in the Polish part of the Tatras, but also in the Spisko-Gubałowski Foothills. Sometimes the Tatra Volunteer Search and Rescue also takes part in actions in other places in southern Małopolska or the Slovak Tatras. In April 2020, no Tatra Volunteer Search and Rescue intervention was recorded, while in the same month in 2015–2019 and 2021, 22–45 such events took place in the Tatra County (Fig. 4). March 2020 was also characterized by a smaller number of Tatra Volunteer Search and Rescue interventions than in 2016–2019 and 2021.

The year 2020 is also characterized by a smaller total annual number of Tatra Volunteer Search and Rescue interventions compared to 2017–2019 and 2021 (Fig. 5).

The effects of the pandemic are also clearly visible in the number of overnight stays in the research area. In the years preceding the pandemic, their annual number in the Tatra County was increasing year by year. In the pandemic years, i.e. 2020–2021, there was a clear decrease in their numbers – from nearly 3.5 million in 2019 to just over 2.3 million in 2020 (the level of year 2015) (Fig. 6). This was a decrease of almost 34% year-on-year. The year 2021 was characterized by an increase in the annual number of overnight stays, but by less than 300,000, hence this result was still lower than in 2016–2019.

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the implementation of restrictions on foreign travel in more than 130 countries, such as closing state borders, mandatory tests or quarantine upon arrival in the country, or a travel ban from high-risk countries.

The pandemic situation also had a huge impact on international passenger transport, as exemplified by the cancellation and suspension of a very large number of commercial flights (Devi, 2020). In addition, the pandemic contributed to the fact that many people in different countries resigned from international travel (Korinth, 2020; Uglis et al., 2021; Zawadka et al., 2021; Nazneen et al., 2020; Elsayed et al., 2021; Huang et al., 2021). The above factors resulted in a significant decrease in the number of foreign tourists (non-residents) visiting the Tatra County in 2020–2021, which in earlier years was steadily increasing (Fig. 7). The report “Tourism in 2020” indicates that, of all voivodeships, the Małopolskie Voivodeship, where the Tatra County is situated, was characterized by the largest decrease in the number of foreign tourists in 2020, which amounted to about 80%. In the Tatra County itself, it was a decrease of almost 63% compared to the previous year. In turn, in 2021, this area was visited by over 65% fewer foreign tourists (non-residents) compared to 2019.

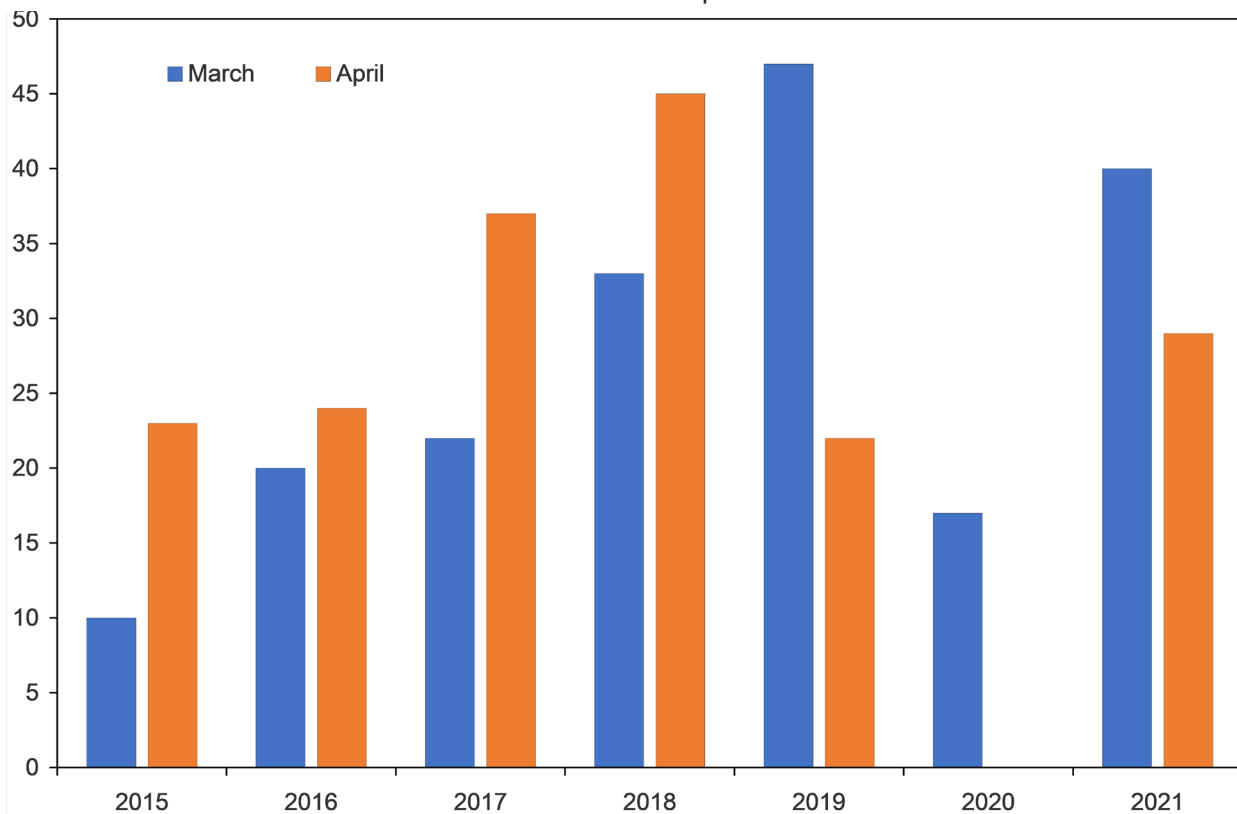


Fig. 4. The number of interventions of the Tatra Volunteer Search and Rescue in the Tatra County in March and April 2015–2021.

Source: own elaboration based on the chronicle of interventions of the Tatra Volunteer Search and Rescue.

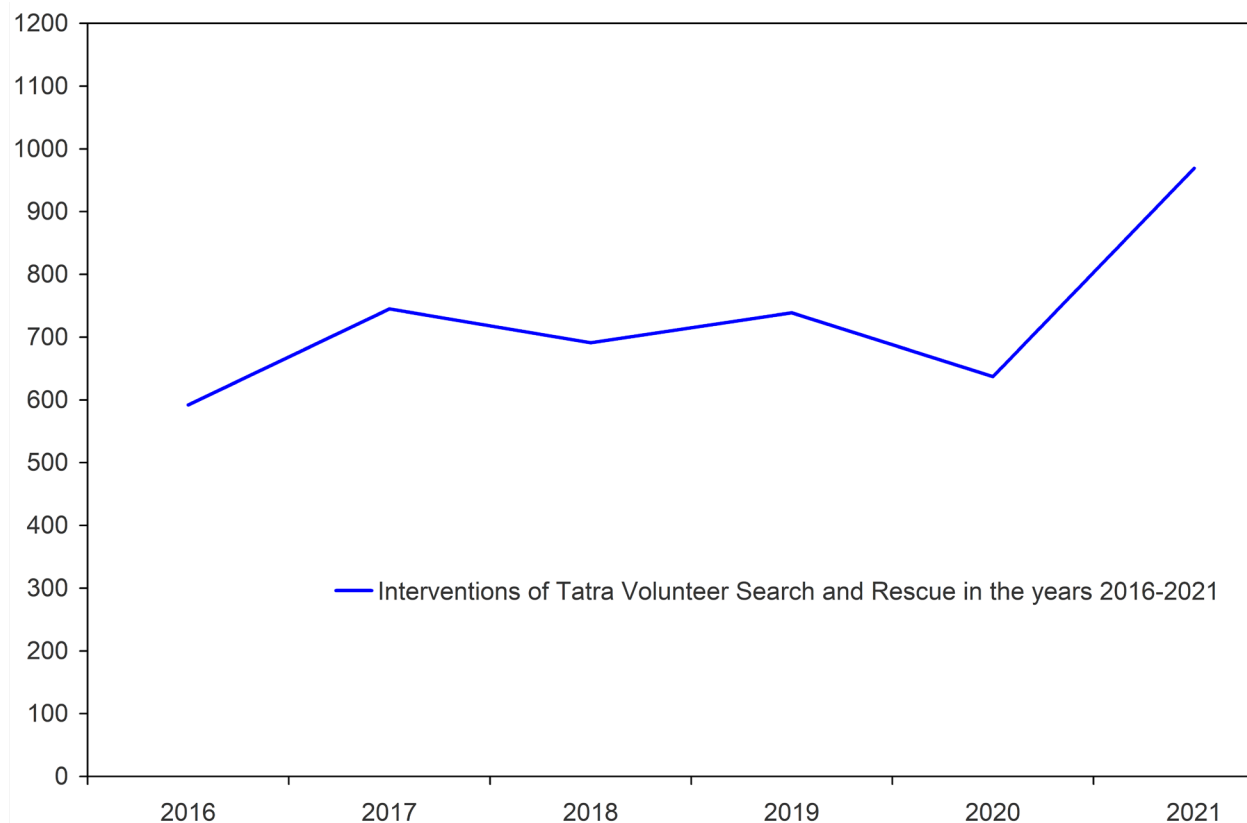


Fig. 5. The total annual number of interventions of the Tatra Volunteer Search and Rescue in 2016–2021. Source: own elaboration based on data from the official Tatra Volunteer Search and Rescue’s statistics.

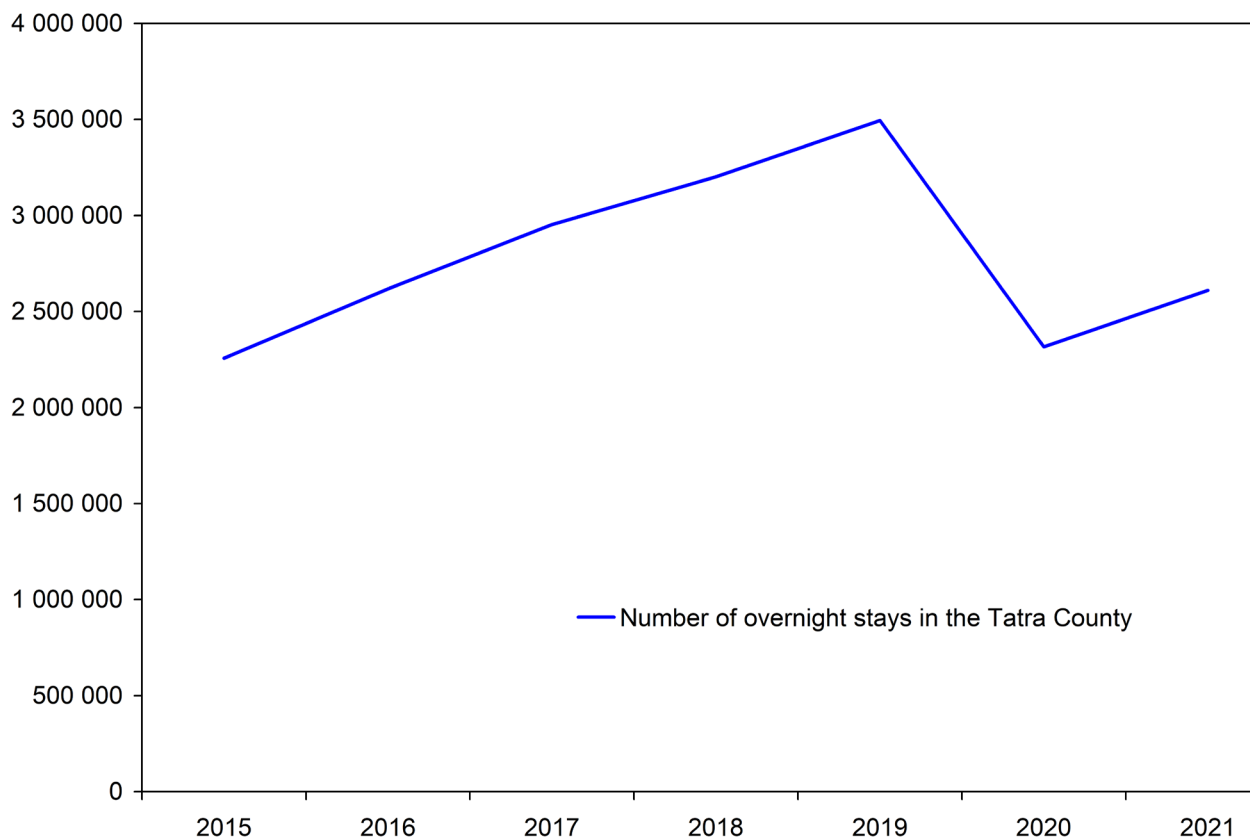


Fig. 6. Annual number of overnight stays in the Tatra County in 2015–2021. Source: own study based on data obtained from the Local Data Bank of Statistics Poland.

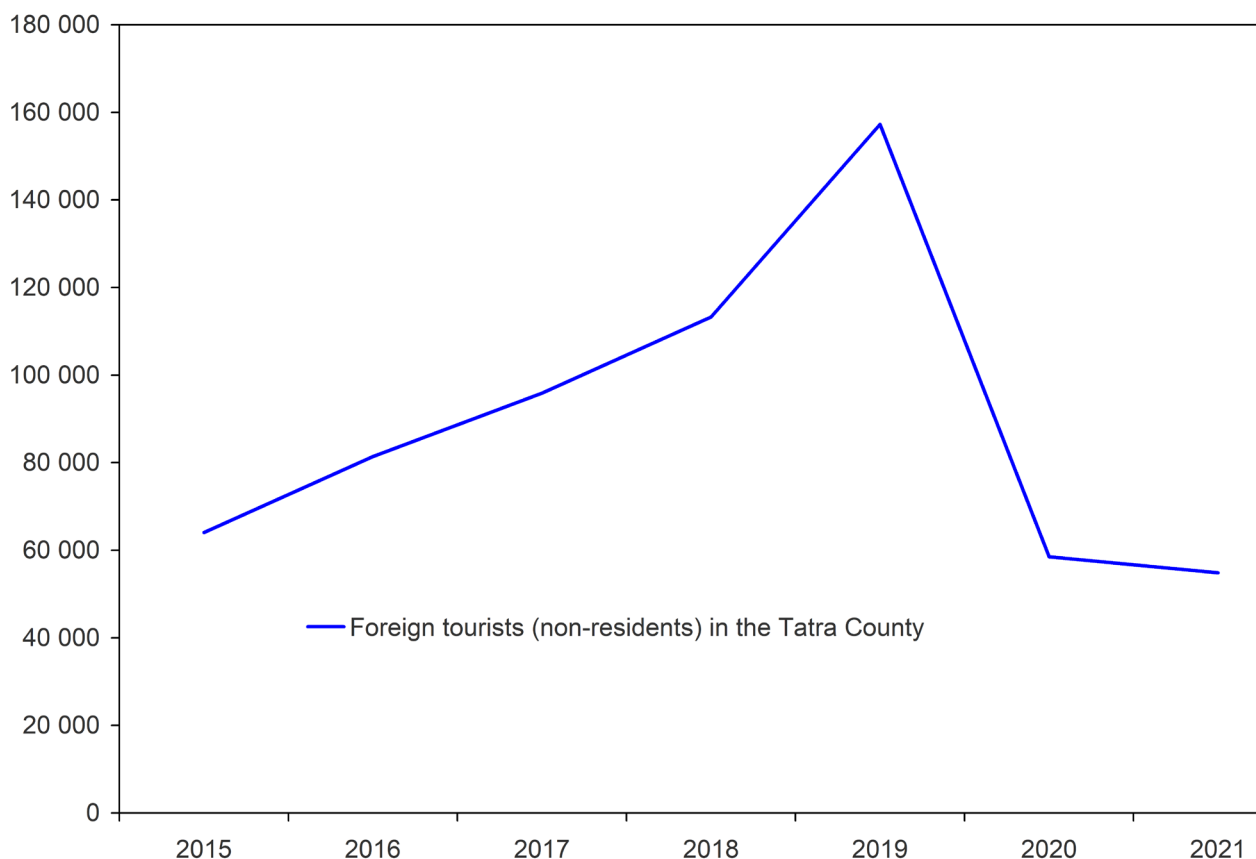


Fig. 7. Annual number of overnight stays in the Tatra County in 2015–2021.

Source: own study based on data obtained from the Local Data Bank of Statistics Poland.

The significant reduction or even periodic disappearance of tourist traffic described above and the decrease in the numbers of overnight stays and foreign tourists in the Tatra County are consistent with the results of similar analyses conducted in this respect in other countries, including those by B. Korinth and R. Ranasinghe (2020) as well as B. Korinth (2021) for Poland, S.K. Deb and S. Nafi (2020) for Bangladesh, L-P. Foo et al. (2021) for Malaysia, S. Jaipuria et al. (2021) for India, J.E. Payne et al. (2021) for Croatia, as well as with the report "Tourism in 2020" prepared by Statistics Poland. Also the United Nations World Tourism Organization indicates a reduction in global tourism by showing a lower number of trips in 2020 compared to 2019 (International..., n.d.), in the same vein as the European Statistical Office does for the European Union and Switzerland (Tourism statistics..., n.d.).

The COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions and bans on the tourism sector also had economic consequences. According to the "Information on the budget of the town of Zakopane during the coronavirus pandemic" (Informacja..., 2020) published on April 17, 2020 on the official website of the town of Zakopane, restrictions and bans on the tourism sector caused by the epidemic resulted in lower revenues to the town budget from this sector.

This can be illustrated by the example of a local tax of PLN 1.5 a day as stipulated in the Resolution of the Town Council of Zakopane No. XXVI/245 of 2004 on: defining the amount of the local tax, defining the rules for determining, collecting, and deadlines for payment, and ordering the collection of the local tax by direct debit, which is collected from natural persons staying for leisure, health, training or tourist purposes in Zakopane for longer than 24 hours. In 2016–2019, the annual revenues to the town budget from this tax were increasing from year to year, exceeding 4 million zloty in 2018–2019. By contrast, in 2020–2021, much smaller revenues from collecting this tax were recorded – in 2020 they amounted to slightly above PLN 3.5 million, which was a decrease of over 24% compared to the previous year. In 2021, there was a further decrease to less than PLN 3.5 million – i.e. by almost 27% compared to 2019 (Fig. 8).

In an interview for the Polish Press Agency which appeared at the end of 2020, the president of the Tatra Chamber of Commerce, Agata Wojtowicz, also drew attention to economic problems in the tourism industry in the study area. She points to the losses incurred by hotel establishments due to the decrease in hotel occupancy rates. She notes that the clients that used to bring significant

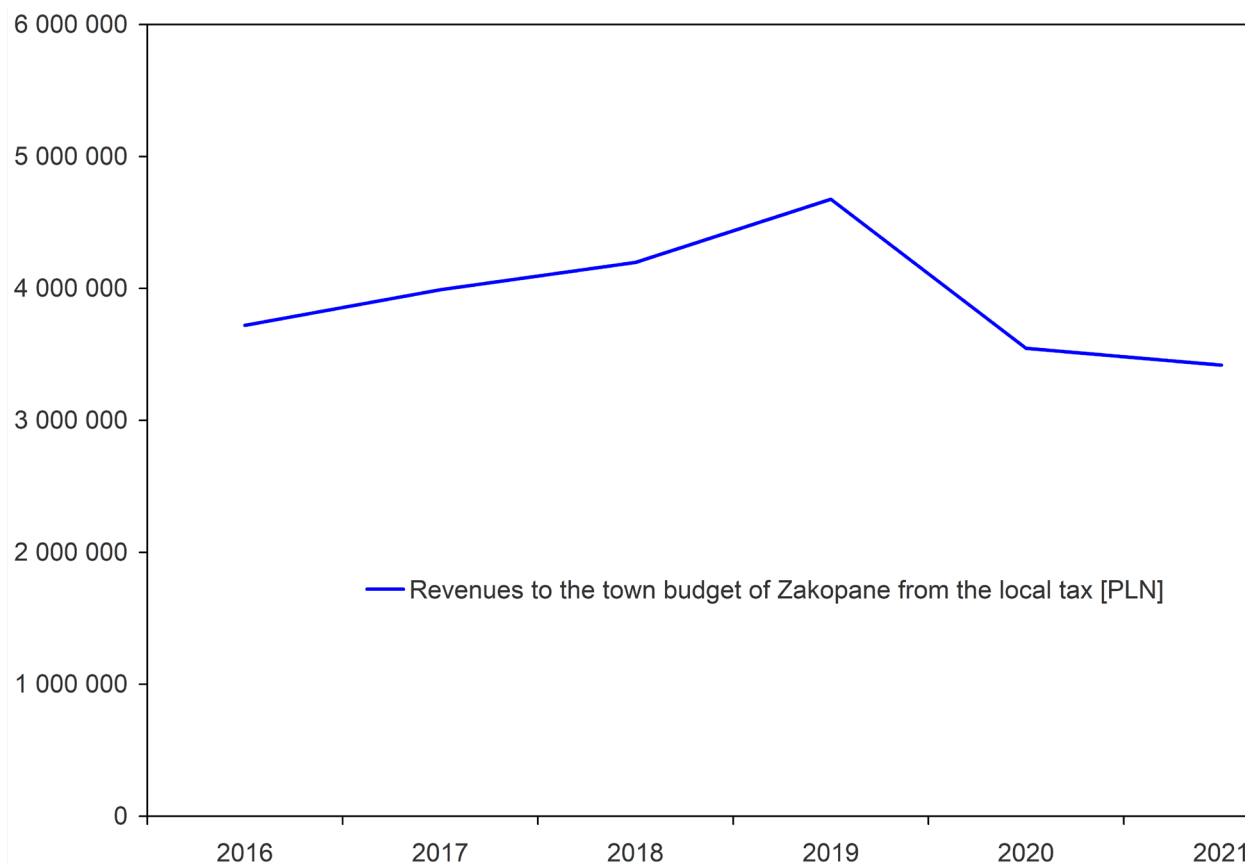


Fig. 8. Revenues to the town budget of Zakopane from the local tax in 2016–2021 in Polish zlotys.

Source: own study based on data of the Town Hall of Zakopane.

revenues were conference and training clients, who were missing after the implementation of covid restrictions. She also drew attention to the negative effects of the pandemic on entrepreneurs indirectly related to tourism, such as laundries serving hotel establishments or the advertising sector, which in this region mostly deals with promoting the tourism offer. She states that the tourism industry of this region has never faced such a crisis before (Tatrzańska Izba Gospodarcza..., 2020). Despite the lack of official data on the economic situation of individual enterprises in the Tatra County during the pandemic and the associated restrictions, it can certainly be stated that lower income or loss was recorded by accommodation facilities, travel agencies, tourist guides, souvenir shops, carriers and many other economic entities for which tourism is the main source of income, and there are many such entities in the analyzed area.

The above results regarding the negative economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are analogous to those presented in the works concerning this issue in many places around the world. Lower revenues or losses in the tourism sector are indicated, among others, by the research of S.K. Deb and S. Nafi (2020) for Bangladesh, S. Jaipuria et al. (2020) for India, L-P. Foo et al. (2021) for Malaysia,

B. Korinth and J. Wendt (2021) for thirty European countries (this work shows a large crisis of the tourism industry, especially in the Mediterranean countries, including Greece and Italy), S. Naidu et al. (2021) for Fiji, Solomon Islands and Samoa, and B. Korinth (2022) on an international scale (this work shows that the largest crisis in the tourism sector was recorded in Hong Kong, Malaysia, Greece and Spain). In turn, the work by M. Rutynsky and H. Kushniruk (2020) for the Ukrainian city of Lviv, like the present study, describes lower revenues in a place important for tourism on a regional and national scale.

6. Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic had a very significant impact on the tourism sector in the Tatra County, which is one of the key elements of the local economy. National and international restrictions introduced as a result of announcing the pandemic state, as well as changes in tourists' decisions and attitudes regarding travel were very clearly marked by the volume of the tourist traffic and the economic situation in the tourism industry in this area, especially in 2020.

In 2021, the increase in the number of domestic trips resulting from the then numerous restrictions on international travels could have affected on a much higher number of tickets sold to the Tatra National Park than in previous, non-pandemic years. On the other hand, the number of overnight stays increased compared to 2020, but still it remained at a significantly lower level than in the period of 2016–2019.

In the years preceding the pandemic, the annual number of foreign tourists visiting the Tatra County was increasing from year to year, but in the years 2020–2021 it plunged. Significantly smaller tourist traffic, and periodically even its lack in 2020, translated into much smaller numbers of interventions of the Tatra Volunteer Search and Rescue in the analyzed area.

In the years preceding the pandemic, the annual number of foreign tourists visiting the

Tatra County was increasing from year to year, but in the years 2020–2021 it plunged. Significantly smaller tourist traffic, and periodically even its lack in 2020, translated into much smaller numbers of interventions of the Tatra Volunteer Search and Rescue in the analyzed area.

Moreover, the pandemic had significant economic consequences for the tourism sector of the Tatra County. Numerous restrictions on the tourism industry resulted in losses or lower revenues from tourism for entrepreneurs directly and indirectly related to the tourism industry, as well as to the budget of the largest town of the research area – Zakopane.

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on tourism in the Tatra County identified in this paper are the same as those recorded in many other countries in the world and individual tourist destinations.

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