

THE BEHAVIOR AND RESPONSE OF REGIONAL DESTINATION MANAGEMENT ORGANIZATIONS IN THE TWO RECOVERY PHASES OF TOURISM DESTINATION AMID COVID-19 PANDEMIC. THE CASE OF CROATIA

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Abstract: Purpose – The purpose of the paper is to examine the behaviour and the response of regional destination management organizations (DMOs) to the current COVID-19 crises. This will enable provide suggestions for improvement of stakeholder management practices and strategic planning in the times of crises and extreme uncertainty. Design/Methodology/approach – Main activities and differences between regional DMOs’ behaviour in the mitigation and restart phase of tourist destination and DMOs will be explored using a mixture of qualitative and quantitative instruments/methods. Primary sources data analysis was used. The regional DMOs’ websites, social media channels, newsletters and different media publications related to regional DMOs were observed and reviewed in the period from mid-March to mid-June 2020 to better understand their response to COVID-19. Findings – Findings illustrate that regional DMOs in Croatia have not managed to advance the relationship with their main stakeholders nor have they implemented integrated management practices during the crises. Originality of the research – The study advances our understanding of the role DMOs have in the times of crises particularly when it comes to stakeholder management, communication and strategic planning.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemics, destination management organizations, destination management, stakeholder engagement, crises management, crises communication.

1. Introduction

Tourism in Croatia is one of the main drivers of the economy. The coronavirus pandemic has caused significant disruptions in the Croatian economy already being under serious pressure. The excessive dependence on tourism is surely the Croatia’s fragility. In 2018 tourism sector in Croatia accounted for 24,9% of GDP (knoema, 2020). Due to COVID-19, Croatia is expecting huge contraction in GDP. European Commission predicts a decline of 10.8% of GDP in 2020 but with a relatively quick start to recovery and 7.5 percent growth next year (European Commission, 2020). United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (2020, 8) in their latest “COVID-19 and Tourism. Assessing the Economic Consequences” report classified Croatia into a country with small domestic market and a low degree of export diversification. As for the aforementioned, Croatia is considered as a highly vulnerable to external shocks, and it has been placed amongst the 47 most impacted countries by COVID-19. Sectors that are the most affected by contraction of tourism in Croatia are recreation and accommodation and food services

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that, according to moderate scenario predictions, might face a 55% of decline in output in 2020.

Restrictions on travel were introduced in March in response to COVID-19 pandemic. As coronavirus continued to spread, all of Croatia destinations remained under lockdown. Mandatory quarantines were implemented for all those arriving from outside Croatian borders and travel between main Croatian regions was restricted. The period from March till end of May authors named as the “mitigation” phase for destination management organizations (hereafter DMO). At the beginning of June, the lockdown measures were eased and borders reopen again. Croatia respected the European Commission’s call for travel and tourism businesses to reopen in a coordinated manner. This phase authors called the “restart” phase.

This paper seeks to examine the behaviour and the response of regional DMOs to the current COVID-19 crises. Main activities and differences between regional DMOs’ behaviour in the mitigation and restart phase of tourist destination will be explored.

This paper is composed of four sections. After the *Introduction*, a theoretical background on the role of DMOs in the two recovery phases is provided. *Empirical results* are provided in the third section. Finally, the last section draws *conclusions* around research results with respect to issues concerning the role of DMOs in two tourism recovery phases and outlines some limitations of the study. The study advances our understanding of the role DMOs have in the times of crises particularly when it comes to managing internal and external stakeholders, communication and planning for the future tourism development.

2. The destination management organization’s voyage through the Covid-19 crises

Travel and tourism industry has been strongly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemics. Lockdowns and quarantines were introduced in March 2020 to stem the spread of the virus. Tourist destinations all around the world closed their borders during the spring coronavirus pandemics. The latest data from the World Tourism Organization shows a 70% fall in international arrivals for the first eight months of 2020 (UNWTO, 2020a). WTTC (2020) estimates that Europe risks losing 29.5 million of travel and tourism jobs and 1,442 billion EUR in travel and tourism GDP (80% of 2019) due to the COVID-19. According to UNWTO (2020b) 40% of destinations worldwide started to ease COVID-19 related travel restrictions in June 2020 opting to kick-start destination’s recovery by adapting to a ‘new normal’. The pivotal role in such situations has been put on DMOs’ resilience strategies. Their traditional role of promoting and selling destination amplified and DMOs are now responsible for strategic planning, education, stakeholder and crises management alongside product development and marketing. In such a situation where nothing can be predictable, where resources are very limited and fear is a constant variable, DMOs need to give themselves a ‘make over’ to survive and thrive. That means being super smart, flexible, inventive, original and purposive. With the aforesaid, DMOs need to focus on three key areas in their response, recovery and resilience strategies (McCaul, 2020): (1) *community building* – roles to play in the community, discussions with stakeholders and decisions for reopening, focus on how to

rebuild the industry in a resilient and sustainable manner; (2) *customer engagement* (tourists) – defining target market to focus on in the short term, building brand awareness for the long term recovery, delivering high values and (3) *sustainable organization* – funding issues, sharing resources and creating efficiencies.

They further have to engage and support their internal and external stakeholders for tourism being a highly fragmented sector that requires coordination so as to ensure coherency of perception and delivery (Wang and Fesenmaier, 2007). Albeit, it sometimes takes time and needs rigorous coordination to avoid conflicts with stakeholders (Abou-Shouk, 2017) and gain their interest and confidence. Along these lines, DMO has the responsibility to engage stakeholders in collaboration and coordinate interests of various stakeholders in order to function best in the ever so changing environment (D'Angella, 2007). More precisely (Destination Think, 2016): leading and collaborating with industry to bring tourism product up to standard, engaging local residents in tourism promotion in order to gain valuable internal advocates, finding innovative ways to work with new non-traditional partners, engaging the industry and working collectively in order to develop product that gets people talking. It is stakeholder management that contributes to effective strategic management of DMOs (Fairley, 2018). As pointed by Nomm, Albrecht and Lovelock (2020) advocacy and community leadership help destination managers maintain their relationship with main stakeholders in tourist destination and with the community. This has certainly gained significant importance during the COVID -19 pandemics when destination managers had to work closely with their stakeholders to strengthen their confidence, assure their safety and security as well as those of tourists. We further support this alluding on the recent analysis that showed that residents would be willing to pay for risk reduction and action in responding to the pandemic crisis (Qui, Park and Li, 2020). As suggested by Lindberg and Johnson (1997) seems that the crisis invariably brings out the best in residents in terms of values and responsible behavior. In the times of crises, according to PhocusWire (2020), DMOs should think of creating new virus-safe attractions, rethinking strategies to not promote more visitors, preparing for a new standard of hygiene and figuring out which technologies can regulate social distancing.

It is also the right time for DMOs to perform the role of managing communications by being content gatherers and curators, rather than purely creators (Destination Think, 2020a). 4 guiding principles for DMOs communication during COVID-19 (Destination Think, 2020): (1) use restriction scenarios to plan for phases of content; (2) lean on emotional lenses to help decide which messages are appropriate at different times; (3) work more collaboratively with stakeholders and industry and (4) use DMO's brand values to clarify DMO's role. Herewith we need to point on the importance of stories that are emotionally resonant when creating content of messages DMOs wish to send to their tourists. It is because stories have the potential to 'take us from the glow of our various screens to places across the world' (Skift, 2020). On the other side, DMOs have to (re)consider their marketing channels and allocate their limited financial funds to those that are the most reliable and provide some sustainable returns.

Finally, as Stankov, Filimonau and Vujičić argue, the COVID-19 pandemic could be considered a wake-up call and opportunity for the tourism industry to embrace the

mindfulness movement that can contribute to rendering more compassionate and meaningful tourism for both hosts and guests. Destination management, after all, has the potential to (Howison, Sun and Finger, 2017 according to UNWTO (2007) and Dwyer & Wickens (2013)): establish a competitive edge, enhance local culture and tradition, build a strong and vibrant brand identity, improve tourism yield, spread the benefits of tourism, ensure tourism sustainability. Surely, another benefit DMOs could provide in the situation when brakes have been put on the growth and development is assuring standards for safety & security and sustainable growth of tourism in the future. Likewise concluded by Paraskevas and Arendell (2007), it is very worthy for the DMO to develop a culture of preparedness and mitigation.

In the following section we will explore the DMOs's response and behaviour in the two recovery phases of a tourist destination and DMO.

3. Empirical analysis

In this paper authors analyse ways DMOs evolve communications with their stakeholders and discuss whether they are migrating their roles from marketing to integrated management. Main research questions:

1. How effectively regional DMOs in Croatia communicate with their stakeholders?
2. What is the level of engagement of different stakeholders (i.e. cultural institutions, hotels, accommodation providers, natural parks, local community etc.) in different promotional and other activities undertaken by regional DMOs in Croatia during COVID-19 pandemics?
3. Do regional DMOs foster collaboration and synergies between stakeholders?

3.1 Methodology

Authors decided to conduct qualitative and quantitative research (mixed method) that helps to interpret and better understand the Kafkaesque tasks of DMOs in the COVID-19 times. The mixed method facilitated the description of authors' observations. The regional DMOs' websites, social media channels, newsletters and different media publications related to regional DMOs was observed and reviewed in the period from mid-March to mid-June 2020 to better understand their response to COVID-19.

3.1.1 Sample

The Law on Tourist Boards and the Promotion of Croatian Tourism (Official Gazette n. 52/19 and 42/20) that was implemented in the January 2020 recognizes the system of tourist boards following the model of destination management organizations (DMOs). The aforementioned Law distinguishes 21 regional tourist boards or DMOs. This research covered all 21 regional DMOs in Croatia (21).

3.1.2 Research Results & Discussion

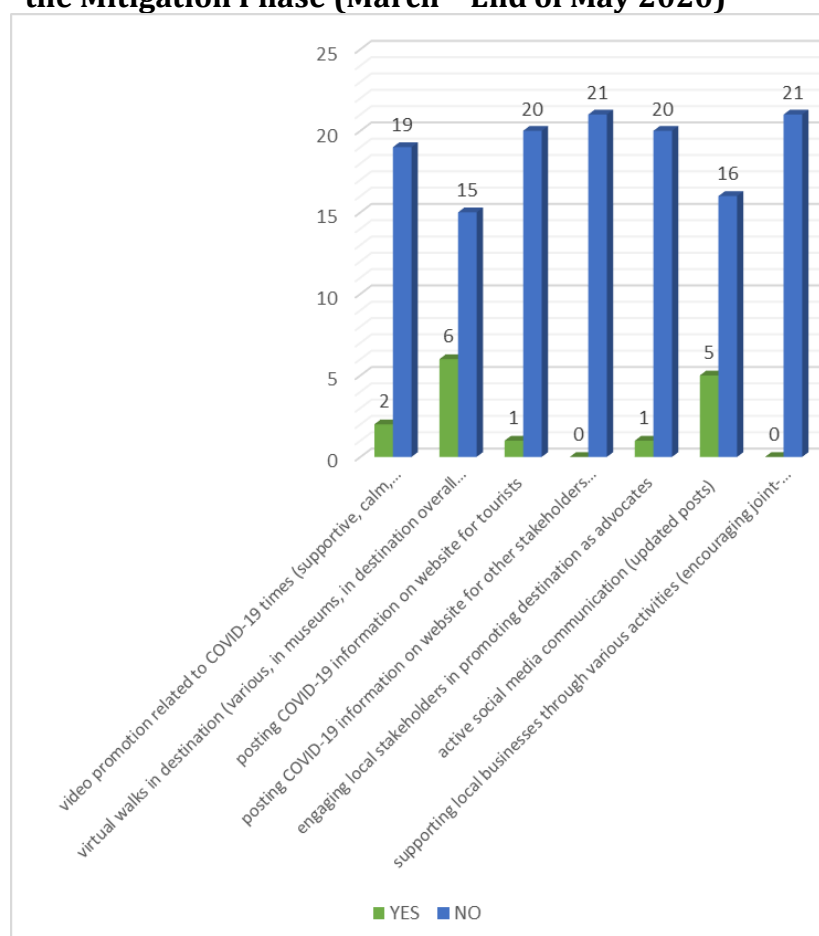
In this section authors provide and comment results based on the research undertaken. The distinction of various activities was made between the two phases observed.

A) *Mitigation Phase*

The mitigation phase is actually the support phase when DMOs need to put strong emphasize on communication in order to support and encourage the potential tourists, local businesses, residents and other stakeholders that contribute to the creation of added value in the destination.

The summary of the analyzed activities of regional DMOs are graphically presented below.

Figure 1: **Main Activities Undertaken by Regional DMOs in Croatia During the Mitigation Phase (March – End of May 2020)**



Source: author's research

Surely, people will need some extra encouragement to travel again. One way to do it is through novel technological experiences (videos, VR, gamification, two-way communication etc.).

In the age of very strong digital transformations, before deciding to travel to any destination, potential tourists are curious and they like to search for information on particular destination, its offerings, experiences they can look forward to etc. Along these lines, tourists are also keen to watch promotional videos of the destination (Marques Teixeira, 2017). Under lockdown people were travelling virtually. Technology made destinations accessible to almost everyone. As per author's research only two regional DMO (City of Zagreb Tourist Board and Split-Dalmatia County) produced excellent videos. "Zagreb Loves You" was used as a communication and promotion tool in these particularly sensitive times for this City. The City of Zagreb not only faced problems caused by COVID-19 but was hit by earthquake while in coronavirus lockdown. The content of this video points on love to construct brand attachment – for tourists and residents alike. Special emphasize was put on memories of the times when people could normally walk and gather, enjoy the city before the city went silent and still. However, the other important observation is the focus on inviting people to slow down and rethink where they are now and what they could do to foster transformations looking "at life from a different perspective". The video was also a call for building memories together again sometimes in the future. Hence, the focus was completely put on people's emotions. The second video was released by one regional DMO from Adriatic Croatia – Split-Dalmatia County. The video's title is very attention grabbing and occasional: "Central Dalmatia – A Dream Waiting For You". Authors point to the similarity of this video with the powerful one of Portuguese destination management organization - "Can't Skip Hope" – that sent the message of hope during pandemics. The video hit the right notes.² The video is actually an excellent example of what DMOs should have done at that stage of recovery – mitigation. This is of particular importance when it comes to destination communication campaigns in times of uncertainty. At that stage, DMOs should have sent encouraging and supportive messages because even in conditions of crisis and complete restriction of travel there could be something magical in virtual travel from the warmth of the own home. They had to adapt and make the most out of the benefits of digital technologies. DMOs should have been in constant virtual communication with their target markets, but also the other tourism stakeholders in the destination. They all strongly contribute to creation of tourist product/experience. That was not the phase in which potential tourists should have been persuaded to travel. On the contrary, it was a phase in which the emphasis should have been put on solidarity and togetherness. Soothing, but at the same time optimistic messages, had to be put at the core of the message content. DMOs should have promoted

² Narrations from the video „Can't Skip Hope“: "It's time to stop. It's time to look out for each other in the distance. Time to stare humanity in the eyes, to take a break for the world. It's time to stop. Time to take a pause, so we can play again. To think of everyone and meet no one. To reset, re-centre, switch off, to move on. Time to change our little world, to calibrate the path of mankind.... "It's time to stop. We are meant to connect and we are stronger together, but separated, we are today more united than ever. And for now, our main strength is to be apart." Closing note: "For when those days arrive, we will say again: Visit Portugal".

a destination that tourists would want to visit once environments set normal again. None of the other regional DMOs in Croatia had managed to create a video that would have spread these and similar messages to their target markets in the virus-induced reality. Seems that regional DMOs in Croatia were expecting to get instructions from national DMO – Croatian Tourist Board - as most of the communication still flows top-bottom direction. In mid-April 2020 Croatian Tourist Board released a video “*Croatia Long Distance Love*”. Some of the regional DMOs linked the video on their website and promoted it on their social media. However, Zagreb Tourist Board and Split – Dalmatia Tourist Board impressed by the creativity and were able to find ways to promote destinations in a generous, inventive, and genuinely uplifting manner.

When it comes to communication campaigns using video material and similar content, it is good to emphasize that several most popular Croatian destinations found ways to promote themselves alone and stand out of the mass. Three popular Croatia destinations stood out.

1. The City of Dubrovnik Tourist Board that makes part of the Dubrovnik and Neretva County Tourist Board launched a promotional campaign “*Dubrovnik is not going anywhere; it is waiting for you*”. The campaign run across social networks in Scandinavia, the United Kingdom, Germany, Slovenia and Croatia during April and May. In the first few days the promotional video with the slogan was viewed around 180,000 times. (The Dubrovnik Times, 2020)

2. The City of Opatija Tourist Board that makes part of the Kvarner Tourist Board launched a campaign “*Dream Today, Visit Opatija Tomorrow*”. The three phases of the campaign were observed: the first phase called for dreaming about a vacation, the second called for planning a vacation in Opatija, and the third was focused on final arrival to the “Cradle of Croatian Tourism”. Each phase was characterized by different video messages and different scenarios. The most attractive segments of the local offer were presented. Opatija Tourist Board was very creative and planned a very distinctive communication campaign. In such a way it showed how to communicate in the times of crisis.

3. The City of Split Tourist Board that makes part of Split-Dalmatia County Tourist Board launched a #TogetherinSplit campaign in April. The aim was to inspire people to fantasize about the moment when they would be able to enjoy the beauties of the City of Split and region again. It sent messages to tourists unveiling they were all in this together although separated at that moment. They invited all travel agencies, hotels, museums, travel guides to join the campaign. According to tourist board director’s view stakeholders reaction was fantastic. This is, certainly, an innovative approach. Two phases of the campaign were planned. The first video was released in April and the second one in July 2020. Both videos resulted from joint efforts of the public and private sector. The first phase of the campaign that run until the end of June had foreign tourists in the focus. In the next phase the emphasize was placed on domestic tourism, safety, security, the natural and cultural beauties of the city.

Amid the lockdown, the COVID-19 pandemic has created a vast array of opportunities for DMOs, cultural institutions and other tourism organizations to offer virtual experiences so that the quest for discovery remains unhindered. This influences

the tourist's decision on whether to visit the destination or attraction in real life in the future. (Wang and Fesenmaier, 2008; Pantano and Servidio, 2011; Marasco et. al., 2018, Boyd and Koles, 2019). Virtual reality offers the potential to build a sensory experience of a tourist destination or attraction (Gibson and O'Rawe, 2018) and creates amazing experiences limited by tourist's imagination only. While traveling was on hold, six regional DMOs or 29% offered virtual walks through destinations, museums and parks on their websites. Four of the regional DMOs were from the Adriatic and 2 from Continental Croatia.

During the pandemics, DMOs focused their outreach to prospective travelers mostly via social media and website. Social media is producing radical changes in the promotion of tourist destination (Roque and Raposo, 2016) and it has metamorphosed the consumer decision-making process (Hudson and Thal, 2013). In the time of crises, with limited budgets, DMOs could seek to create greater value by taking advantage of the social media (Hays, Page and Buhalis, 2013). Evidence show that social media strategies among DMOs are emerging and the importance of these new media is growing (Munar, 2018). DMOs that want to employ successful online marketing strategies need to focus on their community's core needs and attributes (Ružić and Biloš, 2010) This is of particular importance in this virus-induced reality when the sense of insecurity and uncertainty is felt both - on the demand as well as the supply side. However, only five (24%) regional DMOs were active on social media during the lockdown period – four regional DMOs from the Adriatic Croatia and one from Continental Croatia. One regional DMO from Adriatic Croatia initiated newsletter campaigns (“*Istrien So Nah!*”) to more than 500 addresses in Austria and Germany. The campaign specifically addressed the crises management issues. It started online on the 5th of June and lasted for 5 weeks.

“*Život u srcu Dalmacije*” (“Life in the Hearth of Dalmatia”) is an interesting and, at that time, innovative campaign launched by the Šibenik-Knin regional DMO from the Adriatic Croatia. Many tourism stakeholders from the region, as well as tourists, were invited to participate in the promotion of the destination itself. They idea was to create incentives to post videos and photos on the Facebook page of regional DMO. The campaign initiated more than a month before the official launch of the similar campaign (“*Enjoy the Views from Croatia*”) that was operated and monitored by national destination management organization – Croatian Tourist Board. When it comes to residents, bearing in mind the impact COVID-19 has left on people in general, their trust has been shaken and had to be restored. It is no doubt that residents might become the first-line ambassadors for a destination in the future. Localization will be of huge importance in the future. This was the only initiative of such kind undertaken by one regional DMO that engaged different stakeholders in promoting destination.

Most of the regional DMOs were not active on posting information on COVID-19 developments on their websites for tourists³, local residents and other stakeholders in destination though they all contribute in the process of co-creation of tourism experiences

³ Authors exclude the campaign „Istria So Nah“ for being previously already described and for being more focused on two main markets – Austria and Germany. Namly, authors were keen to observe whether DMO publish any information on their websites for tourists – regardless the newsletter and other online campaigns.

(Campos et. al., 2015). DMOs could have been more successful in that phase had they communicated more intensively with their stakeholders as communication constructs the basis for sustainable tourism development (Garbin Praničević and Peterlin, 2015). Particularly, they failed in assuring the two-way communication process although in such a way DMOs could have shared more easily the important information and some proposals with their stakeholders.

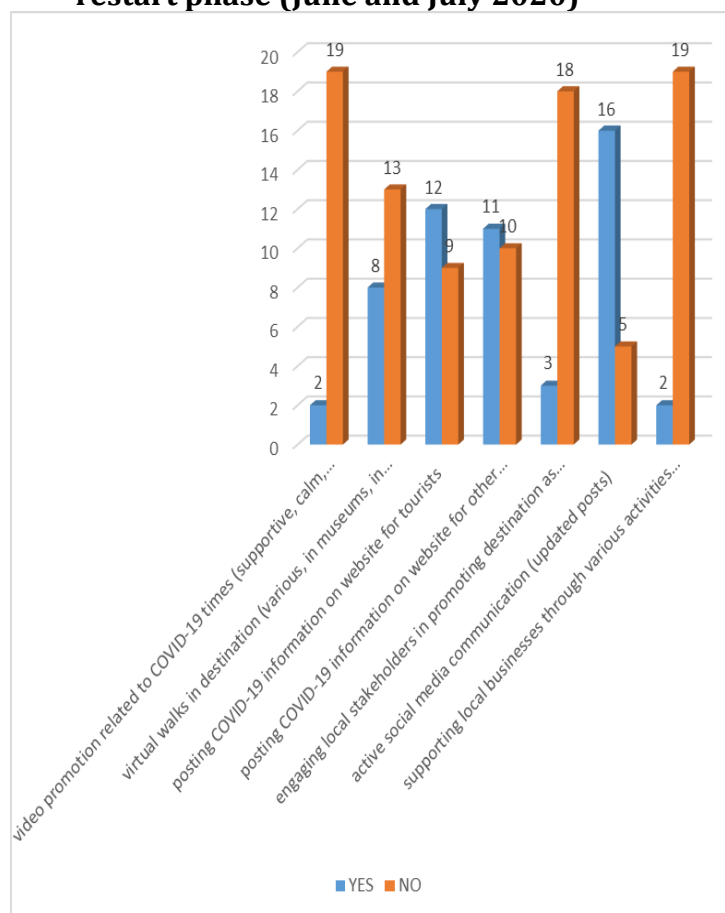
B) Restart Phase

As tourism began to restart, authors wanted to observe the kind of “COVID-aptability” measures undertaken by regional DMOs.

Covid-19 crises is extremely complex. It is a combination of a natural disaster, a socio-political crisis, an economic crisis and a tourism demand crisis (Zenker and Kock, 2020). In the second phase, destinations were gradually opening to tourists. In general, it is said that tourism sector has high resilience and the capacity to adapt to and recover from catastrophic or unexpected phenomena but this time, the tourism sector will have a very severe stress test to pass (Romagosa, 2020). DMOs in the restart phase had to be able to transmit the right messages about what destinations provided to their tourists, how did they adapt to the new normal, what did different stakeholders undertake to ensure the necessary conditions of safety and security for tourists, what kind of tourist products or experiences were offered in destinations. Overall, DMOs had to send clear messages about how socially responsible they were in these times.

In the next part authors focus on activities embraced during June and July 2020 – restart phase.

Figure 2: **Main activities undertaken by regional DMOs in Croatia during the restart phase (June and July 2020)**



Source: author's research

Authors were keen to discover whether regional DMOs have created and released promotional videos related to their destination and its “COVID-aptability” to the “new normal”. Two (2) regional DMOs or 9,5% of them released promotional videos purposefully created to present destination in the COVID-19 times. Whilst observing the content of the videos authors concluded they were directed towards, not only foreign tourists, but domestic as well. The “*Lika je lik*” video and promotional campaign was intended to the domestic market. The intention was to send the message of the importance of staying in nature, benefits of staying in nature and the measures undertaken to assure safety and security as well as privacy of tourists. A digital brochure was prepared to support the designed campaign. The other video - “*Nazdravi za bolje sutra*” (“*Toast for a Better Tomorrow*”) - promoted the wine scene of the Zagreb County with the focus on better future after the pandemic. With uncertainty and fear hanging over traveling, one is clear - pandemic will permanently change the way people travel (Fallows et. al., 2020) and DMOs need to react properly on this. In the COVID-19 times, the “try before the buy” option could be an effective way to restore the tourist’s confidence. Authors noted an increase in offering virtual walks through destination, particular

cultural monuments and institutions, national parks etc. 8 regional DMOs offered virtual walks in the restart phase that made 38% (equal distribution between Adriatic and Continental Croatia) or an increase of 60% compared with the mitigation phase.

Crises communication and stakeholder engagement is important aspect of control DMOs need to handle. Stakeholders were keen to know what DMOs were doing to make things right. Another important aspect was to get the idea of what their role was in the provision of services to tourists because of the need to evolve operations to a new normal (socially distant). This was significant for smaller businesses and home owners who needed to get clear instructions to adapt more properly to the “new normal”. Local residents inevitably were worried that tourists might import the virus and overwhelm the infrastructure and were looking to get proper instruction on how to handle various situations they might encounter (i.e. what are the procedures if they welcome COVID+ tourist in their homes). On the other side, tourists wanted to be sufficiently confident of their safety in a particular tourist destination but they also wanted to make sure they could still enjoy the visitor experience and high-quality service. Imprecise, inconsistent and delayed communications and engagement creates additional uncertainty and kills trust quickly (Deloitte, 2020). In line with that, DMOs should have prepared a sort of a prevention plan that protects providers of services and guests while in destination and on property and to help ensure a positive and safe experience in the destination. Significant improvement was noted when it comes to online communication with tourists (however, one-way only). 52% of regional DMO were posting information on coronavirus for their internal stakeholders, but it was mostly only links on the website on some other national sources (i.e. national coronavirus page). Other information was scarce. 57% of regional DMOs were active on posting information related to COVID-19 on their website and related online channels for tourists. The way information was posted could be characterized as static and an obvious lack of real time information was noted. One regional DMO from Adriatic Croatia continued with the newsletter campaign initiated during the mitigation phase. The focus, though, in this phase was on opening of accommodation and catering facilities, attractions and other tourist facilities. Evidently two-way communication was mostly lacking although required to restore traveler confidence and stimulate demand (Pwc United States, 2020).

16 regional DMOs were active on their social media whilst regularly updating their posts, sending various information to tourists etc. compared to the lockdown period when only 5 regional DMOs were active on social media. Only two regional DMO from Continental Croatia started with connecting local agricultural producers, accommodation providers, restaurants, travel agencies etc. (Lika je Lik, Odmor nikad bliže). The second was the campaign “Odmor nikad bliže” (“The Ever So Close Vacation”) was immersed on provision of experiences in the green oasis of the Zagreb County. Natural attractions, picturesque villages, mansions and castles, wine roads, rural holiday homes, picnic areas, family farms, educational trails, etc. were promoted. Different stakeholders were engaged in this campaign. Three regional DMOs from Continental Croatia managed to engage stakeholders in their promotional initiatives.

4. Conclusion

Unquestionable, the COVID-19 pandemic is one of the most stressful events of the 21st century and has left an enormous impact on tourism. The study's social science viewpoint is observed across the research methodology, discussions and argumentation of the research findings. This study highlights: (1) the response/resilience strategies of DMOs to COVID-19 pandemic (what did they do to overcome this crises) in mitigation and restart phases & (2) the importance of DMOs in the times of crises.

The main conclusions that arose from the research:

1. Overall, regional DMOs in Croatia have not sufficiently applied nor managed new communication approaches in the virus-induced uncertain reality to stimulate the engagement with tourists and internal stakeholders.
2. Regional DMOs have not managed to advance the relationship with their main stakeholders in destination to keep the sense of community alive. They have not succeeded to holistically approach communication whilst creating advocates (i.e. tourists and residents alike) in times of social isolation and modest support was later provided in the restart phase.
3. Interestingly, only two regional DMOs have managed to create videos that were encouraging people to dream, at the same time evoking emotions and giving people (not only tourists) a sense of hope. It is more the lack of incentives than budget constraints that could be considered route-problems.
4. Facebook, YouTube and Instagram allow the DMOs to promote destinations' products/services as well as their responsible behavior. This is something that DMOs needed to take advantage of but did not - especially in the mitigation phase. Obviously, there is a problem with human resources structure in the system because not much budget is needed for certain social media activities.
5. It is intriguing that only three regional DMOs and all of them from Continental Croatia managed to engage stakeholders in their promotional activities and were successful in stimulating the cooperation between them (of commercial value). Seems regional DMOs from Adriatic Croatia spent more time on promoting destination and obvious lack of other activities that would add value to the tourism product/services of the region was noted.
6. Regional DMOs missed to rally local pride by excluding residents, not only from the promotional activities undertaken in the two observed phases, but also from the planning process. In the planning process they had to focus more on collaboration and assistance in the destination. Localisation has passed under the radar of responsible managers.
7. Obviously, no crises management plans existed.
8. There is a need to rethink the role of regional DMOs in Croatia and consider possibilities of forming alliances, particularly when it comes to fostering stakeholder cooperation, promotion of destination, creation of tourism experiences, dealing with crises etc. because much of a *liaison* exists between them.
9. DMOs have still not shifted their role towards integrated management.

However, an intensive planning process is in front of regional DMOs. Regional DMO's managers are responsible for keeping a pulse on the evolving landscape, continually brainstorming adjustments to their strategies. Business as usual approach will no longer be possible because the tourism in the „new normal” is everything but not usual. Regional DMOs will need to prepare recovery plans to rebuild destinations, revise their marketing plans, rethink tourism sector in their regions and foster innovations. Budget amendments will be vital. They will have to leverage relationships between themselves and between other organizations and different stakeholders to share resources as efficiently as possible and be able to create attractive and sustainable tourism products. In the planning for the recovery in the future, regional DMOs should not grab at anything that might bring back tourists in their destinations, quality and responsibility be disrupted. They will need to rethink tourism and bear in mind what tourism will look like for the decades ahead (Brouder, 2020). Smart implementation of digital technology can advance, not only the development and provision of tourist experiences, but help in the fight of the spread of coronavirus pandemics whilst at the same time serving in the process of decision-making. Innovations and digital transformations were particularly prioritized in this time as a key means of growing tourism back but in a sustainable manner. Artificial intelligence and Big Data will help destinations better understand the behavior of their target markets. Along these lines, DMOs will be able to tailor the tourism products and experiences more efficiently as well as to market them properly. Perhaps, as Niewiadomski (2020) argues, the temporary processes of de-globalization offer the tourism industry an unprecedented opportunity for a re-boot –to re-develop in line with the tenets of sustainability. Cheer (2020) argues the concept of ‘human flourishing’, as an alternative touchstone for evaluating the impacts of tourism on host communities, might also have impact on reshaping the future of tourism. Or, some of the major values that might drive innovative alternative social systems in an emergent post COVID-19 world might include: peace, love, health and happiness, equity, fairness, cooperation and green economies as argued by Alan Lew (2020). Ateljević (2020) argues that transformative tourism is offered to reset the global tourism system for good.

Limitations of the study: For further investigation on the efficiency of the current system of regional DMOs in Croatia authors propose to conduct personal interviews with responsible managers of regional DMOs in order to examine and analyze the planning process regional DMO have already started with or will go through it in the near future. Secondly, an online survey should be designed targeted at local residents and service providers in destinations. Research should be conducted in order to discover their opinion on the efficiency and effectiveness of regional DMOs' response to this crisis and the level of their overall satisfaction. Thirdly, an online questionnaire should be designed targeted at tourists to discover their overall satisfaction with the level of information provided to them as well as with the general communication process.

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IL COMPORTAMENTO E LA RISPOSTA DELLE ORGANIZZAZIONI REGIONALI DI GESTIONE DELLE DESTINAZIONI NELLE DUE FASI DI RECUPERO DELLE DESTINAZIONI TURISTICHE NEL CORSO DELLA PANDEMIA COVID-19. IL CASO DELLA CROAZIA

Riassunto

Lo scopo dell'articolo è quello di esaminare il comportamento e la risposta delle Organizzazioni Regionali di Gestione delle Destinazioni (di seguito DMO) in concomitanza con la crisi epidemiologica COVID-19. L'analisi consentirà di fornire suggerimenti per il miglioramento delle pratiche di stakeholder management e della pianificazione strategica in tempi di crisi e di estrema incertezza. Progettazione / Metodologia / Approccio – Utilizzando una combinazione di strumenti/metodi qualitativi e quantitativi vengono indagate le principali attività e le differenze tra il comportamento delle DMO regionali nella fase di mitigazione degli effetti negativi e il riavvio delle destinazioni turistiche. In questa ricerca è stata utilizzata l'analisi dei dati derivanti da fonti primarie. Nel periodo da metà marzo a metà giugno 2020 sono stati consultati e osservati i siti web delle DMO regionali, i vari canali dei social media, le newsletter e altre pubblicazioni dei media relativi alle DMO regionali per comprendere meglio la loro risposta all'emergenza COVID-19. Risultati - I risultati mostrano che le DMO regionali in Croazia non sono riuscite a far progredire le relazioni con i loro principali stakeholder né hanno implementato le pratiche di gestione integrata durante i periodi di crisi. Originalità della ricerca - Lo studio aumenta la nostra comprensione sul ruolo che le DMO hanno in tempi di crisi, in particolare nelle questioni legate alla gestione degli stakeholder, alla comunicazione e alla pianificazione strategica.

Parole chiave: *Crisi epidemiologica COVID-19, Organizzazioni Regionali di Gestione delle Destinazioni, gestione delle destinazioni, coinvolgimento degli stakeholder, gestione della crisi, comunicazione in tempo di crisi.*