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THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON HUNGARY'S IN-BOUND SHOPPING TOURISM

A COVID-19-VILÁGJÁRVÁNY HATÁSA A MAGYARORSZÁGRA IRÁNYULÓ BEVÁSÁRLÓTURIZMUSRA

ABSTRACT

Shopping tourism, in line with other tourism products, suffered an unprecedented decline in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the related restrictions. Despite the widespread interest in the impact of COVID-19 on tourism, the effects of the pandemic on shopping tourism are still under-researched. The aim of the paper is to partly fill in this gap by analysing the changes that took place in Hungary's inbound shopping tourism in 2020. Following the theoretical background, the paper focuses on the changes that took place in the number of shopping trips to Hungary, as well as the changes in the volume and structure of visitors' spending. The study is based on the review of the relevant literature and on the analysis of the database of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office on international travels. Results show that, similarly to other tourism products, the number of inbound shopping trips to Hungary in 2020 and the related expenditures dropped dramatically. Changes in the structure of visitors' spending also revealed that utilitarian travel motivations gained ground during the pandemic indicated by an increase in the proportion of spending on fuel, and on food and beverages.

Keywords: shopping tourism, pandemic, COVID-19, crisis, Hungary

ÖSSZEFOGLALÓ

A bevásárlóturizmus – más turisztikai termékekhez hasonlóan – soha nem látott mértékű visszaesést szenvedett el 2020 folyamán a Covid19-világjárvány és az azzal összefüggő korlátozások miatt. Annak ellenére, hogy a Covid19-világjárvány turizmusra gyakorolt hatásainak vizsgálata igen széles körű, a pandémia következményeivel a bevásárlóturizmus kontextusában mindezidáig csak kevesen foglalkoztak. A tanulmány célja, hogy részben pótolja ezt a hiányosságot azáltal, hogy bemutatja a Magyarországra irányuló bevásárlóturizmusban 2020 folyamán bekövetkezett változásokat. Az elméleti háttérrel követően a Magyarországra irányuló bevásárlóutak számában, valamint a látogatók költségének volumenében és szerkezetében bekövetkezett változásokra fókuszálunk. A tanulmány a vonatkozó szakirodalom áttekintésére, valamint a KSH nemzetközi utazásokra vonatkozó adatbázisának elemzésére épül. Az eredmények azt mutatják, hogy a többi turisztikai termékhez hasonlóan a Magyarországra irányuló vásárlási célú utak száma és az azokhoz kapcsolódó kiadások is drámai mértékben csökkentek 2020-ban. A látogatók költési szerkezetének változása arra is rávilágított, hogy a járvány idején a haszonelvű utazási motivációk hódítottak teret, amit az üzemanyag-, valamint az élelmiszer- és italkiadások arányának növekedése jelez.

Kulcsszavak: bevásárlóturizmus, pandémia, COVID–19, válság, Magyarország

1. Introduction

Shopping is one of the most favourable and most common activities undertaken by tourists (Timothy, 2018). Having been only a complementary activity during the tourist trip a few decades ago, nowadays shopping serves quite frequently as a primary motivation for travel (World Tourism Organization, 2014).

Shopping tourism also plays an important role in Hungary's tourism. Statistics show that before the outbreak of the pandemic shopping was one of the most popular motivations behind inbound trips to Hungary and the spending related to shopping trips amounted to several billion Hungarian forints each year.

The outbreak of the new coronavirus pandemic, however, has dramatically changed tourism. In order to slow the spread of COVID-19, most countries introduced measures that resulted in an unprecedented decline in the global tourism sector in 2020 (Gössling et al., 2020; Hall et al., 2020).

This paper focuses on the pandemic-induced transformation of shopping tourism with special regard to shopping trips to Hungary in 2020. Based on the review of the relevant literature, the first section of the paper discusses the notion and forms of shopping tourism, and the effects of crises on (shopping) tourism with special regard to the COVID-19 pandemic. Following the introduction of the research methodology, the paper focuses on the changes that took place in the number of shopping trips to Hungary in 2020 compared to the previous year, as well as the changes in the amount and structure of visitors' spending. The study concludes with a summary of major findings.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. The notion and forms of shopping tourism

In the broadest sense, shopping is an activity involving the purchase of goods and services when visiting various places (Choi et al., 2016). The World Tourism Organization (2014) defines shopping tourism as a contemporary form of tourism fostered by individuals for whom purchasing goods outside of their usual environment is a determining factor in their decision to travel.

Shopping tourism is an activity specific tourism product, since it is centred around the activity (i.e., shopping) itself, which is also the primary motivation of the tourist trip (Tömöri – Michalkó, 2019). Shopping can either be the primary (sometimes sole) or secondary (complementary) motivation behind tourist trips. If a tourist trip is primarily motivated by shopping (Timothy, 2005),

and the traveller's primary tourism activity is shopping, we speak about shopping tourism.

Shopping as a tourist activity is also often an integral part of trips that are primarily not motivated by shopping. This phenomenon is called tourist shopping (Timothy, 2005), but sometimes it is also referred to as recreational or spontaneous shopping (Michalkó, 2004). In this case, shopping primarily serves as an activity which provides pleasure and memorable moments for tourists, and which contributes to higher tourist spending and to the diversification of the tourist experience (Michalkó, 2007).

A unique type of shopping tourism is shopping in border areas – also known as cross-border shopping (Timothy – Butler, 1995; Timothy, 2005). This consumer activity takes place near international borders, and it is fuelled by economic, legal and social differences.

2.2. The effects of crises on (shopping) tourism

The role of crisis events in tourism has received considerable attention by scholars in the past few decades (Hall, 2010). A substantial part of the literature on crises related to tourism focuses on economic and financial crises (Hall, 2010). Crisis management (Laws et al., 2007) is a widely discussed topic in the literature, since the contribution of tourism to most economies has become so great that policymakers should respond to an unexpected and sudden downturn in tourism demand quickly and adequately (Blake – Sinclair, 2003). Research in some areas of crisis in tourism is clearly inspired by periods of recession or by crisis events (Hall, 2010) such as 9/11 (Goodrich, 2002), the SARS epidemic of 2003 (McKercher – Chon, 2004), the economic crisis of 2007–2008 (Papatheodorou et al., 2010), the MERS outbreak (Shi – Li, 2017), or the COVID-19 pandemic (Gössling et al., 2020).

Research on the effects of financial, economic and political crises on shopping tourism has particularly focused on Central and Eastern Europe and researchers have mainly studied the impacts of the 1998 'Russian crisis', the financial crisis of 2007–2008 and the Ukrainian crisis of 2013–2014. Smętkowski et al. (2017) claim that cross-border shopping along the Russian-Finnish border remained significant even during the global financial crisis. However, the Ukrainian crisis of 2013–2014 (Euromaidan protests, pro-Russian unrest in Donbas, annexation of Crimea by Russia) had a more substantial impact on cross-border trade in the Russian-Finnish borderlands. Stepanova and Shlapeko (2018) claim that the introduction of economic sanctions against Russia in response to the annexation of Crimea and the weakening of the Russian rouble against the euro had a negative impact on the inbound flow of Russian (shopping) tourists to Finland. Smętkowski et al. (2017) come to a similar

conclusion adding that the declined value of the rouble induced fuel tourism from Finland to Russia. Jóźwiak and Piechowska (2017) point out that the Ukrainian crisis of 2013–2014 led to a general increase in different forms of mobility between Poland and Ukraine, including shopping tourism. They argue that the political and economic crisis in Ukraine increased the pressure to use the state border as a resource and as a strategy to overcome social and economic difficulties which, among others, was embodied in the boom of shopping tourism and small-scale cross-border trade (including shuttle trade) from Ukraine to Poland. Studying the Ukrainian-Hungarian border Eröss et al. (2016) come to similar conclusions: owing to the collapse of the Ukrainian economy and to the continuous inflation of the national currency, the hryvna, a new form of small-scale trade emerged, whereby petty traders travel to Hungary, reclaim VAT on items purchased and resell these items in Ukraine making extra profit. Nevertheless, Smętkowski et al. (2017) point out that shopping in the crisis-ridden Ukraine became less attractive for many due to unpredictable waiting times at the border.

Michalkó et al. (2014) investigated the effects of the economic crisis on Hungary's shopping tourism from 2006 until 2010. Results proved that during the period of the economic crisis an increase was detectable both in the number and proportion of inbound shopping trips to Hungary, as well as in the number and proportion of outbound shopping trips by Hungarians to neighbouring countries (Tömöri, 2018). Michalkó et al. (2014) showed that the financial and economic crisis of 2007–2008 dynamized inbound shopping trips to Hungary since the crisis made customers more price-sensitive, therefore many people (especially) in border regions grasped the opportunity of making 'savings' through shopping tourism and redirected their shopping activities to Hungary. Michalkó et al. (2014) also showed that the number of shopping tourists arriving in Hungary during the economic crisis increased particularly significantly from Austria and Slovakia. This was primarily due to the weakening of the Hungarian forint against the euro (Sikos – Kovács, 2008; Buček, 2010; Kovács, 2013) since visitors from eurozone member states could take advantage of the favourable EUR/HUF exchange rate.

The study of the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on shopping tourism has so far received little attention in the literature. Studies directly or indirectly dealing with this topic have mainly focused on the economic effects of the pandemic on shopping tourism. Several studies conclude that the pandemic has had an especially serious impact on shopping tourism since shopping necessarily involves mobility, contact between buyers (i.e., tourists) and sellers (e.g., street vendors) and transactions often take place in crowded environments (e.g., markets, shopping malls) therefore shopping tourism usually does not comply with COVID-19 regulations. Moreover, tourists themselves also tend to be less

involved in activities such as dining and shopping to avoid physical contact (Sengel, 2021; Tilaki et al., 2021).

Several studies explored that the pandemic had an especially negative impact on merchants, retailers, regions or cities that mainly focused on (shopping) tourists' demand. Based on a case study in Barcelona, Frago (2021) found that the collapse of global tourist flows (together with the spread of online shopping) accelerated the commercial desertification of traditional city centres and led to the temporary or permanent closure of retail establishments. According to Tilaki et al., (2021) the decline of international tourism affected vendors at Malaysian night markets especially negatively since they almost completely lost their income during the lockdown period. They also emphasize that in the future it will be crucial to comply with strict health regulations to rebuild tourists' trust which is one of the most important factors of destination image. Malkowski and Mazur (2020) also focus on the negative economic impacts of the COVID-19 crisis; they argue that entrepreneurs on the Polish side of the border suffered significant revenue losses since the closure of the borders completely halted the flow of shopping tourists from Germany to Poland. Finally, García-Milon et al. (2021) also try to find answers on how to increase and encourage tourists' shopping in the future. They argue that the application of modern technology (such as smartphones) can be one of the tools that may help to recover from the crisis caused by the pandemic since smart solutions do not only enable fast, convenient, secure and contact-free payments, but (e.g., mobile applications) also provide excellent opportunities for tourists to obtain information about shopping opportunities in destinations, compare products and prices, and access the opinions of other tourists.

3. Characteristics of inbound shopping tourism to Hungary in 2020

3.1. Research methodology

The study is based on the analysis of the database of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office on international travels¹. As the HCSO also publishes the data on international travels according to the main motivations, it is possible to select and analyse the characteristics of trips in the database that are primarily motivated by shopping, which can provide an overall picture of Hungary's inbound shopping tourism.

¹ Data available at: https://www.ksh.hu/stadat_eng?lang=en&theme=tur

The detailed methodology of data production is available at: https://www.ksh.hu/apps/meta.objektum?p_lang=EN&p_menu_id=110&p_almenu_id=104&p_ot_id=100&p_obj_id=BDGD

https://www.ksh.hu/apps/meta.objektum?p_lang=EN&p_menu_id=110&p_almenu_id=194&p_ot_id=100&p_obj_id=BDGD

The present study primarily analyses the changes that occurred in the major characteristics (number of trips, related expenditure, structure of spending) of inbound shopping trips to Hungary in 2020 compared to the previous year. Nevertheless, with respect to the 2020 data the HCSO database on international travels has certain limitations. First, due to the coronavirus pandemic, emergency measures were introduced, therefore border traffic in 2020 was significantly lower than usual. As a result, the number of respondents in the HCSO questionnaire survey also significantly declined, therefore the reliability of the published data has decreased and they are comparable with the data of previous periods only to a limited extent. Due to the border closure in the spring of 2020, data on international travels are only available for the period between January 1 and March 13, 2020. In the second quarter of 2020, data collection on tourism was suspended, so the production of these data was done by model estimation and imputation. A further limitation of the database is that due to the low number of respondents the HCSO did not publish the data on inbound shopping trips to Hungary according to the travellers' country of origin from the second quarter of 2020, therefore the geographical aspects (inbound shopping tourists' country of origin) of Hungary's inbound shopping tourism cannot be analysed.

3.2. Results

Shopping is one of the most important travel motivations behind inbound trips to Hungary (Table 1). In 2019 the number of inbound trips to Hungary with shopping as a main motivation almost reached 11 million. This means that with respect to all trips shopping was the third most important travel motivation to Hungary, only the number of inbound trips motivated by transit and leisure tourism was higher.

Table 1. The number of inbound trips to Hungary by main motivation (thousand trips, 2019–2020)

	2019	2020	change (2019 = 100%)
Transit	20 277	11 010	54.3%
Leisure tourism	15 471	5 834	37.7%
Shopping	10 938	5 676	51.9%
Work	2 778	2 583	93.0%
Visiting relatives, friends	4 756	2 498	52.5%
Business tourism, conference, dealings	2 785	1 451	52.1%

Medical treatment	2 528	1 232	48.7%
Other private	1 205	995	82.6%
Study	502	292	58.2%
Religion	156	70	44.9%

Source: edited by the author based on HCSO data

Due to the COVID-19 crisis, the number of inbound trips to Hungary in 2020 reached only slightly more than the half (51.5%) of the previous year's figure and the decline, albeit to a different extent, was detectable in all travel motivations. As compared to 2019, the smallest decline emerged in the case of inbound trips motivated by work, since the number of these trips decreased by less than 10%. On the other hand, the greatest decline from 2019 to 2020 was detectable in the case of trips motivated by leisure tourism, since the number of these trips fell by more than 60%. These figures suggest that most people primarily tried to reduce their non-essential (leisure oriented) travels, while they tried to sustain travels that contributed to their living (work oriented) even during the worst phases of the pandemic. The latter was also supported by the fact that both in Hungary and its neighbouring countries people travelling with the motivation of work were subject to less stringent border crossing regulations.

If expenditures are examined, it can be concluded that the spending of visitors to Hungary with shopping motivation plays a major role in the total expenditure (Table 2). In 2019 visitors to Hungary with shopping motivation spent almost 220 billion forints (at current prices) on buying products and services, which means that only travellers with leisure motivations spent more than this amount.

Expenditures related to different travel motivations also show notable changes in 2020 compared to 2019. The greatest decline in spending was observable in the case of trips motivated by leisure tourism and religion. On the other hand, expenditures related to trips motivated by study, work and other private intentions were higher in 2020 than in 2019. These figures suggest that spending shifted primarily towards trips that are essential and cannot be postponed.

Table 2. Expenditures related to inbound trips to Hungary by main motivation (billion HUF, current prices, 2019–2020)

	2019	2020	change (2019 = 100%)
Leisure tourism	1 258.4	376.2	29.9%

Business tourism, conference, dealings	211.3	122.7	58.1%
Shopping	218.4	120.3	55.1%
Transit	174.5	104.4	59.8%
Visiting relatives, friends	194.7	97.1	49.9%
Medical treatment	153.5	90.2	58.8%
Work	62.1	76.3	122.7%
Other private	13.8	36.4	263.5%
Study	19.6	30.1	153.5%
Religion	3.7	0.6	16.1%

Source: edited by the author based on HCSO data

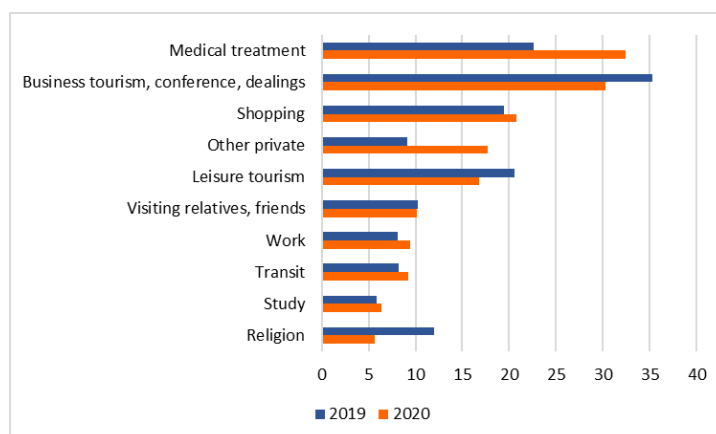
Expenditures related to inbound shopping trips to Hungary declined by approximately 45% in 2020 compared to the previous year, but this means that the decrease in the spending related to shopping trips was 10 percentage points smaller than the decline in the case of all trips (-55%). In 2020 the total amount of spending related to shopping trips was HUF 120.3 billion, which accounted for the third largest category in terms of spending, only expenditures related to leisure tourism and business tourism being higher.

According to the above figures, it can be concluded that the decline in the number of inbound shopping trips to Hungary was greater than the decrease in the expenditures related to these trips. This is due to the fact that although the number of shopping tourists arriving in Hungary in 2020 was less than in the previous year, but their specific (per capita) spending was higher. Data on the expenditures per day per person by main travel motivation clearly prove this (Figure 1). In 2019 a shopping tourist visiting Hungary spent HUF 19,400 per day on average, while this figure rose by approximately HUF 1,400 in 2020, that is, the average per capita spending reached HUF 20,800.

The COVID-19 crisis had a significant impact on the structure of spending as well. Expenditures per day per person substantially declined in the case of trips motivated by business tourism, leisure tourism and by religion. On the other hand, per capita spending rose significantly in the case of trips motivated by medical treatment and other private intentions and also increased (although to a lesser extent) in the case of trips motivated by shopping, work, transit and study. Due to the restructuring of consumption, the per capita spending of travellers motivated by medical treatment became the highest by 2020, which shifted business travellers to second place in this respect. Regarding per capita spending shopping tourists occupied the third place in 2020, since the per

capita spending of leisure tourists significantly decreased compared to the previous year (Figure 1).

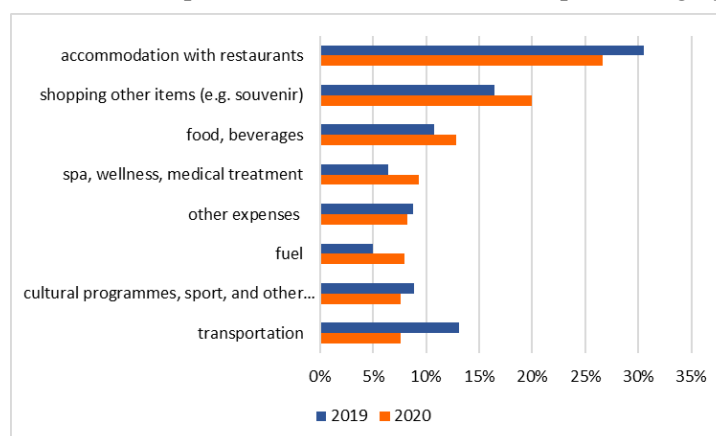
Figure 1. Expenditures per day per person by main motivation (thousand HUF, current prices, 2019–2020)



Source: edited by the author based on HCSO data

Due to the crisis, the structure of expenditures related to inbound trips to Hungary also changed substantially (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Structure of expenditures related to inbound trips to Hungary (2019–2020)



Source: edited by the author based on HCSO data

Although the largest spending category related to inbound trips to Hungary was ‘accommodation with restaurants’ both in 2019 and 2020, but its share within the total spending decreased significantly, which can be due to the

increase in the proportion of one-day trips and to the monthslong compulsory closure of accommodation and catering establishments introduced by the Hungarian government. The most drastic decline, however, was observable with respect to expenditures on transportation. In 2019 transportation represented the third largest spending category. However, it dropped to the last place in 2020. This can be due to the fact that most measures taken to slow the spread of the virus focused on the reduction of non-essential mobility. Moreover, the share of expenditures related to cultural programmes, sport, and other tourism services also declined. On the other hand, there was an increase in the proportion of spending related to the categories of 'spa, wellness, and medical treatment', 'shopping other items', 'food and beverages' and 'fuel'². The increase in the latter three spending categories undoubtedly suggests the strengthening role of utilitarian travel motivations during the crisis.

4. Conclusion

In line with most countries in the world, measures taken to slow the spread of COVID-19 had a dramatic impact on Hungary's tourism sector. In 2020 the number of inbound trips to Hungary almost halved compared to the previous year, while the expenditures related to inbound trips dropped by an even greater extent (-55%). The decline, although to a different extent, was detectable in all tourism products. Border closures, restrictions on mobility, the closure of shops selling non-essential goods, the restrictions on opening hours, the increasing unemployment rates and the decreasing income levels undoubtedly had a negative impact on Hungary's inbound shopping tourism. On the other hand, the weakening of the Hungarian forint against the currencies of the neighbouring countries, the differences in the stringency of anti-COVID-19 measures in respective countries as well as the differences in the pace of lifting these measures resulted in differences in the shopping circumstances between Hungary and its neighbours that were large enough to sustain shopping tourism to Hungary even during pandemic hit year of 2020.

In addition, unconventional tourism products³ (such as shopping tourism) were in a relatively better position compared to conventional ones, since stores selling essential items (such as food or drugs) were allowed to be open even during the worst phases of the pandemic, while accommodation or catering establishments, which are essential to conventional tourism products, were among the first to be shut down.

As a result of positive and negative factors, the number of inbound shopping

² Fuel tourism to Hungary from neighbouring countries was further intensified in November 2021, when the Hungarian government imposed a fuel price cap to curb price rises.

³ For a detailed analysis of different aspects of unconventional tourism, see Timothy et al., 2022.

trips to Hungary declined similarly to the number of all inbound trips. However, the expenditures related to shopping trips decreased to a lesser extent than the spending related to all trips. This is due to the fact that the per capita spending of shopping tourists arriving in Hungary in 2020 slightly increased compared to the previous year. With respect to the structure of spending it is observable that the focus of consumption shifted towards the favourite items of traditional shopping tourism, that is, there was an increase in the proportion of spending on fuel, and on food and beverages. In sum, research results suggest that some consumers (especially those living near state borders or working in Hungary) tried to exploit the benefits of (often cheaper) shopping opportunities in Hungary, which also meant a tool for poorer layers to mitigate the negative economic effects of the COVID-19 crisis.

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