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The EU's responsibility in the securitization of Eastern Europe – prospects for using the full potential of the CSDP in the region

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Abstract

The level of ambition and strategic autonomy of the European Union in the global approach of conflicts and crises was tested in the context of unsolved conflicts which characterised the security environment in the East European neighbourhood area. We set out to analyse the main strategies, security policies and tools used by the EU in relationship with the countries of the Eastern Partnership, in response to various kinds of security problems in the region. The coherence of the European policies regarding the role of securitization of countries from the Eastern border of Europe depends on the use of the whole potential of legal instruments set out in the treaties. At the same time, the Union relevance is defined by the adaptation of these policies to the security needs resulted from the political instability and the military threats to which the countries of this region are exposed.

Keywords: European Union, Eastern Partnership, security, hybrid threats, CSDP

Introduction

The European Union (EU) acts as a global strategic actor in pursuing the objectives defined by the treaties and detailed by global and sectoral strategies which show the aspirations and development perspectives of its contribution to the resolution of security issues in the whole world. The coordinates of action undertaken by the EU as an international security actor have been determined from a medium and long-term strategic perspective, by a series of conceptual and programmatic documents adopted in the European decision-making process designed to imprint the strategic direction, the orientations and general political perspectives in this field. To the primordial strategic documents which compose the general framework of external Union action, the European secondary documents which detail the main objectives and the political declarations in the context of high-level meeting were added.

The attempt at contributing to the definition of the EU role in securitization of a region involves to seek the implementation of these policies from the point of view of the method of action,

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instruments and vision used in the fulfilment of strategic objectives, including in the prospect of relations with other international actors with ambitions in the matter of preservation and counteraction of factors which threaten the international security. In this respect, a particular attention will be paid to the degree of involvement of the EU in several dimensions, among which the economic, political, cultural, military, defence influence, in response to the instability events and the military threats, respectively the real needs of countries from the Eastern Neighbourhood of Europe.

Finally, the question to which we will try to bring an answer to is if the external action promoted by the EU in the countries from the Eastern border of the EU towards which it had a particular approach by the initiative of the Eastern Partnership (EaP), highlighted the prospect of a potential strategic autonomy with a defence component which EU can claim in relationship with other actors acting in the region such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). To support this step, the answer and involvement of the EU in the political crises which the East-European countries had to face over the last years, by use of civil and military instruments specific to the European Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) can contribute to the evaluation of European policies in security matters. These issues will be treated from both the point of view of the European answer to a potential crisis in front of factors such as the hybrid threat or the terrorist threat, as well as in front of events which left traces regarding the territorial integrity of the states concerned.

The proposed research topic is intended to be an analysis of the EU's external action in the Eastern Neighborhood, in light of the policies promoted to ensure security in the region, including those aimed at responding to the terrorist threat and hybrid threats. In this respect, the structure of the paper follows three main questions or research purposes.

The first chapter focuses on the analysis of the strategic objectives undertaken by the EU to respond to international security threats, with a focus on the EU Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy adopted in June 2016. The second chapter deals with the EU's role in conflict prevention and crisis management as a security provider for Eastern Europe following the objective of promoting a comprehensive approach to the issue. Looking at the EU goal of contributing to international security, we aim to find out if the direct or secondary effects resulting from political instability and military threats to the countries of Eastern Europe are a substantial part of the EU's external action in the region or, rather, reveal a lack or a low level of strategic autonomy. Regarding the third chapter, it includes a completion of the first two chapters and the answers to the research questions, leading the way to the conclusions of the research. The section describes the use of CSDP civil and military instruments and cooperation between the EU and NATO.

1. Global security aspirations – EU's strategies on foreign and security policy and the objectives undertaken in relation to the EaP countries

The first step in the direction of the general evaluation of common threats and definition in a unique document of EU objectives and interests in security matters has led to the adoption of European Security Strategy (ESS), under the auspices of the European Council which met on December 12th, 2003 in Brussels, during the mandate of the High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy (HR) at that time, Javier Solana. The general objectives stated in this document for the pursuing of European strategic interests aimed at the active promotion of policies which counterbalanced the dynamics of threats to global security, the development of flexible military capabilities with a high degree of interoperability and the coordination of actions and cooperation between states (Council of the EU, 2009, p. 73). However, with reference to regional conflicts, ESS did not mention the conflicts from the East of EU, and in the section dedicated to the subject of building security in the near neighbourhood, the document only referred to the Balkans area without mentioning the ex-Soviet space expressly (Fawn, 2020, p. 12).

The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) from the prospect of success of actions subject to the model of provider of stability and security in relationship with the partners from East and South, made the object of several evaluations. An analysis of the Council of EU, which had as subject the evaluation of implementation of ESS in the first 5 years from the adoption of the reference document, highlighted that the EU got involved from operational point of view s (instruments specific to CSDP) by carrying out a number of 20 missions in response to crises. Among these, in the near neighbourhood the involvement of EU in the conflict of Georgia is notable and it escalated in a direct confrontation with Russia in August 2008. In this case, the EU has played a central role in the answer of international community to crisis and in mediation of negotiations and *six-point ceasefire agreement* by mediation between the Parties, humanitarian assistance, financial support and a civil mission of post-conflict monitoring (EUMM) established in September 2008, whose mandate was successively extended from that moment on, and the last extension was authorised by the Council of the EU until December 14th, 2022 (Council of the EU, 2020, 3 December). The involvement in a conflict from the Eastern Neighbourhood represented an affirmation of security principles set out in the UN Charter, showing to what extent and by what type of instruments EU can act to sanction the use of armed force against the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Georgia.

With a particular importance in the pursuit of foreign and security policy objectives of the European Union, the EU Global Strategy (EUGS) adopted in 2016 frames and recognizes as threat the violation of European order in security matters in the East and in the South Caucasian, marking the passage from the claims of regional actor to the mission of global actor (Fawn, 2020, pp. 6-10). The document sets out five priorities of external action of the EU, which were correlated with the strategic interests and common European principles and with the norms consecrated by the international treaties in this matter. The first priority refers to the internal dimension of security, which it recognizes to an equal extent the importance of efforts related to external policies and intrinsic connection of internal dimension with the disturbing events manifested at global level, by which it proclaims the attainment of an “appropriate level of ambition and strategic autonomy” in the service of the goal to promote peace and security inside and outside the EU (European External Action Service/EEAS, 2016, p. 9).

The second priority proclaims the promotion of policies for increasing the “resiliency of states and societies” from the Eastern and Southern neighbourhood, mentioning the ENP as distinctive objective in this priority, with emphasis on good governance, economic and societal issues, migration policies. The third priority undertaken by the Union, with applicability in the conflict areas, treats the issue of “comprehensive approach of conflicts and crises”, in which a contribution of Union is set out in all the stages of a conflict – prevention, response to crises, stabilization and forestalling. The fourth priority direction was formulated around the regional dynamics of the role and importance of “cooperative regional orders” based on governance formulas with beneficial effects on multiple levels (security, culture, identity values, influence on international environment etc.). The last priority states the respect of international law norms in the twenty-first century (EEAS, 2016, pp. 9-10).

The Global Strategy for the Foreign and Security policy of the European Union presented in the European Council of 28th June 2016 presents the EU as a provider of security both in the near neighbourhood and in farther regions. The first strategic priority frames the line of action entitled *security and defence*, which proposes actions for the European involvement in the defence component specific to external crises, as part of collective efforts (e.g., actions in cooperation with NATO) and by autonomous actions carried out by the Union with the purpose of developing the European defence. Along with the tasks in the matter of management of external crises, the Union has assimilated the complementary role to contribute to the development of capacities of external partners in matters of security and defence (EEAS, 2016, pp. 19-20). The challenges to security with an external dimension such as the hybrid threats and terrorism, were identified as major concerns for the European security.

The most important part of EUGS from the perspective of relationships with the neighbourhood – resiliency of states from East and South of the Union – defines the meaning and policies related to the objective to consolidate the capacity of countries to manage the internal and external crisis situations (EEAS, 2016, p. 24). ENP is distinctly treated by the extension policy, being based on concepts such as the attraction power of the EU, the Association Agreements, and agreements regarding the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTA). EUGS reiterates the commitment to the EaP and the determination to deepen the partnership relations with emphasis on the realization of economic progress and connections at society level (cultural and educational exchanges, cooperation in research matters etc.).

Within the strategic priorities in relation to the neighbourhood several actions were set out in tested field from the point of view of EU capacity to produce a collective change. In the security and defence field, the actions stipulated were modest, aiming at the strategic dialogue in view of initiating an increased involvement of these countries in CSDP (EEAS, 2016, pp. 21-22). According to EUGS, the main approach promoted by EU in the region for fighting against terrorism is based on the promotion of standards regarding good governance and social inclusion of minority groups, encouraging reforms in justice, security and defence sectors, and consolidation of capacities which should be achieved including in cooperation with United Nations and NATO (EEAS, 2016, p. 26). Therefore, the issue of approaching conflicts and crises did not make the object of a particular attention in the actions dedicated to Eastern Neighbourhood.

However, the applicability of these objectives is extended to the Eastern neighbourhood region in the strategy section dedicated to this specific priority. The emphasis is laid on the involvement of EU in the peace consolidation process, but the lines of action generally refer to a gradual approach and involvement in the three phases of the conflict – prevention, resolution and stabilization (EEAS, 2016, p. 28). Thus, the EU reaffirmed the decision to get involved in the resolution of long-term conflicts from the countries from the EaP by promoting a multilateral approach based on partnerships and adequate global governance for the twenty-first century (Tocci, 2017, pp. 495-496).

Also, the recognition of the contribution of regional cooperation systems in the approach of conflicts, respectively the importance of regions (subregions) in their capacity of “complex webs of power”, highlighted the reality of interference of external actions in the Eastern region, in a regional dynamic which is exposed to threats contrary to “European Security Order” and international law. In this respect, the EU blames the violation of the main elements of these norms (sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity), naming the actions of Russia in Ukraine (the illegal annexation of Crimea, destabilization of East of Ukraine) and the conflicts from the Black Sea region as vectors of EU policies towards the region (EEAS, 2016, pp. 32-33).

The legal tools for the enforcement of objectives and priorities undertaken come from the innovations introduced by the Treaty of Lisbon, for the effectiveness of external action and common security and defence policy, the forecast result being to use of maximum potential so that the Union can respond to the threats to security in the international environment. The external action of the Union is substantiated on a series of principles, among which maintenance of peace, prevention of conflicts and consolidation of international security (TEU, 2012, p. 28), achieved with the support and respect for the objectives stated in the international legal acts of reference. The legal basis regarding the competence of EU as actor on international stage is presented in article 24 of Treaty on European Union (TEU), which sets forth that the action of the Union in Common Foreign and Security Policy includes "all the fields of foreign policy and all the matters regarding the security of the Union", and in this policy they regulated "the gradual definition of a common defence policy which can lead to common defence" (TEU, 2012, p. 30). The specificity of the process of taking commitments in this field shows the political nature and important role of states in adoption of decisions, an important characteristic being the predominance of applying the unanimity rule in decision-making regarding the involvement of the Union in specific CSDP missions (TEU, 2012, p. 39). The scopes of the rule with qualified majority cannot aim at decisions with military or defence implications (TEU, 2012, pp. 33-34).

Also, the enforcement of CSDP is mainly achieved by the civil and military means of the member states, but also by resorting to the especially financial instruments made available by the Union, with involvement of the European Commission (TEU, 2012, pp. 38-39). The main body in the European architecture acting in the external dimension of security is the Political and Security Committee (PSC). Its competences refer to the monitoring of international situation, the reporting of issues of interest and contribution to the definition of policies in CFSP field, by issuing approvals addressed to the European Council (TEU, 2012, p. 36). Thus, PSC can imprint the strategic direction of concerned policies, with the role of assuring the early identification and flexibility in the Union's reaction to the events from the international stage, following thus the mainly political nature of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP).

The legal virtue for the gradual development of a common defence component at Union level involves the opportunity given to the European Council to decide with unanimity of votes, that the common defence policy should result in a common defence of EU and for the fulfilment of this goal, the contribution of member states is necessary (TEU, 2012, p. 38), as well as the consideration of a series of legal, constitutional and institutional implications (European Parliament, 2018, pp. 125-135). The passage from the definition of the common defence policy to the implementation of a common defence will be translated by increasing the level of military integration and defence and especially by giving strategic autonomy to the EU in defence matters.

The promotion form of European goals for the Eastern neighbourhood was defined to a large extent by the normative influence exerted by EU mainly by the Europeanization process which has intensified since 2009. EU positioned in this respect and regarding other kinds of European policies promoted in the ex-Soviet area, in competition on complex levels with the Russian Federation. On one hand, on security level, it highlighted the European objective to establish a stability area at its external borders, the role of mediator was often used by EU for the purpose of efficiently managing the crisis situations by specific CSDP mechanisms. On the other hand, the Russian Federation has promoted objectives by resorting to another kind of power in an attempt to remain the main provider of security in the region, thus highlighting the dilemma of means of resolution for crises between two actors who apply different principles regarding the resorting to military means. In this respect, the resorting to sanctions against the actions of violation of the international law by the Russian Federation entails the issue of their effectiveness, thus questioning the effects on the general relations with this country.

The strategic priorities and their reflection in the cooperation fields promoted by EU in the EaP, respectively the approaches towards the six partners (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Republic of Moldova, Ukraine) in security and defence fields were reassessed on the occasion of the balance of the first decade of European policies circumscribed to this common initiative. In the reflection process on the future of EaP, initiated as a result of approving this step by the conclusions of the European Council of June 20th, 2019, the main recommendations were materialized in the following documents adopted by the European institutions: the joint communication of the Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy of March 18th, 2020 entitled "Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020. Reinforcing Resilience - an Eastern Partnership that delivers for all" (European Commission and EEAS, 2020) and the document which captures the Council conclusions regarding the policy on EaP after 2020, adopted on May 11th, 2020 (Council of the EU, 2020, 11 May).

In formulation of the new political bases of the long-term partnership, the starting point was the trajectory agreed previously, respectively the continuation of efforts to obtain progress in the policy fields identified in the 2017 programme of reforms entitled "20 deliverables for 2020". Also, the measures for consolidation of resiliency were developed and framed depending on the cooperation fields concerned in relationship with partner countries. Among these, the increase of resiliency in the field of institutions, state of law and security, sets forth, apart from measures such as the judicial reform and cross-border cooperation as means of fighting against crime and "stepping up support for security dialogues and cooperation" (European Commission and EEAS, 2020, p. 10).

In the field of security, from the perspective of criminality forms, including the manifestations with terrorist specificity, and the hybrid threats, the European policies for increasing the resiliency of these countries included measures of support by “increased cooperation with EU justice and home affairs agencies, security sector reform (…); and integrated border management” and cooperation measures regarding cyber resiliency. All these measures have as main purpose to increase the capacity of these countries to respond to the crisis situations. As for the direct involvement in the unresolved conflicts in the region, the dominant mission of the Union is diplomatic. The involvement in the negotiation processes to facilitate agreements for the peaceful resolution of conflicts, completes therefore, the actions for consolidation of capacities of these partner countries, including regarding the fight against hybrid threats and cyber resiliency. Also, in order to increase the contribution of the partner countries to the European civil and military missions and operations in the region, the EU has set out to relaunch “Security dialogues and practical CSDP cooperation” (European Commission and EEAS, 2020, p. 11).

2. A global approach of conflicts and crises by the EU and the applicability of the objective in the Eastern Neighbourhood

The European Union has argued the security relations with the countries from the Eastern Neighbourhood by the common objective of establishing a stability area. From this perspective, in the theoretical debate of European integration policy they highlighted that the Europeanization policy was initiated and justified by the objective of reaching stability in the neighbourhood (Browning, 2003; Higashimo, 2004). The political and economic reforms were presented by EU as necessary elements for consolidation of resiliency of these countries as a means of guaranteeing the stability and security in the region (Simão and Dias, 2016, p. 113).

At the same time, the range of security issues was defined depending on internal frailties compared to the threats or risks identified (Ciuta, 2009, p. 317), concerning various fields such as political stability, energy security or conflict resolution. Initially, the ENP and later, the EaP have included the dimension of security in the relationship with the partner countries. The main hypothesis of this work is that the European securitization process was permanently modelled by the dynamics between the security policies promoted by the Russian Federation in this area and the strategic interests of the Union and of member states in the countries from the Eastern Neighbourhood and the special relations of the Union with the Russian Federation and of member states with the same state actor.

On the restricted level of approach towards crisis situations and conflicts, the applicability of the European action in the region was especially tested in the context of increasing tensions in the conflicts in the region. Such moments showed the European preference for the close pursuing of strategic objectives for resolution of crises by peaceful means and valorisation of the stabilization component specific to the crisis management mechanisms against the background of missions and operations carried out by the EU. Another fundamental factor of EU limits in the region is the individual positioning of European MS, materialized in some cases by disagreements and preferences of certain states to act in the name of national capacities they have (e.g., France and Germany) (Deen *et al.*, 2021, p. 15). The lack of harmony is not just reflected in the choice to adhere to positions and European common actions or to act as statal actors, but can also be observed in the debates on the involvement of the EU in the management of security deficit from the countries of EaP, where France has a position characterised by scepticism regarding the development of security and defence dimension in relationship with partner countries (Deen *et al.*, 2021, p. 14).

Also, considering the breadth and meanings resulting from the military component of these conflicts and the inherent role of member states in the foreign policy decisions, EU has the capacity to agree on a common response to crises, which exceeds the prevention framework, facilitates the establishment of a peace agreement, rehabilitation and post-conflict reconstruction. Thus, considering the primordial need of security of these states and the effects that the lack of EU involvement in the resolution of these problems can entail on the success of the other European objectives in the region, the matter of adopting sanctions against the Russian Federation has incited an increased interest inside the Union and in the partner countries.

EUGS claimed in relationship with the countries from the Eastern Neighbourhood the objective for integrated and comprehensive management of conflicts and crises, based on the use of civil instruments for the management of crises by the Union. Moreover, this objective was emphasized by a type of approach on several levels (the local and regional dimension of conflicts) and a multilateral approach which involves partnerships with relevant actors for the given conflict context. More specifically, EUGS notes the decision of EU to get involved in security problems derived from the conflicts from the Eastern Neighbourhood by referring to the events in Ukraine which were precursory to the adoption of strategy. The categorical declarative position regarding the actions of Russia in Crimea and destabilization of East of Ukraine (EEAS, 2016, p. 29), in consideration of the EU claims of actor acting for the approach of conflicts at global level, cannot be reduced from the perspective of objectives undertaken just at vehement position takings in these actions which violate the European and international principles and values.

The inclusion of security problems on the agenda of the EaP was requested by the partner countries – the deeper sectoral integration in the field of cooperation on security matters, along with the proclamation of the objective of stability, security and prosperity in the whole East Europe region (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, 2019). However, the language used in the recommendations of the European Commission for the future of the EaP post-2020 bring close-up the term of *resiliency*, but also support for the *dialogues and cooperation in security matters.* Therefore, in relation to the political and strategic approach reflected in the official European documents, this is the vision which the European Party proposes to cover the security problems in the region, both regarding the unsolved conflicts and before hybrid threats, serious crimes (terrorism) and cooperation in security and defence matters.

On the other hand, the text of regional political commitments in security matters reflects the reserved treatment by EU of this dimension in relationship with the Eastern partners, while the discourse specific to the global security strategy presents a Union characterised by the ambition to become a more strategically autonomous actor. The European Union has a series of instruments to approach the ongoing conflicts on the territory of five of its Eastern partners. In this respect, EU supports the conflict resolution efforts and contributes to the mitigation of their negative effects by missions in CSDP such as EUMM (Georgia), EUAM (Ukraine) and EUBAM (Republic of Moldova and Ukraine). EU also promotes political dialogue in security matters and the European political objectives regarding the multilateral vision based on partnerships, with the aid of *EUSR for the South Caucasus and the crisis in Georgia*. The EUSR mandate includes, among other things, the objective to contribute to prevention of conflicts in the region, to their peaceful resolution (including the crisis of Georgia and the conflict of Nagorno-Karabakh) according to the international law principles and to support the future cooperation between Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia and as applicable, their neighbours. At the same time, the multilateral approach allows EU to contribute to the resolution of conflicts in other formats, the EU has the opportunity to get involved in the various processes facilitated by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe in the region (Deen *et al.*, 2021, p. 16).

As for the hybrid threats (European Commission, 2016), against the background of their emanation from the Russian Federation to the partner countries (Klijn and Yüksel, 2019), this security problem was included on the agenda of strategic priorities of the Union for the EaP. In this sector, the recommendations of COM and HR reiterated the actions of EU for support and assistance for the cyber resiliency of the partner countries by contribution to the development of robust legal, political and operational frameworks of cyber security (EEAS, 2016, p. 15). Considering the potential effects of hybrid threats on European reform policies in the region such as their undermining by disinformation campaigns, the potential and interest in EU involvement for fighting against this kind of threat has increased compared to other security fields.

In the same general objective of consolidating the resiliency in the region there is the national security sector of partner countries. In this respect, EU has promoted reforms in judicial and police sector, in order to contribute to the consolidation of capacities of these countries to manage and efficiently fight against threats. The EU action did not concern issues with weight in security field, such as the sector of intelligence services, military or defence where in order to obtain assistance, the Eastern countries could resort more easily to NATO, USA and the European states (Deen *et al.*, 2021, p. 18). In this field, EU relevance as security partner has recorded a loss, considering the primordial importance given to security and defence by the partner countries.

Even if lately a consensus was outlined among the European officials according to which EU has to adopt a dominant position on the stage of international relations (Gressel and Popescu, 2020, p. 1), which is characterised including by strategic autonomy, so far, no consistent security strategy was developed in relationship with Eastern partners, and the global power ambitions of the Union were only partly achieved in this region of strategic importance for Europe. The declarative assumption regarding support for security by intensification of dialogues and cooperation in security matters is not doubled by adequate and directed policies, which should materialize, for example, in granting assistance in the relevant sectors. In this respect, the global EU objectives in security matters are not now fully adapted to the specificity and needs of countries from the Eastern Neighbourhood, being mainly focused on the promotion of reforms in the spirit of resiliency especially in the institutional policy and judicial sectors and in civil security field, in the field of cooperation with the EU agencies and integrated border management.

3. Use of civil and military instruments of CSDP and enhanced cooperation between the EU and NATO

The comprehensive approach proclaimed by the EU policies in the Eastern Neighbourhood did not achieve the rough security component. The EaP was not thought out as a geopolitical competition, but over time, it started to be perceived thus by the EU and the Russian Federation (Pop, 2016). The main obstacle in alignment of European policies with the stronger and stronger perception of direct Russian threat to national security of the states from East of Europe and European security was the idea that a substantial political commitment at security level will affect the cooperation between EU and the Russian Federation. At the same time, it was obvious that the lack of a firm answer to the use of military force or hybrid and cyber-attacks cannot just be compensated by actions from the economic and civilian sphere. In fields such as the intelligence sector, defence or military sector, EU does not have self-sufficient capacity, which prevents a practical cooperation and the supply of financial assistance, with effects on the political influence and even the diplomatic importance of the Union in the region.

In this context, a gradual approach of policies and strategies promoted by NATO and EU for the Eastern Neighbourhood appeared more often in the political dialogues and the relations between the two actors. The Joint Declaration on EU-NATO Cooperation of July 8th, 2016 treats the cooperation between the two actors on various levels specific to security and defence and regulates the joint commitment for the support of efforts for consolidation of capacity of partners from the Eastern Neighbourhood and their resiliency. For the enforcement of the Joint Declaration a set of 74 proposals was adopted, and its progress in implementation was regularly assessed. The last presentation of the results achieved in each cooperation field highlights that the joint efforts continue to assure the coherence of results between the planification processes of EU and NATO defence, where the requirements overlap, recognizing at the same time the different nature of the two organizations and related responsibilities. The role of coordination, command and control in defence sector played by NATO is in contrast with the European programmes and policies, which attracted the need of coherence between the activities and projects in security/defence field.

The reference document emphasizes the contribution of EU to the NATO projects in the region from the Eastern border of Europe. Among these, during the period June 2019 - June 2020, the following activities took place: in the good governance filed in defence and security sector based on a cooperation agreement signed in 2018, by which the European Commission became a financial contributor to the NATO Building Integrity programme (BI) – UE offered financial support to facilitate the participation of Armenian, Georgian, Moldavian and Ukrainian representatives in many NATO activities for capacity building; the European experts from EU Advisory Mission (EUAM) from Ukraine and the EU representatives participated in evaluation events in the NATO BI programme; the NATO representative office in Ukraine, EUAM and the EU delegation in Kiev continued to closely coordinate the support given to Ukraine, including regarding the enforcement of the Law on national security. The relationship between NATO and EU continues to rely on the complementarity of efforts and avoidance of duplication, according to the *principle of a unique set of forces*, with the specification that the capabilities developed by the two actors remain in principle available for the operations of NATO and EU, under the reserve of national political decisions (EU and NATO, 2020, 16 June).

The interference of the Russian Federation in Ukraine has drastically changed the security situation at the Eastern borders of Europe. Actions such as the illegitimate occupation of Crimea and the military intervention in East of Ukraine have affected the stability and security at the Eastern border of NATO, respectively in the near neighbourhood of EU, violating the principles of international law regarding the sovereignty of states and also affecting the credibility of borders internationally recognized in this region (Freire, 2017). The military component and subsequent territorial issues of conflict increased the difficulty of EU to act decisively, EU was not directly involved in the conflict resolution negotiations (Freire and Simăo, 2020, p. 46). While the destabilizing behaviour of Russia in Ukraine was perpetuated, the answer of EU was characterised by the adoption of political and economic sanctions against Russia, which aimed, among other things, at limitation of access to capital markets for the Russian financial state institutions, restriction of trade in armament, establishing export restrictions for products with double use and final destinations with military purpose (Drent *et al*., 2015, p. 43). Also, EU instated a civil counselling mission in Ukraine (EUAM Ukraine), on July 22nd, 2014 with the main purpose to support Ukraine in development of civil security services, in close cooperation with the law enforcement authorities and the judicial sector. The mission is ongoing, its mandate was extended until May 31st, 2024 (Council of the EU, 2021).

The North-Atlantic Alliance showed that it supported the decision of EU to impose sanctions and decided to suspend any civil and military practical cooperation with Russia, with the preservation of political channels of communication. Also, these events from the Eastern flank modelled the European and Euro-Atlantic strategies and positions. The NATO Summit of 11th-12th, July 2018 tackled the issue of Euro-Atlantic security from the perspective of threats from the aggressive actions of Russia, including the threat and use of force to achieve political objectives, reiterating the commitment for the strengthening of the defence and security capacities of the countries from the Eastern border of Europe. Under the circumstances characterised by the fundamental test for the relevance of the Union as actor in the regional security problems from the events in Ukraine, EU has adopted the new global security strategy. From the analysis of strategy objectives, EU is determined to establish a higher degree of regional strategic autonomy which would allow the initiation of missions of fight forces for the management of crises.

The mission of promoting cooperation in security matters with Eastern partners[1] benefits from the instrument of CSDP missions, but because the decision-making mechanism in this field imposes the need to align the positions of all MS, EU can encounter difficulties in resorting to these kinds of missions. According to TEU, the qualified majority rule can be applied in case of decisions regarding the European Defence Agency and the permanent structured cooperation (PESCO) (TUE, 2012, pp. 40-41). The involvement of EU in the Eastern Neighbourhood could increase with the use of permanent structured cooperation formulas, which would leave behind the problem of internal divisions of EU regarding the positioning of MS towards Russia and would consolidate the response to conflicts and external crises.

Conclusions

The EU promise for the Eastern Neighbourhood wanted to answer the desire formulated by the partner countries, to assure stability, security and prosperity in the face of the security deficit felt by these countries especially as a result of the relationship with the Russian Federation. Also, the inclusion of the security dimension on the agenda of the EaP allowed EU to connect the finality of Europeanization process with the role of security provider for these countries, thus assuring the success of the other European objectives in this region. At declarative level, the content of political security commitments dedicated to the countries from the EaP shows a less ambitious character and the limits of EU in this sector in relation to the wider framework of objectives proclaimed in the EU global security Strategy. The treatment of security problems in the region was thought around the concept of *resiliency* and concerns soft fields of security. From a practical perspective, the EU policies and instruments approached security fields such as the unsolved conflicts, the hybrid threats, good governance issues and treatment of vulnerabilities in the institutions acting on national security level. In this respect, the European efforts focused on the development of robust legal, political and operational frameworks, especially in the hybrid threats sector. As for the sect or of unsolved conflicts in the Eastern Neighbourhood, EU used the CSDP tools for crisis management, the conflict resolution efforts and the monitoring of implementation of peace agreements gave a certain degree of coherence to the European security policies. However, the security challenges from the Eastern border of Europe did not fully receive the necessary attention by objectives and European consolidated security policies, adapted to the specificity and individual needs of these countries. The result of current

[1] For an argumentation of the need for a Security Pact with the countries of the EaP, please see the work of Gressel and Popescu (2020).

debates on the consolidation of security policies and instruments and operational capacities promoted by EU in the Eastern region can open new perspectives in the relevance of EU as global security actor.

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Resilience and adaptability of tourism in EaP region - a systematic literature review

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Abstract

Tourism in the Eastern Partnership countries experienced a sinuous evolution in the post-Soviet period. The abandonment of the classic circuits, economic stagnation, the shock suffered after the events and periods of political crisis, and lately, the frozen activity during the health crisis, make resilience a way of being of the actors in this field. The paper aims at a systematic analysis of studies targeting the forms of tourism in the Eastern Partnership countries, highlighting the development models followed, the areas of tourist concentration and the recommended strategies. From a methodological point of view, the research was staged, having an initial quantitative approach, and then a qualitative one - a content analysis highlighting the key guidelines of the analysed studies. The conclusions of the article aim at mapping the research areas covered by the articles studied, while highlighting the intensely frequented areas and the „white" areas.

Keywords: literature review, tourism, resilience, post-soviet space

Introduction

Tourism is considered an important sector for developing economies. It allows the capitalization of local resources, contributes to job creation and can lead to a high profitability. EaP countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine) have broken away from a closed, centralized system, including in the field of tourism, and have set different strategies for tourism development. A comparative analysis of the main tourism indicators shows us different priorities of this sector (see Table 1). Although Ukraine has the highest flow of visitors, the other indicators show a relatively low importance of tourism in the economy. The highest rates of tourism contribution to GDP, employment and exports are registered in Georgia and Armenia. High contributions to export are also documented in Azerbaijan and the Republic of Moldova, the latter

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having the lowest contribution to GDP. However, too much dependence on tourism can make their economies vulnerable to regional and global crises.

Table 1. Summary of the main tourism indicators in EaP countries

Indicators (2019)	**Armenia (ARM)**	**Azerbaijan (AZE)**	**Belarus (BLR)**	**Georgia (GEO)**	**Moldova (MDA)**	**Ukraine (UKR)**
International arrivals of tourists (millions)	1.9	2.9	2.2	5.1	0.2	15
Total contribution of Travel and Tourism to GDP (%)	11.8	7.2	6.4	26.3	3.9	6.1
The contribution in total of exports (%)	25.2	11.1	2.9	39.5	14.5	3.8
The contribution of Travel and Tourism to employment (%)	12.5	7.7	6.7	27.7	7.6	6.2

Source: World Tourism Organization (2020) and World Travel & Tourism Council (2020)

Our research has as premises two main aspects. On the one hand, the fact that in the six countries of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) tourism is not well developed. Thus, in the top of competitiveness after the tourism field (achieved on approximately 140 countries), the six countries considered occupy places in the second half of the ranking, with volatile evolutions (see Table 2).

Table 2. Overall competitivity index for EaP countries (ranking) vs. number of publications in WoS

Year	**ARM**	**AZE**	**BLR**	**GEO**	**MDA**	**UKR**
2007	74	75	-	66	95	78
2008	89	79	-	72	98	77
2009	91	76	-	73	93	77
2011	90	83	-	73	99	85
2013	79	78	-	66	102	76
2015	89	84	-	71	111	-
2017	84	71	-	70	117	88
2019	79	71	-	68	103	78
Number of publications (WoS)	23	52	22	73	31	242

Source: World Economic Forum (2019)

The best placed are Georgia and Azerbaijan, with relatively low volatilities, then Ukraine and Armenia, and Moldova is placed at the bottom of the ranking, with high volatility. Belarus does not appear in this ranking. In close connection with the level of development of tourism competitiveness we can consider that there is also the number of scientific articles, which leads us to a relatively small number of publications in the field of tourism for the analysed countries. In this context, as opposed to the abundance of literature on tourism practices in top countries, studies on tourism practices in EaP region are less present within the research in the field. Thus, for the country in the first position of the ranking, Spain, the search revealed a number of 2643 results in Web of Science core collection, while for the studied countries, the number of articles in the same database varied between 22 and 242.

Secondly, all the analysed countries have known in the last 30 years major events with a negative impact on tourism (secessionist incidents in Georgia in 1991-1992 and 2008, in Moldova in 1990-1992, conflicts between Ukraine and Russia from 2014 till present, conflicts between Armenia and Azerbaijan regarding Nagorno-Karabakh region in 1980-1994, 2016 and 2020, autocratic regime in Belarus form 1994 till present, economic crisis in 2009 and health crisis in 2020) and, as a result, resilience is a key concept for the actors in the tourism field. Starting from the definition of resilience: "the ability of a system, community or society exposed to hazards to resist, absorb, accommodate, adapt to, transform and recover from the effects of a hazard in a timely and efficient manner" (United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, 2017), we oriented the research towards highlighting the situations of recovery, renewal, resistance, re-orientation, adaptation, transformation from the tourist systems of the analysed countries. Tourism in EaP countries has gone through reorganization (by moving from the old organization system to systems adapted to the market economy), reorientation (for new target groups and to mitigate the impact of political events), introduction of new forms of tourism resistant to major negative processes - dramatic migration, wars, natural disasters. In this context, resilience seems to be a way of being of the actors in the field of tourism in these countries.

Bibliometric research in tourism is relatively scarce (Koseoglu *et al.*, 2016). Our paper aims at a systematic analysis of studies targeting the forms of tourism in the countries of the EaP, revealing the development models followed, the areas of tourist concentration and the recommended strategies. The way in which these aspects relate to the dimensions of resilience has been constantly monitored and highlighted.

1. Methodology

From a methodological point of view, the research was staged, having an initial quantitative approach, and then a qualitative one. First of all, the articles subject to analysis were searched by the keywords "tourism" and the name of the country (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine), within the Web of Science core collection and the Scopus/ Elsevier database. This stage with a quantitative approach was continued with a qualitative approach.

Table 3. The stages of the analysis and the deliverables

Step	Activity	Country	No. of items	
			WOS Core Collection	Scopus & Elsevier
Identification Papers in databases Web of Science & Elsevier / Scopus	Keywords: „tourism" combined with countries' names	ARM	23	23
		AZE	52	55
		BLR	22	24
		GEO	73	121
		MDA	31	28
		UKR	242	240
Quantitative analysis. Output: list of titles and abstracts related to tourism				
Screening Records (title / abstract screened)	Removing duplicates; Removing items referring at regions with similar names (Azerbaijan/ Iran; Georgia / USA; Moldova / Romania)	ARM	23	12
		AZE	36	16
		BLR	18	12
		GEO	35	26
		MDA	18	10
		UKR	230	167
	Excluding articles that do not focus on tourism or refer to different regions	ARM	21	8
		AZE	30	14
		BLR	15	9
		GEO	26	17
		MDA	12	5
		UKR	199	125
Quantitative analysis. Output: 481 individualised titles and abstracts focused on tourism. Qualitative analysis. Output: main features of the studies in tourism				
Eligibility Full-text articles assessed for the eligibility	Full-text papers were excluded: Not accessible Not in English Editorials / commentaries	ARM	14	7
		AZE	12	11
		BLR	11	6
		GEO	22	12
		MDA	9	4
		UKR	152	78
Quantitative analysis. Output: list of individualised full papers focused on tourism				
Inclusion Total included studies	Balanced lots of papers for the six selected countries; Including other studies / reports for analysis.	ARM	10	3
		AZE	7	3
		BLR	5	1
		GEO	9	5
		MDA	6	1
		UKR	22	4
Quantitative analysis. Output: 76 full papers focused on tourism in EaP countries Qualitative analysis. Output: The variables related to the tourism industry				

Source: own representation

The selected articles were analysed according to the targeted period, the form of tourism included in the study, the national or international approach. The results were interpreted in a comparative manner. A content analysis highlighting the key guidelines of the analysed studies - the frequency of key terms related to EU support, resilience, adaptability was carried out at the end of this qualitative approach. A detailed presentation of the analysis stages, highlighting the number of analysed articles is presented in Table 3.

It should be mentioned that the largest number of publications is not found in the case of the country best placed in the competitiveness ranking, but in the case of Ukraine. The explanation comes from the development of university centres and the number of national scientific publications indexed in the studied databases, clearly superior in the case of Ukraine compared to other countries. The selection of the articles included in the study was made starting from the need for a balanced number of publications for each country, as well as for highlighting the forms of representative tourism, in order to outline the tourist profile of each country.

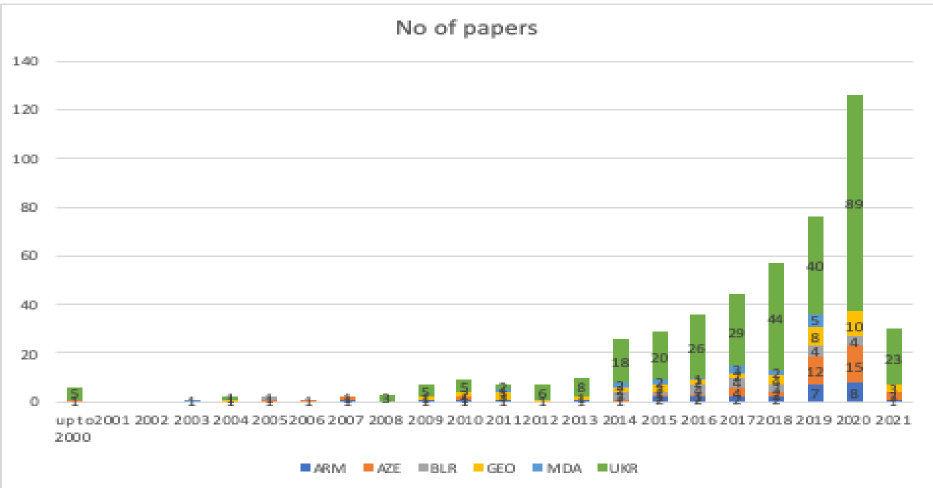
2. Results

From the analysis of the papers that have as subject tourism in the countries of the Eastern Partnership, we were able to deduce several characteristics. The results of the quantitative analysis aim at the evolution of the number of articles, the extent to which they are oriented towards different aspects of tourism and the category of the field in which they fall. The results of the qualitative analysis aim at the common characteristics of the studied countries, as well as the tourist profile of each country, as it is reflected in the analysed articles.

2.1. The results of the quantitative analysis

An impressive increase in the number of works in recent years, focusing on tourism in the EaP, can be noticed (see Figure 1).

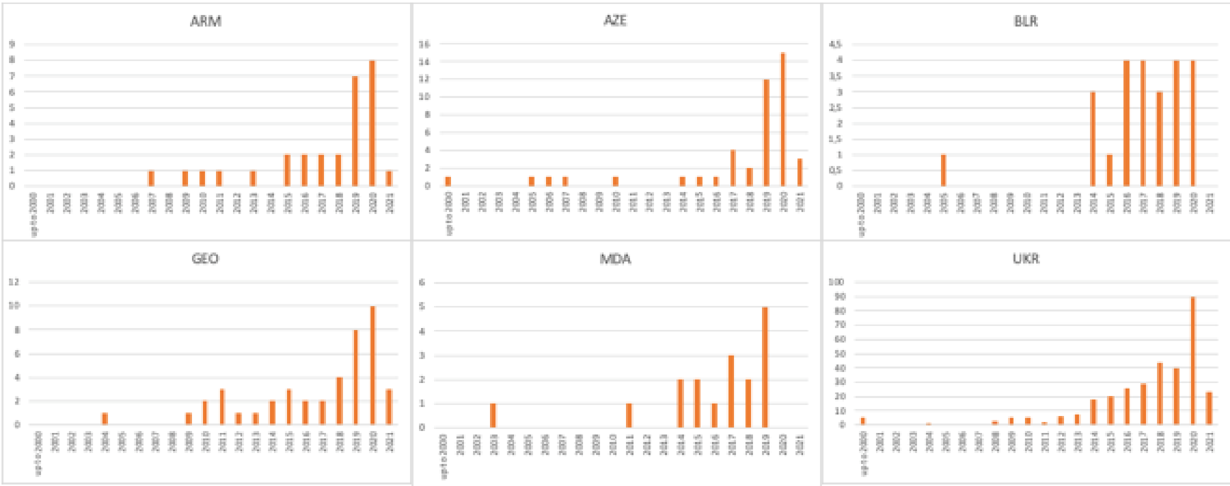
Figure 1. Evolution of the number of articles focused on tourism in EaP countries



Source: own representation

However, there is a more balanced distribution per year of the number of works in the case of Belarus and Moldova - the countries with the lowest number of works in total (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Evolution of the number of articles focused on tourism in each EaP country



Source: own representation

According to the field of publications, as they are catalogued in the databases, there are major differences between the 6 countries studied (see Table 4). The multidisciplinary character of the tourism field is observed, with the predominance of economic and environmental sciences.

Table 4. The types of domains in which the analysed publications fall

Main scientific category of publication	ARM	AZE	BLR	GEO	MDA	UKR
Management	7	5		7		
Geography	4			13	5	36
Astronomy	3					
Economics		11		6		48
Regional urban planning		7				
Hospitality Leisure Sport Tourism			5			20
Environmental sciences				20		19
Secondary scientific category of publication						
Management			2		2	14
History	2					13
Geography			2			
Business		3	2	3		12
Regional urban planning				4		
Hospitality Leisure Sport Tourism		3		5	2	
Environmental sciences	2		2			
Education				3		

Source: own representation

According to the main approach of the article - domestic or international tourism - we also have a different distribution for the countries studied (see Table 5). The only country for which the international approach in tourism articles predominates (62%) is, paradoxically, Belarus. For two countries the approach is relatively balanced, the orientation towards domestic tourism slightly exceeding that towards international tourism - Armenia (55%) and Moldova (59%), and for the other three countries the orientation towards domestic tourism is clear - Azerbaijan (82%), Georgia (81%) and Ukraine (74%).

Table 5. Distribution of articles according to the main approach on tourism

	ARM	AZE	BLR	GEO	MDA	UKR
Domestic	16	36	9	35	10	241
International	13	8	15	8	7	83

Source: own representation

According to the major topic considered in the article, we classified the works into two main categories - those focused on a certain form of tourism (basic or niche) and those with a managerial approach, at the level of international cooperation, at national, regional, local or organizational level (see Table 6).

Table 6. The main topics addressed in the analysed articles

Main topics		ARM	AZE	BLR	GEO	MDA	UKR
Tourism type							
Major	sustainable/ green/ natural resources	4	12	4	16	5	46
	cultural/ heritage/ historic	8	4	2	9	2	40
	rural/ agri-tourism	1	2	5	2	0	18
	health	0	0	2	4	0	14
	marine/ coastal	0	0	0	0	0	11
	urban	0	0	0	1	0	7
	events	0	2	0	0	0	2
	border	0	0	3	0	1	0
Alternative/ niche	wine	0	0	0	0	3	2
	sport events	1	0	0	0	0	3
	scientific/ archaeology/ astronomy	3	0	0	0	1	0
	dark	0	1	0	0	0	0
	other	0	0	0	0	0	10
International/ National/ Regional/ Organizational level							
strategic/ infrastructure		2	7	4	5	1	55
risks/ crises		0	2	0	1	0	28
partnerships		4	4	0	0	1	22

human resource/ education in tourism	3	2	1	5	1	14
hotel/ agencies management	0	2	1	0	0	20
marketing/ brand	2	2	2	0	1	12
technological factors	0	1	0	0	1	14
financial management	1	0	0	0	0	6
comparative analysis	0	3	0	0	0	0

Source: own representation

The predominance of the orientation towards sustainable tourism can be seen, of the one based on natural resources and those of patrimony, but also the existence of a large number of articles that aim at alternative forms, of niche, of tourism. Also, a significant number of articles address the need for a strategic vision, the risks and crises in the field of tourism and the advantages of partnerships.

2.2. The results of the qualitative analysis - country profile according to studies

The countries included in the analysis could not take advantage of the international dimension of tourism until the 1990s, due to their closed economic systems (Majidli, 2020). They still bear the striking features of Eastern European and post-socialist states - quasi-centralized systems, lack of local initiatives, uniformity, cumbersome formalities of crossing supplies, and the problems of newly established countries - increased migration, anaemic economic structures, mistrust in the system (Khartishvili *et al.*, 2020). Tourism has suffered as a result of regional conflicts, both in terms of tourists' perceptions of safety and in terms of the destruction of tourism infrastructure and facilities (Radvanyi and Muduyev, 2007). Partnerships, although seen as development solutions (Golumbeanu *et al.*, 2014), are poorly developed, and universities are often ignored as driving forces for social innovation (Keryan *et al.*, 2020). Their competitive advantages still include low prices (Van Zyl *et al.*, 2019), and the orientation towards innovation and sustainability is at an incipient level (Melnyk *et al.*, 2019; Dzyad *et al.*, 2020). The analysed research reveals different orientations towards types of tourism, specific problems and different strategic approaches for each country.

Armenia

Most articles on tourism in Armenia are oriented towards cultural resources - heritage and history. Armenia is described as a country with centuries of history, culture and traditions, the first to officially adopt Christianity as its state religion. It has important resources in the development of religious, historical, cultural, medical, gastronomic, adventure, agri- and eco-, scientific, educational tourism. In a survey conducted among Armenian foreign tourists (Tovmasyan, 2020), the key defining terms associated with Armenia are: history, culture, Christianity. As a peculiarity of this heritage tourism is the significant proportion of the diaspora among visitors, some of them being involved in investments or volunteer actions (Darieva, 2017).

The form of niche tourism approached in research is scientific tourism (Farmanyan and Mickaelian, 2019), in particular astronomical tourism (Farmanyan *et al.*, 2019), Armenia's resources in this field being considerable, but insufficiently capitalized.

Tourism marketing and tourism infrastructure in Armenia have serious problems. The aspects indicated by tourists as important, but poorly covered are related to the availability of tourist information, the presence and conditions of public toilets in tourist areas, greening of tourist areas (Tovmasyan, 2019). Also oriented towards the development of different forms of tourism are research aimed at developing rural tourism - marketing, language barriers, infrastructure (Tovmasyan *et al.*, 2020), as well as urban tourism, by strictly concentrating maintenance and promotion activities on monuments in self and neglecting their integration in the urban space to which they belong (Mamyan *et al.*, 2016).

The solutions target partnership/ cluster initiatives, identifying a model adapted to Armenia, of collegial coordination through state bodies or representatives of universities and the private sector (Sahakyan *et al.*, 2019).

Azerbaijan

The profile of tourism development in Azerbaijan is complex. On the one hand, the importance of tourism in the economy is recognized, as many articles are focused on strategic aspects. On the other hand, the associated problems and risks are highlighted, especially related to pollution resulting from the development of industrial and oil sectors. Consequently, the need for guidance towards the sustainable development of tourism, based on natural resources, is clearly emphasized.

The forms of tourism with high potential in Azerbaijan are multiple (Gandilova, 2018): rural, natural tourism, ethno-tourism (especially in north-western Azerbaijan on the Silk Road route), leisure, extreme, medical and health tourism, maritime tourism and beach, event tourism, gastronomic and sports tourism. The potential of mega-events is highlighted - such as concerts, festivals (Ibrahimova, 2020) -, as well as their positive impact on urban sustainability, even if they involve new constructions and increase the level of pollution (Mirzayeva *et al.*, 2020). However, a study that investigates the long-term impact of tourism development on the ecological footprint for the period 1996-2014 shows that the EKC (Environmental Kuznets Curve) hypothesis is not verified in the case of Azerbaijan (Mikayilov *et al.*, 2019). Nonetheless, autocratic regime given the increasing number of tourists and implicitly, the demand for transport and energy, a set of regulations is recommended to support the sustainable development of the tourism field.

A comparison between the country's provinces shows a different distribution of pollution problems (Mamedov and Mustafayev, 2007). Thus, in large cities, environmental systems are overloaded, while in the peripheral provinces there is significant potential for the development of rural and leisure tourism.

The development of tourism in Azerbaijan is burdened by the inherent risks, systematically analysed both for the hotel industry and for the field of tourism in general (Rza-Zadeh and Dvořák, 2020). The problems stem from poor training of industry personnel (Serafini and Szamosi, 2015), land and natural resource use conflicts in national parks (Burmester, 2005), but can also have harder-to-manage causes, such as the terrorist threat, which stresses the need for development of crisis plans and immediate action within the tourist facilities (Aliyev, 2020).

The recommendations for the systematic restart of the tourism sector after the end of the COVID-19 crisis are subsumed under the community's orientation towards domestic tourism, respectively ecological tourism and ecotourism (Rahmanov *et al.*, 2020).

Belarus

At the national level, natural resources are not available for tourism - the country has flat relief and no access to the sea. The main forms of tourism are cultural, business, as well as rural tourism and ecotourism (Tarasionak and Nikitsin, 2017). The main attractions are several resorts with a well-developed tourist infrastructure, national parks, castles, and occasionally events, such as festivals and sports.

Although there have been numerous factors that have hindered tourism development, some rural tourist destinations have maintained their attractiveness, especially for domestic tourism. Rural tourism farms represent the highest growth segment at national level (Danskikh and Traskevich, 2018), imposing an orientation towards capitalizing on local resources, functional autonomy and infrastructure of the destination in terms of marketing various sustainable tourism products, while creating a value chain of tourism.

Another promising direction of development is given by cross-border tourism. The visa regime is a barrier to increasing tourist flows, creating a visa-free border space between Belarus and Poland is an opportunity for cultural tourism and ecotourism. Successful examples are significant tourism development along the Augustów canal (Cyargeenka and Więckowski, 2020), through tourism clusters (Pirozhnik, 2020).

Although the sustainability orientation of tourism is stated in the national development strategies (Maksimeniuk and Timakova, 2020), the management of natural areas with tourist potential is subject to permanent threats through the use of land and natural resources for agricultural or industrial purposes (Galay *et al.*, 2016).

Belarus' negative political image abroad, the country's poor reputation in the international tourism market, the existing visa regime, compulsory health insurance, poorly developed infrastructure due to lack of tourism prioritization for a long time, poor quality of services (Tarasionak and Nikitsin, 2017) are factors that impede a significant increase in tourism in the next period.

Georgia

Georgia is a country with remarkable natural landscapes. In addition to its natural features, Georgia has a civilization of over 4,000 years, resulting in a multitude of cultural heritage sites. Being one of the first countries in the world to adopt Christianity, the country's religious heritage is the basis of cultural tourism. Here is a mixture of Asian and European influences, many original customs and traditions being preserved in isolated mountain areas (Metreveli and Timothy, 2010). Even before 1989, Georgia was one of the most popular holiday destinations for Soviet tourists. Currently, in order to attract more visitors, the industry is looking for niche areas with great potential, especially winter tourism, wine and gastronomy, medical, wellness and gambling (Khartishvili *et al.*, 2019). In a study aimed at the purpose of international visits (Cappucci *et al.*, 2015), the preponderance of leisure or recreation destinations, visiting friends or relatives, transit, shopping and business/ professional travel was highlighted. Georgia has very good conditions for the development of ecotourism. Cultural and ethnic aspects - traditional cuisine and local wine - are extremely important in shaping Georgia as a tourist destination.

Most studies are oriented towards rural tourism, eco- and ethno-tourism. Mountainous regions are considered natural resources with significant potential for the development of regions. Thus, the Caucasus is considered one of the 34 "hotspots" of biological diversity, and Georgia is considered among the 200 global ecoregions, making the importance of ecotourism a topical issue at the strategic level (Paresashvili, 2014).

New development directions have been adopted in the mountainous regions of Georgia. Culture and tourism have a synergistic relationship, the experience of the inhabitants of the mountainous areas based on tradition has led to the creation of authentic services for tourists. This competitive advantage of mountain destinations creates socio-economic benefits, while preserving the long-term cultural identity of the host community (Gugushvili *et al.*, 2019). Tourism in mountain regions has the potential to create or revive related economic activities, but can also lead to the reduction or abandonment of certain traditional activities (Salukvadze *et al.*, 2019). However, in the later stages of tourism development, it is assumed that it will be necessary to consolidate the supporting economic sectors. An excessive orientation towards more profitable tourism can lead to a vulnerability of the locals to avoid the potential decreases of the tourism. This meaning a insufficiently exploited tourist infrastructure, developed mainly to the detriment of the agricultural lands (Salukvadze and Backhaus, 2020). Within the supply chain, most local producers are deficient from the perspective of tourism actors. They do not have certifications in agricultural production and food safety, the capacity to provide product delivery services, the marketing skills and propose a supply unstable due to seasonality and volatile quantity, which leads to a feeling of instability for long-term collaboration between local suppliers and recipients.

It is clear that rural tourism in Georgia is at an early stage of its development, generating challenges and constraints for further strategic development. An approach that emphasizes the concept of community tourism and integrated rural development can generate positive effects for all parties involved (Khartishvili *et al.*, 2019). Although there are areas with internationally recognized potential, much remains to be done in terms of tourism image, which does not have adequate international promotion, and for the development of tourism facilities, still far from complying with international standards (Cappucci *et al.*, 2015). The mountainous areas respond differently to similar challenges - a comparative study between the mountainous region of northern and southern Georgia shows that, although their socio-ecological systems were similar, the Skhalta Gorge is rapidly depopulating, whilst in the Upper Svaneti the population is stable (Tevzadze and Kikvidze, 2016). Modern ways of governing, involving decentralization and involvement of locals (Svajda *et al.*, 2020), as well as project-type initiatives with the support of non-governmental organizations (Hirsch and Lacour, 2004), are ways of sustainable tourism development in these areas.

Another interesting development direction for Georgia's tourism is medical tourism, which can provide comprehensive health services - curative, preventive and rehabilitation, with the main advantage of low prices for these services and the climate suitable for recovery. In order to gain a competitive advantage in the health tourism market, hospitals need to improve the quality of services, especially those that are complementary, such as hospitality services, and should meet patients' expectations (Verulava and Jorbenadze, 2018).

The effects of the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia are considered significant for the insufficient development of the sector at the national level, highlighting the damage that the war has generated on tourist sites, wildlife and vegetation, tourist infrastructure, and image, tourists, especially international ones, avoiding the areas adjacent to conflicts (Menghi *et al.*, 2011; Metreveli and Timothy, 2010). There are indications that Georgia could use war heritage for tourism purposes, especially for tourists from the diaspora, but the balance of the war for tourism is obviously negative. There is also evidence of the negative impact of tourism on the environment, the effect of EKC being also considered to be present in Georgia. As tourism has a significant role in CO2 generation (Fethi and Senyucel, 2021), the traditional consumption methods must give way to sustainable methods.

Republic of Moldova

The Republic of Moldova has a rich cultural heritage, with over 140 cultural heritage sites; it is an amalgam of many nationalities and cultures with many traditions, languages, folklore, cooking. The main forms of tourism in Moldova are: rural tourism, wine-growing, cultural, health (Stratan *et al.*, 2015). A systematic analysis of the development needs of the sector (Tribe, 2003) highlighted the following types of tourism with potential: adventure; religious; Business; in the nature; balneary; cultural; of heritage; educational; wine-vineyards; of events; urban. However, there are a number of factors that may jeopardize the sustainable development of tourism in Moldova, most of which stem from poor management. Thus, regarding the development of cultural tourism, one can notice the deplorable state in which there are many architectural monuments, as well as the low involvement of the population in cultural and tourist events (Stratan *et al.*, 2015).

The tourist and recreational potential of natural resources is also under-exploited. Only 47 lakes (12%) are used mainly for recreational purposes (Bacal *et al.*, 2019), the main causes of this under-use being related to the unsatisfactory state of aquatic areas, the massive depopulation of the rural area, the insufficiency of the tourist infrastructure. Landscape attractiveness must be capitalized by introducing areas with geo-tourism potential in the existing natural or cultural routes and by conservation measures of relatively stable landforms (Cocean *et al.*, 2019).

Including in the promotion and development of Moldovan wine tourism, a field in which there are first-rate attractions at the international level, certain limitations are highlighted: low number of foreign tourists at the national level, due to low visibility, low flexibility in package design tourist for different categories of visitors, high price/ quality ratio; limited information on the value of the tourist heritage owned by the rural community, insufficient capacities. insufficiently qualified staff, limited financial resources for the development of the sector, with a low share of business expansion projects in wine and wine tourism (Iațișin and Colesnicova, 2017).

The development of forms of tourism with real potential in the Republic of Moldova will depend overwhelmingly on the training of staff involved in tourism. Therefore, in policy terms, designing training programs would be helpful (Tribe, 2003).

Ukraine

Ukraine has rich natural, climatic, recreational, historical and cultural resources, which are important preconditions for the development of a unique tourist offer for leisure, education, culture or other niche needs (Mazaraki and Voronova, 1994; Chernega *et al*., 2019; Borysova *et al.*, 2020). Although the tourism field is considered a perspective direction for the development of the national economy, the impact of tourism on the economy is negligible. Ukraine is at a low level of attractiveness and value of its national tourism brand, with a low level of competitiveness on the world market (Melnychenko *et al.*, 2021). There is a major imbalance between potential and capitalization of tourism resources (Boyko *et al.*, 2020). The causes that led to this imbalance are multiple: political and economic instability, negative image, lack of prioritization at government level, lack of an efficient management and regulatory system, incomplete reforms, cumbersome border crossings, corruption, lack of strategic cooperation tourism business entities (Mazaraki and Voronova, 1994; Kovalska *et al.*, 2020; Boiko *et al.*, 2017). Tourism has not become the key sector in Ukraine due to the many problems it faces: underutilization of tourist attractions, low level of services, non-compliance with environmental regulations, low level of public safety, poor transport and infrastructure, low qualification of human resources and language barriers (Sass, 2020).

One of the events with a significant negative impact on the current situation is the 2014 conflict and the annexation of Crimea. The immediate effects of political instability include a dramatic drop in the number of tourists, declining revenues and rising costs for tourism operators. The major summer tourist destination has been lost, but the biggest threat remains the feeling of insecurity among potential tourists, even in regions far from the conflict zone and relatively safe. Ukrainian hotels were severely affected, their revenues declining and total costs rising; moreover, the general economic situation has worsened, thus negatively affecting the internal market of tourism (Webster *et al.*, 2017). Internally, well-developed cities with a diverse range of tourism products and sustained marketing have benefited from the redirection of tourist flows from conflict-affected areas (Tomczewska-Popowycz and Quirini-Popławski, 2021).

The multitude of tourist resources and the different socio-economic conditions determined the researchers to approach the issue of regional differentiation of the tourist services market. The unitary approach of tourism development was considered inefficient, the most important spatial polarization factors being the differences in the distribution of natural resources, climatic characteristics, cultural and historical conditionality, disproportionate placement of transport infrastructure, communication, asymmetry of recreational resources distribution (Gorina *et al.*, 2020).

The tourist traffic of Ukraine has undergone a structural change, the development trends of the tourism market being: a substantial disparity of regional development; reorientation of flows from southeast to northwest; the concentrated development of cultural tourism in the northern regions and the lack of extensive diversification; unavailability of southern and eastern regions, previously known as popular tourist destinations (Chernega *et al*., 2019). Clear priorities have been identified for the development of certain types of tourism in a geospatial context: northeast - business; south - recreational; west - balneary; centre - cultural and historical (Vysochan *et al*., 2021; Kovalska *et al*., 2020).

Tourism was perceived as one of the keys to solving economic problems, especially in certain regions, in order to overcome the subsistence level. However, the researchers emphasize the incipient level of development of different types of tourism, both main and niche, as well as the problems that affect their development.

For the development of health and wellness tourism, it is considered that Ukraine has important advantages: natural conditions, resources, resorts with specific infrastructure, modern methods of treatment. Despite positive development trends, there are a number of problems: small number of medical and leisure entities; lack of a well-developed network of alternative means of accommodation; inconsistency of the price / quality ratio for medical and health services; limited use of reservation computer systems; lack of funding and qualified specialists for the restoration of historical, cultural and architectural monuments (Melikh *et al*., 2019). In close connection with medical tourism, the idea of inclusive, social rehabilitation tourism appeared. In Ukraine there were several specific conditions to encourage the development of this form of tourism: on the one hand, the increase in demand due to the expansion of the range of diseases and disabilities due to declining living standards, deteriorating environmental quality, armed conflicts, there is a group significant target; on the other hand, there is the offer, in the form of concentration of recreational and tourist resources, the operation of specialized rehabilitation institutions and facilities of auxiliary infrastructure - social, transport (Bielousova and Lyubitseva, 2019).

Religious tourism in Ukraine is oriented towards the domestic space more than towards the international one, although there are wooden church architecture objects that are included in the UNESCO World Heritage. Having a strong potential for the development of religious tourism, including through the organization of educational circuits, Ukraine has not used it effectively, the reasons including the lack of signs and information on available resources and routes; weak links between travel agencies and religious organizations; the lack of qualified staff in this field, especially of specialists in the development of quality tourist routes. In order to develop cultural and religious tourism projects, the state-private partnership is recommended (Borysova *et al*., 2020; Yaromenko *et al*., 2019).

Ecotourism in Ukraine has huge potential, but is at an early stage (Shvedun *et al*., 2019). Travelers are attracted by the availability of organic products and recreational areas, which is a significant competitive advantage (Kyrylov *et al*., 2020). Although only a few hotels and beaches have received ecological certification (Kalaitan *et al*., 2021), in the rural area important steps have been taken in the development of agri-tourism, laying the foundations of a regional network of farms, which can be used as a marketing tool (Ulyanchenko *et al*., 2019). In the post-pandemic period, it can be assumed that the demand for ecotourism will increase, the recommendations for the development of the sector being the reorientation towards the internal market, the elaboration of new proposals and products focused on individual tours and small groups, the development of new ecological routes (Borysova *et al*., 2021). Marine tourism, in the Black Sea region, has a significant development potential, the main problem being the poorly developed peripheral infrastructure. The development of coastal infrastructure must be done considering the sustainable dimension of tourism and the conservation of recreational resources (Stryzhak *et al*., 2020).

Alternative modes of tourism are identified and analysed in many researches, Ukraine being the country with the most potential forms of tourism among EaP countries. An interesting direction is given by visiting heterotopias, defined as symbols of crisis and deviation. The aristocratic heritage was converted in the times of the USSR, being used as orphanages and hospitals. Heterotopies propose a different approach to the past, they serve as “pieces of the multidimensional puzzle of the multicultural past of Ukraine” (Sarapina, 2016). Another niche sector is that of industrial tourism, extreme. There are offers to visit mines, metallurgical plants, quarries, winery bases (Chernega *et al*., 2019). Photo tourism is emerging as an innovative trend in active tourism. In Ukraine there are destinations for landscape and panoramic photos, destinations for historical and cultural heritage, but also culinary photography of Transcarpathian cuisine, a promising and innovative element. The Chornobyl exclusion zone has become a particularly interesting photo location. However, there is a low availability of photo tour proposals and problematic accessibility of locations (Chyr, 2018).

For urban destinations, especially oriented towards cultural, educational and event tourism, a diversification of the tourist offer can be achieved by highlighting the murals. The creation of routes can be done so as to follow the change of the image of the urban environment, of the buildings built in the Soviet period that did not present architectural decorations or variety of forms, under the influence of street art (Olishevska, 2020).

A unique destination, defining for dark tourism, is Chernobyl. The complexity of the destination derives from the multitude of types of tourism that can be promoted - cultural, cinematic, active, scientific, conference, dark, sentimental, adventure, extreme, industrial, business, event, diplomacy and ecotourism, from the stage of its shaping as a tourist destination (from illegal visits to mass tourism). The narrow segmentation of the product, the predominance of foreign tourists, the influence of the games, television and film industry determined the stability of tourism in the area (Romanova, 2020).

Methods for reducing the effects of political instability have varied. Managers of hotels and tourist offices in Ukraine have been more likely to make marketing efforts than to lower prices or labour costs; Eastern museums have been actively oriented towards temporary interactive exhibitions (Chernega *et al*., 2019).

Tourism is a multifunctional industry, and its development will depend on logistics, the development of the information and communication sphere, the climate of innovation and investment, the financial and legal support of the state (Kovalska *et al.*, 2020). An integrated approach to domestic tourism, cross-border cooperation in tourism through programs and projects developed in partnership (Hrynokh *et al*., 2019), the creation of tourism clusters are opportunities for development of tourism actors and generate multiplier and synergistic effects, increase benefits competitive (Boiko *et al*., 2017).

3. Discussions

Some common characteristics can be deduced from the analysis of articles focused on tourism in EaP countries, but also considering the situation presented in various other studies. Resilience in tourism only appears explicitly in two of the analysed researches, but links with specific aspects of resilience can be detached in a contextual way.

Strategic approach

The strategic orientation of EaP countries in terms of tourism differs (Talmaciu *et al.*, 2020), and the forms of tourism presented in research as potential are not found in national strategies as a priority. The orientation towards domestic tourism predominates in the articles, while the national strategies emphasize the international dimension of the touristic offer. This orientation towards domestic tourism has certain advantages in crisis conditions, when the international flow of tourists decreases considerably. The strategic approach in the researched articles (see Table 7) also includes the institutional reconstruction of the last 30 years, as a result of the detachment from the Soviet bloc.

Table 7. Synthesis of studies oriented towards strategic analysis

Authors	Keywords
Mikayilov *et al.* (2019); Dzyad *et al.* (2020); Fethi and Senyucel (2021); Mazaraki and Voronova (1994);	tourism modelling; role of tourism in social development; sustainable development of tourism industry; environmental consequences of tourism; input-output models; economic-driven tourism growth; main challenges of tourim development; structure of tourism; institutional tourism organizations

Source: own representation

Miscellaneous forms of tourism

Although for incipient stages of tourism development and a limited competitiveness of the offer, a consolidation of traditional forms of tourism - cultural and heritage, ecotourism and rural, coastal - would be expected, for most countries included in the analysis, a diversification of the types of tourism considered with potential was identified, some of them with a strong innovative character (see Table 8).

Table 8. Synthesis of studies oriented towards different forms of tourism

Authors	Keywords
Farmanyan and Mickaelian (2019); Radvanyi and Muduyev (2007); Ibrahimova (2020); Danskikh and Traskevich (2018); Pirozhnik (2020); Khartishvili *et al.* (2019); Paresashvili (2014); Tevzadze and Kikvidze (2016); Salukvadze and Backhaus (2020); Stratan *et al.* (2015); Iaţişin and Colesnicova (2017); Bacal *et al.* (2019); Shvedun *et al.* (2019); Stryzhak *et al.* (2020); Chyr (2018); Iaromenko *et al.* (2019)	astronomical tourism sites; mining vs. recreation; challenges facing the mountain peoples; UNESCO world heritage potential; cultural tourism routes; music management; "youth culture and dark tourism; impact of mega-events; agri-tourism in Belarus resilience in development; increasing rural destination resilience; cross-border spatial development; rural tourism in peripheral regions; rural tourism in Georgia in transition; ethno-ecological contexts; wine tourism; use of lakes; marine and coastal tourism; photo tourism; wooden sacral architecture; culinary tourism; health-improving tourism; diversification as a tool of anti-crisis strategy; surrogacy and procreative tourism

Source: own representation

Thus, for Armenia is astronomical tourism, for Azerbaijan dark tourism, for Belarus cross-border tourism, for Georgia tourism of mountainous peripheral regions, for Moldova, wine-wine tourism, while Ukraine appears to benefit from the most diversified offer - tourism for photos, gastronomic, dark, social inclusive, medical, artistic urban, industrial. The support of orientations in tourism depends fundamentally on the system of national values (Talmaciu, 2015), there being a clear connection between cultural, historical, natural patrimony and the possibility of capitalization through the tourist offer.

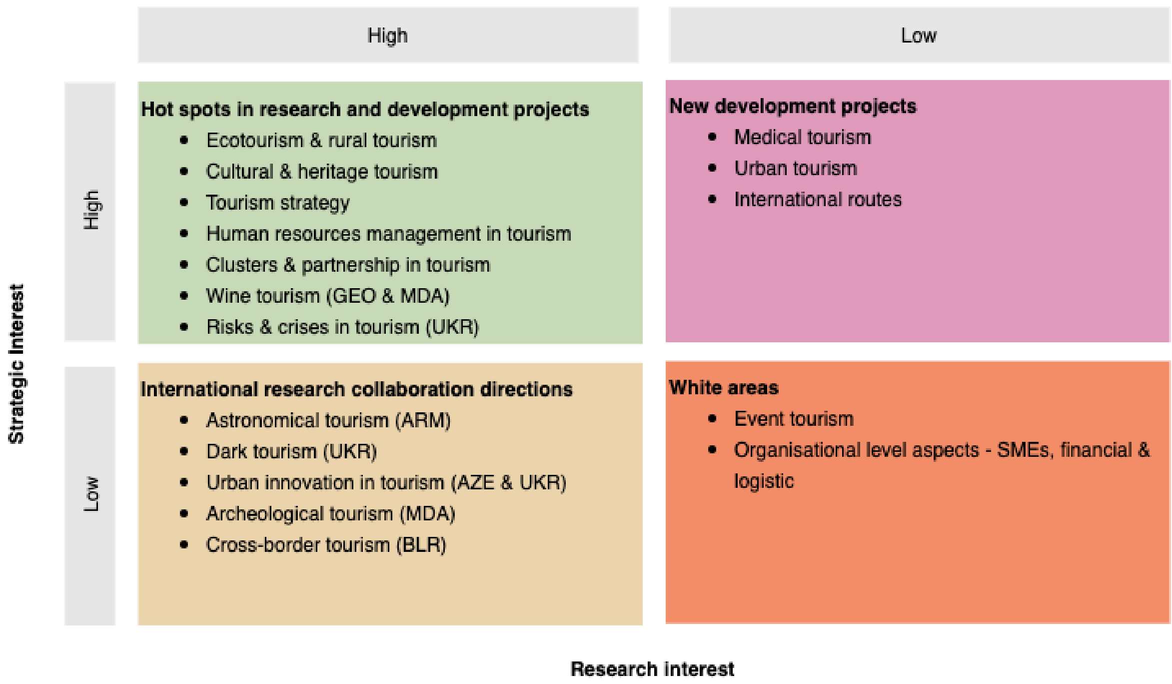
The diversification of the tourist offer and the capitalization of all niches are constituted as tools for diminishing the risks and maintaining the number of tourists at a level that would allow the survival of the tourist destinations.

Overlapping the areas encouraged by national strategies in the field of tourism and the types and aspects of tourism found predominantly in the interest of research, we can identify 4 categories of topics in the field of tourism (see Figure 3).

In the high-high quadrant, which is defined by high strategic and research interest we find the topics that can be themes of future articles, for which there is already relevant consistent literature, but also directions for the development of entrepreneurial projects.

In the low-low quadrant we find topics for which there is no consistent research, and entrepreneurial development can take the form of pilot, local projects. In the quadrant of low interest from researchers, but with major strategic interest, we expect to develop entrepreneurial projects. Finally, in the quadrant with high interest from researchers, but low strategic interest, multi-national research can be carried out, with the involvement of teams of extensive research.

Figure 3. Matrix of research - development directions in the field of tourism



Source: own representation

The long shadow of the Soviet regime

Although 30 years have passed since the EaP countries gained independence and broke away from the Soviet regime, references to its still-living legacy are prominent in the articles analysed (see Table 9). The situation in this post-Soviet area can be explained by the difficulty of reforming a consolidated system, especially when domestic political orientations are not convergent and when being marked by significant events, such as direct conflicts or crises related to Russia during this period.

Table 9. Synthesis of studies aimed at highlighting post-Soviet influences

Authors	Keywords
Metreveli and Timothy (2010); Tomczewska-Popowycz and Quirini-Popławski (2021), Kovalska *et al.* (2020); Sarapina (2016);	tourism - roots - ideology; Russia-Armenia tourist flows; diasporic cosmopolitanism in post-soviet Armenia; cooperation between Azerbaijan and Russian Federation; soviet era; military history of Russia; cultural heritage of Russian; effects of the August 2008 War; conflicts about architectural cultural heritage; ideology in the urban cable network; depopulation in the Central Caucasus; political transit countries; political instability equals the collapse of tourism; epoch of economically - politically reforms and war; geopolitical trial; the context of the conflict; memory heterotopias; contested memories; dissonant heritage; economically depressive regions; memories of the Gulag and post-communist ethnic construction; disaster in Chernobyl; contested landscape

Source: own representation

It is the characteristic in which the dimension of resilience appears significant, both through the transformations supposed by the transition from a centralized system to independent, entrepreneurial systems, and through the resistance of tourism to the implicit shocks to the armed conflicts in the region.

National brand affected by crises and risks

Several researches identify as the main cause of the low competitiveness of tourism the image affected by internal and external crises (see Table 10). Tourists avoid countries affected by armed conflict and terrorism, but they extend the negative perception to the entire region. There is also the phenomenon of boycotting regimes that they consider undemocratic.

It is interesting to note that the conflicts in Georgia and Ukraine are frequently presented as reasons for poor tourism development, but secessionist incidents in the Republic of Moldova and territorial disputes between Armenia and Azerbaijan regarding the autonomy of the Nagorno-Karabakh region are not mentioned in any of the analysed articles. A possible explanation is given by the attempt of these countries to manage their image and by the limited effects of those incidents.

Table 10. Synthesis of studies aimed at analysing the country brand

	Keywords
Tovmasyan (2020); Rza-Zadeh and Dvorak (2020); Melnychenko *et al.* (2021);	effectiveness of tourism marketing and branding; tourist satisfaction index; country image formation, stability, and change; tourists' perceptual maps; risk strategic management in hospitality sector; environmental awareness; the evolution of the image of Belarus; mutual image of Poland and Belarus; nation branding in transition countries

Source: own representation

During crises, tourism becomes quite vulnerable. However, it responds quickly to changes that occur and its recovery period is relatively short. At the same time, the demand for its services and products is declining, but not disappearing. This demonstrates the historical stability of tourism, its ability to recover quickly and to create new jobs after the global crisis has ended.

The influence of the pandemic on tourism

International tourism is one of the most affected sectors of the economy due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the most vulnerable to changes in the global situation are the countries with a high percentage of tourism revenues from the country's GDP, which places the analysed countries in the area of insignificant losers from this point of view - there are few studies on these issues (see Table 11).

Table 11. Synthesis of studies about the influence of the pandemic

Authors	Keywords
Rahmanov *et al.* (2020); Kyrylov *et al.* (2020); Borysova *et al.* (2021);	tourism management: impact of COVID-19; increasing globalization risks; ecological tourism: pandemic lessons;

Source: own representation

Unlike other types of tourism, the relatively developed forms of tourism in EaP countries - ecotourism, heritage and educational tourism, religious tourism have certain advantages during this period. They require a relatively small infrastructure, which does not pose major problems to profitability. As these are not forms of mass tourism, but individual or group, they are adapted to the conditions of health crisis. For instance, in the case of religious tourism, pilgrimage still maintained a high motivation among visitors.

The importance given to the development of human resources in tourism

The subject of education and of the development of specific human resources appears frequently, both as a success factor, and especially as a cause of the insufficient development at national level (see Table 12). Proper training of employees at the level of functional organizations, but also at the level of tourist attractions, contributes to the adaptation of the tourist offer to the requirements of visitors (Manolescu *et al*., 2008).

Table 12. Synthesis of studies focused on the importance of human resources

Authors	Keywords
Serafini and Szamosi (2015); Tarasionak and Nikitsin (2017)	requirements of tourism labour market; improving tourism education; impact of human capital; HRM in five-star hotel; effects of professionalism; connections between research and education in tourism; educational work in tourism; cross-cultural adjustment stress in universities; challenges of the educational programmes; multicultural component in the system of professional training of tourism; mass labour migration; employer branding of the tour operator

Source: own representation

Insufficient, outdated education programs that do not correspond to the skills required by organizations active in the tourism market, low concern and insufficient investment in human resource training at the organizational level, and migration of qualified human resources are the most commonly cited negative issues related to human resources in the field of tourism.

Development solutions through extended collaboration

A surprisingly large number of articles touch on the issue of tourism clusters as an integrated solution for local and regional development (see Table 13). International thematic routes, among which New Silk Road deserves a special mention, are also seen as success factors in the development of international tourism (Manolescu and Borza, 2015), considering the relatively small size of some of the countries analysed. Other proposals for international routes are those specific to wine tourism, those related to the Soviet heritage, gastronomy and landmarks of minority heritage. Cross-border tourism is mentioned through successful case studies, which reduced the problems of border crossing formalities and implemented joint projects with non-reimbursable funding. East-West collaboration is also seen as a success factor in human resources projects, both at the level of tourism organizations (especially through the transfer of knowledge within hotel chains) and at the level of universities, through European-funded projects (Ulian and Castraveț, 2015).

Table 13. Synthesis of studies oriented towards extended partnerships

Authors	Keywords
Sahakyan *et al.* (2019); Khartishvili *et al.* (2020); Keryan *et al.* (2020); Hrynokh *et al.* (2019); Gorina *et al.* (2020); Ulyanchenko *et al.* (2019);	tourist clusters; community-based tourism; university-community cooperation; activated networks in a rural destination; cooperative approaches; cluster strategy; interregional cooperation; New Silk Road Initiative; cross-border cooperation; integrative view of international experience

Source: own representation

The involvement of several stakeholders in the development of tourism, at local and regional level, as well as international partnerships, is the platform for finding solutions for crisis situations, facilitates the transfer of information and supports the implementation of development projects.

Conclusions

The academic environment, through its research and projects, can boost the targeted sectors, especially in the case of a field as applicative and entrepreneurial as tourism. Knowledge of the main topics of interest for researchers in a given region is the premise for international collaborations, both in academia and by developing projects in extended partnerships. The paper highlighted the areas of interest for research and development in the EaP countries, as well as the areas not covered by the relevant literature in the field or by the strategic documentation, through the two-dimensional matrix of the research directions.

In EaP countries, tourism had to face major obstacles, through institutional reconstruction, reinvention through entrepreneurship, rebuilding infrastructure and the image affected by political and military crises, staff retraining and adapting educational programs to the new skills required by the labour market. Resilience acquires a special relevance in this context. Both the problems of the system and the potential solutions are found in the analysed researches, the common preoccupations being able to be grouped around six key characteristics: strategic approach, diversification of tourism forms, (still) strong post-Soviet influences; the need to consolidate the national brand; increased need for human resource training and openness to decentralization, clustering and international partnerships.

The strategic approach in the researched articles includes the institutional reconstruction of the last 30 years, as a result of the detachment from the Soviet bloc, and emphasizes the orientation towards domestic tourism. This orientation has certain advantages in crisis conditions, when the international flow of tourists decreases considerably.

Despite incipient stages of tourism development and limited competitiveness of the offer, a diversification of the types of tourism considered with potential was identified, some of them with a strong innovative character. The high diversity of tourism types has an essential role in the survival of tourist destinations, the reorientation towards personalized tourism being a possible alternative.

Several researches identify the image affected by internal and external crises as the main cause of the low competitiveness of tourism. The dimension of resilience appears significant, both through the transformations supposed by the transition from a centralized system to independent, entrepreneurial systems, and through the resistance of tourism to the implicit shocks to the armed conflicts in the region.

The extensive collaboration between the various parties involved in tourism, with adequate staff training is considered the key factor in the rapid identification of problems and the appropriate response. The role of universities thus becomes extremely important, both by providing relevant studies and by ensuring the staff able to cope with difficult situations.

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What do international tourists seek for when playing in the casinos? A Bucharest gambling market study

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Abstract

The current study focuses on the gambling market, an area often considered part of the hospitality industry. We studied the casino market in Bucharest, Romania, aiming at profiling its customers. Initially, the proportion of foreigners among the players was analyzed. Furthermore, we determined the critical success and failure factors for those players by pursuing a content analysis approach. We found that locals constitute the majority of players, although in 2 out of 5 casinos studied, the foreigners were majoritarly. There were also important differences across cultures in terms of desired experience in terms of gambling.

Keywords: gambling, casinos, hospitality

Introduction

When it comes to the gambling market, not all casinos are alike. There is a significant difference in terms of customer base between casinos catering mostly for tourists and casinos catering mostly for local players (Eadington, 2007). In line with previous research focused on finding the proportion of foreign customers of various tourist destinations casinos (Back and Bowen, 2009; Nickerson, 2005), we firstly aimed at determining this proportion for Bucharest as the leading casino market of Romania. The presence of foreign tourist as customers of local casinos seems to significantly impact the local communities through its economic leverage (Metaxas and Folinas, 2021). Secondly, there is also a body of research dedicated to success factors in the casino industry but mostly at a general level such as finances, marketing, management, ethics, or CSR (Bulatovic *et al.*, 2017; Wu and Chen, 2015; Kim, 2018; Assaf *et al.*, 2013). However, we did not find in literature a clear focus on micro success factors, such as the tangible and intangible elements of casinos themselves as physical spaces.

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We, therefore, pursued a research strategy to identify the key elements that can turn a casino into a successful business and those that risk doing the reverse. We aimed at listing the concrete critical and success factors for casinos based on the case of Bucharest casinos and the content analysis of relevant number of reviews by both local and foreign players.

1. The worldwide economic impact of casino industry

One of the main reasons for the rapid expansion of casinos is the economic benefit (Marinaci *et al*., 2021). Casino tourism has spread rapidly in many regions around the world, despite various financial crises in recent years. Due to the rapid growth of this form of tourism, new hotel properties have been built and decorated in various casino tourist destinations. Casino revenues increased by an average of 18.3% between 2010-2015 in the Asia-Pacific region (Gu *et al*., 2017). Casino games are increasingly being developed as an effective way to stimulate tourism development and growth (Walker, 2013). The fact that Las Vegas was a huge success in this industry, inspired other territories to focus on legalizing gambling. However, Las Vegas remains the most famous destination on earth for tourists and players. Unlike Macau, whose tourist structure is oriented only to casino games, Las Vegas also attaches importance to other services, such as entertainment (Deng *et al*., 2020). For example, 90% of the revenue generated by tourism in Macau comes from casino activities, while in Las Vegas 63% of revenue comes from other activities, hence the profitability rate in Las Vegas casinos is much lower than in Macau (Deng. *et al*., 2020).

Casinos also have the freedom to increase tax revenues, but there is not much research on gambling taxation, which is a recent phenomenon (Gu *et al*., 2020). In analyzing why governments choose to legalize and promote casinos, Calgano and Walker (2010) note that “the main goal of policy is to maximize government revenue”. Governments consider legalizing and expanding casinos as a way to finance spending and balance state budgets through a “voluntary” tax (Marinaci *et al*., 2021). Tax rates for gambling activities vary by country. For example, in the United States, gambling revenues range from 7-9% in Nevada, New Jersey, and Mississippi to more than half in Illinois (50%), Maryland (67%), Pennsylvania (55%) and New York (60-69%) (Walker and Sobel, 2016). However, in addition to direct benefits, casinos should also increase opportunities associated with recreational, leisure and entertainment activities, such as restaurants, bars, pubs, and clubs (Wu and Chen, 2015).

Unlike the fiscal policy gains that accumulate primarily at the state level, casinos have a positive impact on revenue at both the state and county levels. The casino industry has a positive effect on the economy of the host state, as revenues from casinos lead to an increase in personal income per capita at the state level (Walker and Sobel, 2016).

Taking the case of Macao again, we can say that the fiscal policy worked quite well, where the government collects huge revenues from the imposed taxes, while the casino business expands dramatically by the fact that the casino business invests a lot in advertising to attract all tourists. , mainly VIPs (Gu *et al*., 2016). The most important reason for the greater business success in Macao than in Las Vegas is the higher demand for casino gambling due to the lower price (Gu *et al*., 2020).

The rapid development of this form of tourism can be significantly attributed to favorable external conditions (influx of high-income visitors and pathological gambling in VIP rooms), but such a development also involves income inequality and the bursting of the housing bubble (Gu *et al*., 2017). The authors of the research concluded that Macao's economy is neither efficient nor fair because Macao continues to widen income inequality, does not support the prosperity of tourism through responsible gambling, and does not oversee the real estate market, which is currently in crisis. However, they have obtained three political implications that can lead to sustainable tourism and the growth of the local economy. The first refers to the balanced development strategy that must be sought in responsible games, diversified industries and close integration with the regional economy. China's domestic economies and huge markets can also be used to organize events / conferences / exhibitions / meetings (Zuo, 2015). The second political involvement is based on the revenues generated by tourism as a source of domestic investment in profitable sectors. To reduce income inequality, the authors believe that the Macao government should impose higher taxes on casino operators, while increasing the well-being of citizens and providing tax credits to local and foreign companies for their industrial diversification. The third involvement is to break the real estate bubble in Macao. An effective way is to treat this inequality as the main driver of the crisis and to adapt the political levers to suit the task.

On the other hand, there are authors who contradict the fact that the economy in Macau would not be efficient and fair. Zheng and Hung (2011) claim that the gambling industry has made Macau flourish by bringing significant economic progress. Being the only city in China where casino gambling is allowed, Macau is the top gambling center where there is an extremely favorable investment environment, and here not only GDP per capita has grown rapidly, but and tourism and related industries have also thrived (Zheng and Hung, 2011). It is worth noting that this gaming activity in Macau but also in general, has not only an economic motivation, but is also a pleasant and compensatory diversion and an interesting chance for people to get together, socialize and share special moments (Bussu and Detotto, 2013).

In terms of tax revenue, Gu *et al*. (2016) consider that the tax on Macao casinos should be maintained at the current level of 39% on the mass market, but substantially increased on the VIP tourist market. In this way, a slower but healthier growth of the mass market can be registered, where the local well-being will be improved by diversifying the tourism offer and consolidating the marketing strategy. Consequently, economic growth may become less unbalanced and more sustainable (Gu *et al*., 2016).

The expansion of the casino industry has had a substantial impact on local tourism and hospitality development, as well as on other areas, including employment, real estate and transportation (Wu and Chen, 2015). Such an expansion exposes individuals to gambling, causing negative social impacts and addiction problems. Some individuals may develop gambling-addictive behavior (Bonny-Noach and Sagiv-Alayoff, 2021). In 2013, the Statistical Manual for the Diagnosis of Mental Disorders introduced the diagnosis “gambling disorder” (GD). The severity of GD is based on a number of criteria, and it can be: mild 4-5; moderate 6-7; severe 8-9.6 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 2013).

The tourist destinations based on casinos attract besides the leisure players, social and responsible, travelers with this GD condition of different degrees of severity (Bonny-Noach and Sagiv-Alayoff , 2021). Obviously, not all individuals are sensitive to such an influence. They can easily and gradually adapt to the game environment and may become less prone to the risks already mentioned (Prentice and Zeng, 2018). As soon as they start playing and betting in a casino, they make active choices about what they want to bet on and how much money they want to deposit for that bet. Subsequently, if they notice more losses than gains, they become aware of the risks that may follow and choose to leave the casino, and not bet more until they reach substantial losses (Abbot *et al*., 2017).

2. Towards a customer’s profile for the gambling industry

Gambling tourism is a research area that focuses on the tourist desire to visit casinos as attractions (Prentice and Zeng, 2018). They no longer aim only at attracting avid players, but also at recreational tourists. They are specially designed to fascinate and relieve pressure on tourists, as gambling causes adrenaline, emotions and enthusiasm. Wong and Rosenbaum (2012) were the first to propose casino tourism in Macau, China and identified 5 motivational factors for visitors to Macau: novelty and entertainment, leisure activity, escape from pressure, visiting casino attractions and socializing (Wong and Rosenbaum, 2012). They also believe that casino destinations bring countless benefits to tourists, including restoring mental fatigue, improving mood and increasing serotonin.

Tourists seek a variety of experiences in different tourism activities and as a result may present different emotional responses (Man-U Io, 2016). In the case of casino activities, tourists and players may experience a "thrill" when betting, and therefore, gamblers may experience more intense emotional responses that other tourists do not know (Wai Lai *et al*., 2020). Despite the risk of experiencing a negative feeling, most tourists will not stop betting in casino resorts, and one explanation would be that experiences associated with negative emotions would not necessarily lead to customer dissatisfaction with the casino industry. They still stay for entertainment, to socialize or even with the hope of winning in the end, although tourists with the last-mentioned reason, tend to fall into the risk of bankruptcy and lead to personal and financial problems.

Emotion can be stimulated by the external environment or other stimuli, including interaction with people, place and events. And entertainment is just as important as recreational and leisure activities, as it could lead to a positive emotional experience (Man-U Io, 2016). Understanding the emotional experience of tourists not only helps to assess the tourist experience and satisfaction, but also contributes to the analysis of tourist behavior related to their hedonic experience (Pearce, 2009). For psychological well-being, the most beneficial emotions are those of joy, interest, and love. The hedonic experience refers to all the positive emotional experiences of tourists. This experience can be evaluated in three main phases, namely: the anticipatory phase, on the spot and the reflective phase (Filep and Deery, 2010). The most appropriate evaluation phase would be on the spot, because then the emotional experience is much more intense, while at departure its intensity will gradually decrease.

Following the findings of the scientific article entitled "Exploring the impact of hedonic activities on casino-hotel visitors' positive emotions and satisfaction", there are two dimensions of positive emotions that influence the satisfaction of tourists at different levels. Emotions of “light pleasure” tended to influence visitor satisfaction more effectively than emotions of “intensive fun” (Man-U Io, 2016). With this phenomenon in mind, the author believes that more attention should be paid to effectively stimulating the relaxing and pleasant feelings of visitors. The author's findings also showed that not all activities could influence the positive emotions of other tourists, because those activities that are not part of casinos could only influence the emotions of "easy pleasure", while gambling can stimulate in an effective way the emotions of "intensive fun" of visitors.

Understanding the role that emotions play in consumer decision-making, casinos can aim to develop emotional attachment by promoting the emotional experience associated with their specific activities (Malone *et al*., 2014). For example, games are not negative in themselves, as they reflect some relevant aspects of our social life, such as courage, competition and risk-taking. Therefore, promotion, prevention and psychological campaigns are needed not only in the presence of gambling addiction, but also in the case of recreational games, to stimulate interest in responsible gaming (Bussu and Detotto, 2013).

When analyzing the reasons why people bet on gambling, it is also important to understand the development of behaviors during the game. Although not long ago, customer behavior and the global gambling industry were treated as homogeneous, the researchers concluded that in the end there is substantial diversity among players (L. Choong-Ke *et al*., 2014). The purpose of this section is to analyze the differences between casino players and what are their reasons for betting in both physical and online casinos. The reasons why people practice gambling activities are diverse and depend on each type of player: escape, challenge, socializing, intense emotion, visiting and other tourist attractions, or winning. From this we can deduce that players with addictions (hardcore) are more focused on winning, while "relaxed" (leisure) players are more looking to socialize, have fun or visit other goals. In addition, gambling addicts are more likely to be alone when betting, while leisure gamblers usually come with family, friends or relatives (Choong-Ki *et al*., 2014). Hardcore gamblers also spend more money on gambling because they are more focused on winning, being the most wanted customers of casinos (Wong, 2010). Leisure players practice these activities more for entertainment and socializing and there are fewer.

Many years ago, gambling was a predominantly male pastime, with research usually focusing on vulnerabilities and the negative consequences of men. With the expansion of casinos, women, especially those who were engaged, began to have direct contact with this world and be more exposed to gambling (Tang *et al*., 2007). In this environment, women and men are not very different in behavior. The authors Tang *et al*. (2007) argue that the most obvious gender differences were observed in terms of employment status, the duration of a game of chance and the type of game played. However, they found that, compared to male players, female players began to play at an older age, were troubled by a similar number of financial and interpersonal problems, and reported more suicidal thoughts due to losses.

Another important classification is that of young people and older people. Despite the environment in casinos (noise, tension, congestion), many older people stay for a long time and spend considerable amounts of money, but what causes them to visit casinos so often (Phillips and Jang, 2012)? Older adults are an important source of income for casinos as their number of attendees is higher than other generations. In addition, the casino industry is considered to apply a marketing strategy that specifically targets seniors, such as bus-sponsored travel or cheap meals (Piscitelli *et al*., 2016). Pleasure is a major reason why seniors visit casinos, the following being reasons for fun and entertainment (Phillips and Jang, 2012). Pleasure for them means filling free time, overcoming worries about poor health, overcoming worries caused by a close loved one who has died, increasing social relationships and increasing self-confidence (Jang *et al*., 2009).

Young people, on the other hand, focus on the fun and intensity of short-term emotions, but also on banishing boredom or social reasons (Phillips and Jang, 2012). However, younger people practice online gambling more on casino platforms. Obviously, a valid explanation would be the fact that young people do much better with technology than seniors. One of the advantages of online casino platforms is that players can bet with virtual money to hone their skills before betting with real money. Being so exposed to a lot of casino sites, both real demands and simulation ones (gambling with or without virtual money), can lead them to excessive involvement in gambling (Kim *et al*., 2017). Kim *et al*. (2017) formed a focus group with 21 young people, and the participants noticed several factors that influenced them to enter the casino sites: suggestions from friends, ease of accessing online gambling (compared to the locations on the field) and incentives offered by gambling operators (free spins, increased profit on sports betting, deposit bonus, etc.).

To avoid addiction for young people that can drag them into a pit full of financial and personal problems, online casino platforms should provide adequate and true information about the odds of winning, warnings about the negative consequences of excessive gambling and the ability to exclude themselves. Besides, the advertisements for both online and physical gambling should be subject to similar regulations. Prizes, promotional materials and / or incentives should be limited to adults only (Derevensky and Gainsbury, 2016).

3. Research Methodology

We chose to focus on 2 main research questions. The first one was whether there is an international dimension for the casinos' customers on the Bucharest market. According to the Romanian Tourism Statistical Abstract (2020), Bucharest attracts close to 50% of all incoming travel of the country. Apart from that, we selected Bucharest since it is the most relevant gambling market in Romania, but also one of the largest gambling markets in Central and Eastern Europe. The second research question lied in establishing the critical success factors for the customers when it comes to gambling in Bucharest and notice differences across cultures. Therefore, we advanced the following 2 hypothesis corresponding to our 2 research questions:

H1: *Most casinos' customers in Bucharest are foreigners*

H2: *Which are the critical factors which explain the success/insuccess of the casinos in Bucharest?*

For H1, we have compiled a list of the 83 casinos that are still open today, and we have selected with a randomization software (Scientific Randomizer) 5 of them, 2 of which we find inside the Marriott and Radisson Blu hotels. We first checked where we can find the most reviews (Google Maps, Facebook, Trip Advisor, etc.), As most reviews were found on Google Maps we decided to analyze the existing reviews on Google Maps. To identify the origin of customers who left feedback, we entered the profile of each, where we found the language, they used in other reviews posted, the origin of the name and surname and the places they visited most often. After that, we created a table with all the countries identified and the number of people originating from each one. In another table we separated the Romanians from the foreigners, and we calculated the weight of both the total and the one for each casino.

The method applied to H2 hypothesis, also called content analysis, is related to the strategy applied for H1, which implied to the assessment of the 5 casinos extracted with the help of Scientific Randomizer.

We analyzed all the reviews available on Google Maps for each casino (between 187-501 per casino), extracted them and coded them in Excel: a column where we find the reviews and another column that represents the attributes of these reviews and how many reviews refer to that attribute. For example, the most frequently mentioned attribute by customers is related to the professionalism of the staff: Grand Casino Marriott 42.85%, Palace Casino 32.22%, Platinum Casino 34.48%, Game World Mall 32.69% and Fortuna Palace 33, 33%. After that, the 2nd most common is related to the services offered, where, for example, at Platinum Casino we find a frequency of 29.31%.

Also, many reviews do not include a justification for the stars offered, but most were positive. We classified them as irrelevant, as we do not know what customers appreciated or did not, and we only considered those that provide information on all aspects of casinos. For example, for Palace Casino, out of 501 reviews, only 121 (24.15%) were relevant, either positive or negative, and 380 (75.84%) had no justification and we did not take them into account. A more detailed overview of the reviews processed as part of our analysis can be seen in Table 1.

In order to better understand what customers appreciate and what negative aspects are identified in casinos, we chose to analyze, for each casino, all the features found in the reviews in order to design the critical success / failure factors of casinos in Bucharest

Table 1. Reviews of Bucharest casinos synopsis

Casinos	Reviews	Relevant (containing text)	Positive no/freq.	Negative no/freq.	5 most frq. countries of origin
Grand Casino Marriott	152	35	19 / 10.6%	16 / 8.55%	Romania, Israel, Italy Greece, Germany
Game World Mall	237	52	29 / 12.2%	23 / 9.7%	Romania, Italy Israel UK, Hungary
Palace Casino	380	121	100 / 19.9%	21 / 4.19%	Romania, Israel, Italy, Greece, Turkey
Fortuna Palace	191	81	66 / 24.2 %	15 / 5.5%	Romania, Israel, Italy, Turkey, Greece
Platinium Casino	218	116	53 / 15.8%	63 / 18.8%	Israel, Romania, Turkey, Italy, Greece

Source: authors' representation

4. Research results

The **H1 hypothesis is refuted**, since out of the 5 casinos, most customers are foreign only to Platinum Casino (60.77%), and in the case of Grand Casino Marriott and Palace Casino casinos the share between foreign and Romanian tourists is almost equal (with a difference between 0.47-9.78%). The lowest share of foreign tourists is found at Game World Mall (only 7.30%) and Fortuna Palace (20.22%). In total, the share of foreign customers is 38.10%, which is quite high if we consider the fact that Romania is not so promoted internationally in this industry.

Following the analysis of the reviews for all 5 casinos, we found a fairly large number of foreign tourists, especially those from Israel (308). Of the 1567 reviews, 597 are posted by foreigners, the share being 38.10%. The casino with the highest share of tourists is Platinum Casino, where the share of foreigners is 60.77% and that of Romanians only 39.22%. We also found that many of the negative reviews were posted by Israeli tourists, who often complained about the low variety of games and the fact that they meet other Israelis who bother them for unknown reasons. Another disadvantage that they consider is related to the services offered by the casino staff, categorizing it as one below the level of those in Israel, and here they referred mostly to the time of service and the conditions that are require to benefit from free drinks and buffet: the stakes must be higher (to spend a larger amount of money).

The Italians come second place. They visited these casinos also for the appreciation of the staff and for the lower stake for which you can bet. I noticed that Italians appreciate casinos in Bucharest more than those in Israel, most reviews being from 4 onwards. Many appreciated the kindness and respect with which they were treated and the fact that the chances of winning were much higher than in their own country. Of the 71 Italian reviews, we found only 2 that also specify what casinos should improve: selecting customers and adding more poker or blackjack tables.

In the third place we find the Greeks, with a number of 40 reviews, all of which are positive. They mostly appreciated the atmosphere in the casinos, especially the one at Platinum Casino and Grand Casino Marriott. He considers that the atmosphere is very pleasant, where the adrenaline reaches maximum levels when approaching a potential gain, and the staff always has a very friendly communication with customers. They especially appreciate the spirit of Romanians, being some of the most fun people to spend time within a casino.

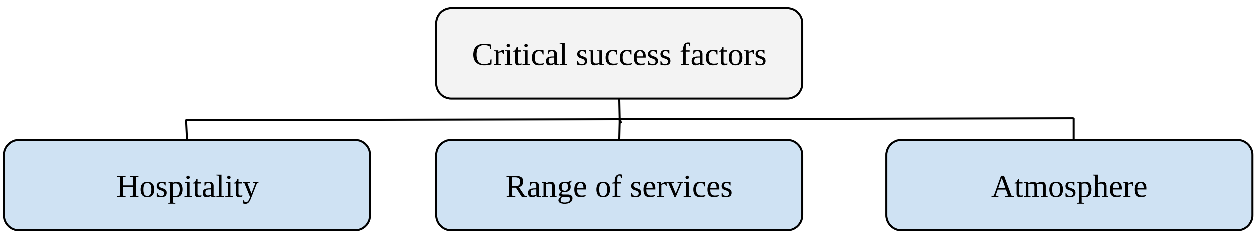
The rest of the foreign tourists who left at least one review come from: Germany (14), France (11), Canada (3), Portugal (3), Turkey (39), Saudi Arabia (5), Morocco (4), China (2), Ireland (2), Russia (11), Syria (2), Slovenia (2), Sweden (2), India (5), USA (8), England (11), Spain (7), Netherlands (4), Denmark (3), Ukraine (2), Switzerland (5), Latvia (2), Poland (3), Cyprus (2), Bulgaria (1), Japan (1), Thailand (1), Lebanon (1), Egypt (1), Serbia (1), Georgia (2), Kazakhstan (1), Indonesia (1), Belgium (2), Macedonia (1), Norway (2), Australia (1), Ghana (1), Croatia (3), Hungary (5), Pakistan (1).

To sum up, we can say that Romania has a great potential for the gambling industry, because it already attracts many tourists from abroad who came to play in casinos. Furthermore, there are very few who left with a negative attitude towards the casinos in Bucharest, which mainly refer to the entrance fees, the low win rate, and the behavior of other customers, especially Romanians and Israelis.

It is also interesting to note that, unlike Romanians, foreigners did not express dissatisfaction with the services (except for the Israelis), staff, conditions and facilities, anti-COVID-19 protection measures and the atmosphere in the casinos.

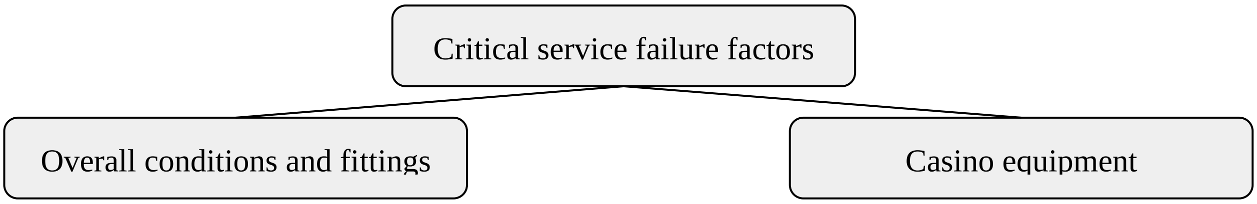
As far as H2 is concerned, after analyzing the number of reviews offered for each feature of the casino, we came to the conclusion that many customers appreciate primarily the hospitality (34%), the atmosphere of the casino (18%) and the services offered (21%). The most negative reviews were about the casino equipment (12.3%), its facilities and conditions (13.8%). Therefore, the critical success / failure factors are the following:

Figure 1. Critical success factors



Source: authors' representation

Figure 2. Critical insuccess/service failure factors



Source: authors' representation

For a deeper understanding of the matter, we summarized and included in the annexes the general results on the studied casinos, with comments on each casino separately, as a result of the content analysis.

Conclusions

Although the hypothesis regarding the largest share of casino clients in Bucharest being international clients was refuted, we noticed a large proportion of those foreigners, namely 39%. This means the foreigners are a relevant share of the gambling market in Bucharest. An interesting finding which might benefit managers is that except for Israelis, the rest of the foreigners leave mostly positive reviews. In this respect, we can recommend to casino managers to pay a closer attention to the needs and expectations of Israeli clients. It could be that a cultural focused approach would pay back in terms of this group's satisfaction.

The second research question aimed at determining the critical success factors as well as the counterparts, the critical failure factors was clarified through its specific hypothesis. We learned that three main success factors are crucial when analyzing the randomly selected casinos: hospitality, range of services and atmosphere. We could also lists other success factors such as the state of equipment or the specific pandemic sanitary measures. As far as criticism brought by guests, we noticed it was all related to the equipment, fittings, and physical environment. There is obviously a need to reinvest in more modern machinery and to pursue a serious refurbishment of premises for a number of casinos.

The current study only focused on the casino market in Bucharest, Romania. It analyzed data from 5 casinos randomly selected, but the research could be further extended For a higher representativity more regions might be included, since the qualitative analysis tools, such as atlas.ti, allow for large chunks of data to be processed.

Due to the period of restrictions caused by the 2020-2021 pandemic, we were restricted to data analysis based on reviews. It would have been useful to be able to collect and compare ground data by carryng out surveys in casinos, while comparing the results with the data extracted from coding the reviews.

It would also be be interesting to analyze differences in critical success/failure factors across cultures. Whilst we only did this to a limited extent, the analysis can be further expanded. One other valuable future research could aim at understanding the role of human and intellectual capital in developing the casinos and their regional markets as it was shown in literature it was the case for other sectors (Nestian, 2007).

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Students' perception of online education during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Based on the chain of events brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020 was the year of online education and in many parts of the world, including Romania, this is still the norm in most higher education institutions. After a full academic year of distance learning, 131 undergraduate business students filled in a questionnaire about how they perceived the entire process and what they thought about their Business English course in particular. Results showed that the teaching, learning and evaluation experience was relatively positive, although direct interaction with teachers and peers have suffered the most in the process. Encouragingly, about 43% would like to continue with a hybrid system in the future, which is no doubt due to the flexibility the online system provides. However, further research is needed in terms of establishing the long-term effects of online education on university (language) courses.

Keywords: higher education, students' perception, online education, Business English, pandemic

Introduction

With the global onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, a series of health-related measures meant to protect citizens all over the world were enforced in a matter of days. At the time, with the limited information available, it was difficult to predict their longevity and, even more so, their impact. Education, which naturally relied on physical interaction among large groups of students, had to be conducted online. In fact, online education has become the global "*panacea for the crisis*" (Dhawan, 2020, p. 7, emphasis in the original). After the initial shock, everyone started wondering what the effects would be on the teachers and students, whether the prolonged distance-learning activities would affect their emotional well-being together with their exam results. Now, with two months left before 2021 comes to an end, answers to these concerns and many more are still pending, simply because the pandemic is not yet over.

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Online education is certainly not new, but it had not been implemented on such a large scale in the Romanian public school system up until March 2020. Even now, a large number of students do not have access to the resources and infrastructure needed to participate in synchronous online education activities. At university level, things are looking better from this viewpoint, but constant monitoring of students' perception of the current situation is important in order to be able for teachers to make the necessary adjustments where possible. Had the crisis only lasted for a couple of months, allowing all the activities to revert back to normal, e-learning would have likely remained at experimental level in most cases. Clearly, we are now past that point, and one of the most important duties of an educational institution and its staff is to make sure that the teaching-learning process is conducted in good conditions.

This study was prompted by the desire to analyse and improve the undergraduate students' experience with online education (and particularly with the Business English course) during the COVID-19 pandemic at a public university, since a one-year-later review of the activities would prove beneficial to both them and their teachers in the attempt to move forward during this extremely unpredictable period and would also provide valuable examples of best practices.

To this end, the three main research questions on which the study is based are the following:

a) What is the students' perception of the fully online education process that took place during the 2020-2021 academic year, in terms of their general level of satisfaction with e-learning, alongside the perceived advantages and disadvantages of the online system?

b) How do they rate the Business English course (in terms of the teaching/input delivery, learning and evaluation components) when it is conducted remotely?

c) Based on the experience of the 2020-2021 academic year, how would students want the education process to be conducted in the future?

Before presenting the results of the study and their implications, the literature review is included below, complete with different views on what online education involves and recent examples of similar studies on students' perception of the online process during the pandemic.

1. Literature Review

The term 'online education' is often used interchangeably with 'e-learning,' 'online learning' or 'distance education,' but it must first be pointed out that for the purposes of this article it could be defined as the use of the internet, videoconferencing and educational platforms to interact with the teacher, other learners and content, to acquire knowledge and to be evaluated and graded based on the learning output, all while being physically removed from the educational institution.

Before it became a global necessity, online education was seen as an enticing opportunity by both education institutions and students. “Within higher education, the impact has been especially dramatic. […] Centers supporting online learning are an increasingly common part of university infrastructure, as are specialized learning management systems such as Moodle, Canvas, and Blackboard” (Miller, 2014, pp. ix-x). It has also been argued that “the arrival of online learning is part of the modern transformation of higher education” (Bach *et al*., 2007, p. 5) and, indeed, the global tendency seems to be towards an increase in the number of students opting for distance learning. This is not surprising since, in a globalised world, more and more people are trying to maximise their learning opportunities by taking advantage of the remote-learning opportunities made available through technology. But Arbaugh (2010) draws attention to the fact that, among other things, disciplinary influences should be considered when talking about online learning effectiveness. Thus, it is important to analyse the overall effectiveness of online education, alongside its particularities when looking at different course types. Quality assurance is an issue that has long been discussed in relation to online courses, as traditional face-to-face education used to be preferred over distance learning when it came to employment opportunities.

In terms of the level of learner motivation, it is difficult to say whether it is negatively influenced by the lack of direct interaction, since the perceived benefits of online education at the level of each individual might overcome the downsides, thus leading to stronger motivation, and vice versa. Maggie Hartnett (2016) discusses the issue of ‘motivation to learn,’ showing that it might benefit from the technologies used in online education. Some would go as far as to say that, when done correctly, “online education can be better than traditional classes” (Lehman and Chamberlin, 2009, p. 2). However, making the transition from face-to-face to online learning requires significant financial investment, including proper training for both teachers and students (Palloff and Pratt, 2001). Given the abrupt start of the pandemic, there was simply no time for that, so teachers were faced with transitioning the old curriculum and evaluation activities online, without the proper resources to adapt them to the new communication channel. At the same time, students were faced with modifying their entire learning strategy, as input was now delivered indirectly and they could no longer rely on interactions with peers to help them get through the educational activities:

> Learners following an online course face a particular challenge in that the medium is still a relatively new mode of learning and thus, unlike learners taking a course within the traditional

> classroom context, they do not have a lifetime of online learning to draw upon. They have no previous experience upon which to base their understanding of the challenges that lie ahead, the way the learning and interaction will work and the new roles they will be expected to take on (Bennett *et al*., 2007, p. 75).

Interaction seems to be a common theme in the online education research literature (Balula and Moreira, 2014; Juwah, 2006; Hartnett, 2016; Lehman and Chamberlain, 2009; Palloff and Pratt, 2001), since it is clearly affected by the change in the communication channel and sits at the basis of effective communication and information transfer. Consequently, it is not uncommon for participants to shift their behaviour completely, or for certain personality types to thrive in the online environment, while others to suffer from the lack of direct interaction (Palloff and Pratt, 2007). This is true for any online course that students enrol in, but it is particularly significant in the current situation, since the switch to online activities was very swift and they were presented with no other viable option. Consequently, it is essential that teachers and educational institutions obtain their feedback and work together to improve the experience. Balula and Moreira (2014) propose a comprehensive model for the evaluation of e-teaching in higher education, providing questionnaire samples to be used when researching teachers', students' or coordinators' perspective, but we now obviously need to factor in the variables connected to the pandemic as well.

Several studies on the university students' perspective of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic have been published in the last year or so, which shows the teachers' preoccupation for the quality of instruction provided during these difficult times. Almahasees *et al*. (2021) investigated both the faculty and students' perceptions of online learning in Jordan four months into the pandemic, concluding that even if this was useful given the circumstances, it was still less effective than face-to-face learning and teaching. Laili and Nashir (2021) distributed a questionnaire to 103 undergraduate students enrolled in an Intensive English class in Indonesia, concluding that most students prefer face-to-face interaction due to issues such as lower motivation levels, unstable signal and high cost of internet access or difficulties in participating to conversations. Baczek *et al*. (2021) conducted a survey of eight hundred four Polish Medical students' perception after eight weeks of distance education, drawing attention that even though the experience was rated as enjoyable by 73% of respondents and e-learning can be a powerful tool in their case, a well-planned strategy is important in the successful implementation of online learning. However, this also shows that, for a limited time at least, online education can be efficient even in fields like medicine, where direct interaction is essential.

Another interesting study, attempting to measure critical aspects of online learning in higher education such as instructor characteristics, social presence, instructional design and trust, was conducted by distributing a questionnaire to 300 students from different universities in the UAE. It concluded that learners' trust in online courses was the most important aspect in implementing e-learning successfully (Nassuora, 2020). Yet another study focussed on the hierarchy of factors identified in the literature as being critical for online learning from the students' perspective. They were, in the order of importance to students: Basic Online Modality, Instructional Support, Teaching Presence, Social Online Comfort, Interactive Online Modality and Social Presence. The authors concluded that, given proper institutional support, most students may be interested in more hybrid and online classes in the future (Van Wart *et al.*, 2020).

Al-Mawee *et al*. (2021) investigated 420 undergraduate and graduate students' preferences and experiences of distance learning at West Michigan University. Overall, online instruction was rated positively, but, unsurprisingly, the lack of interaction among students and instructors remains a source of discontent, together with the perceived negative effect on academic success.

The above-mentioned quantitative research definitely emphasizes that there is common ground in the students' perception of online learning during the pandemic, but one must nevertheless acknowledge the fact that study results vary according to measures adopted at national level, the specifics of the learning institutions and a host of other factors ranging the from teachers' implementation of the activities to the individual resources and needs of the students.

2. Methodology

This case study aims to discuss students' perception of effectiveness of the online education process (both in general and with specific reference to the Business English course) conducted at the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration in Iași during the 2020-2021 academic year, based on the results of a survey carried out in October 2021. What had started as a temporary solution to pandemic restrictions in the spring 2020 semester became a reality for the entire 2020-2021 academic year and is currently still being implemented at the beginning of the 2021 fall semester. Thus, starting with October 1, 2020, all activities have been conducted online using the Microsoft Teams™ platform, with part of the evaluation process done through Moodle. Remote learning had never been attempted on such a large scale, so finding out how the beneficiaries of the education process perceived it is of great importance, especially since this would allow the teacher to make the necessary changes in order to improve the day-to-day learning activities.

The survey was conducted by distributing an online questionnaire (using Google Forms) to 131 second-year undergraduate students, with the purpose to find out more about their online teaching-learning experience in the previous academic year and in the hopes of improving these activities in the future, specifically since they have just entered our second year of full online education. The respondents' age range and their gender were not considered relevant for the purposes of this study. All respondents are students enrolled in the three-year long, full-time Economic Sciences undergraduate programme.

The questionnaire consisted of 13 questions, with 5 general questions about their overall online experience and 8 that were specific to the Business English course. It was conducted in the students' native language, Romanian, specifically to encourage them to provide their own answers to the survey questions which allowed it, since it is less likely for respondents to answer open-ended questions when they do not feel confident in their foreign language skills.

Below may be found the results of the study, as revealed by the analysis of the 131 responses to the questionnaire.

3. Results

The results illustrate the students' opinions on both the perceived advantages and disadvantages of the sudden switch to online education, and also on the way the teaching, learning and evaluation activities unfolded during the Business English lectures and seminars.

For the first question, students were asked to rate the entire online educational process during the 2020-2021 academic year on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 was 'unsatisfactory' and 5 was 'excellent'. Out of the 131 respondents, 65 (49.6%) rated it with a score of 4 out of 5, 32 (24.4%) rated it with 3 out of 5, 24 respondents (18.8%) gave the maximum score, 8 (6.1%) rated it with 2 out of 5 and 2 respondents (1.5%) answered that the online educational process was unsatisfactory.

For the second question, the same 1 to 5 scale was used and students were asked to rate the teaching component of the Business English course. Seventy-one (54.2%) of the respondents gave this the maximum score, 46 (35.1%) rated it with a 4 out of 5, 13 (9.9%) rated the teaching component with a 3 out of 5, and only 1 respondent (0.8%) rated it with 2 out of 5. No one considered that the teaching component was unsatisfactory.

The third question was designed to provide more details about the teaching component of the Business English course. Students had to check one of the five boxes corresponding to the Likert scale (‘total disagreement,’ ‘partial disagreement,’ ‘neutral,’ ‘partial agreement’ and ‘total agreement’) next to the four proposed statements:

- *Information transfer from teacher to student was done with ease*. (76 respondents totally agreed with this statement, 43 agreed partially, 9 neither agreed nor disagreed and 3 partially disagreed, with 0 respondents disagreeing completely)
- *Classes took place at a normal pace, with no technical issues and significant interruptions*. (72 students totally agreed, 41 partially agreed, 10 neither agreed nor disagreed, 5 partially agreed, while 3 completely disagreed)
- *The professors always switched on their webcam during classes*. (91 respondents completely agreed with this statement, 24 partially agreed, 7 neither agreed nor disagreed, 6 partially disagreed and 3 totally disagreed)
- *Teacher-student interaction was according to expectations.* (65 students totally agreed with this statement, 35 partially agreed, 25 neither agreed nor disagreed while 6 partially disagreed. No respondent disagreed completely with this statement.)

Question 4 asked respondents to rate the learning component of the Business English course on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 was ‘unsatisfactory’ and 5 was ‘excellent’. 53 respondents (40.5%) rated this with a 4 out of 5, 44 (33.6%) gave it a score of 5 out of 5, 28 (21.4%) gave it a 3 out of 5, 4 students (3.1%) rated it with 2 out of 5 and 2 students (1.5%) gave it a 1 out of 5.

The next question asked them to specify which of the following five statements they agreed with in relation to the same component: learning. The four statements and the student answers (using the Likert five-point scale ranging from ‘total disagreement’ to ‘total agreement’) are listed below:

- *I had more time and flexibility for individual study.* (49 students strongly agreed with this statement, 48 partially agreed, 28 neither agreed nor disagreed, 4 partially disagreed and 1 strongly disagreed)
- *I missed the interaction and advice from my colleagues.* (46 students totally agreed, 32 partially agreed, 24 neither agreed nor disagreed, 14 partially disagreed, 15 completely disagreed)
- *I needed further explanations in order to prepare for the exam.* (5 students strongly agreed with this, 21 partially agreed, 36 neither agreed nor disagreed, 28 partially disagreed and 41 totally disagreed)
- *The home environment was not conducive to focusing and learning.* (18 respondents completely agreed, 27 partially agreed, 25 neither agreed nor disagreed, 21 partially disagreed and 40 totally disagreed)

Question six referred to the evaluation and grading component of their Business English course. Eighty-four respondents (64.1%) rated this with a 5 out of 5, 33 (25.2%) gave this a 4 out of 5, 12 students (9.2%) rated this with a 3 out of 5, and only 1 student (0.8%) rated this question with a score of 2 out of 5 and a score of 1 out of 5 respectively.

The next question again required them to provide more details about the evaluation and grading process, proposing the following four statements:

- *Evaluation and grading were according to expectations.* (81 respondents totally agreed with this, 36 partially agreed, 9 neither agreed nor disagreed, 4 partially disagreed, while 1 student completely disagreed)
- *Evaluation results were correct and relevant.* (90 respondents strongly agreed, 32 agreed partially, 8 neither agreed nor disagreed and 1 partially disagreed, with 0 students disagreeing completely with this statement)
- *I came across a lot of technical difficulties during the online assessment process.* (7 students totally agreed, 25 partially agreed, 17 neither agreed nor disagreed, 30 partially disagreed and 52 totally disagreed)
- *There were sufficient evaluation tools.* (82 respondents totally agreed, 38 partially agreed, 7 neither agreed nor disagreed, 2 partially disagreed and 2 totally disagreed)

Question 8 was about the Business English teacher's involvement and support during online classes. Ninety-two (70.2%) respondents thought it had been excellent, giving it a score of 5 out of five, 26 (19.8%) gave it a score of 4 out of 4, 11 (8.4%) rated this with a 3, and two students (1.5%) gave this a score of 2.

The following question focussed on student-student interaction during the Business English classes (for example, during group activities). Thirty-nine respondents (29.8%) rated this component with a 4 out of 5, thirty-eight (29%) gave this a score of 3 out of 5, 27 students (20.6%) rated this component with the maximum score, 19 (15.5%) gave it a score of 2 out of 5, and 8 respondents (6.1%) rated peer interaction with the minimum score (1 out of 5, considering it unsatisfactory).

Items nine and ten were dedicated to the advantages and disadvantages of the online educational process in general. Both questions proposed five statements (checking multiple boxes was allowed), with the option of adding in additional ones by respondents.

For question nine, about the advantages of online education, the five statements and the results were the following:

- *I can access the platform from anywhere (including from my workplace).* One hundred and six students (80.9%) agreed with this statement.

- *Access to the teaching-learning information was significantly simplified.* Eighty respondents (61.1%) agreed with this statement.
- *The evaluation process is more comfortable and accessible to everyone.* Eighty-three students (63.3%) agreed.
- *I have saved time and energy by not having to be physically present on-site.* Ninety-eight students (74.8%) agreed with this statement.
- *I have acquired new skills for working online.* Seventy-two respondents (55%) agreed with this statement.

One student (0.8%) added that online education has helped some students save rent money, while another respondent added that this has allowed for spending more time studying.

At question ten, about the disadvantages of online education, respondents had to choose from the following statements:

- *Frequent technical issues and/or lack of necessary devices to participate in online classes.* Sixty-two students (47.3%) agreed with this disadvantage.
- *Teacher-student interaction was insufficient.* Forty-one students (31.3%) chose this disadvantage.
- *Interaction with peers was insufficient*. One hundred and one respondents (77.1%) agreed with this statement.
- *Institutional support was unsatisfactory*. Twenty students (15.3%) agreed.
- *The evaluation and grading process was not relevant*. Eight students (6.1%) agreed with this statement.

Three students (2.3%) identified no disadvantages to the online education process, one respondent (0.8%) complained about things not feeling the same as with on-site activities, one other respondent added that there may be technical issues during the exam and since they cannot be communicated and dealt with in real time, students have to retake the test. Another respondent complained about not being able to participate in the discussion during lectures, since there are about eighty people present and this meant that most of the times students will not participate actively at all. Finally, one respondent commented that the first year went surprisingly well and the faculty did a good job.

The eleventh question asked respondents whether they would like to continue with online education exclusively in the future, whether they preferred a hybrid system (for instance, one that would allow for lectures and/or the exams to be conducted online and the seminars to be held on-site) or whether they wanted to go back to the traditional on-site activities. Respondents also had the option to type in their own response. Fifty-seven students (43.5%) chose the hybrid system, while forty students (30.5%) preferred the return to on-site education. One respondent (0.8%) argued that conducting online evaluation with the rest of the activities held on-site would be the worst idea, since the hybrid system is not appropriate; also, any decision concerning the way activities are conducted should be made and communicated in due time. Another respondent argued that on-site activities should be resumed unless the health of the staff and students is put at risk. However, he or she thinks that online activities were of good quality.

The last question was about the devices students used in order to access the teaching-learning activities. One hundred and thirty respondents (99.2%) used their personal computer, with 77 (58.8%) also using their mobile phone, while only one student (0.8%) used a tablet.

4. Discussion, Study Limitations and Further Research

Overall, the results of this study were consistent with those from the other studies mentioned in the literature review section of this paper. Given the circumstances, the fact that just under 50% of the respondents rated online education with a score of 4 out of 5 shows that, provided with the right tools and proper support at institutional level, distance learning is very much doable in the long run, especially when practical, hands-on activities are not the main focus (like they would be in the case of medical students, for example). Among the advantages of distance learning, students have emphasized the flexibility of being able to access the platform from anywhere (which is also suggested by the large number of students using their mobile phones to log in on the platform), the chance to save time and money and the ease of access to relevant information, while the main disadvantage remains, by far, the lack of direct interaction with peers and/or teachers. Technical issues were also a concern, especially when they interfered with the evaluation process.

In terms of the Business English course, even though the teaching and evaluation components seems to have gone well, it is difficult to determine at this point what the long-term effects are on language use and acquisition. Moreover, when it came to the student learning part, even though the online system allowed for more flexibility and teachers continued to offer help throughout the course, the lack of interaction with peers and the kind of support and advice they would provide each other has been shown to affect the overall online experience.

The results for the last question show that, on the one hand, online learning is best done using a personal computer, but on the other hand mobile devices can also work as a back-up or if the student attempts to multitask and attend online classes while at work or on the go. This contributes, of course, to the perceived flexibility of distance education activities, but it may also have affected the overall quality of the process, resulting in more difficulty to perform tasks and/or poorer evaluation results.

This study only provides a limited perspective on the Business English course and the overall online activities at the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration in Iași, as the number of students who participated in the survey was rather small. Moreover, the fact that it combined general questions about the online learning process with specific ones related to the English course could have affected students' perspective on the specific challenges they faced with the latter. Also, there was no question on how the online activities might have affected student motivation, which could have contributed to a clearer image of their thoughts on distance education. More specific information about the students' area of specialisation within the Economic Sciences field could have helped with the interpretation of the results as well. Nevertheless, students' perception of online ESP language courses in higher education is a topic definitely worth exploring further, as it provides great insight on what may become the future ways of conducting teaching and learning at university level. This would be helpful for both teachers trying to adapt the curriculum to the new challenges but also for decision-makers at higher levels, since online education has not been previously legislated in our country.

Conclusions

Based on the results of this study, students' perception of online education and Business English courses in higher education during the 2020-2021 academic year was overall positive. They appreciated the flexibility of the system and the quality of the process (in terms of teaching, learning and evaluation) does not seem to have been affected significantly. However, even though the results show that a significant percentage of students wishes to continue with a hybrid system in the future, we cannot overlook the fact that e-learning has very much been intended as a temporary and emergency-induced solution to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has not provided us with enough information on its long-term impact. Much like Wallace (2003) concludes her review of research on interactions among teachers and students in online learning in higher education, there is still a lot more to be done in the future. Even now, it seems that "conceptions of distance education are only slowly moving away from a metaphor of 'delivering education' toward a richer and more nuanced understanding of what online environments are offering for teaching and learning" (Wallace, 2003, p. 275). Moreover, a lot more research needs to be done with a view to understanding how the pandemic has affected online education and whether it can be further implemented on a large scale.

At the same time, this has provided us with a good starting point and, as is always the case with change, it brought forth both the teachers and students' power to adapt and make the most of every situation, which is particularly valuable during these challenging times.

Disclaimer: This case study and the corresponding questionnaire have not been ordered or endorsed by any academic institution, including the one mentioned in this article. The students' answers were completely anonymous and the results of the study are only discussed in relation to the purpose of this article.

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Exploring the digital marketing practices in the Greek retail sector

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Abstract

The development of technology has made great leaps in the lives of people. Digital marketing is now an integral part of every business, irrespective of its size and nature. The growing importance of digital marketing has affected the way businesses promote their offerings to old and new customers. The goal of digital marketing is to make the most of the available practices to target and reach the right users, attract their attention, make a sale, and achieve overall customer satisfaction. Through a survey of 100 e-tailers, this study examines the internal and external factors that influence the adoption of digital marketing practices in the Greek retail sector. The results of a regression analysis show that business resources and related practices have a positive impact on the benefits that can be achieved through the adoption of e-marketing practices.

Keywords: digital marketing, e-commerce, retail sector

Introduction

Since its invention, the Internet has become an advantageous marketing tool giving rise to significant changes in shopping culture and consumerism (Eroglu, 2014) and has fundamentally changed today's business and consumer behavior with a variety of marketing strategies (Novak *et al*. 2000; Plaza, 2010). Social media marketing, content marketing, augmented and virtual reality, Internet of Things (IoT) are some of the advances that have had and will continue to have a significant impact on marketing efforts, as they allow companies to implement innovative forms of communication and co-create content with their customers (Borges and Verissimo, 2014). Some of the most popular practices and techniques used in e-marketing include Search Engine Optimization, Paid Search

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Marketing / Pay per Click, Social Media Marketing - Social Media Campaigns, Affiliate Marketing, email marketing, Video Marketing, Blog Marketing, Article Marketing, Google Adsense, banners etc. Companies using such practices enjoy various benefits such as: low cost, quick automation of actions, time saving, affordability, easier market segmentation, direct observation, and analysis of results.

Modern digital marketing capabilities within business processes give companies a new competitive dynamic. In this new environment, digital technology is an integral part of strategy, helping to identify new sources of value creation and new strategic frameworks (Yoo, 2010). Within this framework, digital technologies provide a modern marketing opportunity for companies to develop their business model online, achieve high performance from investments in technology and use it as a strategic asset to gain a competitive advantage.

These technologies, which are constantly evolving, have had a significant impact on the retail sector. Today, retail is a sector of really intense growth and modernization and companies seem to be using more and more improved techniques in their stores. Trends show a shift from traditional brick-and-mortar stores to online shopping (Keen *et al*., 2004), and the number of online shoppers and the volume of purchases in the U.S. and Europe are increasing (Monsuwe *et al*., 2004). Despite this shift, it is important to state that retail sector is sometimes failing to capitalize on the opportunities that e-commerce presents (Lewis and Cockril, 2002). Finally, it must be mentioned that, whilst a significant amount of research has focused upon the success of e-commerce strategies in general (Doherty and Ellis-Chadwick, 2009), the literature about the perceived or actual effectiveness of retailers' web strategies appears to be considerably less extensive (Duffy, 2004; Golden *et al.*, 2004; Lunce *et al.*, 2006; Zhuang and Lederer, 2003). It seems that there is a lack of evidence in relation to the promotional activities that are influenced by the use of e-marketing and the resulting outcomes. Considering the above analysis, this study aims to investigate the digital marketing tools used in the Greek retail sector. In the European Commission Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI 2020), Greece ranks 27th among the 28 EU member states, which means that Greece has not made much progress compared to other EU member states. It is therefore worth exploring how Greek retailers are taking advantage of the opportunities offered by digitalization and whether they are benefiting from the adoption of digital marketing strategies.

1. Literature Review

E-commerce is a new way of conducting business transactions. Its influence on the global environment is constantly increasing over time (Chong, 2008). According to the literature, and with reference to the research of Drennan and McColl-Kennedy (2003), the Internet is dramatically reshaping the retail service firms. With the growth and development of the internet and the resulting web technologies that can be seen today, the improvement of innovation and entrepreneurship can be managed through the use of the various new technological resources and data. The emergence of e-business and e-commerce has created new horizons and new opportunities for the development of an electronic-based market, a market that is very different from the traditional market in terms of laws and rules for management, organizational and operational conditions (Chaffey, 2008). Modern digital marketing capabilities within business processes give companies a new competitive dynamic. In this new environment, digital technology is an integral part of strategy, helping to create new sources of value and new strategic frameworks (Yoo, 2010).

Today, numerous companies around the world offer their products to consumers via the Internet. The use of new technologies has created an interdependence between customers and companies, with the Internet being the main technological tool for the information and communication technology revolution. This has changed the way marketing works in terms of promoting ideas and selling goods and services and provides a tremendous opportunity for businesses and organizations to increase profits and productivity. From the consumer's point of view, the main benefits of e-commerce are as follows: Ease of searching for the right product, saving time, ease of finding reviews, ratings of products, coupons and offers, etc. However, e-commerce is also associated with some disadvantages, such as privacy and confidentiality issues, difficulties in tracking product quality, "hidden" fees, delays in receiving products, problems with Internet access, etc. (Turban *et al*., 2015). From a business perspective, the benefits that characterize the use of e-commerce are the following: Increased customer base, increased sales, round-the-clock availability, expanded reach, and direct transactions. However, as with consumers, many dangers lurk in e-commerce for businesses, namely the following data security problems, problems with credit cards, additional costs and know-how for using e-commerce, problems with Internet services, constant maintenance, etc. (Turban *et al*., 2015).

Regardless of the challenges, the presence of Web 2.0 technologies has changed the environment in which consumers operate. The retail sector is certainly affected by this, considering that the shopping experience has shifted from physical stores to online shopping (Haenninen, Kwan and Mitronen, 2021). The retail sector is a market with strong growth and modernization, and companies seem to be using more and more improved techniques in their stores every day. Retail electronic marketing plays a catalytic role in these growth and improvements, especially through social networks. Facebook, Twitter and similar sites have a huge user base, they provide great information sharing and improve communication channels, leading to an increase in credibility and sales for retail businesses. Social media and advances in mobile technology have changed the way retailers engage new and existing customers to understand and meet their needs (Shanahan, Tran, and Taylor 2019). Retailers now know that social networks play an important role in their customers' purchasing decisions. Resorting to comments, making suggestions, and generating streams of communication on social media sites and blogs make interaction more effective for many retail entrepreneurs and contribute to a more successful online marketing strategy (Mehtainc, 2019).

The academic background of this paper draws from the research on the role of e marketing in retail business. E-marketing in retailing is playing a catalytic role in this growth and improvement, especially through social networking websites. Facebook, Twitter and similar sites have a huge user base, they offer great sharing of information and improve communication channels leading to increased credibility and sales for retail firms. Retailers have today understood that social networking sites play an important role in buying decisions of their consumers. Relying on comments, making suggestions and generating communication streams on social media sites and blogs make interaction more effective for many retail business owners and contribute to a more successful online marketing strategy (Mehtainc, 2019).

The review on the literature showed that a significant amount of research has focused on the success of e-commerce strategies in general (Doherty and Ellis-Chadwick, 2009) but there has been limited interest in the effectiveness of retailers' web strategies (Golden *et al*., 2004; Duffy, 2004; Lunce *et al*., 2006; Zhuang and Lederer, 2003). For this reason, we formulate the following research questions:

RQ: Which are the most important company resources needed for the adoption of the e-marketing strategy?
RQ2: Which are the internal factors that are forcing companies adopt e-marketing tools?
RQ3: Which are the external factors that are forcing companies to adopt e-marketing tools?

The growing investment in e-commerce has sparked academic interest in finding a useful measure of e-commerce success (Zhuang and Lederer, 2003) and understanding the benefits to retailers. For this reason, we formulated the following research question:

RQ4: Which are the benefits reaped from the adoption of the e-marketing strategy?

2. Methodology

Data for this study were collected by means of a web questionnaire that was distributed to 100 retailers who own e-shops and are active in the website Skroutz.gr in Greece. This is the most famous 'best price comparison' web site in the Greek retail sector. The sampling method that was used was the simple random sampling. The data collection process started at 16/05/2019 and ended at 24/06/2019. The questionnaire consisted of three parts and sixteen closed type questions in total. The 5-point Likert scale had been employed. Data analysis was conducted with the use of SPSS.

The sample demographics are summarized in table 1 and table 2. The companies in our sample operated in the fashion industry and they had all been using e-marketing tools.

Table 1. Type of business

Industry type	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Fashion Clothes	67	67.0	67.0	67.0
Footwear	5	5.0	5.0	72.0
Fashion Clothes and footwear	28	28.0	28.0	100.0
Total	100	100,0	100,0	

Table 2. Months of using e-marking tools

Time	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
0-6 months	28	28.0	28.0	28.0
7-12 months	10	10.0	10.0	38,0
1-2 years	16	16.0	16.0	54.0
2-4 years	29	29.0	29.0	83.0
4+ years	17	17.0	17.0	100
Total	100	100	100	

3. Inferential Statistics and Findings

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) and Varimax rotation were employed to test the reliability of the scales and obtain the minimum number of factors. 6 factors were extracted and are depicted in table 3 long with their respective Cronbach's Alpha coefficient (Cronbach, 1951). We used Cronbach's to measure the internal reliability of the scales. All scales satisfied the cutoff point of 0.7 (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994).

Table 3. Factors extracted from the Exploratory Factor Analysis.

Constructs	**Variables**	**Cronbach' Alpha**
Resources	Qualified and skilled marketing staff Good technological infrastructure Sufficient financial resources	0.84
Internal factors affecting the adoption of e-marketing strategy	Improvement of the quality of the work Greater control over the work	0.867
External factors affecting the adoption of e-marketing strategy	Competitive pressure. The Business environment	0.713
The e-marketing practices adopted	Creation or rebuilding of the website Social Media Marketing Online advertising Search Engine Optimization	0.893
E-marketing practices	Customer satisfaction Increased Profits Customer Relationships Reduction of costs Faster discovery of customer needs Greater customization of products	0.897

Having formed the necessary factors, it was easy to form 2 propositions to express the relationship between the use of E-marketing practices, the company resources and the benefits expected from the adoption of e-marketing strategy.

P1: The company resources will have a positive impact on the benefits reaped from the e-marketing strategy.

P2: The e-marketing practices will have a positive impact on the benefits reaped from the e-marketing strategy.

For the purposes of this study, the 'Resources' as well and the 'E-marketing Practices' were considered as the independent Variables (IVs) and the Benefits became the dependent variable (DV). In order to test and quantify the relationship between the set of IVs and the DV, we performed regression analysis. The two propositions were tested. Table 4 summarizes the model evaluation and ANOVA results which are discussed in the subsequent section.

According to our findings, the key resources needed for the adoption of an e-marketing strategy are: qualified and skilled marketing staff, good technological infrastructure and sufficient financial resources. The internal factors that drive the adoption of e-marketing tools are greater control and improved quality of work; the external factors, on the other hand, are the industry (business environment) and competition. The e-marketing practices mostly used form the companies in our sample are: the online presence with a website, Social Media Marketing, Search Engine Optimization and online advertising. The expected benefits that can be reaped are customer satisfaction, improved relationships with customers, increased profits, new products, reduction of costs, faster discovery of customer needs and product customization.

Table 4. Results from the multiple regression analysis

	Propositions	R^2	F	Sig	Result
P1	The company resources will have a positive impact on the benefits reaped from the e-marketing practices	.431	42.372	0,000	accepted
P2	The e-marketing practices will have a positive impact on the benefits reaped from the e-marketing practices	.529	110.216	0,000	accepted

The results from the regression analysis show a positive statistical relationship between the company resources and expected benefits. 43% of the variance in our dependent factor (e-marketing practices) is explained by the quality of the company resources. A strong positive statistical relationship was also found between the e-marketing practices and expected benefits as almost 53% of the variance in the dependent factor is explained by the use of e-marketing practices (see Table 4).

Conclusions

The purpose of this research is to examine the factors that drive e-marketing practices in Greece and how these practices can in turn provide organizational benefits. Primary data were collected through a questionnaire distributed to 100 companies in the fashion and footwear industry. Exploratory Factor Analysis with Kaizer Normalizations was used for variable reduction and extraction of 5 factors. Two of them provide the items to measure the internal and external factors that can drive the adoption of e-marketing in Greek companies. The third factor represents the key resources that are considered important for the adoption of e-marketing practices. The fourth factor represents the e-marketing practices adopted and the fifth factor measures the expected benefits. Our results support previous findings that the adoption of such strategies depends mainly on the nature of the firm and the intensity of competition. (Dlodlo and Dhurup 2013; Kohn and Husig, 2006). Adoption of these practices is positively correlated with organizational benefits, implying that managers need to adopt e-marketing practices and tools to enjoy benefits such as customer satisfaction and product customization.

If we follow the technological developments, we can say that digital marketing on social networks is part of our daily life. In a society that is constantly evolving technologically and where consumers know more about using social networks, e-retailers should focus more on the opportunities they offer. They should build a strong bond with their customers by motivating them to follow and interact with their accounts on social networks. The competition is fierce, and the opportunities are numerous. Therefore, proper, and more frequent use of social networks is mandatory. Policymakers should remain vigilant in updating their social networks and look for practices that attract or maintain more audiences

As with all research studies, there are some limitations. The sample of 100 respondents is quite small to apply inferential statistical techniques and derive conclusions about cause-and-effect relationships. Another longitudinal research design could possibly further explore the measurement of predictors and dependent constructs.

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