

## Enhancing competitiveness and resilience of tourism in crises condition. Experiences from Eastern Partnership countries

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### Abstract

*The long-term goals set for the post-2020 EaP policy are oriented to support economic resilience. Due to its peculiarities, tourism has proved to be one of the most sensitive economic sectors to the manifestation of multiple crisis experiences. The present study aims to: study and identify the effects of crises on tourism competitiveness and performances in Eastern Partnership countries; to identify measures by which the European Union authorities intend to counteract the effects of crises and improve the response capacity of governments and tourism companies; and to identify actions through which the tourism industry can improve its capacity to manage the various crisis phenomena. To achieve these objectives, the authors used European Commission programmatic documents and reports, statistical reports, data and information on the effects of crises on the activity of the tourism industry in EAP countries. In the frame of the partnership and cooperation relations between the European Union and the EaP countries, special attention has been paid to the support measures established to counteract the negative effects of the pandemic crisis.*

*Keywords:* competitiveness, Eastern Partnership policy, tourism, resilience, crisis

### Introduction

The scope of the European Neighbourhood Policy initiative is to strengthen security at the periphery of the European Union and to improve the resilience of the economies of the states that are part of the eastern and southern partnerships. Achieving and supporting resilience is a key element of the policy targeting Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries after 2020. Thus, in order to address the many challenges the Eastern Partnership countries are facing, to support sustainable development and to provide concrete results for their citizens, the following long-term goals have been set: resilient, sustainable and integrated economies; responsible institutions, the rule of law and security; environmental resilience and climate; resilient digital transformation; and resilient, fair and inclusive societies (European Commission, 2020, p. 4). The long-term goals set for the post-2020 EaP policy

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are oriented to support economic resilience, in order to respond to the common challenges facing the European Union and the EaP countries. Due to its peculiarities, tourism has proved to be one of the most vulnerable domains to the manifestation of crisis phenomena (economic or financial, health, climate, energy, food crises, environmental, political, military). Thus, the resilience of tourism implies the adoption of political and economic measures to improve the response capacity of governments and companies and to prevent the negative effects of crises.

The benefits of tourism sustainable development must be expressed in the form of a positive long-term impact for all stakeholders: local communities, governments, investors, tourists, the environment, etc. EU policies have focused on encouraging sustainable tourism, which starts from the premise that aspects of economic sustainability, environmental conservation and the preservation of identity and cultural heritage are mutually supportive, and long-term investments in sustainability guarantee the long-term competitiveness of the tourism industry (Tambovceva *et al.*, 2020; Manolescu *et al.*, 2016). Thus, in order to achieve the long-term efficiency, effectiveness and competitiveness of tourism and to strengthen the resilience of the sector, solutions must be identified to neutralize the factors that can generate sectoral crises and to minimize their effects, but also is needed the adoption of some appropriate practices for crisis management. Under these conditions the results obtained will be: improved image of tourism destination (safety and security), increased economic performance of tour operators and the business value, increased operational efficiency, increased societal and environmental protection.

The six member countries of the EaP have faced, after the disintegration of the former USSR, numerous political and military crises caused by territorial disputes, fuelled by Russian interference and by the economic and energetic dependence on it. Thus, the countries in the region face security and safety issues, which have a negative impact on the development of tourism (Talmaciu *et al.*, 2020). To these were added the negative effects exerted by the global crises: the economic/ financial crisis of 2009 and the health crisis that began in the early 2020. Under these conditions, is necessary to adopt measures to improve resilience and responsiveness of the tourism industry, in the face of various crisis situations.

Through this paper, the authors aim to determine and analyse the effects of crises on tourism industry performances in the Eastern Partnership countries; to identify measures by which the European Union and EaP countries intend to counteract the effects of crises, to improve the response capacity of governments and tourism companies; and to identify actions through which the tourism industry can improve its capacity to manage the various crisis phenomena.

## 1. Literature review

Tourism is the economic sector characterized by a high vulnerability and sensitivity to various crisis situations, reacting to the smallest changes in economic, socio-political, environmental (natural disasters), biological/ health (epidemics) environments (Timothy, 2006). Pandemic medical crises can induce a state of inertia, with long-term negative effects, the fear of infection causing an extension of voluntary quarantine, a reaction with important negative influences on tourism (Borysova *et al.*, 2021).

Tourism crisis represent unforeseen events having a disruptive nature, which have unfavourable impact on the resilience and sustainable development of tourism (Robertson *et al.*, 2006). These events may cause many negative effects:

- undermine the trust of tourists into destination (World Tourism Organization, 1998);
- affect the capacity of businesses to operate normally (Robertson *et al.*, 2006);
- prejudice the destination image (affecting safety, attractiveness and comfort); negatively alter visitors' perceptions (Sönmez, 1998);
- requires radical management practices (Beirman, 2003);
- induces necessities of immediate reactions in order to reduce the negative effects (Glaesser, 2005);
- perturb the activities of the markets or tourism services and may discredit the reputation of a tourism destination (Hapenciuc *et al.*, 2009; Sönmez *et al.*, 1999).

In the literature are identified various factors generating crises in tourism (Hapenciuc *et al.*, 2009):

- natural causes - natural extreme phenomena;
- actions having an anthropogenic character that appear more often: *economic risks* - financial crisis, economic recession, economic restructuring or transition; *crises related to the social environment* - violence acts, organized crimes acts, social conflicts, etc.; *political risks* - terrorist attacks, armed conflicts, civil wars, etc.; *biological risks* - the threat of some extremely contagious biological agents (SARS, Ebola, avian or swine flu, COVID, pollution of the environment with toxic substances); *technological risks* - dangers determined by the development of ICT, nuclear accidents, pollution related with the increase of intensity of the economic activities.

Often, crisis conditions in tourism have their source in the diversity of human actions, which make their mark on the health and balance of the macroeconomic, political, social, legal, institutional and natural environment (Talmaciu *et al.*, 2015). The factors that contribute to tourism safety and

security are considered essential for the realization of the potential tourism entrepreneurship (Mazur *et al.*, 2020).

Tourism industry is one of the most vulnerable economic sectors to crisis generating phenomena, fact highlighted by the data in Table 1. The average values presented in the table were established analysing the impact of the different types of crises that have confronted the tourism sectors in different countries of the world. Thus, in terms of the magnitude of the impact the disease crisis has the strongest impact, followed by the political turmoil and environmental crises. Regarding the number of months of recovery depends on the magnitude of the crisis generating phenomena, a higher number of recovery months is needed in the case of political turmoil crises, followed by the disease and environmental crises. The data (see Table 1) show that the largest losses of tourists are determined by political turmoil crises, followed by disease crisis and terrorism crisis. Regarding the lost spending indicator, the biggest losses are also determined by political turmoil crises, followed by disease and environmental crisis.

**Table 1. The impact of crises on tourism industry - an analysis at global level**

Type	Disease		Environmental		Political turmoil		Terrorism	
	Between	Avg	Between	Avg	Between	Avg	Between	Avg
Impact depth (%)	1 - 70	24	1 - 57	18	6 - 56	24	0 - 34	9
Month to recovery	10 - 34	19,4	10 - 92,8	16,2	10 - 44,9	22,2	2 - 42	11,5
Lost Arrivals (Thou.)	78 - 5,599	2,177	3 - 7,824	761	72-18,435	2415	2 - 17,815	1,481
Lost spending (Mill. \$)	67 - 4,411	1,447	2 - 10,971	1,168	43-16,426	2,146	2 - 10,658	861

Source: Adaptation from World Travel & Tourism Council (2019)

Undoubtedly, crisis phenomena have an disruptive effect on the normal conduct of human activities and generate many negative effects on all sectors of the economy: declining demand and income, rising costs, disrupting the normal conduct of operations, disrupting decision-making and communication (increased risks and uncertainty, reduced reaction time), staff availability, stressful work and living environment, disruption of investment processes, disappearance of companies, etc. (Okumus and Karamustafa, 2005; Kash and Darling, 1998). Beyond the negative effects, we must see crises as an opportunity to accumulate new knowledge, to improve the response capacity of economic operators, governments and society as a whole to the manifestation of such crises or disasters (Faulkner and Vikulov, 2001; Fink, 1986).

The literature emphasizes the importance of crisis situations preparedness and the adoption of appropriate strategies for managing them. Thus, tourism specialists should not question whether such unwanted events will occur, how often and to what extent, but should anticipate procedures to improve the resilience and their ability to respond to various types of crisis and minimize their

negative effects. The models of response to crisis and disaster situations, recommended in the literature, present a variable number of stages:

- 4- or 5-stage models that provide appropriate procedures to each stage: pre-crisis, acute crisis, chronic crisis, and resolution (Fink, 1986; Kash and Darling, 1998);
- the 6-phase model proposed by Faulkner and Vikulov (2001): *Pre-event phase* - disaster contingency plans, scenarios or probability assessments play a major role in the disaster management strategy; *Prodromal phase* - the disaster is imminent, and warning systems and command centres are established (contingency plan actions are initiated); *Emergency phase* - measures are required to protect people and property in the tourism destination; *Intermediate phase* - short-term and immediate necessities of people have to be undertaken by emergency and rescue teams, coherent media communication strategy is decisive; *Long-term (recovery) phase* - the impaired infrastructure has to be rebuilt, and environmentally damaged areas have to be rehabilitated; *Resolution phase* - routine is restored or a new, improved state occurs.
- the 3-phase model proposed by Ritchie (2004) is considered a more comprehensive (holistic) and strategic model for approaching crisis management: *the preventive stage* of strategic planning of policies, actions and procedures in crisis situations; *the stage of implementing the strategy* that involves the implementation of policies and procedures, the application of adequate communication and control systems, the adequate management of the organization's resources; *the stage of resolution, evaluation and feedback* - involves post-crisis recovery and recording of lessons learned.

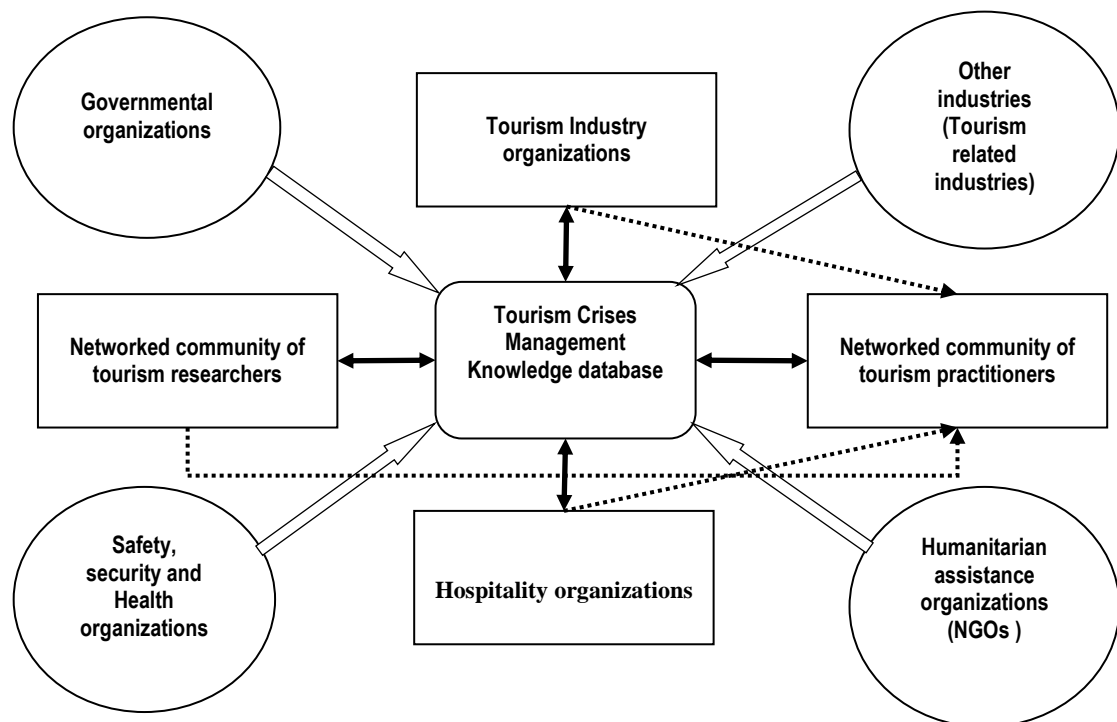
The specific strategies of crisis response models can be divided into two categories (Xu and Grunewald, 2009):

- proactive strategies - characteristic of the pre-crisis stages, which include activities specific to the preparation of the crisis / disaster management plan, training of employees and awareness of stakeholders (community) on the possibility of crisis / disaster;
- reactive strategies aimed at taking action after the onset of the crisis or disaster (disaster communication, resource management, stakeholder collaboration and elimination of negative effects).

The development of effective tools for managing future crises requires collaborative actions carried out at regional/ national/ international level, respectively the development of international platforms for sharing knowledge and experiences of tourist destinations that have faced comparable crisis situations, through which to provide systematic and complete documentation on crisis management processes (see Figure 1). The databases to support the effective management of crises in tourism can contain information from different sources:

- the entities directly involved in tourism: the tourism industry organizations, the hospitality organizations, the networked communities of tourism practitioners and researchers;
- the organizations that are not part of the tourism industry: the governmental organizations, the organizations from tourism related industries, the safety, security and health organizations and the humanitarian assistance organizations.

**Figure 1. Collaborative Crisis Management System for the Tourism Industry**



Source: Adaptation from Pizane and Kozmina, 2010

Crisis management plans need to be developed, to provide a rapid response to potential threats and to offset their negative effects. These plans require to assessing the economic impact of the crisis on the tourism industry, to think about possible scenarios for its evolution and to propose actions / procedures to improve the resilience of tourism companies to the occurrence of such unforeseen events.

## 2. Methodology

The present study aims to: study and identify the effects of crises on tourism competitiveness and performances in Eastern Partnership countries; to identify measures by which the European Union and Member State authorities intend to counteract the effects of crises and improve the

response capacity of governments and tourism companies; and to identify actions through which the tourism industry can improve its capacity to manage the various crisis phenomena.

In order to accomplish the objectives, the authors identified and analysed academic works and scientific papers on crisis management and tourism resilience in crisis / disaster situations, documents and reports of the European Commission on cooperation relations with EU eastern border countries to overcome the effects of the pandemic crisis (COVID 19). Also, they were identified and analysed reports from the World Tourism Organization, the OECD and the World Bank on the implications of the COVID 19 crisis on the countries from the eastern border of the European Union and the measures taken by them to overcome the crisis (Eurochambres, 2021; European Commission, 2020, 2021; OECD, 2020; World Economic Forum, 2019; World Tourism Organisation, 1998; World Travel & Tourism Council, 2019). The authors also analysed information on the combined initiatives of the European Union and the EaP countries in order to improve the responsiveness and resilience to the crisis phenomena facing tourism.

At the same time, were analysed statistics on the development and competitiveness of tourism in the EaP countries, prepared by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), Eurostat and national statistical organizations.

In order to establish the effects of crisis situations on tourism in the EaP countries, the empirical research was based on an integrated methodology, combining descriptive-exploratory research with quantitative analysis of statistical indicators on socio-economic development of tourism and qualitative analysis of the strategic documents prepared by the 6 member countries in partnership with the European Union and other international organizations.

The analysis of the documents was carried out on three levels: identifying the crises faced by EaP countries in the last 20 years, their effects on tourism development and identifying and analysing action plans and initiatives taken to overcome crises and strengthen tourism resilience to the crisis phenomena.

### **3. Results and discussions**

All six state members from the Eastern Partnership have been confronted with many security and stability challenges, which exerted a negative influence on tourism development (Talmaciu *et al.*, 2020):

- security and territorial integrity risks: the incidents in the secessionist territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia - 1991-1992 and 2008; the disputes between the Republic of Moldova



and Russia over the Transnistrian secessionist region - 1990-1992; the conflicts between Ukraine and Russia that have ending up in the annexation of the Crimean peninsula by Russia - 2014 until now; the conflicts between Armenia and Azerbaijan regarding the autonomy of the Nagorno-Karabakh region - 2020;

- the vulnerability of the economy and energy dependence - vulnerability of the Georgian economy as a result of the dependence of the tourism economy;
- social risks to which citizens are exposed as a consequence of incidents and of autocratic regimes altering the rule of law (Belarus).

To these were added the effects induced by the global crises: economic / financial in 2009 and the health crisis that began in 2019. Although the pandemic has hit countries with the highest share of tourism revenues in GDP, the poorly developed, rural regions, where tourism contributes to complementary incomes for the population, are extremely vulnerable to the negative effects of the health crisis (Kyrylov *et al.*, 2020). In the case of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Ukraine, tourism has been affected by the combined effect of the health crisis and of the conflicts over territorial disputes.

The consequences of the crises on tourism have been multiple. Regional conflicts have reduced the population in the affected areas (Kohler *et al.*, 2017), infrastructure and some tourist facilities have been destroyed (for example in the province of Svaneti, Georgia, where there are UNESCO World Heritage Sites), the image of tourist destinations has long-term suffering, causing potential tourists to bypass them (Radvanyi and Muduyev, 2007). The landscapes, fauna and flora of the war-affected regions also suffered, both directly as a result of the attacks and subsequently as a result of the pollution involved in the use of ammunition and chemical agents (Metreveli and Timothy, 2010). The impact was higher on foreign tourists, who consider the entire region dangerous, not just the areas affected by the conflict. Although the regions directly involved in the conflict are the most affected, the negative effects also spread to the adjacent regions, considered safe by domestic tourism actors. Conflicts often deepen a negative state from a social and economic point of view (Lyubitseva and Zavarika, 2019), previous tensions and inefficiency of institutions acting as barriers in the tourist development of these areas.

The economy of the countries involved in the conflict is also affected, resulting in more shock waves on tourism. Economic agents involved in tourism see their marketing efforts as inefficient, experiencing an increase in costs and a dramatic reduction in revenues, associated with a decrease in the number of tourists (Ivanov *et al.*, 2017). The migration of the local population, although partially reversible after the end of the conflicts, creates problems for the labour market (Elizbarashvili *et al.*, 2020), including in the field of tourism.



War and tourism are considered irreconcilable phenomena, visitors being concerned about their safety and cancelling trips when there are political tensions in certain areas. The threat of terrorism, more present in areas that have been involved in armed conflict, is another factor that contributes to reducing the intention to visit (Aliyev, 2020).

Domestic crises can also have a significant impact on tourism. Belarus' image in the international arena is closely linked to domestic politics - human rights violations, electoral fraud, changes in the constitution in favour of dictatorship, repression of protesters and opposition, hijacking of planes to arrest dissidents, etc. - with disastrous effects on the intention visitation, including the emergence of the phenomenon of boycotting a political regime (Biketova, 2016).

In conflict situations, internal / external tourist flows change dramatically, causing macroeconomic imbalances. Thus, the population prefers foreign tourism, while international tourists are in a much smaller number (Sass, 2020).

Recommendations for mitigating the impact of the pandemic on tourism can be divided into three broad categories: crisis management, mitigating the negative consequences and stimulating the accelerated recovery of the tourism industry (Borysova *et al.*, 2021). In the post-pandemic period, a reformation of tourism is recommended. The emphasis will be on domestic tourism, with a focus on individualized forms of tourism, such as ecotourism. This will have a positive impact on the development of local companies, small and medium, with offers for small groups of tourists. Tourist services will have to meet all epidemiological standards, will increase the possibilities of own transport, reservations will be much more flexible, including the option of cancellation without penalties (Rahmanov *et al.*, 2020).

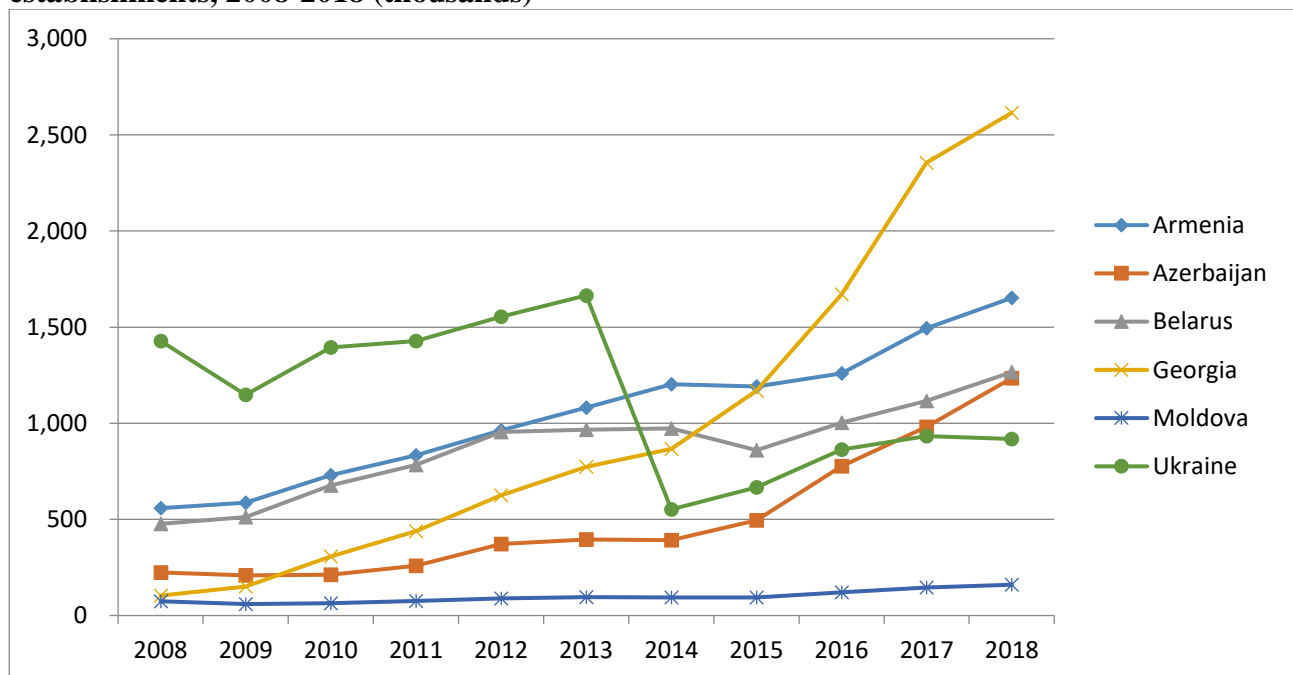
The orientation towards sustainability, both at programmatic, strategic level and at the level of projects, represents a success factor in the development of tourism, through the multiplier effect highlighted in the related fields (Manolescu *et al.*, 2019). The diversification of activities, even in the deficient institutional context of the analysed countries, can contribute to the survival of the actors involved in tourism (Doan and Kiptenko, 2017) and to the resilience of rural destinations (Ilnitsky and Chikurova, 2015).

Crisis situations with careful management can lead to the creation of new products and services, generating new opportunities on the tourism market (Melnychenko *et al.*, 2021). In the context of the medical crisis, however, it is necessary to reduce the uncertainty in the travel preparation processes and during its development, by ensuring confidence in the rapid responses to tourist demands and correlating the quality of services with customer expectations. Violence and conflicts can be included in the tourist products of the affected areas, through thematic tours, guided tours that remind visitors

of the tragic events. Although the market for such tourism products is limited, it contributes to the definition of the tourist image of the region (Schlegel and Pfoser, 2021).

In the period 2008-2018, tourism registered a favourable evolution in most Eastern Partnership countries, except for Ukraine, where tourism was strongly affected after the outbreak of the war with Russia in 2014 (see Figure 2). Among the EaP countries that have registered a higher dynamic of international flows of tourists and with the tourism industry better represented in the macroeconomic indicators, we mention: Georgia - 33,7% total contribution to GDP, 29,7% total contribution to employment and 43,5% total contribution to exports, and Armenia - 14,1% total contribution to GDP, 12,5% total contribution to employment and 23,5% total contribution to exports (Talmaciu *et al.*, 2020). In Georgia's case, given the higher vulnerability of tourism to crisis situations, the high economic importance of tourism leads to a higher vulnerability of the entire economy.

**Figure 2. The evolution of the international tourists staying in tourist accommodation establishments, 2008-2018 (thousands)**



Source: Eurostat (online data code: tour\_occ\_arnat)

According to the Tourism and Travel Competitiveness Report (World Economic Forum, 2019), most of the EaP states are placed in the centre of the ranking, with the exception of the Republic of Moldova which occupies the 100th position (out of 144 countries). The best positioned are: Georgia (68th position), Azerbaijan (71st position), Ukraine (78th) and Armenia (79th). The vulnerability of tourism to various risk factors is highlighted by the score obtained at Safety and Security Pillar, where the most of countries occupy positions in the first half of the ranking: Georgia position 25 out of 144

states, Azerbaijan position 38, Armenia position 40 and Republic of Moldova position 67. The exception is Ukraine, which ranks 107.

After the onset of the COVID 19 crisis in the first quarter of 2020, the activity of companies in the tourism industry has decreased considerably as a result of restrictions imposed by the authorities. In some periods was imposed the economic lockdown and the activity of tourism companies has been completely stopped. In these circumstances the international arrivals of tourists experienced a radical decline: Armenia -80%; Azerbaijan -75%, Georgia -79%; Republic of Moldova - 83% and Ukraine - 75% (<https://www.unwto.org/international-tourism-and-covid-19>).

As policy response to the COVID 19 crisis the major part of the EaP countries adopted general measures dedicated to support all economic sectors (see Table 2).

Armenia has focused on liquidity, risk management and on incentives and adopted special measures for post-crisis tourism recovery: liquidity measures to help SMEs pay salaries, interest-rate subsidies for loans that banks agreed on granting to SMEs etc. For the fast recovery of tourism Armenia authorities plan the implementation of a post-crisis tax system for the tourism sector.

Azerbaijan has focused on tax measures deferrals, holidays, amendments to tax code and has adopted general character measures. Also, the authorities plan to change the growth model, to support job creation and sustain income and SMEs, to foster digitalisation and a more flexible tax administration. For the fast recovery, they intend to adopt several measures: changing the growth model to support job creation and sustain income and SMEs, increased investments to foster digitalisation, a more flexible tax administration, SME support policies/ developing access to finance and technology, enhancing the relations of government with business environment and B2B services.

Belarus has focused on differentiated sectoral responses and has adopted limited measures: identifying the most affected sectors and to reduce tax rates, providing support through wage subsidies, credit guarantees, etc.

Georgian authorities have focused on the tourism sector and has adopted special measures for tourism: full exemption of property taxes, delay of income tax for 9 months, 80% loan subsidies for six months, and support packages under the “Produce in Georgia” programme. Also, the authorities conceived an action plan to ensure a fast recovery: to facilitate the participation of tourism service providers in international fairs, to develop tourism products and services that could be needed after the crisis (medical services/wellness, wine and eco-tourism), promoting high safety standards to prevent tourists from bringing the pandemic to Georgia, arrangements are being planned for green corridors with partners from areas with low numbers of infections.

Moldova authorities has focused on support measures to SMEs and sole entrepreneurs: tax measures, introduction of payroll subsidies, the Interest Grant Subsidy Programme, e-commerce programme, virtual academy for entrepreneurs, and a SME digitalisation programme etc. As fast recovery measures adopted by the authorities are: e-commerce programme, an EU financing programme about the virtual academy for entrepreneurs, a programme for the SME digitalisation, a plan to launch an early warning mechanism based on EU practice.

Ukraine has focused on tax measures and liquidity support: unified tax contribution, temporary cancellation of fines for violation of tax regulation, temporary suspension of real estate tax, reducing the refinancing rate, the programme “Affordable loans at 5-7-9%” for SMEs, the digitalisation of government services etc. The fast recovery measure was the digitalisation of government services.

**Table 2. EaP country policy response to the COVID 19 crisis**

	ARM	AZR	BLR	GEO	MLD	UKR
<b>Bank incentives</b>						
Support measures for individual entrepreneurs						X
Reducing the refinancing rate						X
Interest rate subsidies/reduced interest rates on loans for SMEs/ credit guarantees	X		X		X	X
Targeted liquidity measures to help SMEs pay salaries	X	X	X		X	X
<b>Tax exemption/relief/delay</b>						
Changes in tax legislation	X	X	X	X	X	X
Increased budget spending on public health	X	X	X	X	X	X
Exemption from property tax		X		X		X
Exemption/ corporate income tax delay		X	X			
Deferrals of tax payments		X				
Reduction of VAT/zero VAT rate/refund VAT		X			X	
Unified tax contribution						X
Temporary cancellation of fines for violation of tax regulation					X	X
Temporary suspension of real estate tax/non-residential properties						X
Postponement of personal income tax declaration					X	X
Reduce tax rates			X			
Different social measures			X			
<b>Tourism policy measures</b>						
Post-crisis tax system for the tourism sector	X					
full exemption of property taxes				X		
delay of income tax for 9 months				X		
80% loan subsidies for six months				X		
Support packages under the “Produce in .....” programme				X		
Credit guarantee scheme to help overcome liquidity shortages				X		

Source: Own elaboration after OECD Eurasia Competitiveness Programme (ECP) (2020)

In the frame of the partnership and cooperation relations between the European Union and the EaP countries, special attention has been paid to the support measures established to counteract the negative effects of the pandemic crisis (see Table 3).

**Table 3. Summary of the EU support to the Eastern Partnership countries during the COVID19 crisis**

	ARM	AZR	BLR	GEO	MLD	UKR
COVID 19 response package (mill. EUR)	96	31,6	17,4	183	128	190
Support to the health sector and emergency needs	x	x	x	x	x	x
Support to the civil society (children, elderly people, isolated communities)	x	x	x	x	x	x
Support to SMEs and to small farms - Eu4business (grants, loans, business advice, digital transformation)	x	x		x	x	x
Support to fiscal resilience - economic resilience, built resilience of health sector, anti-crisis economic plans	x			x		
Support to socio-economic resilience		x			x	x
Support to the environment and green transition				x		
Support to macro-financial stability				x		

Source: Own elaboration after European Union. Eastern Partnership (2021)

Based on the cooperation relations established with the EaP countries, the European Union provided emergency financial support to the 6 countries. Regarding the issues covered by the support, it can be seen that all countries have received support for the urgent needs of the health system and for vulnerable social groups (children, the elderly, isolated communities). Support is also provided to SMEs and small farmers from all countries (except Belarus for which no information was found) through grants, loans, advice. In the case of Armenia and Georgia, fiscal resilience is strengthened, and in the case of Georgia, the support is provided for macroeconomic stability and for the environment and the green transition. In 2020 was organized a webinar, under the auspices of the OECD and the European Commission, which aimed to identify the most appropriate measures to respond to the COVID 19 crisis and the medium and long-term priorities for recovering from the crisis. The following opinions were formulated by the participants (OECD, 2020):

- among the preferred policy instruments to help SMEs indicated by respondents are: tax and social security payment deferrals (48%), followed by wage subsidies grants and loan guarantees (46%), the direct lending being the least appreciated measure (19%);
- among the biggest challenges for providing support to SMEs during the crisis were highlighted: large informal SME sector (33%), the limited capacity of the public administration (31%), lack of digital infrastructure (24%) and limited access to information (13%);

- regarding to the most appropriate means to improve the resilience and competitiveness of SMEs, the following were highlighted: digitalization and e-commerce (46%), connectivity and regional value chains (22%), green economy (16%) and innovation (15%).

The industries highlighted as needing long term support (Eurochambres EU4Business: Connecting Companies, 2021), after the end of the pandemic crisis were: tourism and hospitality, hotels, restaurants and catering, textiles (Armenia, Georgia), creative industries (Moldova, Ukraine), transport and logistics (Azerbaijan, Moldova), events and entertainment (Azerbaijan). In the case of Ukraine, the intention to focus on horizontal measures (rather than on certain industries) was highlighted: access to public procurement for SMEs, promotion of exports for SMEs, access to markets, access to finance. The Republic of Moldova is focusing its efforts on the digitization of SMEs and sustainable growth, taking into account that digital transformation is one of the EU's five long-term policy goals for the Eastern Partnership. Special attention should be paid to the fight against corruption (anti-corruption measures, investigation of corruption cases and sanctioning acts of corruption), as corrupt people can look for opportunities to gain personal benefits, especially in times of crisis.

The health crisis that began in 2019 is proving to be one of the worst in the last century and has shown the vulnerability and inability of the economic sectors and authorities to provide an adequate response to neutralize its negative effects. Tourism industry, more than the other economic sectors, were more severely affected by the measures that have restricted the free movement of people and the activity of the companies in the hospitality industry. In these circumstances, in addition to the measures taken since the beginning of the crisis by the authorities of the Eastern Partnership countries, some of them with EU support, for the future is needed a proactive attitude, by developing plans, strategies, measures and procedures, to improve both the ability to anticipate the occurrence of crisis situations, as well as the ability to act.

To this end, it is needed to adopt multi-stakeholder approaches, by creating collaborative networks of entities (economic, political, social, research), which share knowledge, experiences and good practices, in order to adopt preventive measures and to improve the resilience of tourism industry in crisis situations. Thus, it can prove useful to set up communication platforms and databases that incorporate the knowledge and expertise of tourist destinations that have faced crisis situations and to share the good practices adopted to neutralize their effects.

## Conclusions

Given the frequent political crises that confronted the EaP countries is needed to mitigate the security and territorial integrity risks, by close collaboration and cooperation in the context of ENP initiative. In addition to the global crises that have affected tourism on a global scale, a source of vulnerability for the Eastern Partnership countries is the political turmoil (territorial disputes, undemocratic regimes, corruption, etc.). Thus, in order to strengthen the economic resilience the EaP countries, it is necessary to provide more effective support for the elimination of territorial disputes, the strengthening of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries in the region.

Various actions are needed to improve the resilience of tourism to crisis situations: studying crises and generating adequate knowledge on prevention and establishing appropriate procedures to neutralize their effects; effectively cope with the effects of crises through cooperation and collaboration actions between all stakeholders; improving the capacity of public authorities to adopt appropriate policies to support the business environment in order to overcome crisis situations; improving the knowledge and capacity of companies on crisis management.

The measures taken by the Eastern Partnership countries to mitigate the effects of the pandemic crisis had, in most of the cases, a general nature, targeting all sectors of the economy, such as fiscal facilities and banking incentives. In the case of Georgia and Armenia, due to the increased economic and social importance of tourism, special measures have been envisaged to increase the resilience of tourism and post-crisis recovery plans have been established.

Among the measures that can be taken to reduce the vulnerability of tourism to crisis situations and to strengthen the resilience of the sector are:

- to increase the capacity of human resources to realize and better understand the risks of crises, in order to change attitudes and behaviours regarding the security of tourist destinations in crisis conditions;
- to eliminate the negative influence of bureaucracy on business and improving the capacity of public administration to act in crisis situations;
- to enhance the communication efforts and to regain the trust of tourists in the safety and security of the tourist destination;
- diversifying the tourism services portfolio through innovation, in order to minimize the effects of crises and to attract new segments of visitors (proposing post-crisis tourist services);



- to improve the connectivity between countries and regions, in order to develop cross-border value chains and to develop joint tourism development projects by capitalizing on the complementary character of neighbouring countries' tourism offers;
- digitalizing of tourism businesses and modernizing the way they are managed, enhancing their capacity to prevent and to react in crisis situations; to provide the access to databases with useful information on preventive measures that can be taken and related to the business behaviours in crisis situations.

Based on the experience gained from various crisis situations, a proactive approach to crisis management must be adopted, by developing management plans that capitalize the expertise of all stakeholders in the tourism industry. To reduce the negative impact of the crisis on the tourism industry, collaborative management systems can be developed, supported by stakeholder networks that can provide useful knowledge on the measures that can be taken to strengthen the resilience of tourism.

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