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Tourism and Travel Competitiveness Index: From Theoretical Definition to Practical Analysis in Romania

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Abstract: The competitiveness of tourist destinations presents, from the perspective of sustainability, certain benefits in terms of local and regional development: the involvement of local authorities (city, local and county councils, population) in the conservation of tourist resources, the involvement of tourism agencies in the promotion of rural areas, the creation of brands for each tourist destination/region and the protection of cultural-historical heritage from degradation. Competitiveness, as a segment of sustainability, integrated in Romanian local communities, is necessary in order to offer tourists an unmistakable experience of the natural and anthropogenic tourism potential of destinations, to raise the population's awareness, to preserve traditions, customs and habits and to practice tourism based on sustainability, awareness and without any pollution of terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems. This study aims to highlight the image of Romania's tourism competitiveness, which could support the tourism economy in the long term, by analysing the Global Tourism and Travel Competitiveness Index (TTCI) in Romania, compared to two other neighbouring countries, Bulgaria and Hungary. The Global Competitiveness Index provides an integrative picture of the main sub-indices that interfere in the formation of a country's competitiveness, with insights on the 12 pillars that intervene in the sustainable development of tourist destinations worldwide.

Keywords: competitiveness; tourism; competitiveness Index; destinations; indicators



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1. Introduction

According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), the tourism industry constituted 10.4% of the worldwide Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2018. It generated 319 million jobs, which accounted for 10% of the total employment. Additionally, the tourism sector represented approximately 6.5% of the overall global exports [1,2].

In 2022, the Travel and Tourism sector contributed 7.6% to the global Gross Domestic Product (GDP), marking a 22% increase compared to 2021 when the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic was at its height. It is worth noting that this figure was only 23% below the levels recorded in 2019 [3]. Therefore, it can be concluded that the tourism sector represents a dynamic market for the growth, development, and capitalization of economies worldwide.

Consequently, one can say that the tourism sector represents a dynamic market in the growth, development and capitalization of the economies of all countries worldwide.

Competitiveness, as defined by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), refers to the inclination and capacity of a specific country, region, city, or business entity to manufacture goods, including services, that fulfil the demands of the global market (in terms of internationalizing businesses) within a free market environment. Simultaneously, it involves the ability to sustain and enhance long-term real personal incomes and ensure development through ongoing, steady, and dynamic technological advancements [4].

Competitiveness can also be viewed as a pursuit of sustained profitability that typically exceeds the average performance within the industry [5]. At the same time, tourism

competitiveness is related to the ability of a certain destination to ensure the development of sustainable tourism [6]. In the field, experts and academics have argued that destination competitiveness pertains to the destination's capacity to generate and deliver added value, while effectively managing its available resources such as natural and man-made tourism resources. It also involves preserving its market position towards competitors [7,8].

Competitiveness is acknowledged as a crucial economic aspect of sustainability in the HORECA sector. However, it is frequently disregarded in discussions about sustainable tourism because it is directly associated with promoting ecotourism [9] and social tourism that is found in the specialized literature with a doublet of benefits (1) there are evident social advantages when it comes to providing travel opportunities to underprivileged individuals within society, and (2) social tourism is related to the sustainability of tourism [10], i.e., in areas with a high concentration of tourism—polarizing-urban areas (example: Azuga, Bușteni, Brașov, Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve, etc.), ecotourism which involves activities set in a natural environment [11] with a wide range of benefits for the local community [12], rural tourism encompasses a range of attractions and activities that occur in non-urban areas, offering visitors a countryside experience [13], spa tourism which is essential for Romania [14], wine tourism is a form of tourism that revolves around the enjoyment of wine through activities such as tasting, drinking, and even buying wine [15] and rural tourism plays a dual role by not only preserving cultural heritage and rural lifestyles but also by raising awareness among both locals and tourists about the significance of natural and agricultural heritage [16]. Furthermore, it serves as a catalyst for economic development in vulnerable communities, particularly in rural areas [17].

Through a comprehensive review of the academic literature on sustainable tourism, a prevailing issue emerges: the simultaneous enhancement of economic, social, and environmental sustainability. Researchers face the challenge of effectively addressing this triad, seeking ways to advance all three dimensions concurrently. Furthermore, there is emphasized the significance of adopting a comprehensive approach to social and environmental challenges as a fundamental strategy in fostering a successful tourism sector [18–20], which accompany the development of sustainable regional and national tourism everywhere in Romania.

Tourist Destination Competitiveness (TDC) is quite well-known in the academic, tourism, economic and environmental fields, being studied for more than 30 years. All the activities in the tourism field leave a particular trace on the environment, and they (travels, accommodation and food production and consumption) impact negatively the environment if they are not properly managed [21], by all the involved factors (population, tourism staff and managers, but also residents who host tourists during their holidays).

The term of “Tourism Destination Competitiveness” is a highly controversial, as the concept is complex, multidimensional and difficult to measure [22–29]; therefore, it is very complicated to specify a universally acceptable definition of tourism competitiveness.

The competitiveness of a tourist destination can be understood as the capacity of the destination to fulfil the various needs of visitors throughout different aspects of their tourism experience. It also entails providing superior products and services in relation to those specific aspects of the tourist experience that are important for tourists [24].

The challenge concerning the applicability of the competitiveness concept to regional and national tourism destinations arises from its tendency to be predominantly seen from a short-term standpoint, as noted in previous studies [30]. This issue is further compounded by the profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on tourism and its associated activities, particularly during the 2020–2022 period [31]. Additionally, in the context of migration from Romania, there has been a notable decrease in the substantial outflow of individuals seeking employment opportunities abroad, diverging from the patterns observed in preceding years [32].

The “Diamond Model” created by Porter (1990) presents the determinants of international competitiveness operating at the microeconomic level [33]. Thus, the model proposed by Porter represents the international competitiveness of a branch of economic activity,

based on the action of six factors, four of which are considered determining factors: the factors' conditions (1), the conditions of demand (2), the growing number of branches of activity as well as those adjacent activities supporting the tourism sector (3), the policies and strategies that support the branches of economic activity (4) and two factors of an exogenous nature: chance (5)—exogenous events: unexpected developments and trends on the markets, for example: SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, and the government (6)—state institutions.

The paper is divided into six consecutive sections, outlined as follows: Section 1 provides a brief introduction, while Section 2 presents a review of the most important scientific papers in the field of tourism destination competitiveness and sustainable tourism development. Section 3 describes the methodology used in the research, covering the analysis of Romania in the local and European context. It presents the pillars that constitute the Tourism and Travel Competitiveness Index, the research objectives, and the hypothesis. Section 4 explicitly and comprehensively presents the results obtained in correlation with the research objectives. Section 5 discusses the findings of this research in relation to previous studies reviewed in the specialized literature. Finally, Section 6 concludes the research by summarizing the main conclusions obtained from the analysis of tourism competitiveness, along with the limitations and future research perspectives that will be explored in further studies.

2. Literature Review

The negative impact of SARS-CoV-2 pandemic was temporary, but managing tourism in a sustainable manner of competitiveness is essential for medium and long-term policy and strategy planning [34]. Competitive strategies and policies are extremely important to enhance a country's economy (example: Romania). Those countries that were dependent on the tourism sector before the pandemic, acknowledged that their venues from tourism activities represented the main source of income [34].

Increasing the capacity of a competitive tourist destination is indispensable, as it can represent the economic growth engine of the country and can be achieved by increasing the number of domestic and foreign tourists and their travel expenses, thus improving on long term the physical environments for both residents and visitors [35]. For example, the travel destination, such as Romania with a higher level of destination competitiveness supply unique experiences and a higher attractiveness for tourists in comparison to other neighbouring destinations (Bulgaria and Hungary) [22].

The central element playing a key function in the sustainable development of tourism—the core of the tourist destination, indicates the three basic attractions for travel destinations: (1) natural competitiveness, (2) cultural competitiveness and (3) contextual competitiveness [36]. The natural competitiveness of tourist destination refers to the natural elements that form the tourist potential of a tourist area/zone. Cultural competitiveness represents the set of immaterial tourism potential of a county/country (traditions, customs and traditions inherited from generation to generation). Contextual competitiveness is related to the incomparable attributes of a tourist destination [36], for example: Decebal's face from Mehedinți County, the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve from Tulcea County, the Sphinx and Babele from the Bucegi Massif, the Merry Cemetery from Săpânța, Maramureș County, etc.

In the global economy, destination competitiveness is becoming a requirement for remaining successful [37,38]. Thus, it is noted in the literature that it does vary depending on the regions (tourist destinations). For a tourist destination to remain competitive, it should: (1) attract significant numbers of foreign tourists and/or visitors, (2) grow along with international globalization, and (3) offer unique experiences and knowledge [38]. A region's tourism competitiveness has the potential to offer various advantages [39]. Rodríguez et al. (2020) mention that the tourism sector significantly contributes not only to economic growth and development but also to the generation of new employment opportunities [40].

The development of tourist infrastructure and technical-building facilities within a tourist destination and the generation of taxes are among the economic benefits of the growth and development of tourism [41].

The fast evolution of information technology, the development of skills and a higher educated human capital [39], the GDP growth, the improvement of tourism companies' performances, but also the employment of well trained and qualified personnel contribute to the economic growth of a development region: North-East Development Region, South-East Development Region, South-Muntenia Development Region, South-West Oltenia Development Region, West Development Region, North-West Development Region, Center Development Region and Bucharest-Ilfov Development Region. Regional competitiveness stands as a fundamental component of the European Union's regional policy, receiving consistent monitoring. Consequently, specialized literature recognizes it as the main factor for development [42].

According to UNWTO, sustainable tourism encompasses a comprehensive approach that considers the present and future economic, social, and environmental impacts. It addresses the needs of visitors, the HORECA industry, the environment, and the host community. In addition to the traditional three pillars of sustainable development, namely society, environment, and economic advantages, UNWTO includes two additional Ps: prosperity and partnership [43,44]. Furthermore, we can expand on the framework by adding five more Ps: research, performance, innovation, tourist supply and attractiveness.

The analysis of tourist destinations' competitiveness from the perspective of tourism demand and supply is very important, because the points of view of the demand side are completely different from those formulated by the supply side [45]. Increases in travel demand and available jobs number, as well as disruptions in the global supply chain, growth of fuel prices and inflation caused by various factors, such as the war in Ukraine and the earthquake in Turkey and Syria, are likely to increase the costs and prices of services throughout the T&T supply chain and ecosystem [9].

Sustainability is a capital topic in the 21st century. In September 2015, the United Nations (UN) introduced the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with the aim of enhancing our world by 2030. These SDGs replaced the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that were established in 2000, serving as a plan for global development until 2015.

Fierce competition between companies and tourism destinations, tourist awareness and regulations, government laws are among the factors driving small, medium and large companies worldwide are encouraged to embrace sustainable practices, and the tourism sector is no exemption to this imperative [46–49].

In the context of recent events through which tourism activities have passed there is a notable increase in competition between tourist destinations [50] and micro-tourism destinations, such as the Danube Gorge. The higher competition was supported by a relevant fact in the dynamics of the economic activity sector (tourism), meaning the complexity of tourist products that has led to the appearance of new destinations entering the traditional tourist circuit to create a tourist supply [50], which is both differentiated and competitive in terms of sustainability on the Romanian national market. Moreover, in tandem with this trend of sustainable growth of tourism, the negative effects, triggered by the crisis in the sanitary system from 2020 to 2022, on the Romanian market and beyond it must also be taken into account.

It should be noted that the measures to restrict mobility, but also social distancing, both at national and international level, adopted by various authorities to limit the spread of the virus (COVID-19) represented a real burden, which limited the size [50] and the continuous development of tourism market.

As a result of the economic crisis caused by SARS-CoV-2 virus [51], at the global level, a significant number of individuals working in the tourism and hospitality industry have encountered exceptional levels of job insecurity [52,53], thus it is important to know the characteristics of this industry so to anticipate the future trends of interest in the tourism field of activity [54]. Tourism is an activity centred around meeting the specific needs

and preferences of customers, aiming to provide satisfaction [55]. As such, tourism has demonstrated its adaptability in responding to the evolving demands and preferences of various generations [55]. On the other hand, hospitality services are reflecting the people who interact with the tourist, consequently the quality of tourist services must be strictly dependent on the professionalism of service providers [56].

One of the sectors of economic activity, one sector of tourism that has been significantly impacted by the pandemic crisis is collaborative tourism, particularly home-sharing [53]. In the clarity of instant business renewal process, shortly after the Coronavirus pandemic, the development of integrated management systems has emerged to deal with environmental, social, health and economic issues [57].

As a result, the integration of industrial symbiosis and circular economy development paradigms could play a crucial role in the shift from linear practices to circular practices [57]. This transition would enhance the interconnections between suppliers (companies), suppliers (tourists), and the dynamic relationship between tourists and local residents.

Moreover, taking into account that there is a close connection by establishing environmental strategies, there is potential for the harmonization of economic growth and environmental protection, particularly in the areas of food, accommodation, and transportation. This alignment can result in various benefits and positive outcomes, leading to a reduction in costs, increasing, at the same time, the activities' effectiveness and the trust of customers [57] who will purchase new tourist products with a minimally invasive impact on the terrestrial and aquatic ecosystem, and practice forms of sustainable tourism in protected areas. According to [58], new tourism products encompass novel experiences and offerings that have not been previously encountered or familiar to tourists, whether it be in terms of the activities provided or the destination experience itself.

In today's competitive market, companies allocate substantial investments in advertising endeavours aimed at capturing consumers' attention. A prevalent strategy employed by many companies involves leveraging the influence of celebrities in advertising campaigns to endorse and promote their products, services, and brands [59]; the type of celebrity (more or less famous/known) can positively or negatively influence the buyer's attention towards the product or brand promoted in different contexts [60,61] and, at the same time, research indicates that the association between a celebrity and a brand has a favourable effect on the intention to purchase the endorsed product [61].

The global competitiveness of a nation serves as a crucial factor in comprehending why certain countries generate greater wealth and sustainable sources of income, particularly in the context of tourism development [62]; competitiveness depends, first of all, on the countries' ability to produce knowledge, secondly, on encouraging education and innovation as indicators of growth and globalization [63] and thirdly, to create performance and values for a high competitiveness of tourist destinations in Romania.

Consequently, it is imperative to reduce the gaps between the Romanian development regions and the European and international countries by strengthening trade, exports, competitiveness, but also productivity in the regions. The competitiveness of a country plays a primary role in the state's efforts to attain sustainable development that has a positive impact on the well-being and lifestyle of the population is a key objective; as a result, its assessment has been included in various studies in the international literature [62,64].

At the same time, the competitiveness of tourist destinations simultaneously contributes to the application of economic policies, both at county level, as well as at regional and national level, which, in turn, can affect small and medium-sized enterprises, especially in the development of post-pandemic policies and strategies meant to improve micro-destinations in Romania.

In order to present a broader approach, previous research on the competitiveness of tourist destinations and the Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index (TTCI) were outlined in Table 1. This presents different interpretations and explanations of competitiveness from the literature, providing significant background information and descriptions.

Table 1. Various definitions of tourism destination competitiveness and TTCL.

Concepts	Authors	Definitions
Tourism destination competitiveness	Crouch & Ritchie (1999) Dwyer & Kim (2003) Ritchie & Crouch (2003) Hassan (2000) Cho (1998) Buhalis (2000) Bordas Rubies (2001) Dwyer, Mellor, Livaic, Edwards & ChulWon (2004) Bahar & Kozak (2007) Boikova, Zeverte-Rivza, Rivza & Rivza (2021)	Destination competitiveness reflects the intensification of living standards [22,24,35,65–71], for the inhabitants of rural and urban areas within the destinations (example: resorts of national interest, resorts of local interest, protected natural areas etc.).
	Tsai, Song & Wong (2009) Farinha, Bienvenido-Huertas, Duarte Pinheiro, Silva, Lanca, José Oliveira & Batista (2021)	Competitiveness is „one of the core issues for tourism destinations and regional stakeholders” [72,73].
	Bris & Caballero (2015)	The notion of competitiveness refers to how any country, region and tourism company (travel agency) manages its competencies in its entirety, in order to record benefits or gains [74].
	Selim, Abdel-Fattah & Hegazi (2021)	The competitiveness of heritage tourism destinations extends beyond financial capacity to encompass cultural, historical, social, political, and environmental elements [75], as well as the visual and aesthetic aspects of human heritage objectives.
	Murayama, Brown, Hallak, & Matsuoka (2022) Hong (2009) D’Hauteserre (2000) Hassan (2009) Mendola & Volo (2017) Hassan (2000)	The competitiveness of a tourist destination refers to its ability to develop, include and adapt tourism products/services with additional profitability [76] and to maintain its position in the market, compared to their competitors [26,65,77,78], always supporting the existing resources: natural, ecological and anthropogenic ones [65].
	Ng, Hsu, Chao & Chen (2023)	The competitiveness of a destination refers to how it offers an „innovative product” or a unique tourist experience within the tourist stay [79].
	Ahn & Bessiere (2023) Shariffuddin, Azinuddin, Hanafiah & Zain (2021) Rey-Maqueira & Ramos (2016) Tse & Tung (2022) Zaman (2023)	The competitiveness of the destination represents the capacity of the tourist destination to attract and retain tourists, at the same time, generating economic benefits from visiting it [36,38,80–82].
	Phuthong, Anuntavoranich, Chandrachai & Piromsopa (2022)	Competitiveness represents the action of recognizing the (special) tourism development strategies and policies that businesses use in a competitive environment [83] or exceptional situation of calamity/natural disasters, economic and health crisis—COVID-19, to ensure the maximum efficiency of tourist demand.

Table 1. Cont.

Concepts	Authors	Definitions
Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index (TTCI)	Bernal Escoto, Portal Boza & Feitó Madrigal (2019)	TTCI is thought to be a suitable marketing mechanism for tourism companies, for the promotion, development and evaluation of national tourism [84].
	Martín, Mendoza & Román, (2017)	The aim of the TTCI is to analyse and compare the factors and policies that contribute to the attractiveness of the Travel and Tourism (T&T) sector's development and expansion in numerous countries [85].

Source: Author's compilation.

3. Materials and Methodology

3.1. Field of Interest

Romania is located in the south-east of Central Europe [86], in its central-south-eastern part, at approximately equal distances from Cape Finisterre in Spain (2750 km), from the western part of England (2700 km), the Ural Mountains (2706 km) and the North Cape of Norway (2800 km), but only 1000 km from Cape Matapan in the Greek Peloponnese peninsula. From a European regional point of view, but in a physical-geographical sense, Romania is fixed on the Carpathian-Danubian-Pontic Areal [87] (p. 17). In other words, Romania is located between three geographical elements that define the Romanian territory: the Carpathians, the Danube River and the Black Sea (Figure 1).

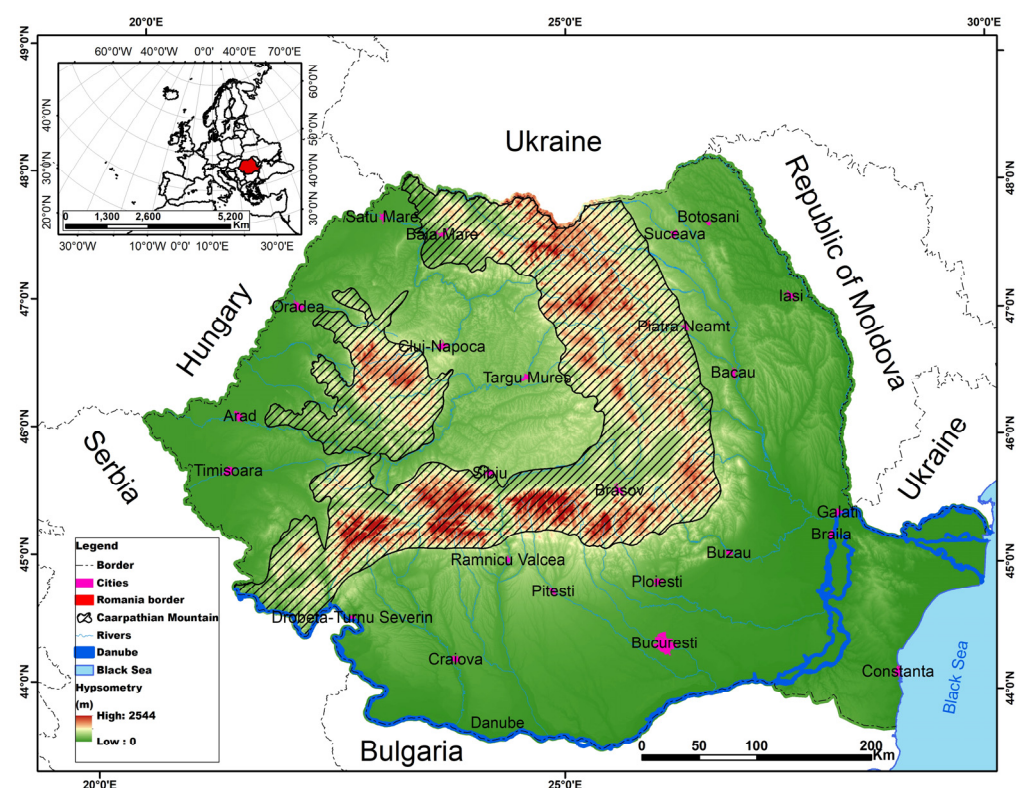


Figure 1. The location of Romania at local and European level. Source: authors' data processing in ArcGIS 10.7.

On the other hand, Romania is located in the lower basin of the Danube (Figure 1), a river that crosses ten European states, namely: Germany, Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Bulgaria, Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and last but not least, Romania.

Romania owns 38% of the entire course of this great river and 45% of the length of navigable Danube, which, in its lower sector, from Brăila to its meeting with the sea, for about 175 km, is also accessible to maritime vessels [86].

Thus, Romania's location on the Black Sea western shore—the ancient Pontus Euxinus—with a maritime opening of 245 km, the presence of Constanța and Sulina ports and of those on the maritime Danube, with importance for international maritime navigation, also gives Romania the attribute of a seaside country [86].

Iordache (2009) provided a definition of an administrative-territorial unit as a territory delimited by a normative act, where the authority over all economic and social activities is entrusted to a state administrative body. Generally, a country's territory encompasses administrative-territorial units of various categories [88], distinguished by factors such as the environment they belong to (urban, rural), the level of development, the importance of the responsibilities they undertake, and their territorial extent.

The largest area is that of the Timiș county—8697 km². The city of Bucharest has a total area of 238 km². The counties with the smallest area <3999 km² in 2018 are: Bucharest Municipality, Ilfov, Giurgiu, Covasna and Sălaj, whereas the largest areas >7000 km² are registered in Tulcea, Constanța, Suceava, Bihor, Arad, Timiș, Hunedoara, Caraș—Severin and Dolj (Figure 2).

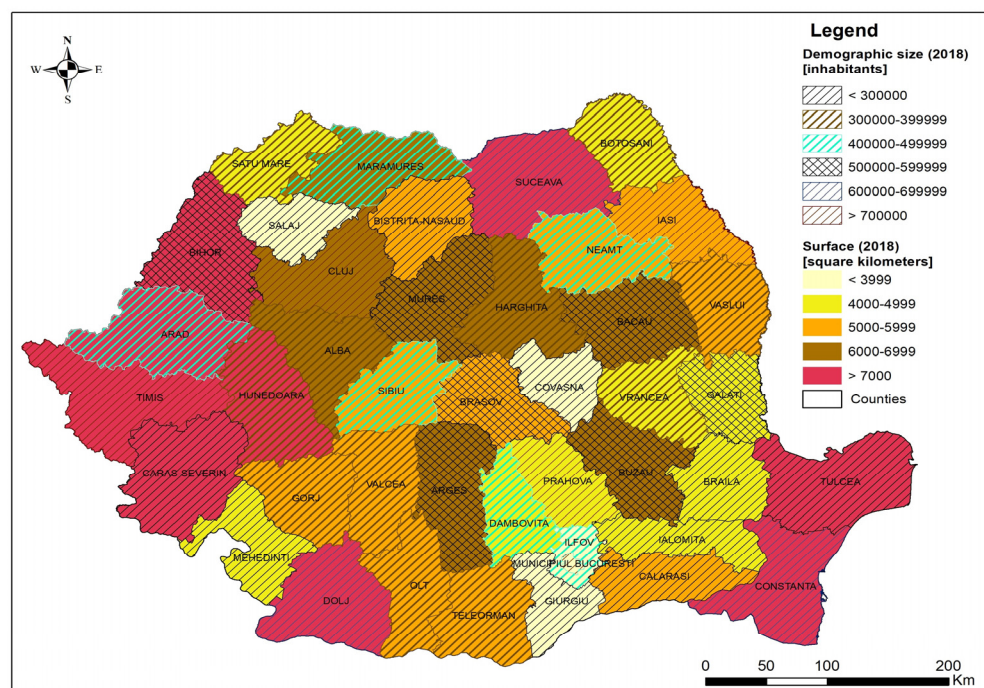


Figure 2. The classification of Romanian counties by demographic size (population) and area in 2018. Source: authors' data processing from NIS [89] and Statistical Yearbook of Romania [90] in ArcGIS 10.7.

The county with the largest population is Iasi (792,481 inhabitants). In July 2018, the municipality of Bucharest had 1,828,900 inhabitants.

Regarding the demographic size in 2018, it can be observed that the counties with the lowest demographic size <300,000 inhabitants are: Mehedinți, Caraș—Severin, Sălaj, Bistrita—Năsăud, Covasna, Brăila, Tulcea, Ialomița, Călărași and Giurgiu, and the counties with the largest demographic size, >700,000 inhabitants in 2018, are: Bucharest, Prahova, Iași, Cluj and Timiș (Figure 2).

In the counties of Iași, Cluj and Timiș, a positive migratory balance is registered because, apart from Bucharest, they are the main regional polarizing centres in Romania, the population migrated from the countryside to these counties in order to have stable and well-paid jobs. At the same time, from the perspective of education, Iași, Cluj and

Timișoara are the main university centres that attract high school graduates to continue their studies, because they want to stay in the respective city for a job.

3.2. Data Sources

The tourism competitiveness of a destination is regarded as a combination of regulations, infrastructure, and resources that facilitate the sustainable development of the tourism sector. In our study, the analysis of tourism competitiveness was based on data from reputable sources such as the World Economic Forum (WEF) [91].

Since 2007, the World Economic Forum (WEF) has been responsible for creating the Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index (TTDI), which is periodically published in the Tourism and Travel Competitiveness Report. This index evaluates the competitiveness of prominent tourist destinations worldwide [92]. The primary goal of the TTDI is to assess the factors and policies that contribute to the attractiveness of a destination for international tourism [21]. Thus, the analysed reports in this paper are based on secondary statistical data from various international bodies and provide Tourism and Travel sector managers with a detailed characterization of tourism competitiveness in Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary.

The World Economic Forum is an organization dedicated to the presentation of statistical data worldwide that also issues data showing tourism competitiveness, for each state [91].

The latent (unobserved) variable is “tourism competitiveness”. The variables under observation include the Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index (TTDI) and the 14 competitiveness pillars incorporated in the TTCR-2015, which are employed by the World Economic Forum (WEF) for presenting the index. The study discovered that the inclusion of the TTDI index as an additional pillar did not impact the outcomes when considering solely the 14 pillars. This can be attributed to the fact that the TTDI is exclusively derived from these pillars [93].

Global Competitiveness Index, developed by the World Economic Forum, represents the most visible multi-criteria hierarchy of the competitiveness of the world’s states. Why is this index the most visible multi-criteria hierarchy of a state’s competitiveness? The argument is extremely simple but very plausible, the number of countries included in the analysis of this indicator increased from 16, in 1979 (when the first edition of the Competitiveness Report appeared), to over 140 countries, with small variations in their number, from year to year (144 countries, according to the 2014 Report).

The World Economic Forum implemented the Global Competitiveness Index (GCI) as a means of evaluating the factors and policies that contribute to the appeal of the tourism and travel sector across various regions of the continents. In 2019, the GCI was based on four categories of variables that facilitated or led to the competitiveness of tourism and travel industry: Environmental Permissiveness sub-index, T&T Policies sub-index, Infrastructure sub-index and Natural and Cultural Resources sub-index (Figure 3).

Environmental Permissiveness sub-index encompasses five pillars: business environment, safety and security, health and hygiene, human resources and workforce, and IT&C availability. The second pillar, T&T Policies is composed of: T&T Prioritization, International Openness, Price Competitiveness and Environmental Sustainability. Within the third sub-index, Infrastructure, the following pillars are found: Air infrastructure, Land infrastructure and Tourism infrastructure. Lastly, Natural and Cultural Resources sub-index consists of two pillars: Natural and Business Travel Resources and Natural Resources.

Considering the availability of statistical data from [89] National Institute of Statistics (INS), which are mainly related to the number of tourist accommodation structures, the existing and in operation accommodation capacity, arrivals of tourists and overnight stays, all these indispensable components of tourism competitiveness for Romania will be analysed in this paper in the form of tourism indicators.

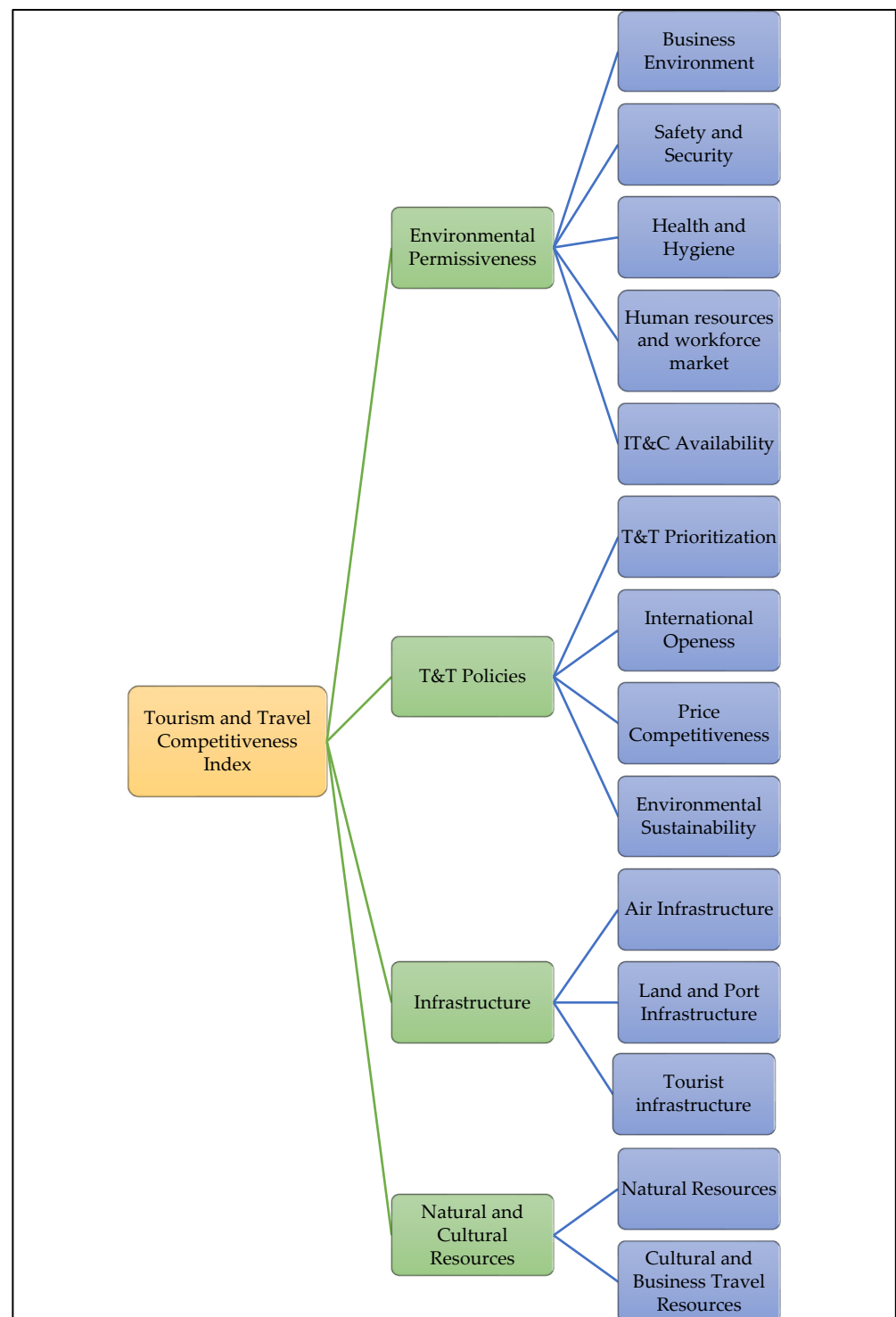


Figure 3. The components of the Tourism and Travel Competitiveness Index. Source: processing after World Economic Forum (EFE)—Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report 2017, 2019 [94,95].

The tourist flows (circulation of tourists) is described in the specialized literature as “the movement in the territory of visitors from the areas of origin to the receiving areas” [96] (p. 19). Tourist traffic at the level of a geographical space/zone/territory can be interpreted through the density of tourist circulation, using the following calculation formula [96]

(p. 20). Thus, according to the equation, the tourist traffic density is the ratio between the total number of arrivals and the population of a country (Romania).

$$TTC = \frac{S}{PoP} \times 100 \quad (1)$$

TTC = tourist traffic density

S = total number of arrivals

PoP = population of the country on 1 January 2022

The receiving area represents the place where the intensity of tourist traffic can be rigorously assessed by reporting the number of tourist overnight stays per year that belong to a resident of the destination (Romania), according to the formula [97] [p. 229]; [98] [p. 195]:

$$Tti = \frac{Os}{Pst} \quad (2)$$

Tti = tourist traffic intensity

Os = number of tourist overnight stays

Pst = settled population of the country on 1 January 2022

Also, the tourist function rate allows a balanced view of the size of tourist phenomenon in relation to the population in the reception centres; this indicator was calculated for the first time by Defert (1967) [99]. A tourist function rate of 100% means the possibility of a destination area to receive a number of tourists equivalent to its own population [97] [p. 233]:

$$Tfr = \frac{Tacu}{Tp} \quad (3)$$

T_{fr} = tourist function rate

Tacu = total number of accommodation units

Tp = total population on 1 January 2022

In our study, the primary focus of analysis is referred to as the “target,” while the research objectives being examined are considered the “framework/actions.” These objectives serve as the strategic framework to effectively achieve the target established at the outset of this research [100].

In order to successfully obtain the main goal of the paper, i.e., the statistical analysis and interpretation of the Global Tourism and Travel Competitiveness Index (TTCI) in Romania, compared to Bulgaria and Hungary, we have several objectives in the carried out research: (1) acknowledgement and review of specialized literature from a theoretical point of view of the concepts analysed in the study “competitiveness” and “tourist competitiveness”; (2) quantitative and qualitative analysis of the Tourism and Travel Competitiveness Index for 2015; and (3) testing and describing the development of sustainable tourism by using and calculating the formulas mentioned above: tourist traffic density (ratio between the total number of tourist arrivals and the population of Romania), tourist traffic intensity (ratio between the number of tourist overnight stays and the population) and the tourist function rate (ratio between the total number of accommodation units and the population of Romania), in order to process the statistical data from the national database.

Correlating the formulas with the research objectives, it is noted that there is a relationship of interdependence and balance between them, because the number of tourist arrivals within the tourist accommodation units in Romania and the number of overnight stays of tourists within the tourist reception structures can determine which is the tourist traffic in a specific period (example: 2016–2022), the tourist traffic intensity and what is the tourist function rate for Romania.

The present paper is grounded on the general hypothesis that Tourism Competitiveness represents a multi-criteria, fluctuating and active concept, determined by the efficiency or inefficiency of countries to adapt to the needs and demands of consumers of tourism products.

4. Results

4.1. Analysis of the Competitiveness of Romania in the World Economic Forum Report, Compared to Bulgaria and Hungary

The assessment of tourism competitiveness for the three countries will be conducted utilizing data from the Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report (TTCR) 2015, published by the World Economic Forum (WEF) [101]. The methodology outlined earlier will be applied, and the graphical method has led to the following diagrams for analysis. The applied criteria are the 14 pillars that group the used four sub-indicators.

The data presented in the Tourism and Travel Competitiveness Index (TTCI) provides valuable insights into a country's competitive strengths and weaknesses as a tourist destination. This information is crucial for formulating effective public policies and facilitating private sector initiatives to promote tourism [102]. Hence, it is essential to calculate the index in a manner that accurately reflects the reality of each analysed territory to the best extent possible [102].

Finally, while analysing the specialized literature, we found out the analysis of the Tourism and Travel Competitiveness Index is included by researchers in their studies and research undertaken on the competitiveness of tourism in different countries of the world [28,103–108].

In the context of increasing interest for tourist activity, in 1924, at the initiative of Romanian scientist Emil Racoviță, the National Tourism Office (NTO) was established, as a state organization in the field of tourism; the main concern was promoting Romania abroad as a tourist destination. Consequently, NTO opened offices in Paris, Berlin, Prague, Warsaw, but also in other European cities. There also fall under the responsibility of the National Tourism Office [109]:

- drafting tourist guides, brochures, posters etc.;
- sharing catalogues, brochures, thematic magazines etc.;
- studying opportunities and means of promoting tourist activity;
- organizing conferences, exhibitions and tourist-themed fairs in the country and abroad;
- participating to events, exhibitions and international fairs with a tourist profile, in order to promote Romania as a tourist destination, through images, photos etc.;
- organizing specific sporting events, in collaboration with other specific entities;
- offering support to individuals in terms of building new reception and tourist catering units etc.

Romania maintained its position (68th place) in 2013 and 2017, then went up 15 positions in 2021. Thus, from 2011 to 2019, it recovered ten positions, occupying the 53th place in the world regarding competitiveness (Figure 4). Bulgaria climbed three positions from 2011 to 2019, thus occupying the 45th position in 2019, and from 2021 to 2021 it climbed 7 positions, occupying the 41th place globally. Hungary had an oscillating evolution, falling from 38th in 2011, 39th in 2013, then climbed to 41th (2015) and 49th (2017), recovering sharply from 2017 to 2021, when it climbed 12 positions worldwide (i.e., position 37).

Regarding the overall Global Competitiveness Score (Figure 5), Hungary had the best score among the three analysed countries. Romania recorded a downward trend in the 2011–2017 period, after which it recorded an upward trend in the 2019–2021 period.

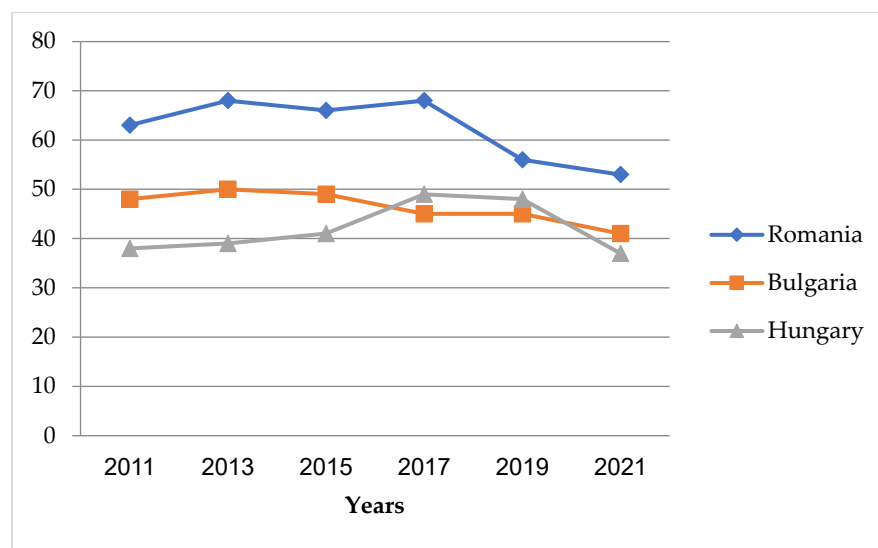


Figure 4. Ranking of Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary regarding competitiveness at global level. Source: authors' data processing of World Economic Forum data [94,95,101,110–112].

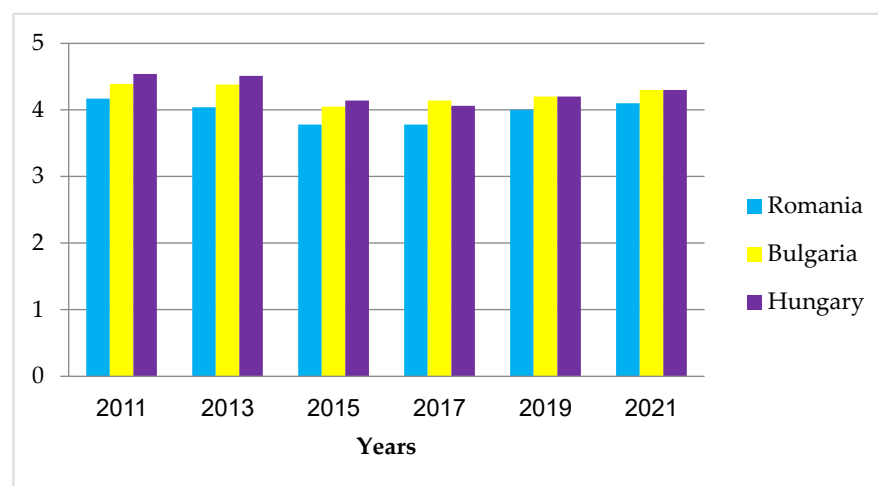


Figure 5. Overall Global Score of Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary. Source: authors' data processing of World Economic Forum data [94,95,101,110–112].

Pillar I—Permissiveness of the environment—2015 (Figure 6): for the Business Environment Indicator, Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary obtained a score of over 4. For the Safety and Security Indicator, the best score was held by Hungary (5.79), followed by Romania (5.42) and Bulgaria (5.24). In Safety and Hygiene, Bulgaria has the best score (6.70), followed by Hungary (6.61) and Romania (5.94). For Human Resources and Labour Market, Bulgaria and Hungary recorded a score of over 4.70, and Romania is rated with a score of over 4.50. In IT&C Availability, Hungary has the highest score (4.93), followed by Bulgaria (4.76) and Romania (4.36).

For Pillar II T&T Policies (Figure 7): in 2015, for the T&T Prioritization indicator, among the 3 compared countries, Hungary had the best score of 5.13, followed by Romania (4.34) and Bulgaria (4.18). At the International Openness, Hungary also has the highest score (4.15), followed by Romania (3.91) and Bulgaria (3.87). The Price Competitiveness Indicator ranked highest for Bulgaria (5.08), followed by Romania (4.89) and, the lowest score, Hungary (4.6). For the Environmental Sustainability Indicator, Hungary had the best score (5.16), followed by Bulgaria and Romania, which recorded a score of over 4.00.

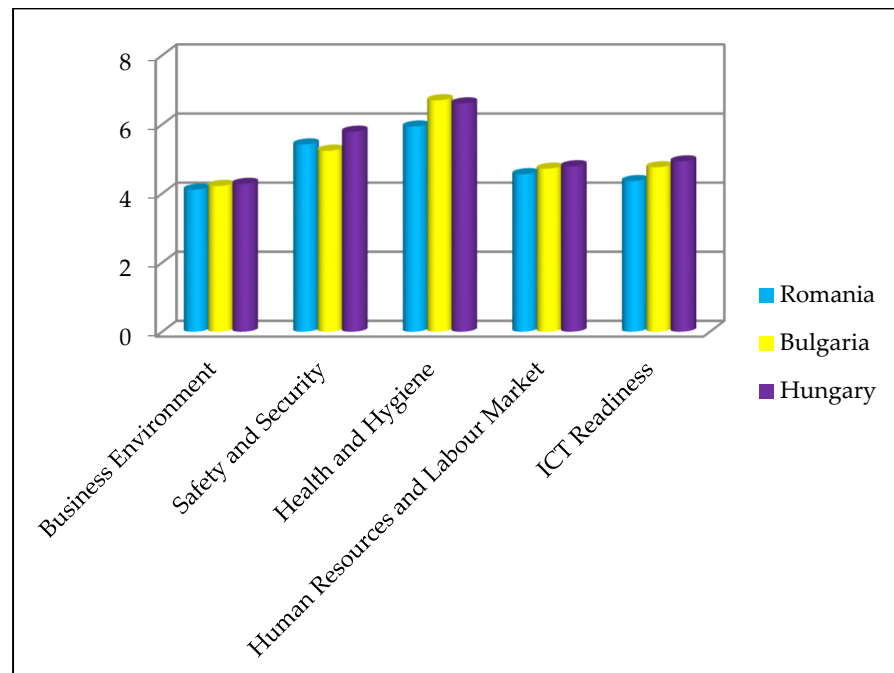


Figure 6. Environmental Permissiveness—2015. Source: authors' data processing of World Economic Forum data [94,95,101,110,111].

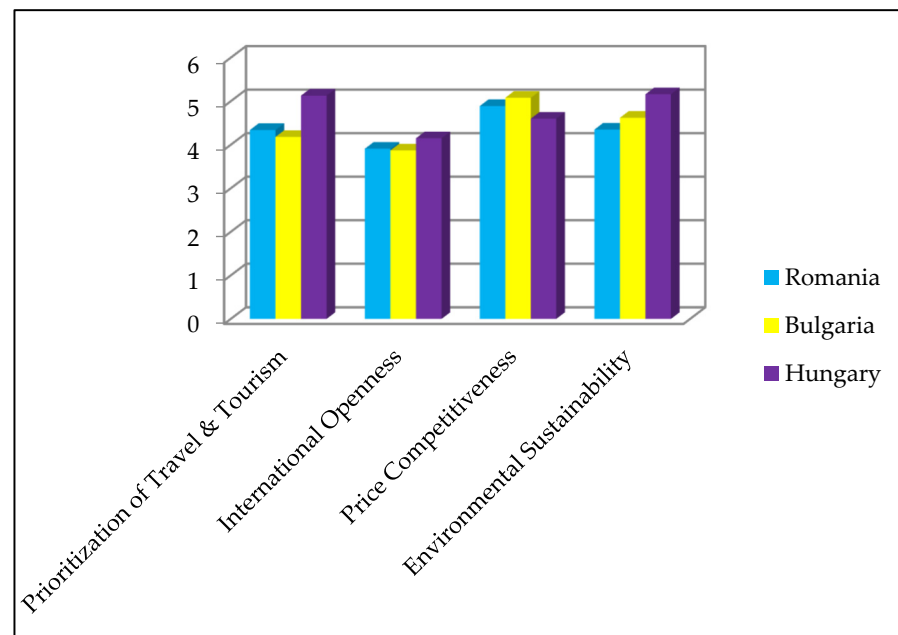


Figure 7. T&T Policy and Enabling Conditions—2015. Source: authors' data processing of World Economic Forum data [94,95,101,110,111].

In 2015, for Pillar III (Figure 8), the best score for the Air Infrastructure indicator was held by Hungary (2.71), followed by Bulgaria (2.46) and Romania (2.34). For Land and Port infrastructure, Hungary also had the highest score (4.45), followed by Bulgaria and Romania. In terms of tourist infrastructure, the situation is completely different, thus Bulgaria had the best score (6.06), followed by Hungary and Romania.

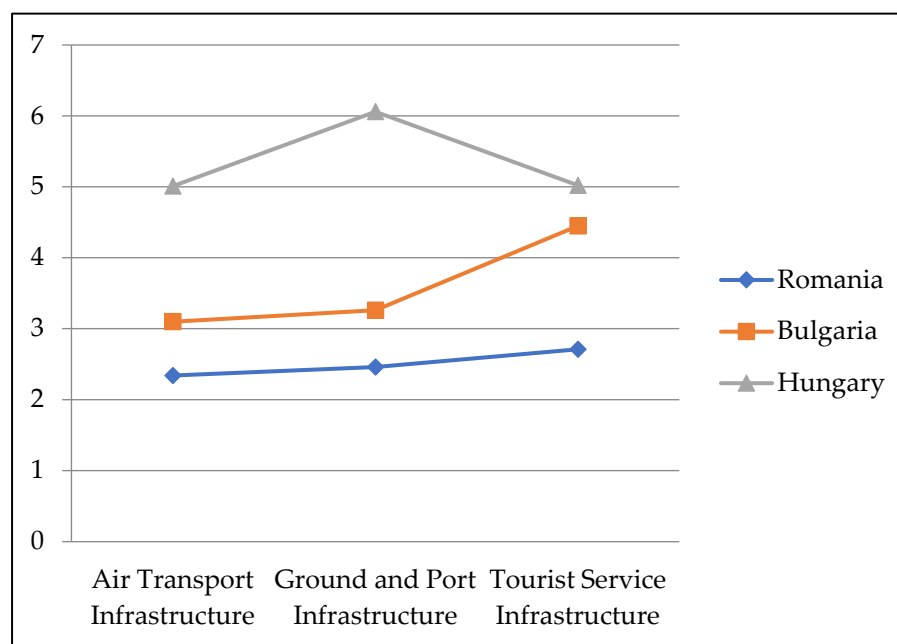


Figure 8. Infrastructure—2015. Source: authors' data processing of World Economic Forum data [94,95,101,110,111].

For Pillar IV Natural and Cultural Resources (Figure 9): in 2015, for the Natural Resources Indicator, Romania has the lowest score 2.7, followed by Hungary with 2.72 and Bulgaria with 3.44, the highest score. In Cultural and Business Travel Resources, Hungary has the best score with 2.72, followed by Romania 2.07 and Bulgaria 1.96.

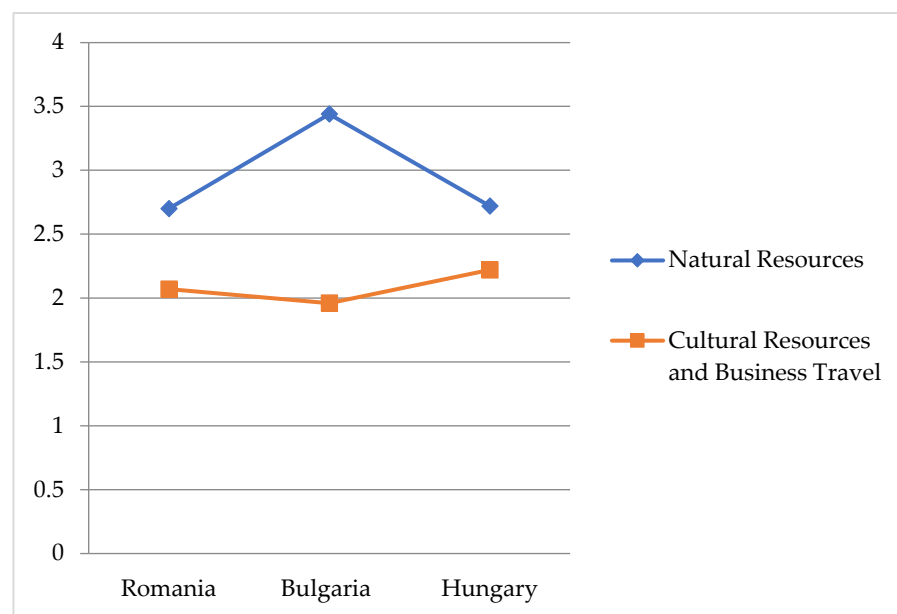


Figure 9. Natural and Cultural Resources—2015. Source: authors' data processing of World Economic Forum data [94,95,101,110,111].

4.2. Development of Sustainable Tourism in Romania

In 1987, the World Commission on Environment and Development introduced the concept of “sustainable development” through the presentation of the Brundtland Report to the UN General Assembly [113–115]. This report marked the emergence of sustainable tourism as a transformative paradigm in the field of tourism development. Over time,

it has gained significant recognition, becoming a widely adopted slogan and exerting a profound influence on the discourse surrounding contemporary development [116]. At the same time, the term has been widely used in many fields, maintaining its ability to highlight essential issues for humanity [117]. Sustainable tourism is economically viable and economic growth should take place in a manner that is both environmentally sustainable and socially equitable [45].

The COVID-19 pandemic has showed the significance of sustainable development objectives and sustainable practices across various economic sectors [118], including non-profit organizations [119]. For non-profit organizations, the establishment and implementation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) pose a challenge in terms of managing relationships with stakeholders such as hotel managers, tourism personnel, donors, volunteers, members, partners, as well as public and private institutions [120–122].

For the post Pandemic COVID-19 revival of Romanian tourism on medium and long term, the following priority objectives are a priority [123]: tax reduction, profits reinvested through tax exemption for a certain period, improvement of legislation and institutions for harmonizing them with the norms of the World Tourism Organization and the European Union, domestic tourism promotion, development of tourism staff training and professional reorientation of the workforce laid off from other economic sectors due to the SARS-CoV-2 virus, development of projects and tourism programs focused on regional development (transport, telecommunications, planning and organization of territory), promotion of quality brands, all of them meant to increase competitiveness on the tourism market and to gain recognition for the quality of services in tourism.

By analysing the graph below (Figure 10), we can note that the highest value of tourist traffic density in the period 2016–2022 was recorded in 2019 (70.23 tourists/inhabitants) and the lowest tourist traffic density was recorded (33.60 tourists/inhabitants) in 2020. The decrease in this indicator's value was caused by the very small number of tourists arriving in Romania (6,398,642 tourists), because there were travel restrictions and social distancing in 2020 due to the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

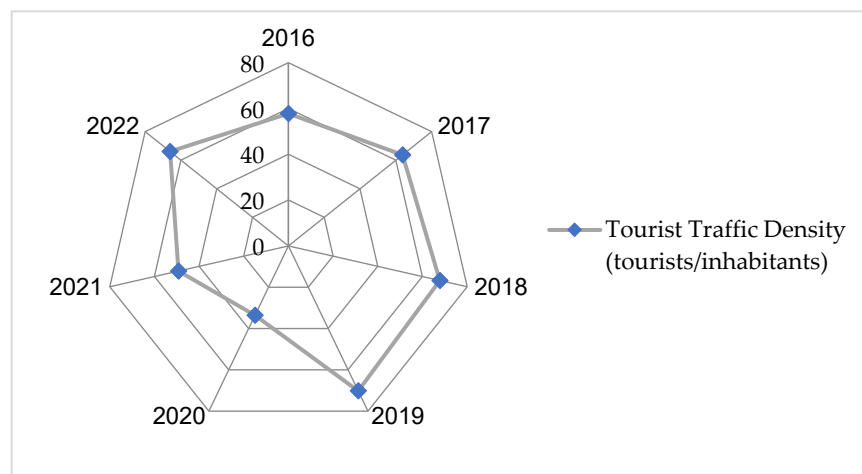


Figure 10. Tourist Traffic Density (tourists/inhabitants). Source: authors' data processing.

From Figure 11 we observe that the highest intensity of tourist traffic was recorded in the pre-COVID-19 period, year 2019 (1.57 overnight stays/inhabitant), but in the following year the lowest tourist traffic intensity was recorded (0.76 overnight stays/inhabitant) for the 2016–2022 analysed period. Our prediction is that in the post-COVID-19 period (2023–2025) an increase will be recorded, i.e., an intensity of tourist traffic will be above 1.50 overnight stays/ inhabitant.

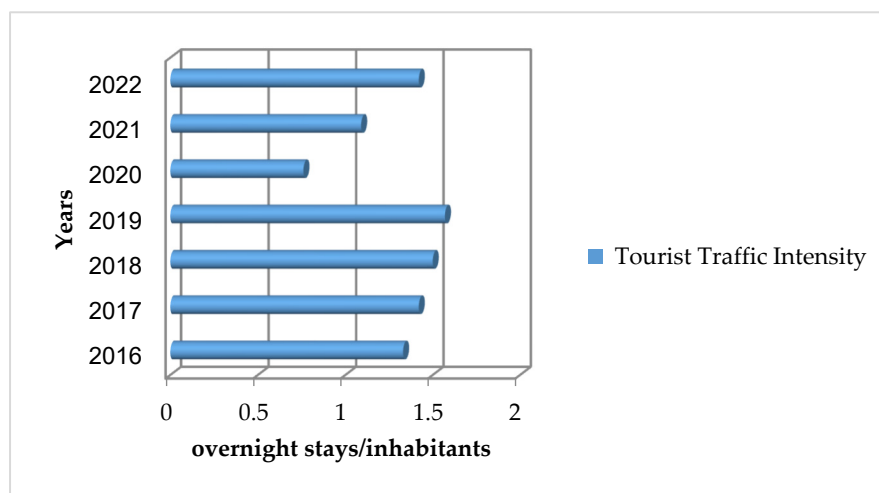


Figure 11. Tourist Traffic Intensity. Source: authors' data processing.

Analysing the graph below (Figure 12), it can be seen that the highest tourist function rate was recorded in 2022 (4.88), while the lowest (3.36) of the 2016–2022 analysed period was recorded in 2020. The tourist function rate was the highest in 2022 due to the increase in the number of accommodation units: 93,007,230 number of places-days, made available to tourists (tourist accommodation capacity in operation) by tourist accommodation units (hotels, motels, hostels, tourist guesthouses, agrotourism guesthouses, tourist villas, etc.).

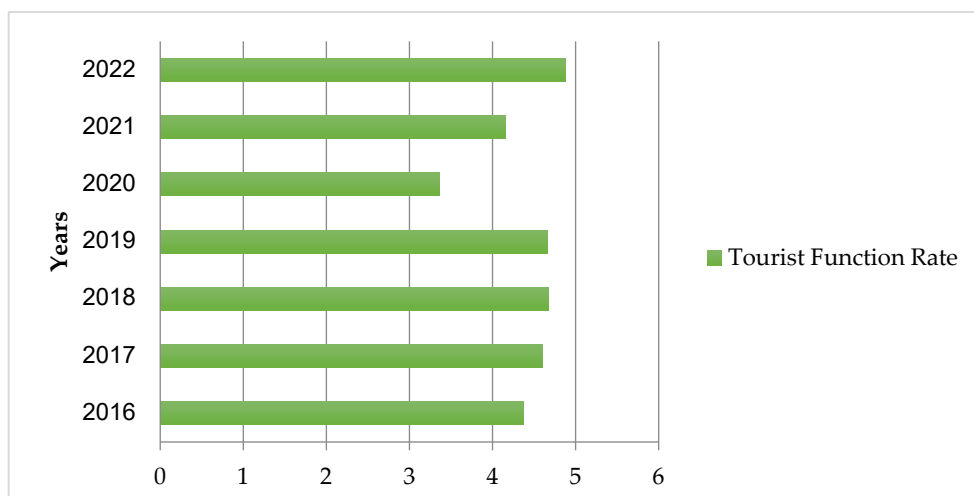


Figure 12. The Tourist Function Rate. Source: authors' data processing.

5. Discussion

The specialized literature emphasizes some significant directions of the concept of competitiveness which is considered as innovation, as regional and national productivity, as welfare of a nation and as a social and economic objective.

The evaluation of the international competitiveness of economies typically involves the utilization of a set of indicators that are classified as follows: (1) Long-term indicators (high interest rate, rising medium and long-term inflation rate, long-term real exchange rate etc.) and (2) Short-term indicators (GDP growth rate, real personal income, real wage growth rate, international trade, real exchange rate etc.).

The Global Tourism and Travel Competitiveness Index is structured in 14 “pillars” encompassing a set of qualitative and quantitative variables. Thus, each of the 14 pillars is calculated as an unweighted average of the individual component variables. And then sub-indices are calculated as unweighted averages of the included pillars [95,124].

Abreu-Novais et al. (2016) stated that the TTCI is one of the most frequently used and practicable indices in the sphere of competitiveness, as a result of the credibility and accuracy of the data at the global level [125]; it represents an extremely effective means of comparability for demonstrating the strengths, weaknesses, but also the opportunities of tourist destinations [124]. As a result of the observations of [126], numerous studies in the specialized literature evaluate the competitiveness of the tourist destination by applying the TTCI in the global investigation [102,127].

Tourism is a continuously developing market, more obvious in the case of Romania. The difference is no longer made by neither the hotel offered to the tourist, nor the program. The tourist is more and more educated, more responsible, and travels more. The tourist also knows what to ask for and appreciates what is offered to him. Therefore, the difference lies in the attitude, the behaviour, the degree of information, the ability to listen and the attitude to solve issues [128].

The dynamics of the global landscape is evolving, emphasizing the pressing need for the tourism sector to balance competitiveness with sustainability. It is widely acknowledged that long-term competitiveness is contingent upon embracing sustainable practices. One crucial aspect of this shift is addressing the challenges posed by climate change, thus tourism industry needs to minimize its impact on greenhouse gas emissions and destinations need to adapt to evolving demands and the evolving nature of tourism experiences [128].

Innovation represents the complex element of tourism competitiveness and tourism development success, it occurs when tourism companies (travel agencies) successfully develop new objectives [58]; this is identified in the specialized literature as a strategy (marketing policy) used by businesses to acquire a positive-competitive benefit (from an economic point of view), compared to other tourism companies. In other words, effective innovation to outperform the competition results in the companies' expected resilience, growth and increased profitability [129,130] and the regeneration of new products in the post-COVID-19 period.

Nguyen et al. (2021) stated that SMEs face challenges in innovation, for example the difficulty of recouping the considerable reduced costs of innovation due to economies of scale; restricted access to capital markets; inadequate management experience and organizational capabilities [131–134].

The accelerated deployment of information and communication technology (ICT) in the 2020–2022 period, and post COVID-19 has transformed the tourism and hospitality industry [135,136]. ICT has the following benefits: it facilitates the mobility of passengers and luggage, and at the same time, increases the efficiency in the marketing of tourist services and reduces the travel burden of tourists [131,137]. Therefore, during the period of development of the Coronavirus, social media platforms (Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, etc.) were very widely used as marketing channels, promotion of tourist destinations; communication has the role of driving the decision-making of vacations [135,138]. Even so, many SMEs in the tourism sector do not have as many skills in terms of information and communication technology management and capabilities to maximize the benefits of innovation [131].

In the tourism industry, tourists not only gain ownership of a tourism product, but benefit from an unprecedented experience that is determined by their interactions with tourism products [139,140]; tourism resources are valued as basic products for the development of tourism competitiveness [27,141]. Thus, the competitiveness of a tourist destination is strongly related to the advantages that tourists acquire from their visit to the tourist destination, such as tourist attractions, tourist products and comfort [142]; the diversity of tourism resources in Romania contributes positively to the well-being of the population and to the formation of tourist experience of non-residents. Above all, anthropogenic tourism resources (visiting art and heritage sites, churches, monasteries, museums and theatres, etc.) represent the determining origin of visitors' natural and cultural tourism experiences.

The very important significance of tourist resources in the formation of out-of-the-ordinary (unique) experiences of hikers has therefore been debated by several researchers [143,144].

Sustainable tourism aims to fulfil the diverse economic, social, and aesthetic requirements of all involved stakeholders, while ensuring the preservation of cultural and ecological integrity, biological diversity, and the sustainability of all life-supporting systems [128]. In the context of sustainable tourism development in Romania, several measures must be applied [128,145,146]: a more complex thematic tourism products and a proper infrastructure should be developed in order to better capitalize the existing tourism potential and to diversify the tourist activities that have to be environmentally friendly.

6. Conclusions

The tourism industry has seen considerable growth in recent years [147], providing tourists with opportunities and appropriate infrastructures for spending free time. The global crises generated by the Coronavirus pandemic determined a shift in the conventional model of mass tourism, and the post-Coronavirus era emerges as a key moment for rethinking the planning and management of tourism [148–153]. This re-evaluation of tourism relies on key elements such as competitiveness, performance, and adaptability to foster sustainable tourism.

Currently, tourism holds again a top position globally, thanks to its wide-ranging positive impacts on the economy, culture, history, and society. Moreover, tourism is often regarded as an abundant resource for businesses in numerous countries, for cultural-historical organizations and sports events, generating income in correlation with jobs and currency exchanges that present fluctuations, but also changes in the lifestyle of the population [154–159].

The study area, Romania country, seen as a competitive tourist destination represents an attractive place for tourism due to its historical, cultural and geographical landscapes and attractions, centuries-old traditions and customs, gastronomy, but also the diversity of protected areas. Hence, the promotion of various tourism forms can bring multiple advantages in terms of social, cultural, economic, and ecological aspects.

The methodological approach consisted in a theoretical review of the existing literature on this topic and a quantitative analysis of statistical data from the Global Index of Tourism and Travel Competitiveness for the three analysed countries.

Researching the sustainable tourism and examining the TTCI in depth proved to be a valuable tool for measuring the competitiveness of tourist destinations, mainly by using the categories of variables (i.e., Environmental Permissiveness, T&T Policies, Infrastructure and what determines the increase in the density of tourist traffic, but also the intensity of tourist attractions—natural and cultural resources within a state/tourist region).

This research provided an interesting perspective on tourism growth of the analysed countries in terms of the Tourism and Travel Competitiveness Index. The results reveal significant differences between the three analysed EU member states (Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary), as well as fluctuations between the best and the worst performance and technology innovation indicators. In 2015, Romania obtained the best position in terms of T&T Policies, namely 35, out of 141 countries that are analysed in the World Economic Forum Report, and the best score for Environmental Permissiveness, respectively 4.88, out of 7 maxima.

Each tourism destination should use the best tourism indicator in order to maximize the benefits of tourism activities (such as the consequences of the evolution of the real exchange rate on the economic growth, GDP variation, the rate of price growth in line with spending, but also on the exchange rate), and should focus on the impact of the external competitiveness of other destinations.

The tourism competitiveness study of Romania in comparison with neighbouring destinations can be a tool that can help state institutions, political decision-makers to better formulate sustainable development strategies, guidelines and policy implementation of

travel and tourism strategies. It can help tourism companies to identify the best tourism development projects in order to achieve development at the highest quality standards.

Tourism and Travel Competitiveness Index represents, through the country profile, a policy and strategy tool that can help decision-makers during the periods after economic and health crisis, although political and strategic plans differ from one region to another and from one European state to another. For Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary, tourism competitiveness is crucial to attract a significant flow of tourists by offering new innovative services and tourist attractions, guaranteeing every time that tourism resources are used in an efficient but sustainable way for future generations.

Having a projection of the short and medium-term trends in tourist indicators is valuable for decision-makers by anticipating the required workforce in the field of tourist services and hospitality in Romania, but also the competition on the global market and perception of tourist destination.

The three factors, higher tourist occupancy rate, better prices and quality services, are dependent on the tourist destinations' competitiveness, both from the point of view of the accommodation and food units, as well as the technical-building facilities within the tourist destination. In Romania, the biggest challenge for the tourist destinations' competitiveness is the remarkable number of tourist products existing on the Romanian market [160–163] that can represent real strategic initiatives for the competitiveness of sustainable destinations in the studied area.

From reviewing the specialized literature in Romania, one can notice that most of the studies on the topic of Tourism and Travel Competitiveness Index, stated this index indirectly (without analysing the statistical data from the World Economic Forum), and, for this reason, the current study reflects mainly the international literature approaches.

Some of the limitations of this research refer to the fact that the paper did not fully investigate the impact of the contagious virus SARS-CoV-2 on the post-competitiveness evolution of tourism (due to the lack of data). It focused mainly on the analysis of a tourist destination—Romania in comparison with two neighbouring countries, Bulgaria and Hungary, interpreting three measurable indicators in the assessment of competitiveness. In addition, the used research variables, the four sub-indexes (Environmental Permissiveness, T&T Policies sub-index, Infrastructure and Natural and Cultural Resources sub-index), can change over time in terms of figures, but the underlined trends are noticed to remain stable.

Further analyses could examine the mediating effects of other research variables, for example R&D and Innovation, by analysing the performance sectors in Romania: (1) the public sector, which includes the government sector and the higher education sector and (2) the private sector, taking into account the two subordinates sectors: the business environment sector which represents a target of tourism competitiveness and the non-profit private sector and also the investigation of Research and Development Programs (exploration and exploitation of the environment, transport and telecommunications—infrastructure, health, culture, recreational activities, religion and media etc.).

Future research may focus on investigating, at the same time, the differences in the relationship between natural and anthropogenic resources and the promotion and marketing of different tourist destinations. Moreover, a cluster analysis and multidimensional scaling techniques as seen in [164] are intended to be investigated, taking into account the 14 pillars of the TTCI for the 27 European Union countries, including Romania.

Consequently, this study is only an argument for future studies on the taxonomy of tourism competitiveness and its determining indicators, including the Global Index of Tourism and Travel Competitiveness, and, at the same time, it represents a starting point for future research with a strong impact on the tourism sector.

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M.M., A.N., I.-A.D. and M.G.; supervision, M.M. and A.N.; project administration, A.-F.B., M.M., A.N. and I.-A.D. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations were used in this paper:

GIS	Geographic Information System (Software)
TTCI	Global Index of Tourism and Travel Competitiveness
WTTC	World Travel and Tourism Council
PIB	Gross Domestic Product
OCDE	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
TDC	Tourist Destination Competitiveness
UE	European Union
UNWTO	World Tourism Organization
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature
ONU	United Nations
ODD	Sustainable Development Goals
ODM	Millennium Development Goals
WEF	World Economic Forum
GCI	Global Competitiveness Index
INS	National Institute of Statistics
TTCR	Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report
ONT	National Tourism Office

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