

Sustainability of Russian Tourism Industry During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Russia is a distinguished country with a diverse environment and culture. The term environment refers to the natural resources and infrastructure available to benefit social and economic growth. One way to benefit from these abundantly available environmental factors is to develop the tourism industry, which Russia has accomplished. The industry has substantially contributed to the national GDP and improved people's welfare involved in the industry. It also changed the impression of Russia, previously known to be a restricted country. Unfortunately, the inevitable COVID-19 pandemic has harmed all sectors of the tourism industry. The predicted slow recovery of the tourism industry is caused by the government's aim to prioritize public health, such as improving health facilities and developing the vaccine Sputnik V. This article will analyze whether prioritizing the health sector will accelerate the recovery of the tourism industry. We shall explore the policies and measures taken by the government to support this process. We will also evaluate adaptations made in the tourism industry and the new ideas that will replace conventional tourism.

Keywords: COVID-19, Economy, Policies, Russia, Tourism

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has harmed Russia. A decrease in economic activities due to COVID-19 restrictions has heavily affected various industries, especially the tourism industry. Russia's Minister of Economic Growth, in April 2020, estimated that Russia's GDP could experience a decline of up to -12%. This decline was due to the 6.6% decrease in industrial output, 23.4% in retail trade, and 37.9% in paid services [1]. The tourism industry plays a significant contribution to Russia's GDP. According to UNWTO, the tourism industry's GDP income could decrease -1% to -2%. Tourism provides direct and indirect employment, thus providing socio-economic development for the people involved. Over 1.1 million workers are threatened by a decrease in income or mass unemployment. Workers may experience a wage reduction of -1% to -4% [2].

Direct workers in travel agencies, airlines, ships, hotels, restaurants, shopping centers, and various tourism attractions experience this mostly. Meanwhile, indirect workers, such as food and souvenir merchants who were not tied to work, experienced decreased income.

Russia has seen a 15% decrease in inbound tourist rates. The Russian Travel Agency estimated that Russia could lose USD 4,1 billion per quarter due to travel restrictions. The Association of Tour Operators of Russia (ATOR) reported that around 45,000 Chinese tourist packages to Russia were canceled in March 2020 due to the eastern Russian border [3]. This closure results in a

decrease in room occupancy rates in Moscow and St. Petersburg [4].

To avoid loss and decline in workers' welfare in the tourism sector, the government and tourism organizations are working to create the best solutions to allow tourism activity to continue safely. However, even though the Sputnik V vaccine has been registered and has gone through clinical tests, it is still not available for mass use. How can the government guarantee the health of tourism industry workers and tourists even though the vaccine is still not available?

Previous research has proved how physical distancing measures have helped revive the tourism industry in different countries worldwide. This research will find the most suitable solution to return the Russian tourism industry to stock and how the Sputnik vaccine could boost the process. There was no specific research on Russia's tourism industry during the pandemic. This research could become a new finding as solutions applied in Russia may or may not be suitable for other countries. Information in this research could be used as a comparison with other countries

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research is based on "COVID-19 and "Tourism: Assessing the Economic Consequences" by Gopalakrishnan, Peters, and Vanzetti [5] published through UNCTAD and "Hospitality, tourism, human

rights and the impact of COVID-19" by Baum and Hai [6]. Official policies are from the official website of the Russian Travel Agency. Pieces of information on global policies, plans, and forecasts are from the official tourism organization website such as UNWTO and WTTO. Information supplied by official news updates and data from the official statistical organization is used to analyze the latest findings.

This research uses both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. This research's problems are justified based on reviewing literature such as books and journals of the related theme. In this article, the author will analyze and summarize Russia's tourism industry's condition during the pandemic. The analysis is taken from March 2020 until August 2020. The findings came at the start of the tourism season in July 2020.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1. Beginning of Pandemic

Russians who are unable to travel outbound due to travel restrictions cause an immense loss to travel agents. According to Russia's Association of Tour Operators (ATOR) press secretary, Irina Tyurina, Russia's outbound travel market could lose 27 billion RUB as many travel packages and services related to trips outside Russia were canceled. Russians massively canceled trips to Italy, the third country that has become a favorite outbound destination for Russians under Turkey and Ukraine [7]. Turkey's culture and tourism minister, Mehmet Ersoy, said that in May, Turkey lost nearly 40% of Russian tourists [8].

To overcome the disadvantages of no international outbound travel, in April-May 2020, the Russian government encourages its people to take domestic trips around the country, especially for the summer holidays. The government, supported by the Russia Travel Agency, has started promoting domestic holiday destinations such as beaches in Crimea and Sochi, lakes, and forests in Karelia and Kamchatka's wilderness following health policies and mobility restrictions these locations [9].

3.2. Business Helped by the Government

The Russian government has allocated at least 2.3 billion rubles, or about 2.9% of Russia's GDP, to help support various small and large tourism companies that have suffered losses due to this pandemic [10].

3.2.1. Small Companies and Individuals

A 3.5 billion RUB was allocated to reimburse tour operator costs resulting from non-refundable airfare/ticket. Companies can access and use the Personal Responsibility Fund to refund money to tourists. Refund regulations have also been established for canceled or rescheduled events such as performing arts and museum exhibits. Companies are also allowed for more extended

license renewal periods. Other policies include interest-free loans for salary payments, grants for salary payments, urgent necessities, electric bills, subsidies for small scale businesses to access loans at preferential interest, deferred lease payments, bankruptcy moratorium, tax insurance moratorium, and customs inspection moratorium. The government also provides tax exemptions or extends the tax payment limit for registered companies [11].

3.2.2. Large Companies

Large companies receive assistance in the form of subsidies for reimbursement of airline costs for export tourists, license and permit renewals, and interest-free loans for salary payments. Companies can receive tax delays of up to 12 months, a moratorium on bankruptcy with a term of 6 months, an extended tax sanctions moratorium of up to 3 months, and a tax audit postponement until June 1, 2020, moratorium on tax, customs, and field inspections. Other policies include calculating the deadline for implementing the law on taxes and fees, fulfilling credit, and loaning obligations regarding the days that are declared non-working, and subsidizing subsidies at preferential rates [12].

3.2.3. Airline Companies

In May 2020, the Russian government issued an order to distribute around 23.4 billion rubles of state funds for airlines experiencing a crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The federal aviation agency stated that the number of airline passengers in Russia has decreased by 92%, around 771,200 people in April, whereas the previous month decreased by more than 28%.

The airlines which have received this assistance include the Aeroflot Group (including Aeroflot, Rossiya, Aurora, and the low-cost airline Pobeda), which is 51.2% owned by the government. The group is estimated to receive up to 8 billion rubles of aid. Meanwhile, other airline companies such as the Ural Airlines and S7 group can receive the remaining subsidies of around 15 billion RUB.

There are several conditions for getting these subsidies. A company cannot receive more than 33.7% of the total subsidy. Another requirement is that the airlines within the company must be owned 50% by the government and have more than 20 million passengers by 2019. This condition applies to Aeroflot group companies, which experienced a decrease of passengers in April by 95.2% (147,700 people), and Rossiya, which experienced a decrease of 92.2% (65,700 people) [13].

3.3. Reopening domestic and international tourist destinations

3.3.1. Inbound

From 15 July 2020, all persons who will enter Russian territory must present documents showing negative COVID-19 at least 72 hours before arrival in English or Russian. Russian citizens traveling back and foreigners who do not have these documents must run a PCR test that shows negative COVID 19 within 72 hours of arrival. If the PCR results are positive, the person is required to self-isolate for 14 days. Russia has begun to open its borders with Belarus, Croatia, and Turkey. The 13 other countries that the Russian Federal Service for Surveillance on Consumer Rights Protection and Human Wellbeing (*Rospotrebnadzor*) recommended reopening its travel routes were England, Germany, China, the Netherlands, Denmark, Finland, Hungary, Italy, Norway, Poland, Mongolia, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam [14]. Continuing international aviation activities requires cooperation and agreements with the governments of other countries. Russian citizens entering Russia must fill out a form on a public service page (*gosuslugi*) and upload their PCR results on that page. Passengers also have to fill out a particular form during the flight. However, the Russian electronic visas offered to many foreign tourists have not been issued for the time being [15].

In July 2020, traveling to Russia for work, education, healing, or to look after family members is permitted. The permit is the first such opening since 27 March 2020, when the Russian government suspended international flights except for cargo, mail flights, and select government-approved flights that aim to repatriate tourists from or to Russia. For example, during April-August 2020, there are select flights to repatriate Russian tourists from Denpasar, Indonesia, to Moscow, St. Petersburg, and other cities.

3.3.2. Recovery Period

The deputy prime minister Tatyana Golikova stated that as of August 1, 2020, Russians were allowed to make international flights to Britain, Turkey, and Tanzania.

As ordered by Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin, all international flights operate through airports in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Rostov-on-Don. Meanwhile, according to the Minister of Transport, Yevgeny Dietrich, Russia is still discussing an agreement to allow flights to 30 other countries [16].

The travel permit has prompted Russian tourists to immediately flock to Turkey's tourist attractions, especially for the summer holidays. Flights to Ankara were reopened on August 1, followed by charter flights to Dalaman, Bodrum, and Antalya on August 10. The latter destinations can also be reached via transit flights from Istanbul and Ankara [17]. After this announcement,

at least 10,000 Russian tourists immediately made holiday bookings in Turkey. Russian tourists contribute the most to the number of inbound tourists in Turkey. According to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, at least 7 million (5.6%) Russian tourists visited Turkey, with 5.5 million people (35% of total tourists) visiting the city of Antalya in 2019 [18]. During the recovery period for many Russian and foreign tourists, travel to Turkey was due to its cheapness. The cost of holidays in Turkey is lowered due to the decline in the Lira currency value. By mid-August 2020, Turkey had already received 110,808 Russian tourist passengers, an increase from only 4006 Russian tourists who visited Turkey in June.

According to the head of TURSAB (Association of Turkish Travel Agents), Firuz Baglikaya, at least 735 charter flights are planned to enter Turkey from Russia by the end of October. Local regulations and policies govern the safety and health of Russian tourists. All Russian tourists arriving at Antalya airport are checked through thermal cameras. Tourists are continuously reminded of physical distancing, health, and hygiene regulations [19].

The Abkhazia region in the South Caucasus also saw an increase in Russian tourists during the recovery period. This region became a tourist choice due to its close distance and absence of health document requirements upon entry. As a result, on the day of the border opening, at least 700 cars and 7,500 Russian tourists crossed the border into Abkhazia. Russian tourists primarily invaded sanatoriums and resorts in Tsandryphsh, Gagra, and Pitsunda. About thirty sightseeing buses made stops at Lake Ritsa and New Athos Cave [20].

3.4. Policies Implemented in Tourist Attractions

Several recommendations by the Federal Service for the Oversight of Consumer Protection and Welfare, the Ministry of Health, and Russia Travel Agency were issued. These recommendations are to be followed by various tourist attractions.

3.4.1. Sanatorium, Hotel and Spa

The sanatorium, hotel, and spa will only allow tourists to enter the location if they have not contacted a positive COVID-19 patient in the previous 14 days. A document stating free of COVID-19 is required. Only documents issued by epidemiologists, pediatricians, therapists, or a general practitioner are accepted. Only one person can occupy per one room in the sanatorium. The ventilation system of the spa room must be cleaned before the operation. Room decorations must be cleaned and sterilized according to the existing standards at least once a day. Mattresses and pads should be cleaned with steam generators.

Cleaning wet carpet is carried out in a washing machine using chemical cleaners. All surfaces outside the

room, such as corridors and hallways, should be cleaned once every 2 hours. Air disinfection is used to clean walls and ceilings. Disinfectants of cleaning must comply with medical standards and be safe for humans. Disinfectants are stored in sealed packages and stored in a cold and dark place. It should be out of the reach of children and used as directed. Guests and employees must practice personal hygiene, such as wearing masks and frequently washing their hands with soap. Pieces of Furniture are to be arranged according to the principle of social distancing.

It is necessary to install transparent barriers on counters and install automatic hand sanitizers. Employees with acute respiratory symptoms are not allowed to work. The employee's body temperature is checked with a non-contact thermometer. A face shield is always to be worn.

Food equipment must comply with the standards of the Food and Health Service Organization. Cracked and deformed dishes should not be used. Containers should be washed in a modern dishwasher in hot water at no lower than 65°C for 90 minutes [21].

3.4.2. Children Recreation Camp

Children can do summer recreation during the COVID-19 pandemic in the area where they live. The activities of this organization can resume according to the rules of the epidemiologist. Before opening each day, general cleaning should be carried out with a disinfectant strong enough to kill the virus. At all building entrances, an automatic hand sanitizer must be installed. All employees and children should have their temperature checked every morning with a non-contact thermometer. If the symptoms of COVID-19 show up, the children and adults must be isolated immediately. In children's cases, they will only be further isolated after the parent or guardian's arrival or until the medical team's arrival. Employees are required to wear a face shield and gloves. In children's and employees' bathrooms, soap, toilet paper, and an antiseptic dispenser should always be available. Unauthorized people are prohibited around the camp area. All modes of transport and logistics materials must be cleaned with disinfectants [22].

3.4.3. Airline Facilities

Airlines have started to implement new rules and have added medical facilities to the passenger's safety. Aeroflot's new policies include all aircraft cabin surfaces being cleaned with disinfectant before each flight and additional cleaning once a week. Each aircraft carries anti-epidemic types of equipment and protective masks. Toilets on the aircraft were provided with antibacterial gel soap, and all passengers were given antiseptic wipes. The air system in the cabin updates the air every 2-3 minutes. All Aeroflot's aircraft are equipped with HEPA air filters, which can clean 99.9% of bacterial and viral particles.

When boarding, all passengers must wear masks and gloves and maintain a distance of at least 1.5-2m between passengers. All passengers' temperatures will be checked. If it exceeds 37° C, they are not permitted to board the aircraft. All passengers are required to wash their hands or use a hand sanitizer before boarding the aircraft.

In flights, passengers are required to change masks every 3 hours. All outerwear must remain within the overhead lockers. The movement of passengers in the cabin and to the toilet is very restricted. During flights, toilet facilities are regularly cleaned with a disinfectant. All food products are packaged in individual packaging or thermal packaging. Passengers can bring personal food and drinks, including baby needs, and can only be brought in if the packaging is sealed. All ground crew and flight attendants have been trained to handle passengers with respiratory problems during the flight. All cabin crew is also required to wear masks and gloves [23].

3.5. Upgrading for Post Pandemic

The cessation of many activities during the COVID-19 pandemic has provided an opportunity for the tourism sector to reset and improve its system. According to the UNWTO Ethics, Cultural, and Social Responsibility Division, several things could be improved during this pause.

First, increasing the data and information exchange between sectors will understand the impact caused by the pandemic. By obtaining data on the social and economic impacts of COVID-19, the authorities can make appropriate policies or mitigation plans to restore the tourism industry.

The second is to launch innovative alliances. COVID-19, which forces people to stay at home, encourages people to consume media more than usual, for example, increasing TV viewing hours, watching online film services, and internet usage. Media coverage can help promote tourist attractions through cooperation with technology companies to launch the program. The third is to inspire and shape the future of sustainable tourism. Tourism also serves an educational function. However, unfortunately, it has not been able to reach many people, so this time it can be used to re-plan promotional methods to reach a wider audience. Fourth, building a sustainable tourism industry workforce, namely by training professional/educated staff in the tourism sector to adjust to the times progressively. The fifth is strengthening management structures to improve coordination and exchange of information. This pandemic is driving the development of cross-sectoral governance to of effective communication and agreement on tourism development. The sixth is to attract new audiences, especially from the younger generations [24].

3.6. Healthcare and Vaccine

3.6.1. Heath facilities

The Russian government has improved its health system by strengthening disease monitoring systems. Disease testing capabilities and capacities are increased to aid virus detection and reduce its spread. Mass testing is followed by tracing and isolating COVID-19 patients in healthcare facilities or at home. The capacities of many general and primary health care hospitals are increased by ensuring the availability of trained medical personnel and medical support equipment. Several hospitals are designated to treat COVID-19 patients exclusively. Numerous temporary hospitals are also constructed in several areas for patients with less severe conditions. At least 130,000 beds have been prepared for COVID-19 patients throughout Russia.

The government ensures medical workers' safety by providing personal protective equipment (PPE) and increasing their wages. Private sectors are encouraged to produce ventilators, PPE, and other required medical equipment. The government educates the public through the media to ensure that all people understand the dangers of COVID-19. The Ministry of Health and the Federal Service for Supervision of Consumer Rights and Human Welfare has established a telephone service to answer questions about COVID-19 [25].

3.6.2. Vaccine

Sputnik V is an adenovirus vector-based vaccine registered by the Russian Ministry of Health on August 11, 2020, and it is the first registered COVID-19 vaccine on the global market. Phase 1 and 2 of clinical trials were conducted on August 1, 2020, and none of the volunteers experienced any symptoms or unusual side effects. Not a single participant from the clinical trial has currently contracted COVID-19 after being given the vaccine. The outstanding efficacy of the vaccine was confirmed by high-precision testing for antibodies in the blood serum of the volunteers as well as the ability of the volunteers' immune cells to activate in response to the S protein spike of the coronavirus, which indicates the formation of antibody and cellular immune vaccine responses. The mass production of the vaccine is expected to begin in September 2020 [26].

3.7. Alternative Virtual Tour

Virtual tours are online tours that offer a 360-degree view that can be accessed anywhere and anytime through the official website by using electronic devices such as laptops and mobile phones. VR glasses give an even better experience if connected to gadgets. These virtual tours gave people a holiday experience even during the quarantine. The State Hermitage Museum, Peterhof Museum, and The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts

offer these free virtual tours. The tour allows visitors to discover all parts, floors, and location inside the museum and read information about the exhibits inside the museum. The website provides complete floor plans and allows visitors to zoom in and out. These virtual tours gave people a holiday experience even during the quarantine.

There is also a project that can be accessed online called "*Moskvastoby*" (*москвастобой*), which was launched by the Moscow City Tourism Committee. More than 500 videos of guided tours were published. Videos of workshops, masterclasses, lectures, cartoons, circus events, and operas are accessible. More than 120 excursions from The State Tretyakov Gallery, the Pushkin Museum, the Center for Cosmonautics and Aviation, and Garage Museum for Contemporary Art are prepared [27]. This project is arguably successful in attracting enthusiasts because, more than 110 thousand people have accessed online tours on the page [28].

There are five travel routes with different themes available for tourists to select. The attractions visited will be adjusted to the chosen theme. For example, the route 'Moscow's Iconic Buildings' will visit historical buildings such as Red Square and St. Basil's Cathedral. The 'Romantic Moscow' route visits Old Arbat to take a romantic walk. The "Merchant Moscow" route will take tourists around the streets and places where the country's wealthiest merchants, such as Morozov, Ryabushinky, and Mamontov, played a big part in building the city. The 'Vagankovsky Hill' route will visit locations of historic royal residences. Through this route, visitors can learn about interesting artworks by visiting art museums such as The Ilya Glazunov Moscow State Art Gallery. The last route is the 'Moscow's Space Exploration Sites' route. In this route, visitors will visit the space museum, planetarium, and observatory. For example, tourists will visit the Museum of Cosmonautics, The Moscow Planetarium, and the Yuri Gagarin Monument [29].

Facebook Russia has developed a project called "*Россия из дома*" (Russia from Home) with the support of the Federal Agency for Tourism. It is accessible from russiafromhome.ru. The project aims to inspire and give information on different tourism locations throughout Russia with the help of professional photographers and influencers. The website is in the form of a chatbot, where visitors will have their preferences asked by the chatbot. The chatbot will be a digital guide based on replies made by the visitors. The locations recommended by the chatbot include Karelia, Baikal, Tatarstan, Altai, Caucasus, Moscow and Moscow region, Kamchatka, St. Petersburg, and the Black Sea coast. Visitors will also be able to learn about places of interest and recreation sites as recommended by the website. Visitors will be redirected to the websites of resorts and travel facilities of their choice [30].

4. CONCLUSION

The Russian government, tourism organizations, and ministry agencies have created policies that best comply with international health standards and protocols. These policies are established to provide support for the continuation of activities in the tourism industry. Alternative tourism plans such as domestic tourism boosted the domestic economy during the pandemic. Virtual tourism gives a convenient tourism experience from peoples' houses. Simultaneously, online platforms are easy to access and do not require people to spend their money to access them.

Compliance with health protocols improved healthcare systems, and government assistance to support entrepreneurs have shown promising results. The successful effort is evidenced by the resumption of tourism activities seen from July 2020 after a complete halt in March to June 2020. Travel agents have regained orders for overseas travel, which automatically returns the number of plane passengers.

This rapid recovery is undoubtedly encouraged because of the Russian government's agility, especially ministries and organizations engaged in the medical field in preventing the further spread of COVID-19. Meanwhile, all tourism sectors can self-evaluate to rebuild and offer sustainable and advanced tourism products following current technological developments during the closing period. This future-oriented change must be prepared to reach more people when conditions are free from COVID-19. The Sputnik V vaccine's availability assures that recovery in Russia and globally will occur faster. Coupled with the planned mass production in September 2020, it is optimistic that ordinary life can resume. However, there are many things to be evaluated and adapted following the change caused by the pandemic. The vaccine may return conditions to normal, but conditions may not be the same as in the pre-pandemic. This condition has become a challenge, as new travel procedures and policies are most likely to be established in the post-pandemic era, which should comply with the conditions later. Policies in the future would focus on maintaining the health and safety of the travelers.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection and analysis were performed by Audreylia Lesmana and Hendra Kaprisma. The first draft of the manuscript was written by Audreylia Lesmana and all authors commented on previous versions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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