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Opportunities for tourism recovery and development during and after COVID-19: Views of tourism scholars *versus* tourism practitioners

Abstract

For many years, tourism scholars have been investigating tourism development issues and disseminating their research results through papers published in academic journals. Although there is evidence that their viewpoints are in discrepancy with the viewpoints of tourism practitioners, these inconsistencies were rarely investigated and juxtaposed. As the global health pandemic caused by COVID-19 stopped travel and tourism all over the world, it created time for both groups of tourism experts to reflect on the various opportunities and challenges that the tourism sector will face in the future. Using the qualitative research design, the authors had the chance to collect, analyse and discuss the views of tourism experts on the recovery phase and possible changes to tourism in Croatia. Data was obtained through semi structured interviews of tourism practitioners from public and private sectors, and through literary review of published opinion papers by international scholars. The aim of the research was focused on the comparison of their views on the short-term recovery of tourism, as well as the long-term possibilities to transform the sector towards a more sustainable and more inclusive sector that is able to utilize the regional competitive advantages in the best possible way. The research results revealed more similarities regarding the attitudes on the recovery during short-term period, as opposed to more dissimilarity on the long-term future of tourism in Croatia. According to the research results, the future of tourism would benefit from the experience and knowledge of both groups combined – practitioners and scholars.

Key words: tourism recovery; COVID-19 crisis; tourism scholars; tourism practitioners; transformation of tourism; sustainability; Croatia

1. Introduction

For many decades, tourism has been among the main economic drivers worldwide. Tourism brings economic wealth to many regions that have limited resources and development options, and it employs many people with different skills and educational levels (United Nations World Tourism Organization [UNWTO], 2019). As a horizontal activity, tourism represents the market for many industries such as transport, culture, sport, health, food production, event businesses and many other activities, contributing to its importance.

The history of tourism has revealed that its success depends on the needs and preferences of people all over the world, but with the possibility to travel as the main factor constraining or stimulating development. As the global pandemic caused by COVID-19 triggered the complete halt of international travel, tourism is among the primary sectors that have been extremely adversely affected (European Travel Commission [ETC], 2020; UNWTO, 2020a). Prior to the COVID-19 crisis, some negative impacts of tourism development led to the change of tourism development goals, emphasizing the need for more 'sustainability' in many tourism regions. At the moment, this change is temporarily overshadowed with the 'need to survive' and return investments in tourism, focusing on short-term

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activities and overlooking the mid and longer-term goals (UNWTO, 2020b). Both the academic sector and the tourism practitioners themselves are trying to find the best solutions for short as well as long-term tourism development.

Several authors have lamented the lack of partnership in tourism development between the tourism industry and academic social sciences (Higuchi & Yamanaka, 2017; Pyo, 2012). At the same time, they clearly highlighted the possibilities of the scientists' contribution to innovation in tourism and the sustainability of tourism development. Hjalager (2002, p. 468) pointed out that "a basic assumption is that knowledge is created in academia and subsequently transferred to enterprises for further development". However, there are a number of gaps between academic research and the business sector that need to be overcome. For example, Higuchi and Yamanaka (2017) stated that qualified researchers should have, among other things, the communication skills for smooth dialog with practitioners, the business sense to understand commercial activity, and the motivation to support the tourism industry through the knowledge-gaining process. Although 'new' knowledge in tourism is very important, the responsibility is both on the one who gives and the one who receives; as Pyo (2012, p. 1173) stated: "the success of future tourism depends partly on the amount and quality of the focused practical knowledge in the destination knowledge depository and proper method of its use".

In Croatia, tourism is among the most important economic activities with the share in GDP of 14.2 to 16.3 percent of the gross value added to the whole of the economy (Ivandić & Šutalo, 2018) and many jobs in Croatia depend on tourism development. Following the beginning of the pandemic, Croatia – as with many other countries – reacted quickly to protect jobs in tourism as predictions for tourism activities in 2020 were not optimistic, and the government worked on '30% of the tourism income' (Kovačević, 2020). Many economists (Ivandić & Šutalo, 2018) highlighted the overdependence on tourism, but did not really indicate possibilities for the development of other sectors' nor establish priorities according to the resources available in specific regions.

As tourism can be considered a competitive advantage for the Croatian economy (Meler, 2011) and also a sector that promotes other economic activities and sectors, it is necessary to take into account the possibilities to recover in both periods, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. In the period of tourism crisis, public as well as private sectors need to know how to approach tourism development, specifically: how to control and guide tourism development in the short term, with consideration to the COVID-19 health restrictions and market segment attitudes, and how to better integrate tourism within regional economic development while expanding the possibilities of tourism as an integrative social activity in the long term.

To be able to contribute to answering those questions raised by the tourism sector in Croatia and, as a group of researchers from the Institute for Tourism – a national institution with long and established links with tourism practitioners, (Dwyer, Čorak, & Tomljenović, 2017) – we are always stressing the need to use the experience, knowledge and initiatives of both. When considering development issues, tourism scholars and tourism practitioners can have different perspectives (Tomljenović & Ateljević, 2016). The aim of this paper is to give directions for both tourism futures in the period of the crisis and after COVID-19 crisis – short and long-term – based on the views of both tourism scholars and tourism practitioners.

2. Research design

The paper is based on three-fold mixed qualitative research design, which combines literature, in-depth semi structured interviews, and researchers' experience. As a tourism destination, Croatia served as

an example in a research context, as it was among the rare few European countries that had almost no infected persons during June 2020, while also being accessible by car and, therefore, during the summer months of July and August 2020, achieved about 50% of the overnights realized in the same period of 2019(Hrvatska turistička zajednica [HTZ], 2020).

Arguments for discussion are based on:

(1) Articles published in "Tourism Geographies – An International Journal of Tourism Space, Place and Environment", 2020, Vol. 22/3 https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rtxg20 written by 45 international tourism scholars in 28 articles

(2) Qualitative research that was conducted using interviews among the main tourism stakeholders in Croatia (n=12), including: tourism boards, hotel industry, tourism agencies, nautical tourism and Ministry of Tourism and Sport of the Republic of Croatia, during the period of April-May 2020. Inspired by one of the international webinars, the semi structured interview (Wengraf, 2001) was based on 5 questions encompassing short-term recovery but also long-term possible changes: 1. What activities have been ongoing or are planned for destinations in order to overcome the health crisis; 2. Are there any changes regarding the destination management system in comparison to the pre-COVID-19 crisis; 3. Does the public sector support tourism stakeholders in changing their business models; 4. What do you think about changes in marketing; 5. Have you noticed the stakeholders' need for improvement of their knowledge. Reports on each interview were written as basis for the analysis.

(3) Authors' professional experience, spanning more than 30 years of tourism research (longitudinal national survey on attitudes and expenditures of tourists) and tourism consulting (authoring and co-authoring many regional and destination tourism development/master and marketing plans), both oriented to support sustainable tourism development in Croatia (Dwyer et al., 2017; Marušić et al., 2020). Using the above research input, the analysis focused on similarities and differences between tourism scholars' and tourism practitioners' views on tourism recovery and development in short and longer time periods, which can help in shaping more sustainable and responsible tourism development.

3. Findings

As an international journal, "Tourism Geographies" was among one of the first journals to publish a series of 28 papers on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on global tourism, offering the views and ideas of 45 tourism scholars from different scientific interests in tourism. It served as a foundation for a variety of academic viewpoints on the temporary situation, but also on the future of the tourism sector (Table 1). Both the broadness and the clarity of the scholars' reflections provided ample framework for discussing possible tourism recovery options. Their views are similar in the leading idea that this crisis should become a turning-point for the 'growth-strategies' in tourism development to be transformed into more sustainable and more inclusive activity (Brouder et al., 2020). They envisaged the short-term possibilities while also offering guiding principles for the future of the tourism sector (Table 1).

Table 1
Articles published in "Tourism Geographies" (2020, Vol. 22/3) – Authors, titles and main concepts

Authors and paper titles	Main concepts/results
Ateljević I.: *Transforming the (tourism) world for good and re-generating the potential 'new normal'*	• Meaningful and positive transformation of the planet and tourism is needed • Necessary transformation towards the regenerative paradigm and regenerative economic systems • The vision of connecting regenerative agriculture and transformative tourism to reset the global tourism system for good

Table 1 **Continued**

Authors and paper titles	Main concepts/results
Benjamin, S., Dillette, A., &. Alderman, D. H.: *"We can't return to normal": committing to tourism equity in the post-pandemic age*	• Tourism transformation must bring an actionable focus on equity • Tourism as a social force with the power to change people and societies
Brouder, P.: *Reset redux: possible evolutionary pathways towards the transformation of tourism in a COVID-19 world*	• COVID-19 presents a once–in-a-generation opportunity for transformation • Matrix of potential evolutionary pathways towards tourism transformation: PATH (Creation; Dependence), INSTITUTIONAL (Inertia, Innovation)
Carr, A.: *COVID-19, indigenous peoples and tourism: a view from New Zealand*	• The COVID-19 pandemic's impact is predicted to be long-lasting with an intergenerational impact on both indigenous and non-indigenous peoples • Indigenous values and aspirations would underpin a renewed, resilient and caring global tourism industry for future generations and ecosystems worldwide
Cave, J. & Dredge, D.: *Regenerative tourism needs diverse economic practices*	• Calls for a new relationship between tourism and capitalism have intensified due to COVID-19 • The "diverse economies" framework provides a promising pathway forward by directing attention towards the diversity of economic practices of tourism
Cheer, J. M.: *Human flourishing, tourism transformation and COVID-19: a conceptual touchstone*	• The concept of 'human flourishing' has the potential to offer a more nuanced set of approaches by which the impact of tourism on host communities might be better measured
Cooper, J. A. & Alderman, D. H.: *Cancelling March Madness exposes opportunities for a more sustainable sports tourism economy*	• An understanding of the impact of COVID-19 offers an opportunity to bring about an alternative, more sustainable sport-tourism economy
Crossley, E.: *Ecological grief generates desire for environmental healing in tourism after COVID-19*	• Tourism research is starting to take interest in the psychology of environmental distress – how expressions of hope or environmental reparation can be connected to ecological grief • The challenge is to design tourism futures by harnessing and channelling environmental hope in a way that heals the natural world and our ecological grief
Edelheim, J.: *How should tourism education values be transformed after 2020*	• Higher education will have to adapt to a different reality • Courses planned and executed for years using textbooks and reading that highlight the 'need' for growth will look dated • Attention will need to be directed to safety and security, health issues, and microenterprises that serve tourism, whilst simultaneously being engaged in other fields that can secure an income in the event of another lockdown
Everingham, P. & Chassagne, N.: *Post COVID-19 ecological and social reset: moving away from capitalist growth models toward tourism as Buen Vivir*	• The pandemic provides an opportunity for reimagining tourism away from exploitative models that disregard people, places, and the natural environment • The South American concept of 'Buen Vivir' can help to shift priorities away from economic growth and towards greater social and environmental wellbeing; it can reorient the tourism industry towards localized tourism
Galvani, A., Lew, A. A., & Sotelo Perez, M.: *COVID-19 is expanding global consciousness and the sustainability of travel and tourism*	• Travel and tourism contribute to the expansion of global consciousness • The pandemic will stimulate growing numbers of people, businesses, and governments to adopt new ways of thinking, behaving and operating, which are more aligned with sustainable development
Hall, C. M., Scott, D., & Gossling, S.: Pandemics, transformations and tourism: be careful what you wish for	• The effects of COVID-19 may lead to the reorientation of tourism in some cases, but in others will contribute to policies reflecting selfish nationalism • The response to planetary limits and sustainable tourism requires a global approach • The possibility for a comprehensive transformation of the tourism system remains extremely limited without a fundamental transformation of the entire plan
Haywood, K. M.: *A post COVID-19 future – tourism re-imagined and re-enabled*	• The academic community needs to be engaged – urgent need to determine how skills and knowledge can be put to better use • Critical issues: how to establish a purpose for communities-as-destinations, improve governance, formulate tourism strategies and make revisions to policies that reflect purpose and principles
Higgins-Desbiolles, F.: *Socialising tourism for social and ecological justice after COVID-19*	• The COVID-19 pandemic crisis may offer a rare and invaluable opportunity to rethink and reset tourism toward a better pathway for the future • Community-centered tourism framework that redefines and reorients tourism based on the rights and interests of local communities and local people

Table 1 **Continued**

Authors and paper titles	Main concepts/results
Huet, S. T.: *COVID-19 leads to a new context for the "right to tourism": a reset of tourists, perspectives on space appropriation is needed*	• 'Right to tourism', unlimited occupation of space for leisure purposes – possible reset of tourists' perspectives on space appropriation? • Deeper understanding of the challenges facing remote communities, as tourism hosts and greater empathy for those who lack the possibility of transnational mobility
Ioannides, D. & Gyimóthy, S.: *The COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity for escaping the unsustainable global tourism path*	• COVID-19 offers public, private and academic actors with a unique opportunity to design and consolidate the transition towards a greener and more balanced tourism • Redesigning curricula and educational activities to train students to gain skills in complexity-thinking, knowledge of post-capitalist economies, and collaborative business models
Lapointe, D.: *Reconnecting tourism after COVID-19: the paradox of alterity in tourism areas*	• Relinking of tourism to the needs of the host communities as a part of a survival strategy • "6 foot-tourism world" where sanitary safety would be a core of a closed and controlled tourism development – initiatives to diversify the customer base and to rely more on the local market
Mostafanezhad, M.: *COVID-19 is an unnatural disaster: Hope in revelatory moments of crisis*	• Reframing the pandemic as an "unnatural disaster" opens new debates at the intersection of tourism geographies and political ecologies of hope in moments of crisis
Niewiadomski, P.: *COVID-19: from temporary de-globalisation to re-discovery of tourism?*	• 75 years of neoliberal agenda and popularisation of international travel and expansion of tourism industry • Temporary processes of de-globalisation offer the tourism industry opportunity for a re-boot, chance to re-develop in line with the tenants of sustainability
Nepal, S. K.: *Travel and tourism after COVID-19 – business as usual or opportunity to reset?*	• Mass tourism is not going to go away anytime soon, but that needs to be carefully planned – diverse portfolio of tourism markets and not overreliance on one segment • Certain areas need to be totally off-limits to tourism development while some areas should limit development so as to maintain the status of highly attractive high-value tourism destinations
Penecky, T.: *Critical tourism scholars: brokers of hope*	• Different varieties of hope we can draw upon to better understand why one can be both critical and hopeful • Fragility is present in tourism in general as people navigate uncertainty, environments, experiences, and encounters that are unpredictable
Prideaux, B., Thompson, M., & Pabel, A.: *Lessons from COVID-19 can prepare global tourism for the economic transformation needed to combat climate change*	• The recovery phase will overlap with global efforts to deal with the climate crisis • Beyond COVID-19, the global economy and political system will be forced to respond to climate change, which will necessitate further transformation of the global economy
Renaud, L.: *Reconsidering global mobility – distancing from mass cruise tourism in the aftermath of COVID-19*	• Host territories relying on national and regional governance should gradually ban or restrict the arrival of mega-cruise ships, and implement policies that promote the development of a niche cruise-tourism industry
Romagosa, F.: *The COVID-19 crisis: Opportunities for sustainable and proximity tourism*	• Tourism can be a good tool for local development, but it should not be the only one • It will be necessary to find social balance in every destination – important for tourism planning and management policies
Rowen, I.: *The transformational festival as a subversive toolbox for a transformed tourism: lessons from Burning Man for a COVID-19 world*	• Transformational festivals can offer conceptual resources for a transformation of tourism into a more responsible and sustainable practice • Values such as participation and civic responsibility can inform and transform not only festivals, but also the relationship between guests and host, while supporting more sustainable tourism practices
Stankov, U., Filimonau, V., & Vujičić, M. D.: *A mindful shift: an opportunity for mindfulness-driven tourism in a post-pandemic world*	• The COVID-19 pandemic is a wake-up call and an opportunity for the tourism industry to embrace the mindfulness movement, trusting in its capacity to pave a new way towards more compassionate and meaningful tourism for both hosts and guests
Tomassini, L. & Cavagnaro, E.: *The novel spaces and power-geometries of tourism and hospitality after 2020 will belong to the 'local'*	• Rethink the future scenario of tourism and hospitality to bring about a positive transformation after 2020 • The urgency of belonging to the local is more and more evident (multiplicity of functions)
Zeng, Z., Chen, P-J. & Lew, A. A.: *From high-touch to high-tech: COVID-19 drives robotics adoption*	• Robotics, artificial intelligence and human-robot interactions have gained an increased presence to help manage the spread of COVID-19 • Robotics can help in better monitoring and protection of natural and cultural resources, re-route tourists to prevent overcrowding, and provide concierge and public information systems

Although the authors of the papers (Table 1) described the situation and possible tourism future(s) from their different perspectives and different aspects, they all call upon the transformation, regeneration, re-boot of tourism and its economic, environmental and social characteristics. The tourism scholars supported the need for change with arguments for the fundamental transformation of the entire planet (Hall, Scott, & Gossling, 2020) creating a vision for a better future through connecting "regenerative agriculture and transformative tourism" (Ateljević, 2020) or through the transformation of the entire tourism system (Nepal, 2020). The majority of the authors expressed similar thoughts on the health pandemic as a rare and invaluable opportunity to rethink and reset tourism toward a better future (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020) and a chance to re-think future scenarios of tourism and hospitality (Tomassini & Cavagnaro, 2020). The transformation of the tourism industry towards a more sustainable sector is considered by almost all of the authors (Table 1) but discussed from different points of view, including: environmental, societal or economic (Galvani et al., 2020; Everingham et al., 2020; Prideaux, 2020; Haywood, 2020) and within different contexts.

Niewiadomski (2020), highlights the neoliberal agenda that allowed popularisation and expansion of tourism; however, the temporary processes of de-globalisation caused by COVID-19 as a recent social movement, offers the tourism industry with an opportunity to re-boot toward sustainability. On a more operational level, Nepal (2020) elaborates on the return of mass tourism, pointing out that tourism needs to be carefully planned with a diverse portfolio of the tourism market. Meanwhile, Cooper and Alderman (2020) discuss alternative and sustainable sports-tourism economy to build more resilient local economies, while Renaud (2020) argues on the need to restrict mega-cruise ships and develop niche tourism industries that will include local actors.

The social context of future tourism development has also been tackled by Higgins-Desbiolles' (2020) through the idea for a community-centered tourism framework that redefines and reorients tourism based on the rights and interests of local people, also pointing out that de-globalisation can lead to potential nationalism of some countries (Niewiadomski, 2020). Cheer (2020) described the concept of 'human flourishing' for measuring the impact of tourism on host communities, while Stankov et al. (2020) elaborated on the mindfulness movement, and Everingham and Chassagne (2020) explained the South American concept of 'Buen Vivir' which can help to shift priorities away from economic growth towards greater social and environmental wellbeing.

Ateljević (2020, p. 468) stressed the difference between 'change' and 'transformation' while citing Ackerman-Anderson that "change happens within the existing world view, while transformation in fact is the emergence of a new order out of existing chaos, which begins with ever-increasing disruption to the system, moves to the point of death of the old way of being, and then, as with the phoenix, proceeds toward an inspired rebirth". Hall et al. (2020) discussed the degree of change from minimal to high change of all factors, and the interventions driving tourism change and recovery, from economic intervention, to public health interventions, travel restrictions, tourism policies, and the destination's capacity to recover as well as future crisis preparedness. They gave predictions on the focus of initial tourism revival depending on domestic tourism but also on international travel with medical certificates for COVID-19 as a prerequisite for travelling. Brouder (2020) presented a matrix of potential evolutionary pathways towards tourism transformation based on supply and demand, and 'path' development and 'institutional change'. The matrix implies that transformation in tourism is possible when there is institutional innovation in both the demand and the supply side.

As explained within the research design, five questions were posed to tourism practitioners that work in public and private tourism organizations. In their answers, tourism practitioners predominantly

mentioned the need for government financial support and they were also aware of the inability of some of their local governments to immediately respond to the crisis (Table 2). The public sector primarily used social media for communication with their potential guests, while tourism companies focused on health protocols that could help in achieving a safe environment.

Table 2
Strategies, measures and activities for post-COVID-19 tourism in Croatia

Research questions	Strategies, measures and activities
Activities that have been ongoing or are planned for destinations to overcome the health crisis	• Government financial support - 66 measures to preserve jobs in COVID-19 affected sectors and to ensure the solvency of tourism companies • Health measures for different stakeholders (private renters, hotels and villas, marinas, restaurants) • Redefinition of all marketing campaigns – focus on social networks (#CroatiaLongDistanceLove and #CroFact) • Incompetency of local governments to quickly respond to the crisis situation • Some DMOs focusing on online selling (tickets for museums, river rides) and Internet campaigns
Changes regarding the destination management system in comparison to the pre-COVID-19 crisis	• There is no crisis management on a destination level – health and other measures are on a national level • Ministry of Tourism – meetings with tourism associations regarding their problems • Reorganization of DMOs on regional and local levels have to be harmonized with new legislative (but not driven by the pandemic) • Istria is the only region that organized a new Tourism Committee with different stakeholders (including a medical expert) to ensure the quick revival of tourism and prompt communication channels for all involved in tourism development • Main DMOs tasks – communication with stakeholders, guests and media using social media (focus on safety) and online education about crisis management and the use of digital marketing
Public sector support of tourism stakeholders in changing their business models/measures for the new situation	• Nothing will be changed except for social distancing • No ground for transformations • Online education will become a necessity • It is still too early to consider changes of business models (depending on the duration of the COVID-19 crisis) • More orientation to sustainable development • Redefinition of online campaigns (focus on outdoor activities, beauty of nature) • Joint promotional campaigns of hotels, DMOs and county government
Opinion on changes in marketing	• Joint promotional campaigns – Ministry of Tourism and National Tourism Board • New communication concept – "Welcome Croatian into your home" (focus on gastronomy, beauty of nature, active holiday and culture) on Instagram (more than 4 million people) • Joining the UNWTO #TravelTomorrow campaign, which accentuates permanent tourism values including gastro diversity and heritage; WTTC and ETC 'Together in Travel' campaign • Stronger direct communication with loyal guests • Dominance of online marketing • Evaluation of product portfolios – nautical, camping and family market segments
Stakeholders' interest for improvement of their knowledge	• It is difficult to think about the improvement of knowledge while we still have to survive the crisis • Concern for the future of the sector – probably DMOs have to change • Local agriculture needs to be activated and linked to tourism • Insufficient knowledge on crisis management but still too early to plan educational programs • Stakeholders will accept education only if it is necessary for their business – if it is about their inclusion in destination and 'soft' skills they will not participate

Besides their obvious focus on financial and marketing issues (Table 2) and the main interest to 'survive' the period of lockdown, tourism practitioners seem to be aware of the stronger communication with their target markets. Activities for overcoming the crisis came from national level (government financial support to protect jobs, health measures and redefinition of marketing campaigns) and there were no changes regarding the destination management system in response to the crisis, except the previously planned harmonization of the system of DMOs. Only one region (Istria, as the most developed tourism destination) established a new Tourism Committee with different stakeholders (including a medical expert) to ensure the quick revival of tourism and prompt communication channels for all involved in tourism development.

As marketing activities could be changed much easier than other business aspects, tourism practitioners mentioned the new communication concept on a national level, joint promotional campaigns, stronger direct communication with loyal guests, and dominance of online marketing. All of these changes were market driven with no intention toward long-term changes. When asked about the need to improve their knowledge, tourism stakeholders emphasized that it was still "too early" to think about the future although they were aware of the need for obtaining more skills on crisis management; unfortunately, 'sustainability' was rarely mentioned as a goal.

Discrepancies between the opinions of international tourism scholars and national tourism practitioners were expected as they stem from their respective work experience and professional background. As can be concluded from the research results (Table 1 and Table 2), scholars expressed their thoughts on global issues and long-term perspectives, while tourism practitioners were primarily focused on immediate positions and local perspectives, as well as short-term activities and survival strategies.

As a sector, the tourism industry needs to go through the recovery process on the way to revival. To that end, it is worth discussing both discourses – those of scholars as well as practitioners' – in both short-term and long-term periods, in the context of the Croatian summer tourism season.

3.1. Short-term recovery or how to respond to (temporary) market preferences

For comprehension of the recovery process and activities, it is crucial to understand the context. Free movement is a key prerequisite for tourism flows and COVID-19 travel restrictions, which were dependent on the health situation of each individual country, led to almost the complete halt of travel and tourism within Europe from March to June 2020. Some European countries, such as Croatia, managed to reduce the number of infected persons early on and, as a result, were able to ensure a favourable health situation during June 2020 for the possible restoration of tourism services over the 2020 summer season. Upon a better health situation, the majority of EU countries decided to open their borders and international tourism commenced, with very few international arrivals registered in Croatia during June. However, during July and August 2020, the numbers increased to almost the same levels of summer months from previous years in many destinations along the Adriatic coast (HTZ, 2020). Traditionally, these destinations are the major summer attractions in Croatia (Dwyer et al., 2017). Croatia is located near the main generating countries such as Germany, Austria, Italy and Slovenia and has all the advantages that tourists wanted during the COVID-19 health crisis – they could feel safe, they could arrive by car and feel independent regarding mobility, and besides hotels they could stay in campsites or secluded villas that offered secure ambiance for their summer holidays. As result, the northern part of the Adriatic coast and islands managed to attract almost half of the flows registered in 2019, though destinations further south along the Adriatic coast suffered a bigger loss of tourism, as potential tourists were not inclined to arrive by plane. But Croatia was one of the only EU countries that allowed USA visitors to come. During summer (July and August) Croatia

witnessed the rise of nautical tourism, tourism on islands, camping as well as stays in villas, especially in the northern parts of the Adriatic coast (Istria and Kvarner County) that are easily accessible by car. In Croatia, overnights registered by e-Visitor during July and August 2020 amounted to 32.5 million, which represented 59% of overnights achieved during the same period of 2019, as the leading destination of the Mediterranean (HTZ, 2020).

However, with opening of national borders, and with the organization of local festivals, family gatherings, weddings, and night clubs, the number of those infected by COVID-19 started to grow at the beginning of August, causing the earlier return home for many tourists. This situation opened the door for some countries to make political decisions such as not recommending Croatia as a travel destination, or even putting Croatia on the so-called 'red list' of countries, meaning that, upon their return, tourists would need to have a valid health certificate or would be required to stay in a 2-week quarantine. These decisions could be characterized as political because the number of COVID-19 positive individuals was greater in their own countries in comparison with Croatia. The use of the COVID-19 crisis for political purposes has also been documented in the sport arena when some countries forbid competitions upon the arrival of athletes due to unclear guidelines on the timing and the responsibility for testing potentially-infected athletes. These are the arguments that supported the viewpoints of some of the scholars that, not only would domestic tourism be protected, but that the situation could also lead to the potential nationalism of some countries (Niewiadomski, 2020). In an interview for daily newspapers in Croatia, Otmar Michaeler (the CEO of the Falkensteiner Group – one of the international hotel companies in Croatia) (2020) suggested that for economic prosperity Europe needs open borders, cooperation and intensified data exchange. He also argued that closing the borders or retaliation is a 'short-breath' approach.

On an international level, the European Commission (2020a) reacted with a press release – "Tourism and transport: the Commission's guidance on how to safely resume travel and reboot tourism in 2020 and beyond" with recommendations for safely restoring free movement, reopening the borders and safely resuming tourism services, while advocating for a phased and coordinated approach. Unfortunately, that did not happen as countries individually decided to open their borders and, later on, established different lists – placing other countries on these lists according to risk status (red, orange or green) according to the number of COVID-19 cases per 100,000 inhabitants, but each with different criteria. Although the policy paper was created to solve the short-term tourism crisis in EU countries, and to make travelling attractive again, it also highlighted the need for sustainability and the ambition "to maintain Europe as the world's leading tourist destination in terms of value, quality, sustainability and innovation" European Commission (2020a). In the document, it is also noteworthy that the terminology regarding tourism changed from the previously widely-used term 'tourism industry' to an emphasis on the more appealing 'vibrant tourism ecosystem'. On the international level, it is clear that policy makers were aware of both situations – the importance of short-term recovery but also the need for long-term transformation. It is interesting to note, that both tourism scholars and tourism practitioners never mentioned this framework, or any other, by the international organizations.

In these circumstances, when the reality was changing from day to day, it was expected that tourism practitioners in Croatia would be focused on the survival phase of their tourism businesses, expecting various support from the national government. Activities that have been ongoing or were planned for destinations to overcome the health crisis mainly came from the public sector, with regard to the redefinition of marketing activities and strengthening social media campaigns as virtual reality became the major promotional tool during the 'lockdown' phase. Dominance of digital marketing was recognized by tourism practitioners (Table 2) but not really the lack of knowledge or special skills.

Researchers responded (Table 1) with great concern to the global pandemic and in the short-term they accentuated health-restrictions and the necessity to take care about the health recommendations. Lapointe (2020) called it the "6 foot-tourism world" where sanitary safety would be the core of closed and controlled tourism development while Edelheim (2020) pointed out the need to take care about safety and security, as well as health issues. Behavioural science also offered recommendations regarding behavioural interventions such as clear principles for communicating health crisis information (Lunn at al., 2020). Theories developed earlier, such as the nudge theory (Thaler & Sunstein, 2009), were among those theories that could be applied to health crisis where 'social distances' need to be respected and where intervention, but not banning, could be used to make lives better. The theory can be used for reducing the number of tourists on the usually-crowded tourism spots, but the same can also be applied to keeping the distance during health pandemics. There is still not enough evidence about the benefits of the nudge theory, with regard to health situations; therefore, researchers need continue to develop new and different tools that would improve people's decisions.

According to tourism flows in July and August 2020, the summer season in Croatia showed that the tourist market is more resilient to the COVID-19 crisis than was previously assumed. Moreover, some of the segments – such as younger tourists, nautical tourists, and those who chose to stay in camps and villas outside the destinations – are not ready to give up their 'holiday time', even despite recommendations from their own governments. It is still not known how risk perceptions influence the decision to visit destination countries. EUROMONITOR International investigated the market segment attitudes regarding COVID-19 and changes of their consumer behaviour (Euromonitor International, 2020) and subsequently determined that the majority of the defined consumer segments still place more value on real experiences in comparison to virtual ones. In addition, they are not so sensitive to the crisis as they would rather stick to their usual preferences as opposed to changing them. Of course, digital and online shopping prevailed in their shopping habits, as that was posed by their national health restrictions during the 'lockdown' phase. Again, preferences for more sustainable and greener options were highlighted by the majority of consumer segments, showing high level of accordance with the scholars' views.

It was expected that tourism practitioners would put emphasis on the 'survival' models and all issues regarding safety and security for their guests, along with models for financial support that they expected to come from public sources. Although tourism scholars argued more about the opportunities to transform the tourism sector – meaning a long-term transformation period – it can be concluded that there was a rather high level of accordance between the scholars' views and those of practitioners.

3.2. Tourism transformation or how to make more profound, long-term changes

The results of the interviews conducted with the tourism practitioners revealed that they were shocked by the COVID-19 pandemic. Their efforts were focused on economic options and short-terms results, neglecting the previous challenges of tourism development, which were so often expressed by tourism scholars, such as: short tourism seasons, pressure on destination infrastructure, impact of climate change, lack of cooperation by stakeholders, and the need for efficient destination management and tourism planning (Čorak & Boranić Živoder, 2017; Kranjčević, 2017).

The global pandemic and the specific position of tourism during 2020 for Croatia has additional importance as the latest "Strategy of Croatian Tourism to 2020" Government of the Republic of Croatia (2013) came to the end, indicating the need for creating and implementing a new strategy. As quantitative goals of the previous Strategy, for example, the growth of tourism flows and tourism expenditures were either completely achieved or almost completely achieved. However, many

development challenges – such as: spreading the tourism season, more equal development of the coastal and continental parts of Croatia, improved tourism attractions, more efficient destination management, greater diversification of tourism products, and sustainable development – are still goals that have not yet been achieved in a sufficient manner. Of course, there are examples of tourism regions and destinations within Croatia that have already improved their tourism in many of the above-mentioned aspects, but they are still only cases of good planning and efficient destination management (Dwyer, Ateljević, & Tomljenović, 2017).

Irena Ateljević, as an experienced researcher and scholar, led a team of researchers from the Institute for Tourism, which was empowered by Pauline Sheldon in conducting research entitled "Auroville empirical survey of transformative tourists" (UNWTO, 2016) with the primary aim of obtaining a travel portrait of transformative tourists. The study confirmed the trend of conscious consumers revealing "respondents' high commitment to environmental and social justice as well as cherishing self-direction, benevolence and universalism" (UNWTO, 2016). At that time, even the UNWTO was not inclined to use the term 'transformative tourism' in defining the title of the publication and decided to entitle the publication as "Global Report on the Transformative Power of Tourism" with similar terms, but not the same meaning.

During April 2020, tourism practitioners from both the public and private sectors (Table 2) were completely oriented towards the 'survival phase' showing differences in comparison to scholars' views (Table 1), which were much more comprehensive and oriented towards longer-term development and future tourism benefits. It was expected that the scholars with the international careers in tourism research and/or education had more global and more profound perspectives than practitioners from one country. It is interesting to note that both groups were solely engaged in their 'world of experience' and were not trying to discuss the measures and activities suggested by policy papers published by the international tourism organizations. One of the issues that occurred was an overdependence on tourism, as mentioned by scholars (Ivandić & Šutalo, 2018; Kovačević, 2020) and an important challenge for the Croatian economy as well. The concept of smart specialization was overlooked, despite being a concept and planning procedure that offers significantly better use of regional resources as well as the cooperation of sectors that are gathered around regional competitive advantages. The concept of smart strategies has been supported by the EU for over a decade (s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu) as a bottom-up approach that is based on priorities such as knowledge and innovation, and utilizes sustainable growth, which promotes a greener and more competitive economy with inclusive growth, delivering economic, social and territorial cohesion (European Commission, 2020b). For the majority of the 177 regions and 19 countries that joined the EU Smart Specialization platforms, tourism is a horizontal activity with a weak connection to other economic activities. Although smart specialization in tourism is a relatively new research area, Jonshon and Samakovlis (2018) made a bibliometric analysis of knowledge development in smart tourism research, which revealed research cluster groups that are focused on e-tourism and foundations of smart tourism. Buhalis and Amaranggana (2014, 2015) also emphasized the rapid development of technologies that form the basis for the smart tourism destinations concept. They also pointed out that "bringing smartness into tourism destinations requires dynamically interconnecting stakeholders through a technological platform on which information relating to tourism activities could be exchanged instantly" (Buhalis & Aranggana, 2015, p. 377). That accent on technological development was further elaborated by Zeng et al. (2017) through the provided example of use of robotics and artificial intelligence, which could help in preventing the spread of COVID-19 as well as better monitoring and protection of natural and cultural resources.

Now, the ultimate question is how to make the necessary steps toward the development of more sustainable tourism while, at the same time, ensuring it is better integrated into regional development, which was a primary goal prior to COVID-19 crisis. All of the scholars highlighted the need for change on a global scale, with urgent transformation of the whole system of tourism (Ateljević, 2020; Tremblay-Huet, 2020; Hall, Scott & Gossling, 2020 and other authors published in Tourism Geographies Vol 22/3). As tourism practitioners are predominantly focused on their temporary situation and frequently neglected long-term necessary changes, it is up to tourism scholars to detail the steps toward a better future and to provide practitioners with the necessary motivation and knowledge to overcome all the burdens of the development of such a complex sector as tourism. It is the view of the authors of this paper that more activities are required to unite the academic world of tourism with that of the real world of tourism. The results of tourism research, which are presented only in scientific journals, need to be regularly disseminated and put in the context of tourism business more often, as the tourism industry requires leadership and creativity from academics (Brouder et al., 2020). Tourism practitioners, on the other hand, need to take into account the research and expertise of educators when planning and discussing the future of their companies' destinations. Cooperation should be a two-way path toward a better future, and not just parallel existence with only occasional dialogue.

4. Concluding remarks

The need for more collaboration between tourism scholars and tourism practitioners has been stressed in some of the academic papers, but was rarely the focus of scientific research in tourism. It is self-evident that for the development of any activity, but especially such a global and complex phenomenon as tourism, the scholars' knowledge, creativity and different views on many tourism topics are needed. Meanwhile, any country or region that is developing tourism needs experienced tourism practitioners who are able to respond to the challenges faced by tourism on a daily basis. The COVID-19 pandemic has once again stressed the need to have clear views on the actions that have to be undertaken in the recovery phases, but also the need to take this opportunity to make necessary transformations for a better future of the sector.

Croatia is a good example of a country that has the chance to use this break for reconsidering and rethinking its strategic options in developing tourism. Although the majority of strategic documents – such as "Strategy of Tourism Development in Croatia until 2020" (Government of the Republic of Croatia, 2013) – supported sustainable tourism development, Croatia witnessed a substantial rise in tourism over the past decade. This rise had positive consequences in the majority of the destinations but, during the last few years, some of the destinations have also faced some negative aspects, especially environmental ones, as the infrastructure of the destinations were not designed or built to accommodate so many people. Therefore, the need for expanding the tourism season was often pointed out in order to ease congestion but, still, statistical data on overnights achieved predominately favoured growth during main summer months, rather than spread over the other seasons. According to *eVisitor* (HTZ, 2020) the total number of overnights in 2019 was 95.5 million, while 57.5 percent of that total was realized in July and August. This share has not changed significantly during the last five years. The global pandemic caused by COVID-19 also revealed the overreliance of the Croatian economy on tourism, but economists did not really discuss many other options, highlighting the need to continue further development of tourism, but in a more sustainable and responsible manner. The opportunity to capitalise on the advantages of Croatian tourism – such as: authentic local experiences in rural areas, gastronomic offers, animation programmes, cultural, sports and adventure tourism offers, – were

accentuated together with the call for the digital transformation of all tourism stakeholders and better tourism governance overall.

The gaps in the opinion of tourism scholars and tourism practitioners provide a solid basis for further discussion and cooperation between both groups. The practitioners should be more open to education, aside from the conventional hospitality and management curricula, as broader views can help in more efficient work-problem solutions. Since tourism is multidisciplinary area, their education needs to encompass a few disciplines, besides tourism economy and management, for instance: environmental, psychology, and modern technology. To ease the use and interpretation of research results and scholars' opinions on transformation or other complex issues, simplification and precise definition of each of the steps required to achieve the specific goal(s) would help. Only disseminating academic papers and publishing in international scientific journals is not sufficient enough for creating comprehensive development plans and strategic activities in the real-world sector of tourism. This is certainly not the first time this kind of conclusion has been offered but, during this time of global crisis, it is now more apparent than ever. The challenges faced by tourism as a result of COVID-19 have accentuated the need for the harmonization of data, activities, policies and measures, along with the need for closer collaboration between practitioners and policy makers and scholars, both universities and research organizations. The "COVID-19 world" in which we live has forced us to introduce more webinars, instead of seminars, while video-conferencing became a standard reality in almost every business sector. This is evidence that changes can be embraced when really needed, and it is upon us to decide when is the breaking point that will lead to quick changes in tourism that would ensure a safe and healthy future of this sector, and the experience that we would love to have in our lives. We believe that we can all agree with Meg Wheatley (2001) in that "In nature, change doesn't happen from a top-down, strategic approach. Change happens from within, from many local actions occurring simultaneously".

5. Limitations

Due to the specific research circumstances and authors' willingness to quickly respond to the COVID-19 crisis with immense consequences for the tourism sector, this research has limitations that concern the qualitative sample of tourism practitioners (number of respondents) as well as the limited number of opinion papers published.

In health crisis such as the one caused by COVID 19, it is important that both tourism practitioners as well as tourism scholars offer their views and solutions. Tourism practitioners, due to multidisciplinary character of tourism could also be of a different views, and future studies should take into account differences withing different groups of tourism stakeholders (private and public stakeholders).

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