

Analysis of the tourism potential of Bukovina in the context of Covid-19 crisis

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Vol. 32 / 2022, 113-125



Published:

online first

19 December 2022

ABSTRACT: Tourism is an extremely present activity in people's daily lives. It facilitates the highlight of the cultural heritage and the natural and anthropic resources of a destination, develops the education and culturalization of the population and supports the development of the communities involved in tourism activities. Bukovina is one of the most famous touristic regions of Romania, a true national brand, the place where traditions blend perfectly with modernism, the place where authentic Romanian traditions are kept alive. At the same time, Bukovina is the most visited destination from the North-East Region of Romania, tourists being attracted by the richness of the objectives, by the hospitality and warmth of the locals and by the diversity of entertainment opportunities offered. The global crisis caused by the SARS-COV-2 virus has had a particularly strong impact on all the world's economies, but especially on the tourism sector, with the world tourism market experiencing unprecedented declines in tourist arrivals. This paper aims to analyze the touristic potential of the Bucovina region by interpreting statistical data on tourism infrastructure: number of tourist accommodation establishments, accommodation capacity, number of arrivals and number of nights spent in tourist accomodation in the context of the SARS-COV-2 pandemic. From the analysis we can conclude that although the Bukovina tourist region has decreased by over 45% in the number of tourist arrivals, it has the potential for tourism development due to the rich cultural and natural heritage of the region and the many opportunities generated by it.

KEY WORDS: tourism, Bucovina, tourism infrastructure, SARS-COV-2 crisis, touristic potential.

1. Introduction

The tourist attractiveness of Bukovina is recognized worldwide. This touristic region of Romania annually attracts important tourist flows, both from Romania and from abroad. The researches on the analysis of tourism in Bucovina are numerous, given the rich natural and anthropic potential of the region and of the promotion made at national and international level. Numerous studies

undertaken in Romania have been focused on the touristic potential of Bukovina and its perspectives of development, such as: an analysis of the touristic potential of Suceava County through statistical research (Hapenciuc, 2003), an overview of the natural elements and their role of support for the development of the touristic activities (Hrișcă, 2007), or an analysis of Gura Humorului-Vatra Dornei axis, highlighting the importance of respecting the principles of sustainable development in the development of touristic activities (Dincă, 2009).

More recent studies highlighted the balneal potential (mineral springs, salt mines) of Bukovina (Bistricean, 2020) or have focused on the assessment of the climate potential for tourism in the North-East Development Region of Romania (Mihăilă et al., 2019). Furthermore, a study published in 2021 by the authors Roșu et al. analyses the natural factors that provide touristic attractiveness on Sucevița-Soveja-Vizantea axis and the way these factors influence the touristic activity. The impact of COVID-19 epidemic crisis on international tourism was analysed by Livandovschi and Melnic in 2020. Also, the impact on the global tourism economy was analysed through a paper published in 2021 by Racu. This study will analyze how tourism dynamics in Bukovina is affected in the context of the pandemic caused by the SARS-Cov-2 virus.

The objectives of the study:

- to analyze the touristic potential of the Bucovina region and its importance in the regional touristic dynamics;
- to assess the impact of the coronavirus crisis on the Bukovina' touristic sector;
- to formulate conclusions based on the evolution of the statistical parameters and draw recommendations for the development of the tourism sector in Bukovina in the post COVID world.

2. Study area

Geographically located between the Eastern Carpathians and the Prut, the tourist region of Bukovina is located in northern Romania and overlaps with Suceava County, except the area of Fălticeni, Dolhasca, Broșteni.

From a historical point of view, Bukovina is a region composed of the Chernivtsi Region, Ukraine (in the north) and the northern part of Suceava County (Southern Bukovina). Etymologically, the name Bukovina comes from the Slavic word "buk" which means "beech", the region being also known as "Beech Country" or "Beech Forest Country". The total area of the historical province of Bukovina is approximately of 16.655 km², the southern part of the region being about 8,555 km² (the study area of the present article).

With a rich cultural heritage and a long history, the Bukovina touristic region is a natural and cultural monument, a treasure of the Romanian heritage. On its territory there are numerous touristic attractions: historical monuments, churches, cultural objectives, wonderful breathtaking landscapes and unique Romanian traditions.

The richness of the touristic potential had been a subject of many studies, such as: an overview of the bioclimatic potential was made by Teodoreanu et al. in 1984, highlighting also the climatic risks and their effect to the population in a paper published in 2003.

Furthermore, an extensive research about the touristic potential of Bukovina was conducted by Cheia in 2013. Also, Bulai in 2013 analysed the potential of Bukovina through a case study

conducted in the North-East region of Romania. The relation between climate and tourism was analysed by various papers: Mihăilă (2014), Mihăilă and Bistricean (2018).

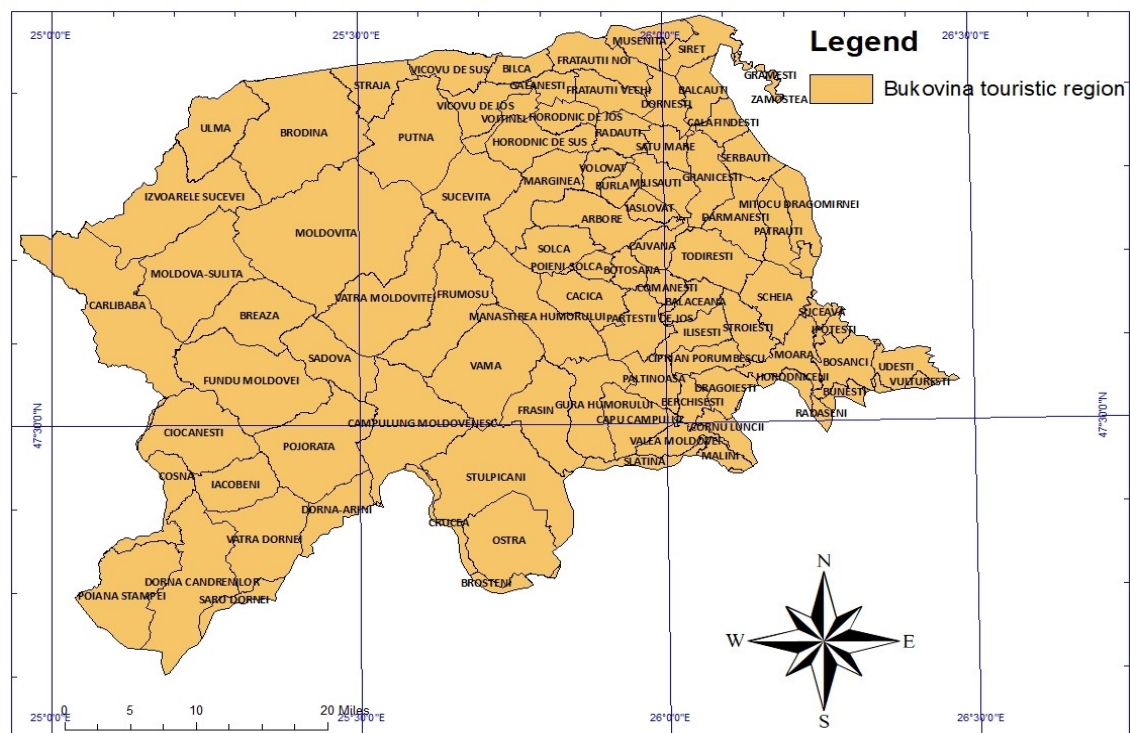


Figure 1. The study area.

Due to the diversity of historical and cultural objectives and extraordinary natural landscapes, Bukovina includes several forms of tourism:

- Cultural tourism - represented by a rich cultural and historical heritage of the region: medieval fortresses, museums, historical monuments, memorial houses, traditions, monasteries, monuments and churches included in the UNESCO World Heritage list;
- Business tourism - participation in conferences, exhibitions, fairs, scientific events in the urban centers of the region: Suceava, Rădăuți, Gura Humorului;
- Balneary tourism;
- Railway tourism: Old steam train at Moldovița;
- Leisure tourism: Sports and leisure activities;
- Ecotourism: experiencing various activities in the Bukovina's beautiful nature, but protecting the nature and the local traditions in the same time (mountain climbing, visits in the national parks, festivals, exploring the mountains);
- Agrotourism: experiencing the life on a local farm from Bukovina, participating in the rural activities, experiencing the local food: Ciocănești Village, Margina Village.

The most beautiful touristic region of the country, Bukovina, is also the most attractive destination in the North-East Region of Romania, attracting the largest number of tourists each year.

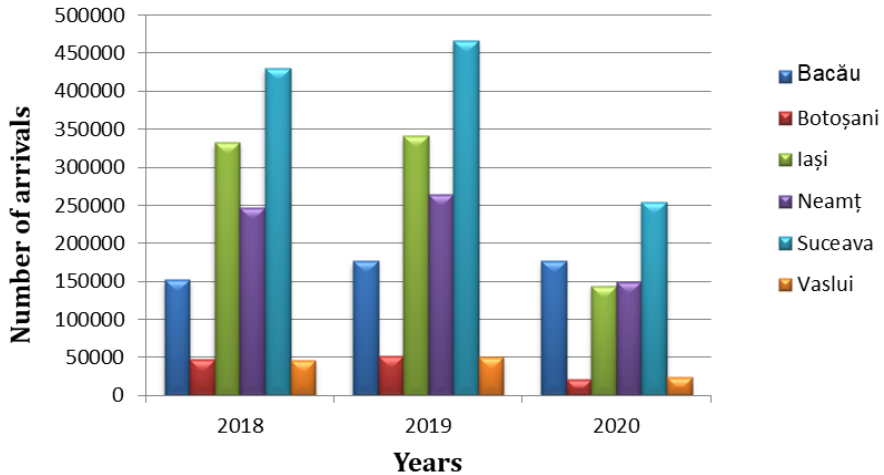


Figure 2 The evolution of the number of tourist arrivals in the North-East Region of Romania (2018-2020). Data source: National Institute of Statistics, Romania, 2021.

According to the data presented in Fig.2. it can be observed that Suceava County (over which the Bukovina tourist region overlaps) attracts every year the largest number of tourists when compared to the other counties from the North-East Development Region.

Although the pandemic caused by COVID 19 virus led to a decrease in tourist flows by about 50%, the main favorite destination of tourists remained Bukovina (254,480 tourist arrivals in 2020). On the second place in the preferences of tourists was placed Neamț County with a number of 149,167 arrivals.

3. Methods

The objective of this study is to analyze the touristic potential of the Bukovina region by interpreting statistical data on tourism infrastructure and to assess the impact of COVID-19 epidemic crisis on the tourism activities.

The tool used to outline an overview of the tourist potential of Bukovina is SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats).

For assessing the impact of COVID-19 crisis on the touristic indicators we analysed the statistical data on tourism dynamics.

The statistical data on tourism dynamics is highlighted by the following indicators:

- number of tourist accommodation establishments (number of units);
- accommodation capacity (number of beds);
- number of arrivals (number of people);
- number of nights spent in tourist accommodation.

The evolution of those indicators through a three-year period (2018-2020) in the study area was analysed, first of all, by collecting data from the Tempo Online platform, a large online database platform, created and updated by the Romanian National Institute of Statistics.

The next step was the processing the data collected by using Microsoft Excel 2010 in order to create graphs to support the information presented.

Also, the cartographic material was elaborated by means of the software ArcMap 10.7.1. This software is integrated in ArcGIS platform, a geographic information system that allows data processing and their representation through maps.

4. Results and discussion

Tourism is highlighted as a key sector in the world economy, becoming in recent years the industry with the fastest growth. According to the World Tourism Organisation, in 2019 (before the pandemic), tourism was the world's third largest exporter with US \$ 1.742 billion revenues, surpassing well-known industries such as the automotive industry and the food industry.

The global crisis caused by the SARS-COV-2 virus has had profound effects on many economic sectors (agri-food, manufacturing, transport, automotive, construction, tourism). One of the most affected sectors was tourism, travel restrictions imposed by different states, as well as the cancellation / rescheduling of various activities that attracted a significant number of tourists each year led to a decrease in tourist flows and thus a decrease in tourism revenues.

Globally, 2020 was the most difficult year for the tourism sector, registering an unprecedented decrease in the number of international arrivals.

In Romania, the crisis caused by SARS-COV-2 virus led to an 40% decrease in tourist flows, compared to the values recorded in 2019 (Figure 3).

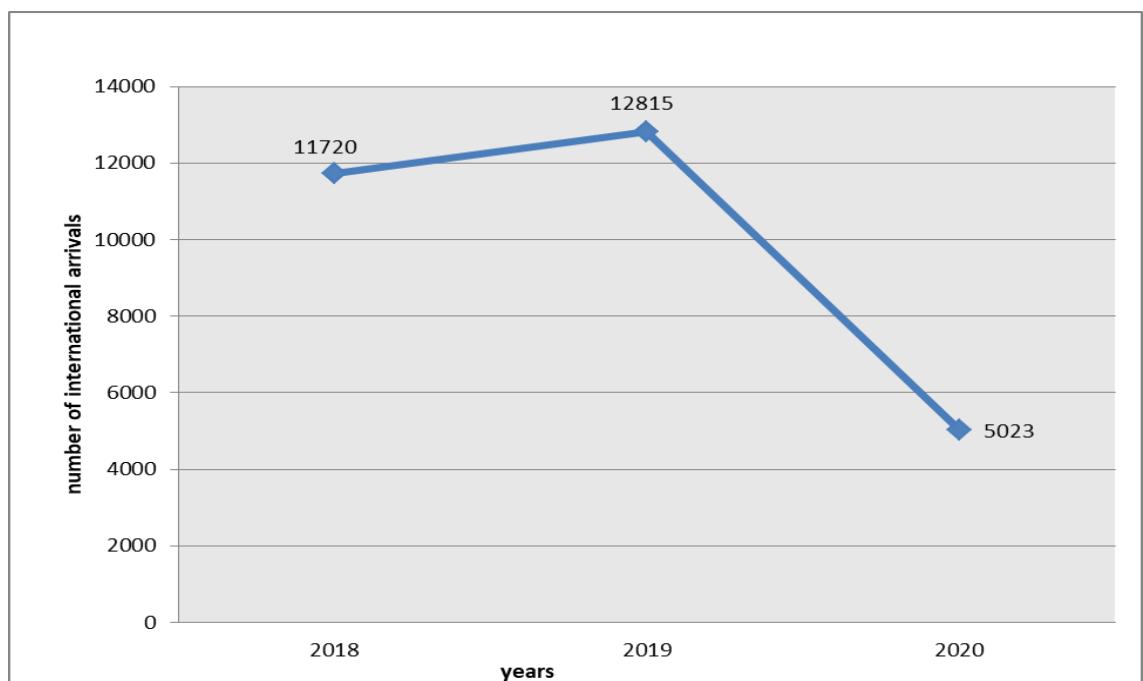


Figure 3 The evolution of the international touristic arrivals in Romania (2018-2020). Data source: National Institute of Statistics, Romania, 2021.

The overall picture of the touristic potential of Bukovina is drawn by SWOT analysis (Table 1).

Table 1 SWOT analysis of Bukovina touristic potential.

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The extremely valuable and diversified touristic potential that offers different opportunities. • The diversity of touristic opportunities that can be practiced in Bukovina. • The existence of a pronounced ethnic-cultural identity characterized by traditions, gastronomy, folklore. • The image of Bukovina as a welcoming and blessed land. • The hospitality of the locals. • Presence of "Stefan cel Mare" International Airport. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of developed infrastructure: roads, railways. • Absence of a touristic brand of the region. • Insufficient capitalization of natural resources. • Lack of training of staff involved in tourism activities. • Insufficiency of qualified personnel. • Lack of communication between local stakeholders involved in tourism activities.
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The extremely generous touristic potential that offers multiple possibilities for tourism development. • Capitalizing on natural resources by attracting investors. • Possibility to access European funds for the development of the region and the touristic infrastructure. • The possibility of establishing public-private partnerships that encourage the capitalization of the region's tourism potential. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legislative instability in the field of tourism. • Degradation of tourist objectives. Attractiveness of other touristic destinations. • Work force migration to other sectors / countries. • Global crises, such as the pandemic caused by COVID 19 virus that can affect the tourism sector.

The touristic dynamic in Bukovina was on an increasing trend. The data collected for the previous 10 years showed the increasing numbers of the touristic indicators due to the large investments made for the development of the tourism sector.

The number of tourist accommodation units grew from the 245 units in 2010 to 310 units in 2015 and to 496 units in 2020.

The accommodation capacity (number of beds) grew from 8,033 beds in 2010 to 11,883 beds in 2017, to 12,364 in 2019, and to 12,970 beds in 2020.

The number of arrivals (number of people) grew from 194,365 arrivals in 2010 to 385,676 arrivals in 2017 and to 465,921 arrivals in 2019, followed by a massive decrease of the arrivals in 2020 (254,480) due to the epidemic crisis provoked by COVID-19 and its impact on the touristic sector.

The number of nights spent in tourist accommodation grew from 460,367 nights spent in 2010 to 815,632 nights spent in 2017 and to 1,014,447 nights spent in 2019, followed by a massive decrease in 2020 (540,165 nights spent) due to the epidemic crisis provoked by COVID-19 and its impact on the touristic sector.

4.1. Number of tourist accommodation establishments

Analysing the data registered in the reference period (2018-2020), we can observe from figure number 4, that the number of accommodation establishments has increased in 2020 (496 units) by a percentage of 8% compared to 2018 (460 units).

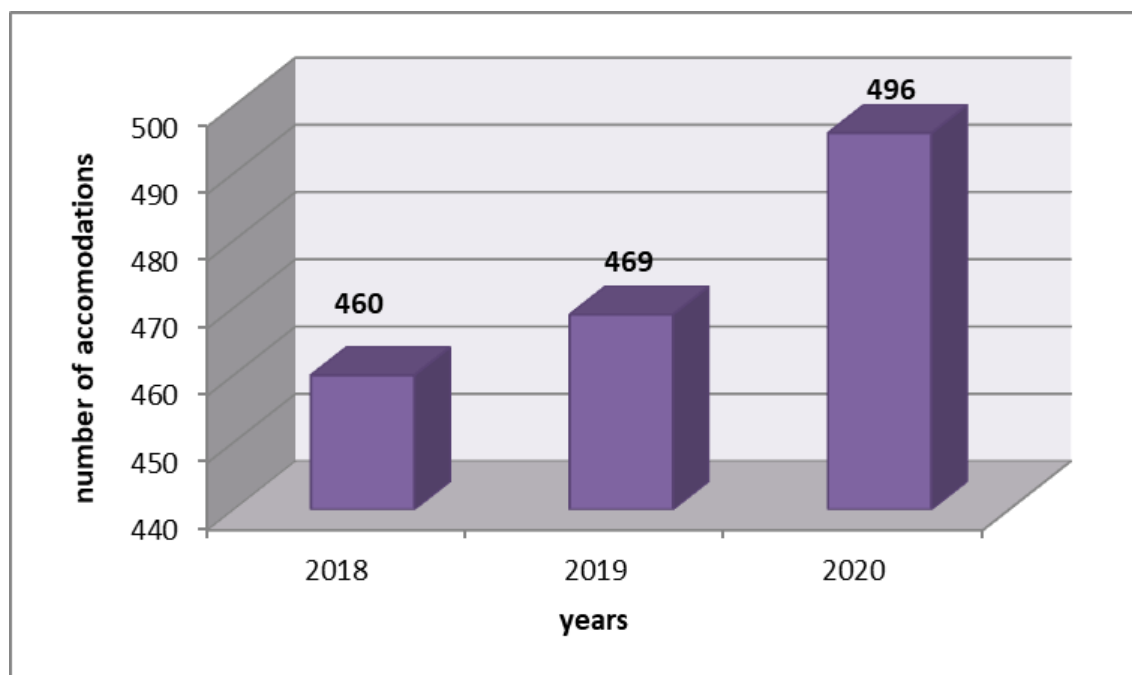


Figure 4 Number of accommodation establishments in Bukovina (2018-2020). Data source: National Institute of Statistics, Romania, 2021.

At the level of 2020, we note that, despite the negative effects of the pandemic on tourism, the number of accommodation units has increased compared to the figures recorded in 2019, which indicates an increasing trend of development due to the tourism potential of the region that offers countless opportunities for tourism development.

Analyzing the centralized data in Fig. 5, we notice that in Vatra Dornei balneary resort there are 66 accommodation establishments. This is due to the enormous potential for tourism development and the large range of touristic opportunities: the existence of mineral waters and the facilities for rest and treatment, facilities for winter sports, a beautiful natural environment.

4.2. Accommodation capacity

The evolution of the indicator that expresses the accommodation capacity is closely related to the evolution of the number of accommodation establishments, respectively, it is observed from the analysis below (Fig. 6), an increase of the number of accommodation beds directly proportional to the increase of the number of accommodation establishments.

At the level of 2020, the highest number of accommodation beds is registered in Vatra Dornei, (2,649 accommodation beds), Gura Humorului, (1,502 accommodation beds), Suceava (1,386 accommodation beds), cities with the highest tourists attractions in Bukovina. (Figure 7).

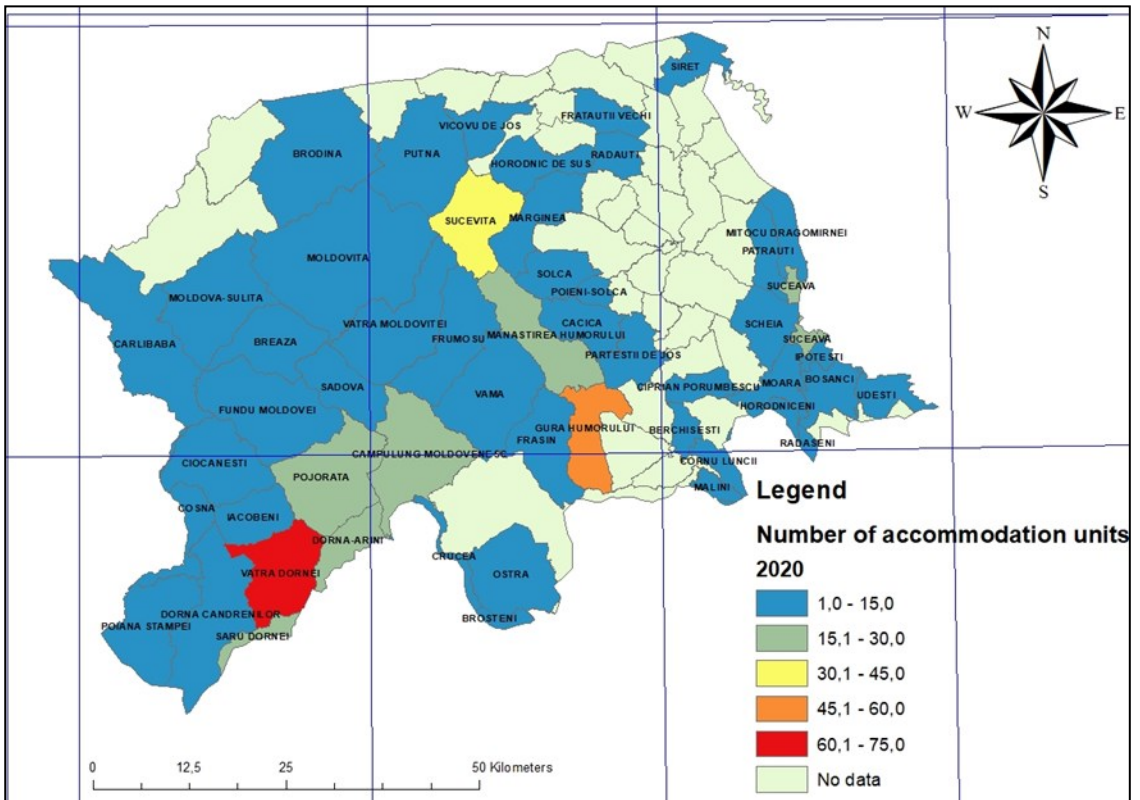


Figure 5 Number of accommodation establishments in Bukovina (2020). Data source: National Institute of Statistics, Romania, 2021.

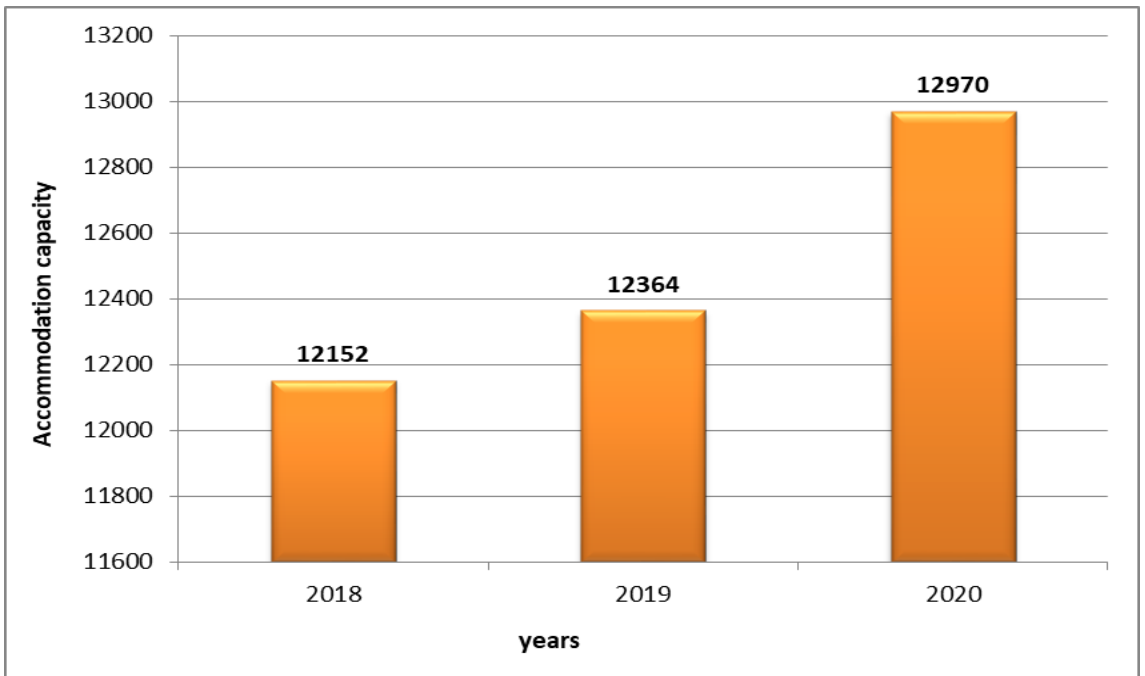


Figure 6 Accommodation capacity in Bukovina (2018-2020). Data source: National Institute of Statistics, Romania, 2021.

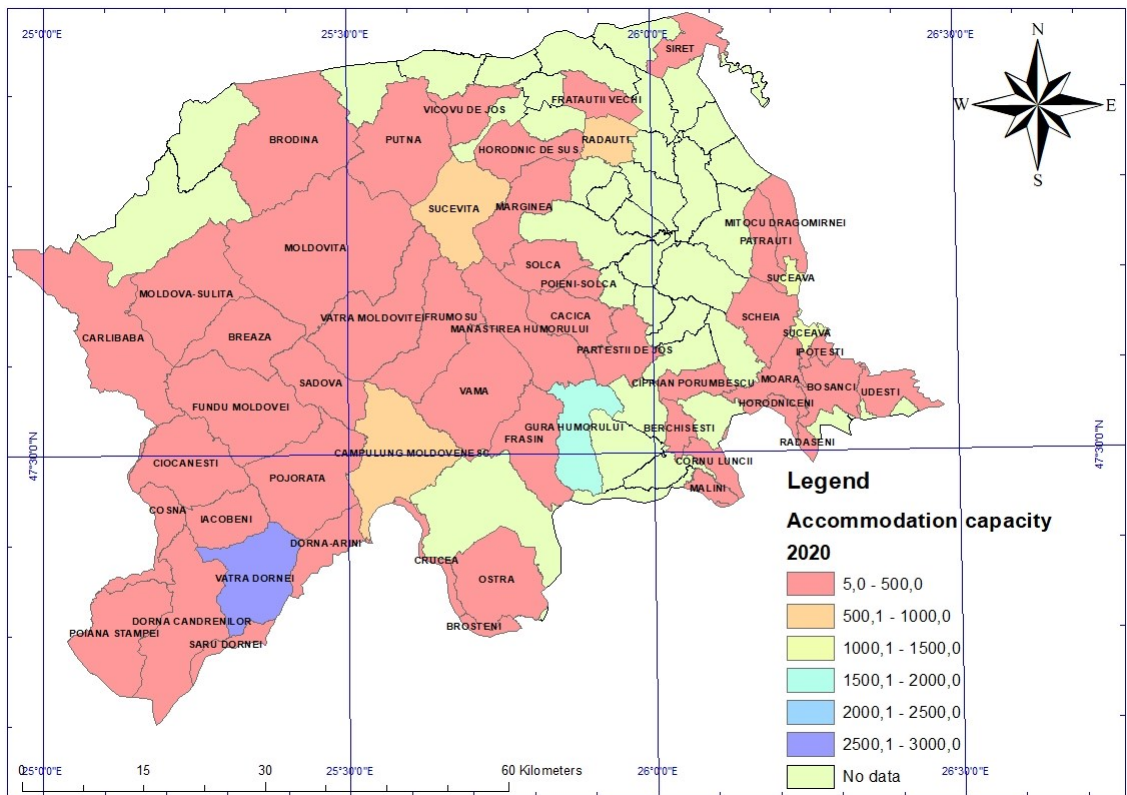


Figure 7 Accommodation capacity in Bukovina (2020). Data source: National Institute of Statistics, Romania, 2021.

4.3. Number of arrivals

Analyzing the data provided by the National Institute of Statistics (Figure 8), we note that the number of arrivals in 2020 decreased by 45% compared to the number of tourist arrivals recorded in 2019. This decrease occurs amid the crisis caused by the SARS-COV-2 pandemic with strong repercussions on the tourism industry.

Measures taken by world governments to stop the spread of the virus (restricting or even banning travel, suspending the activities of hotels and restaurants, suspending cultural activities) led to a decrease in the number of visitors to the region. Furthermore, the health crisis (unprecedented in Romania) that hit the area of Suceava caused the quarantine of the entire affected area, making Suceava a real red zone of risk.

At the level of the region, in 2020, (Fig. 9) the highest number of tourist arrivals was registered in the city of Suceava (51,915 arrivals), a very attractive city from a tourist point of view due to the variety of touristic attractions. Also, Vatra Dornei enjoys a large presence of visitors, registering in 2020 a number of 43,112 arrivals, tourists being attracted by the extremely rich touristic potential of the city.

4.4 Number of nights spent

Similarly, the evolution of the indicator "Number of nights spent in accommodation establishments" is correlated with the evolution of the number of tourist arrivals, the values of both indicators being affected by the negative impact that the crisis caused by the COVID 19 pandemic had on tourism. Data recorded in Fig. 10, shows the decrease by about 53% of the number of nights spent in 2020 compared to the values recorded in 2019.

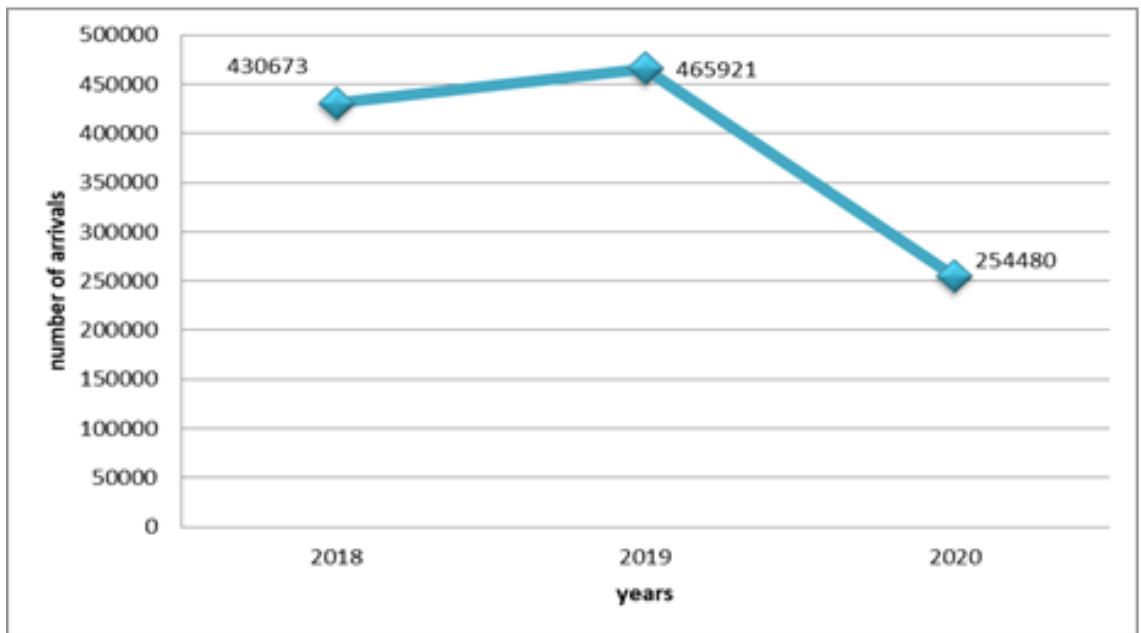


Figure 8 Number of arrivals in Bukovina (2018-2020). Data source: National Institute of Statistics, Romania, 2021.

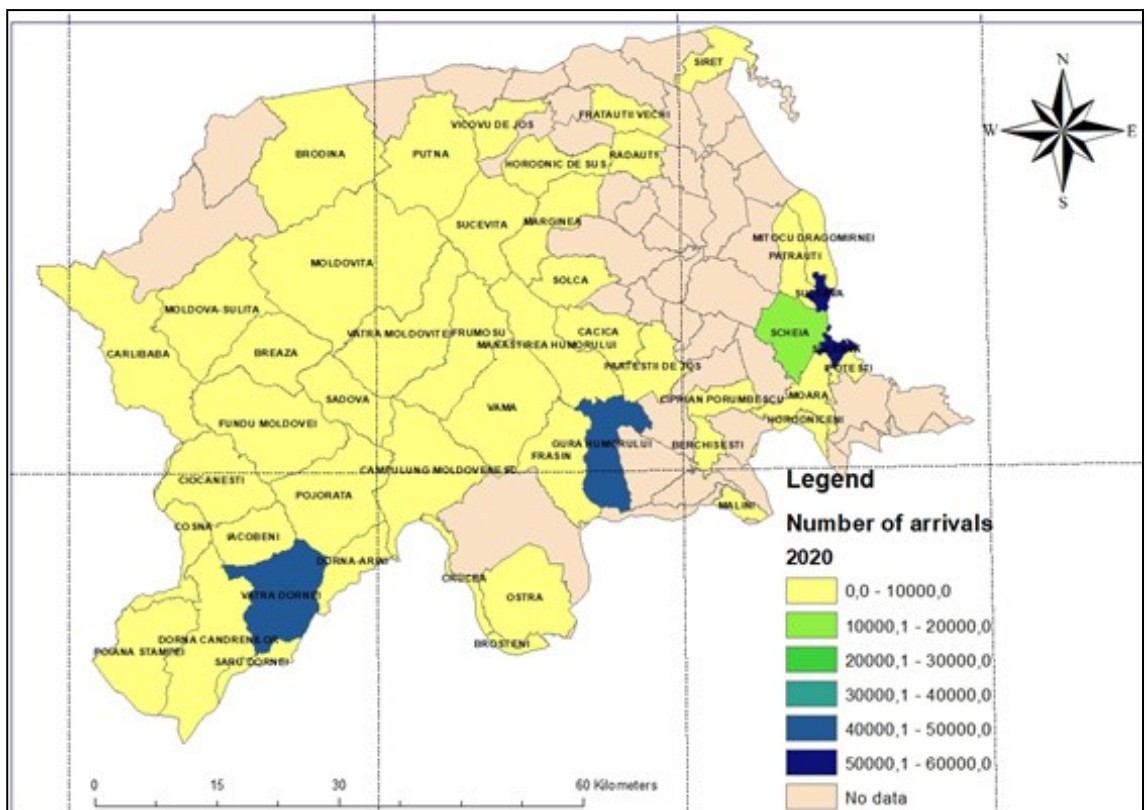


Figure 9 Number of arrivals in Bukovina (2020). Data source: National Institute of Statistics, Romania, 2021.

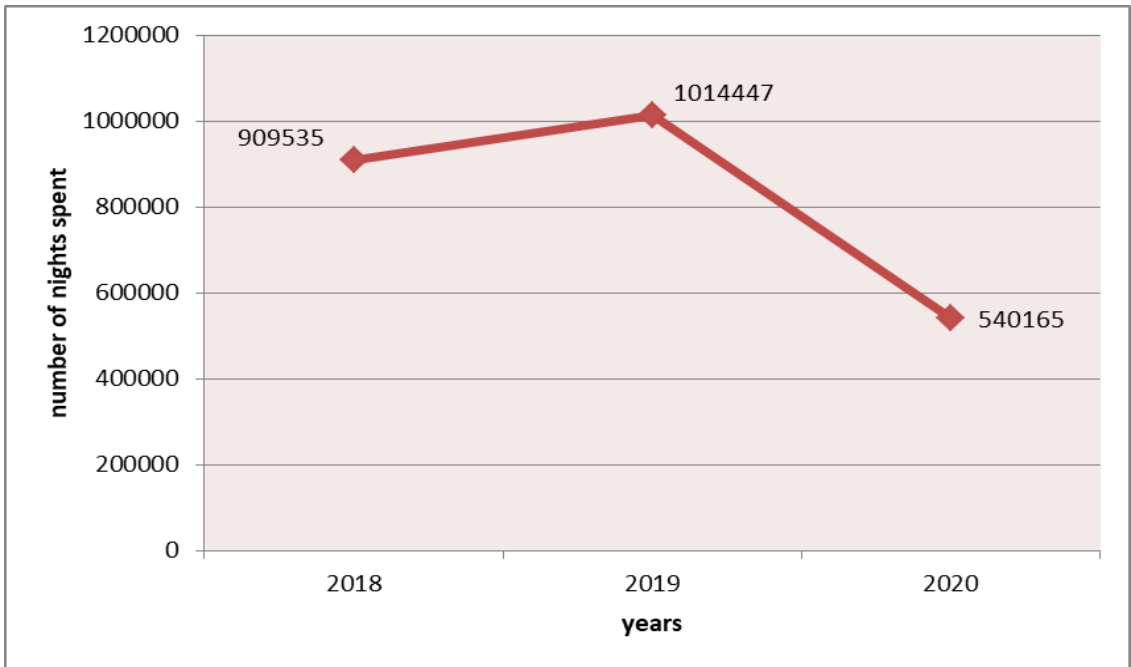


Figure 10 Number of nights spent in Bukovina (2018-2020). Data source: National Institute of Statistics, Romania, 2021.

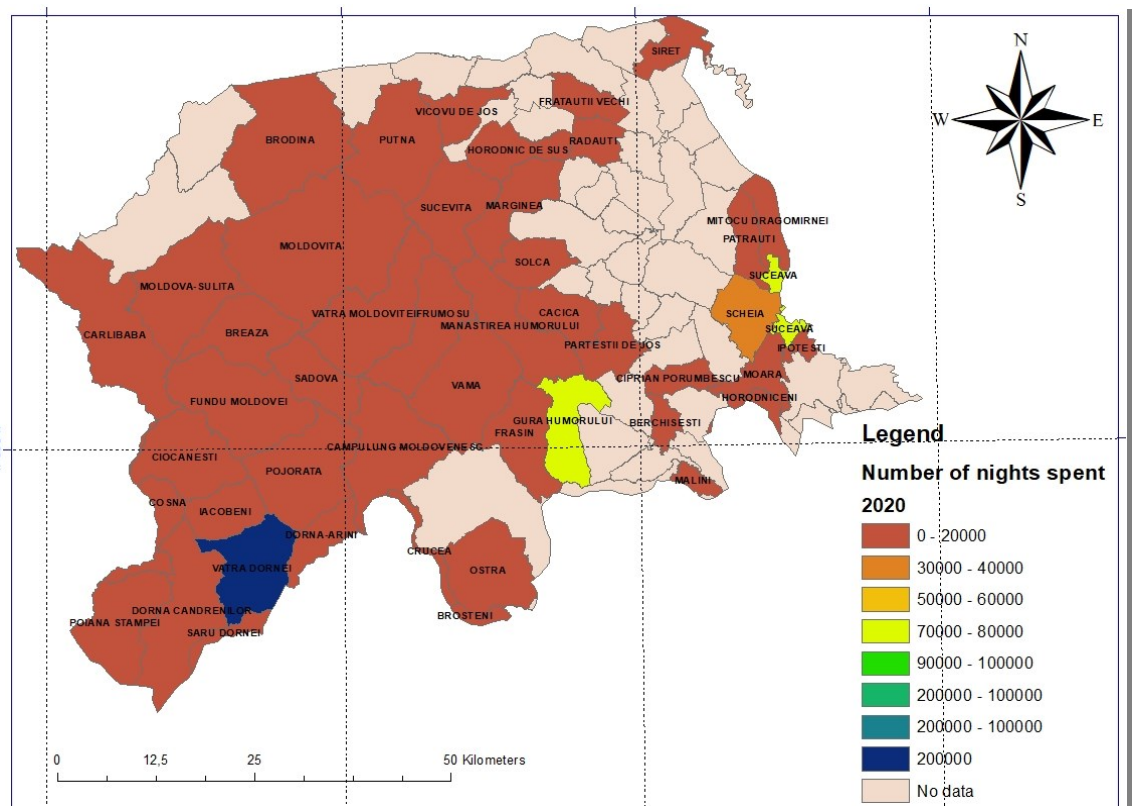


Figure 11 Number of nights spent in Bukovina (2020). Data source: National Institute of Statistics, Romania, 2021.

We can observe from the Figure 11 that the highest values of the number of nights spent are found in the cities where the number of arrivals is high, respectively Vatra Dornei (141,813 nights spent), Gura Humorului (77,869 nights spent) and Suceava (75,934 nights spent).

5. Conclusion

Bukovina has a variety of touristic objectives, natural, cultural or historical objectives. Also, here can be made a multitude of tourism activities.

The development potential of the region is extremely high, and this can be seen in the increasing trend of the touristic dynamics of Bukovina. The number of accommodation establishments and accommodation beds are in the constant increase for the past 10 years (2010-2020).

The pandemic caused by the SARS-COV-2 virus hit the tourism sector very hard, and the Suceava area even more, the Bukovina region registering decreases of over 45% in the number of tourist arrivals and a decrease of over 53% of the number of nights spent in 2020 compared to the values recorded in 2019.

The COVID-19 crisis changed the way we see our life, changed everything. The touristic sector was the most affected sector, and its needs to adapt to all the changes in order to cope with all the factors that threatens its development.

In the new post-pandemic era, a few necessary recommendations are important to make for the development of the tourism sector in Bukovina:

- the association of the sector stakeholders in order to act together for the sector development;
- investments in the tourism infrastructure
- investments in new forms of tourism, highlighting the importance of eco-tourism and the sustainable tourism;
- the development of a touristic brand of Bukovina.

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