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THE RETURN OF INTERNATIONAL TOURISM TO THE LEVEL BEFORE THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract:

The present study looks at the return of international tourism to pre-Covid-19 levels. Since the spring of 2020, travel bans and global economic challenges have led to a reduction in tourism activities and services around the world, thus affecting employment and income. Despite economic uncertainty and geopolitical shocks, the tourism industry is close to reaching pre-pandemic levels, demonstrating its resilience and key role in the global economy. The research focuses on the industry's global recovery five years after the health crisis, demonstrating the sustainability of the sector. High transport and accommodation costs are the two main challenges currently affecting international tourism. According to the Economic Impact Report (EIR), prepared by the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) together with Oxford Economics estimates that 2025 will be a record year for tourism, with tourism's contribution to global GDP exceeding the peak in 2019 by approx. 710 billion euros. For 2025, the UNWTO forecasts a full recovery (+2% compared to 2019), with expectations based on increased demand, improved air connectivity and easier access to visas. Despite global challenges, international tourism grew by 5% in the first half (H1) of 2025, compared to the same period in 2024, and by about 4% more than in 2019, which entitles us to hope that pre-pandemic levels will be exceeded this year,

Key words: pandemic, economic and geopolitical uncertainties, international tourism, development

JEL classification: L83, Z32

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, tourism has been addressed as a theme in numerous articles in light of the impact of the health crisis on a field that, until the end of 2019, was on the rise, although the pandemic was not the only shock suffered by the industry. Over time, events with a negative impact such as H5N1, SARS, the September 11 attacks or natural disasters have strongly affected the tourism sector. Although 2019 marked an increase in the number of tourist arrivals, it was tempered by Brexit, geopolitical tensions, the slowdown in the economy, or the bankruptcy of the Thomas Cook group and some low-cost companies. In this climate, Europe suffered a drastic drop of 68% in international arrivals in 2020 (Țuclea, 2022).

The research focuses on the global recovery of the industry five years after the health crisis, as a result of the increase in the number of tourist arrivals and overnight stays internationally, based on statistical data published mainly by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) for the period 2019-2024 and mid-2025.

Also, of particular importance is the increase in tourism revenues and the generation of jobs in the field, as well as measures to counteract the effects of economic and political instability at global level.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism is identified as being much more sensitive to crises and disasters than other industries, being severely affected by pandemics and climate change. Given that the hospitality industry facilitates the spread of diseases, health crises have a direct impact on the demand and economic performance of tourism. Despite regional crises such as Ebola or MERS, international tourism grew steadily between 2009 and 2019, demonstrating resilience until the 2020 shock, which profoundly transformed the global economy (Sánchez-Cañizares et al., 2021).

The sharp drop in tourism has put pressure on vulnerable communities and led to massive job losses, a situation exacerbated by travel restrictions. Subsequently, the crisis was complicated by the war in Ukraine and the increase in energy prices, with Romania having some of the highest prices in the EU. Armed conflicts, along with terrorism and pandemics, continue to be major negative factors for tourism (Dogru-Dastan and Tütüncü, 2024). The global economic landscape has undergone radical transformations due to the health crisis of 2020.

In this context, the experiential economy has become a central concept in the industry, being adopted in various branches of tourism - from airlines and cruises, to hotels and peer-to-peer accommodation platforms (Taylor et al., 2021). Although tourism is a resilient sector, it has been one of the most affected areas, a situation also felt in our country. Amid ongoing concerns, governments have reacted swiftly, since the spring of 2020, to mitigate the socio-economic impact and limit the damage, prioritizing supporting the most vulnerable segments, such as reception structures with accommodation, food or leisure functions. Priority programs and various financial instruments have been launched, including loans with advantageous interest rates, deferrals or exemptions from payment, grants intended especially for SMEs, as well as subsidies, state guarantees and the payment of technical unemployment for employees, etc.

The steep decline in international tourism, generated by the global economic crisis, has put immense pressure on disadvantaged communities, especially in developing countries. The decrease in the flow of tourists has created major problems for the industry, leading to massive job losses. These difficulties have been exacerbated by the pandemic, with travel restrictions drastically reducing the number of tourists and the revenues generated by this sector worldwide.

In the post-pandemic period and after the outbreak of the invasion of Ukraine, European countries experienced record energy price increases (Liobikienė et al., 2023). The socio-economic impact of these events, combined with the increase in taxes and imports, has affected the energy market in Romania, practically transforming it into the country with the highest prices in the EU (Mionel Viorel et al., 2024). Similarly, military conflicts continue to have a detrimental effect on tourism, comparable to that of terrorism or pandemics (Liu et al., 2024).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In 2019, the tourism and travel sector provided 334 million jobs worldwide, representing 10.5% of the total workforce. After the severe decline in 2020, when around 69.5 million jobs were lost, 2023 marked an almost complete recovery. Thus, the sector ended up generating 330 million jobs (10% of the global total), standing at a difference of only 1.4% compared to the level of 2019. According to the UNWTO, the industry has recovered about 89% of its pre-pandemic revenues and economic contribution. This recovery is also confirmed by the World Tourism and Travel Council (WTTC) analyses carried out together with Oxford Economics, which show that the value added to global GDP in 2023 was only 4.1% lower than in 2019.

What's more, WTTC's latest annual report highlights growth above expectations, with the sector currently supporting nearly 348 million jobs globally – more than 13.6 million more than its pre-pandemic peak. The current discourse has passed the recovery phase, anticipating record results in terms of the number of tourists and the contribution to GDP. For 2025, the UNWTO forecasts a full recovery and even a 2% surpass of the 2019 level, amid increased demand, improved air connectivity and easier obtaining visas. Despite economic uncertainties and geopolitical tensions, the industry has demonstrated its resilience, reaching pre-crisis levels. The desire to travel remains intense, with consumers willing to allocate larger budgets and travel more often. However, a September 2025 survey by the Tourism Expert Group signals that the main obstacles remain the high costs of transport and accommodation.

The optimism is also reflected by the UN Tourism Confidence Index, which rose from 114 points (May-August 2025) to 120 points for September-December 2025. In terms of direct, indirect and induced economic impacts, if in 2019 tourism generated 10.3 trillion dollars (10.4% of world

GDP), the collapse of 2020 reduced this contribution by 48.4%. By 2023, the sector's contribution increased again, reaching $9.9 trillion, or 9.1% of the global economy (Fig.1.1).

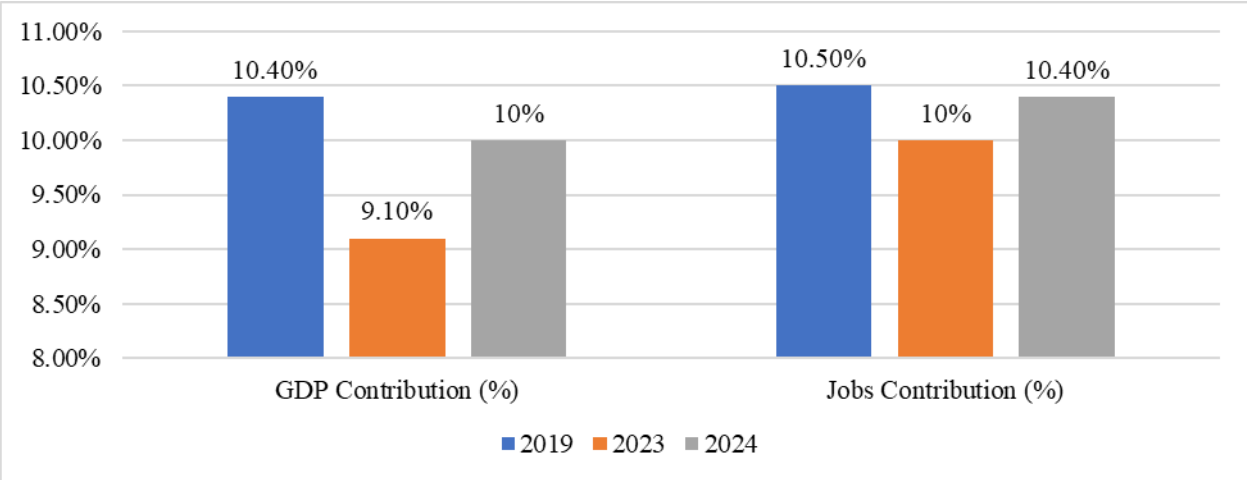

Figure 1. Contribution of tourism to global GDP and the share of the employed population in tourism (% of total),
Source: WTTC (2025).

Monthly data points to robust growth in international tourism revenue through June 2025 in key destinations: Japan recorded an 18% increase, the United Kingdom 13% (as of March), France 9%, and Spain and Turkey each reported 8% increases.

Analyzing the structure of spending, there is a predilection for domestic tourism, whose share rose from 72.2% in 2019 to 75.3% in 2023 (Fig. 1.2). Although 2020 brought dramatic decreases in both segments (46% domestic and 68.6% international), the subsequent evolution confirmed the experts' expectations: domestic tourism recovered faster (+29% in 2021 and +22.5% in 2022), compared to international tourism (+10% and +86.1% respectively).

In the first part of this year, the demand for holidays abroad remained high in the major issuing markets, highlighting increases in spending in China and Spain (both +16% until March), the United Kingdom (+15%), Singapore (+10%) and the Republic of Korea (+8%). However, according to the September 2025 Tourism Expert Panel, the main obstacles for the current year remain the high costs of transport and accommodation, along with other economic factors.

As for tourism prices, specific inflation is expected to moderate from 8.0% in 2024 to 6.8% in 2025.

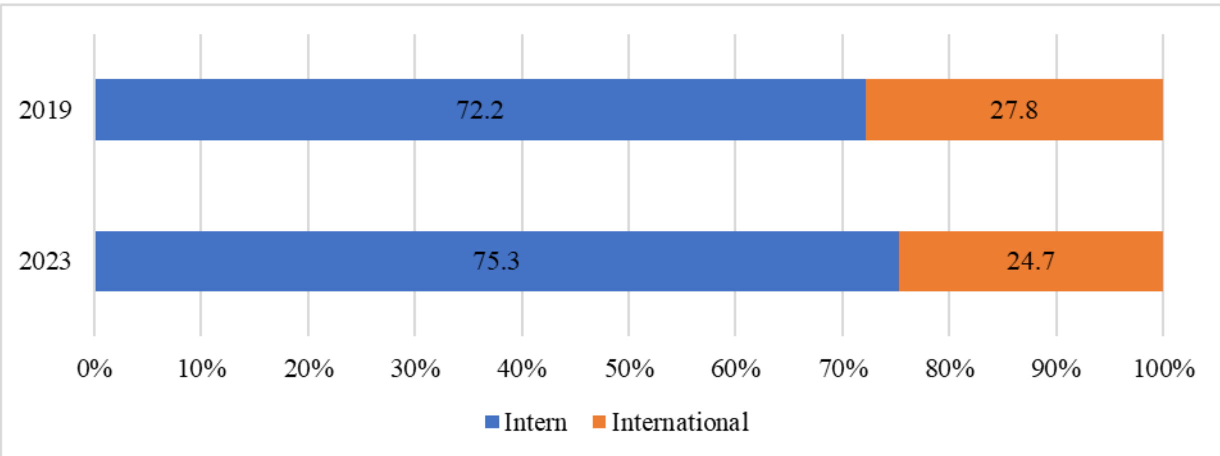

Figure 2. Comparative analysis of spending on domestic and international tourism (%)
Source: WTTC (2025)

However, the rate remains above headline inflation (4.3%) and well above the pre-pandemic level of 3.1%. In response, tourists are becoming more pragmatic, looking for an optimal value for money, opting for closer destinations, shorter stays or reducing expenses.

Economic and geopolitical uncertainty are affecting travel confidence. In September 2025, declining consumer confidence was identified as the third major risk factor, followed by geopolitical risks (4th place), rising trade tariffs (5th place) and travel requirements (6th place). Despite these challenges, national data shows solid spending in the first half of 2025, continuing the evolution of 2024, when revenues from international tourism exports reached a record $2 trillion, 14% above the 2019 level.

In the decades leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic, global tourism experienced an almost continuous growth, with previous crises (such as the SARS epidemic or the 2009 financial crisis) being considered minor incidents by comparison. After 2020 became the worst year in the history of the field, 2021 brought a modest recovery, of only 13%, but slowed down by the persistence of restrictions.

China's reopening in early 2023 was a key moment for the revitalization of international tourism. Currently, five years after the declaration of the pandemic, the industry is once again showing optimism (Statista, 2025), a fact confirmed by the record number of arrivals in the last three years and, in particular, in the first part of this year.

Data from the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) indicate a gradual recovery: in 2023 there were 1.3 billion international arrivals, a level only 12% below that of 2019 (1.5 billion). In 2024, the number of arrivals increased to 1.47 billion, marking an almost total recovery.

In the first half of 2025, international tourism grew by 5% compared to the same period in 2024 and by about 4% compared to the pre-pandemic level, validating January forecasts that predicted annual growth between 3% and 5% above pre-crisis levels.

At the level of the European Union, the accommodation sector reached an all-time high in 2023, according to Eurostat, with almost 3 billion overnight stays - an increase of 1.6% compared to 2019 and 6.3% compared to 2022.

Table no.1. Evolution of International Tourist Arrivals by Country and Region Groups in 2019 and 2024.

Region / Group	**No. of Tourists (millions)**					
	2019	**2020**	**2021**	**2022**	**2023**	**2024**
World	**1468**	**408**	**461**	**976**	**1307**	**1470**
Advanced economies	777	221	240	545	756	783
Emerging economies	691	187	221	431	551	687
Europe (total)	**745.8**	**240.8**	**302.8**	**610.7**	**710.6**	**758.6**
Northern Europe	83.9	23.7	21.9	67.1	79.4	87.1
Western Europe	290.5	83.7	57.6	182.7	207.9	215.3
Central/Eastern Europe	152.5	45.2	54.4	95.4	114.8	125.8
Southern/Med. Europe	304.2	88.4	138.9	265.5	308.3	330.6
Asia-Pacific (total)	**362.1**	**59.0**	**26.5**	**292.7**	**237.8**	**317.8**
North-East Asia	170.3	20.3	10.0	90.5	94.9	144.7
South-East Asia	138.1	25.6	3.1	41.6	97.5	121.4
Oceania	17.5	3.6	0.9	6.8	12.9	14.0
South Asia	36.3	9.6	11.7	23.8	32.4	37.3
Americas (total)	**219.3**	**69.7**	**81.7**	**157.1**	**200.2**	**218.3**
North America	146.6	45.5	52.7	101.9	126.6	137.3
Caribbean	26.1	10.4	14.5	23.6	28.2	31.4
Central America	10.9	3.1	4.7	9.5	11.3	12.0
South America	35.6	9.8	5.3	22.4	33.6	37.6

Region / Group	No. of Tourists (millions)					
Africa (total)	**68.8**	**19.9**	**18.9**	**55.2**	**72.0**	**75.7**
North Africa	26.5	5.6	6.6	19.1	26.9	31.1
Sub-Saharan Africa	43.2	13.4	13.3	28.1	38.3	42.7
Middle East	**71.6**	**19.4**	**30.5**	**68.0**	**93.4**	**101.2**

Source: WTO (2025)

The interest of visitors from outside the continent was high, accounting for 46% of all arrivals. Europe has strengthened its position as regional leader, increasing its global market share from 50.7% in 2019 to 54.6% in 2023 and 54% in 2024, despite a decrease in the absolute volume of tourists below the global average. According to the latest UN Tourism Barometer, Europe attracted around 690 million international tourists last year, 33 million more than the previous year. The positive trend continues in 2025, with the first half of the year bringing almost 340 million international tourists, an increase of 4% compared to 2024 and 7% compared to 2019. The analysis of recent data highlights an uneven recovery in tourist arrivals globally: while some regions have shown resilience and recovered quickly, others have not yet fully overcome the shock caused by the pandemic. In terms of accommodation units, the overall occupancy rate remained constant, reaching 69% in June 2025 (similar to the level below 70% in June 2024) and 71% in July 2025 (identical to July 2024), according to STR data included in the UN Tourism report. At the same time, many destinations reported significant revenue increases in the first half of 2025.

There is a notable difference between the evolution of arrivals and receipts depending on the type of economy. Advanced economies saw modest revenue growth of just 0.5%, while emerging economies benefited from a 2.5% increase in international tourism revenues. This discrepancy is reflected in market shares: advanced economies attract about two-thirds of total global revenues, although, in terms of the volume of tourists (arrivals), they hold a share of only 55%. Regionally, compared to 2019, the Asia-Pacific region suffered the largest decline, with the number of tourists decreasing from 362.1 million to 317.8 million in 2024 (Fig. 3).

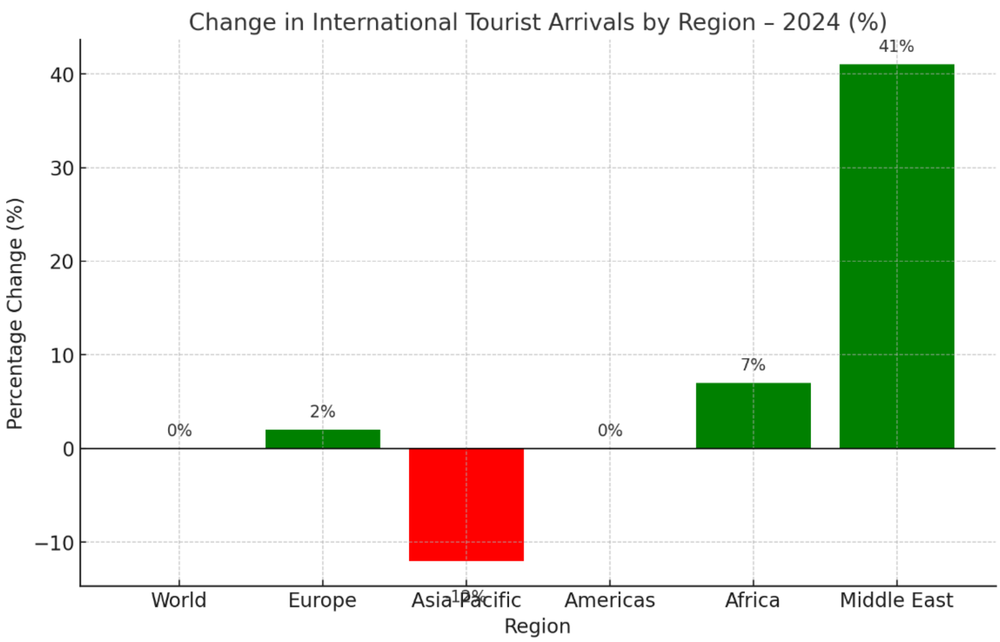

Figure 3. Changes in the share of international arrivals (year 2024 compared to 2019) -%

On the other hand, the Middle East marked the strongest growth, with the number of tourists rising from 71.6 million to 101.2 million, which represents an advance of 41%.

Worldwide, revenues generated by international tourism registered a slight increase of 1.3%, increasing from $1,488 billion (USD) in the pre-pandemic period (2019) to $1,507 billion in 2023. However, this modest increase should be viewed with caution, taking into account the impact of inflation and exchange rate fluctuations.

Looking at the regional situation, Europe reported a 13% increase in revenues, with 2023 setting a record of $600 billion. Although its global share has increased significantly to 43.8% (an advance of 4.5%), it remains below its share of the number of arrivals (54.6% in 2023).

For 2024, international tourism revenues climbed by 11%, reaching a record high of US$1.734 billion, exceeding pre-pandemic levels by about 14% (in real terms) and reflecting intense visitor spending globally.

The recent dynamics, both inter-regional and intra-regional, highlight the transformations of recent years, the pace of recovery after the pandemic being closely linked to the ability of destinations to adapt to the new global context.

In the first half of 2025, the highest growth rates among major destinations were recorded in Japan and Vietnam (both with +21%), Morocco (+19%) and the Republic of Korea (+15%). Mexico and the Netherlands reported increases of 7%. Although Malaysia and Indonesia saw increases of 9% and Hong Kong of 7%, arrivals in these areas still remain below 2019 levels.

Monthly data through June 2025 indicate solid gains for Japan (+18%), the United Kingdom (+13% through March), France (+9%), Spain and Turkey (both +8%). Robust demand is also reflected in the external spending of the major issuing markets: China and Spain (+16%), the United Kingdom (+15%), Singapore (+10%) and South Korea (+8%). Also, world leaders, France and Spain, continued to record steady increases of 5%.

The United States maintains its position as the world's leader in terms of revenue volume, despite an 11.6% decline (from $199 billion in 2019 to $175.9 billion in 2023). However, the amount collected by the US exceeds the cumulative total of the next two ranked countries, Spain and the United Kingdom, which had positive developments of +15.4% (+USD 12.3 billion) and +26.5% (+USD 15.5 billion), respectively. There is a discrepancy between the top arrivals and the top receipts: four countries in the top 10 arrivals (Mexico, Germany, Greece, Austria) are not in the top 10 receipts. In their place are destinations with higher costs, such as the United Arab Emirates, Australia, Canada and Japan (the latter being in the last position in the top 10, with a decrease in receipts of 16.3%). The most dynamic increases in receipts were recorded by the United Arab Emirates (+69.1%), Turkey (+44.3%) and Canada (+31.5%). The United Kingdom climbed two positions, overtaking France. Canada made a spectacular jump from 15th place to 9th, Turkey from 12th to 7th, and the United Arab Emirates from 13th to 6th. Germany left the top 10 (reaching 11th), Macau dropped to 13th, and Thailand recorded a drastic drop, from 4th to 16th, performing below expectations in the post-pandemic period. Globally, international tourism revenues increased by 11% in 2024, reaching a record value of $1.734 billion, which is a 14% surpass of pre-pandemic levels.

Compared to the volatility observed in the rankings of arrivals and receipts, the hierarchy of international tourism expenditures demonstrates superior stability, with the top five positions remaining unchanged, even if the rates of evolution have varied. Outside of this stable core, however, significant changes have taken place: Russia dropped from 6th to 9th, South Korea regressed from 9th to 10th, and Australia marked its only exit from the top 10, reaching 12th place in 2023. On the other hand, positive developments were recorded by Canada, which climbed one position, and Italy, which advanced three places (Fig. 4).

It is obvious that the recent period has been characterized by an asymmetric recovery of the major tourist destinations, both in terms of the number of visitors and the revenues generated. Mature and established markets – the US, Germany, UK, France, and Italy – maintain their steady presence in all three major charts.

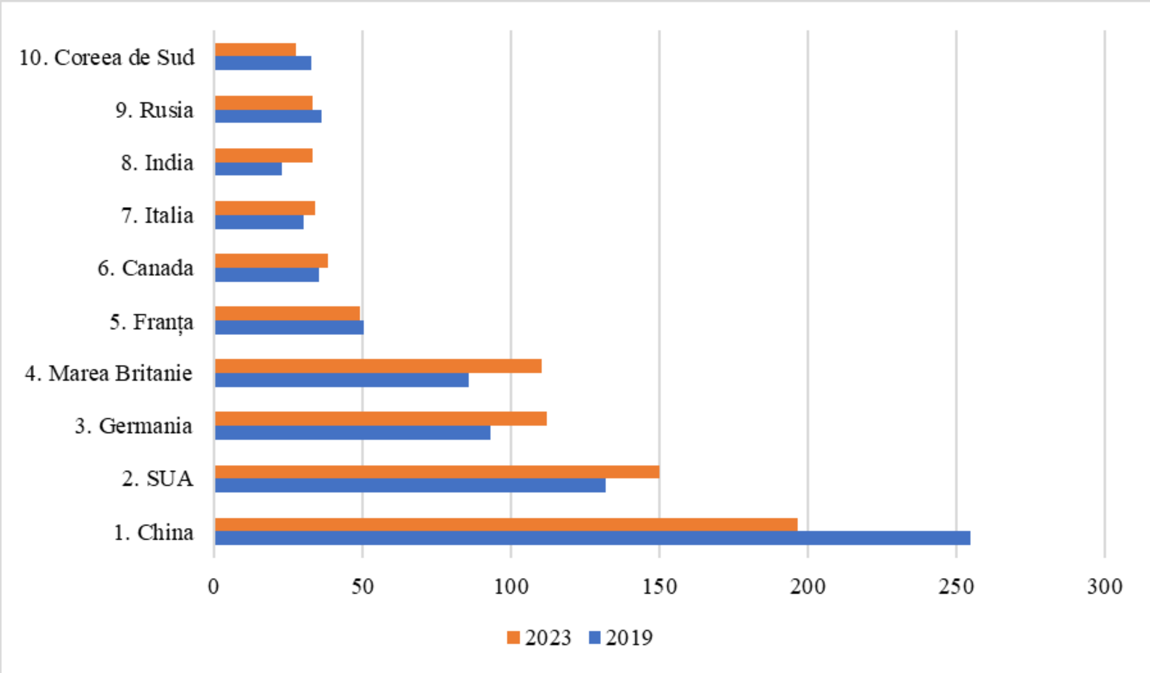

Figure 4. Spending on international tourism ($ billion)

According to a regular survey conducted by the UNWTO among experts, the main factors holding back the growth potential of international tourism are the high costs for transport and accommodation (60%) and the general economic context (59%). The list of challenges is complemented by climate risks (such as the floods in Valencia), global conflicts and service-specific issues, in particular the shortage of qualified personnel (Fig. 5).

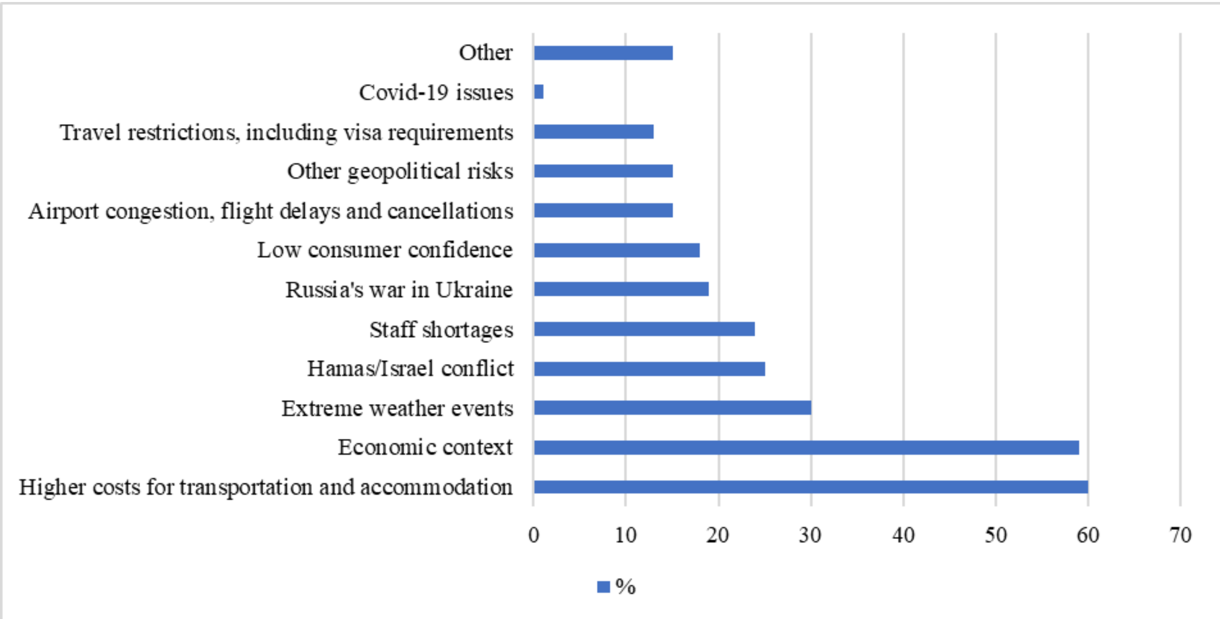

Figure 5. Main factors influencing international tourism

Despite these obstacles, the UN Tourism Confidence Index for 2024 reveals that the performance in the first months of the year exceeded expectations. The outlook points to a full post-crisis recovery, with industry growth supported in particular by the Europe, Middle East and North America regions.

The report "Travel and tourism: market data and analysis", prepared by Market Insights (Statista, 2024), highlights some essential directions for the future of the industry: post-pandemic dynamics: the savings accumulated by the population during the crisis could stimulate an increase in tourism demand; focus on sustainability: increasing demand for eco-friendly tourism products (such as the transition to alternative fuels in the cruise industry, etc.; massive digitalization: it is estimated that, by 2027, 75% of the sector's revenues will be generated from online sales, to the detriment of traditional agencies, a clear trend towards digitalization; Customization of tour packages, flexibility and innovation – these will define future tourism products.

4. CONCLUSIONS

External factors have always influenced tourism, having a direct effect on the population's willingness to travel. A roundtable at the World Travel Market perfectly captured this climate under the title: "Inflation, war and social collapse... What's next for the world's economies and whether tourism can evolve." Although the industry has proven its flexibility, it is now facing an unprecedented accumulation of external shocks: the effects of climate change and the need to transition to sustainable energy sources are putting pressure on prices, a situation aggravated by the conflict in Ukraine. In this context, it is not surprising that energy prices are 89% higher compared to the level of 25 years ago.

Demographic transformations play a crucial role, with an estimated 80% of the population of developed countries soon to be over 60 years old. This phenomenon will lead to an economic slowdown, although immigration could act as a balancing factor. Another major trend is the exchange of the relay between generations: as the "baby boomer" generation travels and spends less, the market is taken over by Millennials and Generation Z, who come with different needs and tastes. Tourist destinations, especially those in emerging markets such as China and India, need to adapt to these new requirements. Regarding the economic context, specialists anticipate a decrease in inflation and a return to normal by the end of this year.

With the intensity of the Covid-19 crisis diminishing and the revival of world economies, the tourism industry has entered an upward trend. While forecasts for 2025 anticipate a full recovery in international arrivals and receipts, the structural effects of the crisis persist, manifesting themselves in an uneven recovery across regions and subregions.

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