

## Article

# The Impacts of COVID-19 on the Visitor Attendance of Cultural and Natural Heritage: A Case Study of the South Moravian Region

Kristýna Tuzová, Antonín Vaishar \*, Milada Šťastná and Martina Urbanová

Department of Applied and Landscape Ecology, Mendel University in Brno, Zemědělská 1, 61300 Brno, Czech Republic; xtuzova@mendelu.cz (K.T.); milada.stastna@mendelu.cz (M.Š.); martina.urbanova.uke@mendelu.cz (M.U.)

\* Correspondence: antonin.vaishar@mendelu.cz; Tel.: +420-602966506

**Abstract:** Tourism is one of the world's most affected sectors by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. This article deals with the assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on the visitation of the South Moravian Region, including important cultural and natural sites, based on the analysis of empirical statistical data in the last decade and the calculation of the year-on-year change in attendance between 2019 and 2022. According to the results, the number of visitors to the South Moravian Region in 2020 fell by almost half, including a decrease of a quarter of visitors to cultural monuments compared to 2019. On the other hand, visits to natural areas with no restricted access increased by a fifth after 2020, but natural areas with restricted access fell by more than 40%. From 2021, attendance of the South Moravian Region began to increase slightly, and in 2022, it reached ninety percent of the level before 2019, including attendance at cultural and natural sites. The results of the research confirmed the growing trend in visitors to the South Moravian Region, including cultural and natural monuments, which were significantly influenced by the impact of COVID-19 on tourism after 2020, with a recovery of tourism in 2022.

**Keywords:** culture; nature; tourism; heritage; COVID-19; Moravia

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## 1. Introduction

This article discusses the impact of COVID-19 on tourism in the South Moravian Region, including the attendance of the most important cultural and natural monuments and the prediction of possible directions for the development of tourism in the investigated locality in the future. The aim of the research was to find out how the restriction of visitation to cultural monuments was reflected in the period of COVID-19 and how the visitation of important natural sites in the South Moravian Region developed compared to other regions in Czechia. The South Moravian Region is the second most visited region in Czechia and the region with the third highest number of visitors to cultural monuments in Czechia. Tourism in the South Moravian Region is primarily oriented towards learning about cultural and natural heritage, local traditions, folklore and gastronomy.

The South Moravian Region was selected for the analysis of the impacts of COVID-19 on cultural tourism due to the concentration of a significant number of cultural monuments, the attendance of which was limited during the COVID-19 period. The region represents a certain counterbalance to other tourism regions in the Czech Republic. Tourism in the South Moravian Region is primarily oriented towards learning about the cultural and natural heritage, local traditions, folklore and gastronomy, and active and passive recreation, which are concentrated in a few touristically important areas, whose attendance in the main tourist season can be unsustainable in the long term from the point of view of excessive tourism, and the attendance of other cultural monuments in the district

is low compared to the most important monuments. From the point of view of natural tourism, the South Moravian Region is limited by the absence of mountainous terrain that would allow year-round tourism, including winter sports. However, on the other hand, there is a significant amount of protected natural areas in the territory, which provide a background for active and passive tourism. In connection with COVID-19, professionally oriented tourism in the regional center of Brno was also significantly limited in the South Moravian Region, where it is possible to include business trips, exhibitions and fairs, which contribute to the attendance of the South Moravian Region in connection with the Brno exhibition center, where they come every year hundreds of thousands of visitors.

One of the consequences of the transition to a post-material society is the shift in employment opportunities and forces to services [1], which are becoming an increasingly important sector of national economies [2]. Tourism is an important part of the development of services [3]. Several other manufacturing and non-manufacturing activities are linked to tourism [4]. Transport also plays an important role, as it was only the development of public and individual transport that enabled the emergence of tourism [5].

A century ago, tourism was the domain of the upper social classes. Today, it is a common part of the life of the middle class and, in a certain sense, part of the consumption of almost the whole of society [6]. In addition, however, tourism has a number of other functions in terms of regeneration and development of physical strength, getting to know foreign regions and their inhabitants (and thus mutual understanding between different ethnic, regional, and social groups), developing one's own personality, and the like [7]. The development of tourism is connected with the increasing importance of leisure time [8].

The entire industry can be classified according to various criteria. McKercher [9] tried to merge the various approaches into five categories: pleasure, personal quest, human endeavor, nature, and business. In practice, individual motives and types of tourism intertwine, both from a territorial point of view (in destinations) and also from the point of view of providers and consumers. In our contribution, we do not distinguish between individual types of tourism, although it might seem that cultural tourism [10] is at the center of attention.

In addition to the positives, some problems can be identified in the field of tourism. One of them is the carrying capacity of the landscape concerning mass tourism—so-called overtourism [11]. Limiting factors can also be the shortcomings of tourist infrastructure [12], as well as the sometimes negative attitude of local residents towards tourists, who disturb the environment with increased movement, noise, garbage, and the like [13]. A relatively significant problem is the sensitivity of tourism both on a global scale and within individual destinations to disturbing influences. These include wars and social unrest, natural and man-made disasters, as well as epidemics. People pay more and more attention to security and risk in tourism [14].

Epidemics of infectious diseases have accompanied humanity since the time when travel from place to place began to spread [15]. Bacteria and viruses also travel with people. This fact directly connects epidemics and tourism. The last major epidemic was the so-called Spanish flu [16], associated with the end of the First World War. After that, the invention of antibiotics, the development of sanitation services, vaccinations, and other medical measures seemed to at least greatly reduce the risk of pandemics. However, the development of air travel, allowing disease carriers to spread worldwide within days, brought this risk back into play [17].

In 2019, the SARS virus spread from Wuhan in China and, in a short time, engulfed most of the world as the cause of the disease COVID-19 [18], from which around 7 million people died. Due to the extremely high contagiousness, one of the measures against the spread of this disease was a strict quarantine, which was introduced relatively quickly in Czechia [19]. This measure, which had a different course in different countries, very significantly and globally limited tourism, on the one hand, due to the restriction of mass

transport of people, especially by air and also due to the tightening of conditions for accommodation and the near exclusion of visits to some indoor attractions. For those who did not want to give up tourism, there remained mostly outdoor, often rural activities [20], provided by their own private transport for relatively short distances.

Some governments at different levels have tried with varying success to take measures to help sustain the tourism industry and employment in it. At the same time, tourism providers have also tried to maintain their businesses. Vulnerabilities to the pandemic proved different in territories with different characteristics, with peripheral and rural micro-regions appearing to have weathered better [21].

However, the pandemic and anti-pandemic measures also had some positive effects. They probably hastened the digitization of the tourist industry [22] and supported the development of creative tourism [23]. They freed up congested mass tourism destinations and dispersed tourists over a larger area, and brought a (temporary) reduction in crime, except for partner violence [24]. Apparently, they also brought some development hope to lagging peripheral micro-regions, which could offer alternative destinations with a smaller concentration of people and activities [25]. Earlier research on hard tourism (resorts, hotels, and infrastructure) is beginning to change into an emphasis on soft forms of tourism, such as participatory tourism, intangible tourism, and the like [26].

As the pandemic is over, the entire tourism industry is starting to recover. The question is which types of tourism and which destinations have shown the highest resilience. It is also an opportunity to evaluate the shifts that the pandemic and anti-pandemic measures have brought to the industry and where they have moved it. The longer-term consequences of the pandemic may be unexpected [27]. That is why we need to ask ourselves the questions that this contribution also tries partly to answer.

In connection with COVID-19, global tourism has declined rapidly since the beginning of March 2020, when measures to limit tourism were introduced [28]. A significant recovery in tourism occurred in 2022, but this still a third less than in 2019. The number of participants in tourism in Czechia reached almost 22 million in 2019, with a significant drop of half to 10.8 million visitors in 2020 and a slight increase in attendance to 11.4 million visitors in 2021. From 2022, the recovery of tourism in Czechia is noticeable; the total number of visitors reached 19.4 million, which is almost 88% of the pre-pandemic level. Inbound tourism experienced a record decline in the monitored period, falling to the level before 1989. Inbound tourism was mainly oriented to cultural and historical monuments located in important destinations (Prague, Český Krumlov, and Karlovy Vary), with a higher proportion of visitors from distant and non-European countries (China, Korea, and USA). On the contrary, domestic tourism fell in the period 2020/2021 by only a quarter compared to 2019, and in 2022, it was almost 9% higher than in 2019. Tourism in Czechia was gradually revived after 2021, also thanks to the growing demand of domestic visitors who are interested in discovering tourist attractions, including cultural and natural heritage. Among the most important areas in terms of tourism in Czechia is the South Moravian Region, which in 2022 was the second most visited destination, after Prague.

With the exception of Brno and some other destinations, the South Moravian Region is more of a destination for domestic cruise traffic. The location of the territory in the southeastern part of the Czech Republic is disadvantageous because the region is far from the western border. The majority of foreign visitors are tourists from Slovakia (21.6%), Poland (20.7%), Germany (12.4%) and Austria (7.4%). The relatively low proportion of Austrians may be a consequence of the similar structure of tourism in the adjacent region of Lower Austria (wine culture, protected areas, and historical monuments), so the region is not so attractive to them. Nevertheless, the South Moravian Region ranks second in the Czech Republic and accounts for a tenth of the Czech Republic's visitors on a long-term average [29].

In terms of the economic impact of tourism in Czechia, in 2019, tourism accounted for 2.87% of the national GDP and 239,506 jobs in the tourism industry, which corresponds to 4.41% of total employment in the country. In the following year of 2020, the share of

tourism in GDP fell to 1.5% and the number of workers in the tourism industry decreased to 220,663 (4.13%). In 2021, the share of tourism in GDP increased only slightly to 1.55% and contributed to 215,233 jobs (4.02%) of total employment in Czechia [30]. Based on an economic comparison, Czechia is not among the countries most affected by the effects of COVID-19, due to the lower share of tourism in GDP and its share in total employment. In terms of the economic share of tourism in the gross domestic product, the South Moravian Region is the third most important region in the Czechia with a share of 1.6% of GDP from tourism and the second most important region in Czechia with a share of 11.6% tourism in the national HVA in 2021. The tourism sector in the South Moravian Region accounts for 4% of employment, which corresponds to approximately 25 thousand jobs and is the second region with the highest employment in the tourism sector in Czechia.

The visitation of cultural monuments and natural sites has a significant influence on the development of tourism. Monitoring data on the number of visitors can be used as a basis for regional development plans that could effectively support the development of tourism in locations where the importance of industrial and agricultural production has declined and there are suitable prerequisites for the development of tourism (the presence of cultural and natural attractions, accommodation, catering facilities, and transport accessibility) [31]. Cultural and natural attractions can attract new visitors and prolong their stay in a destination, thus influencing the seasonality of tourism [32]. On the other hand, the development of tourism depends not only on the presence of cultural and natural monuments, but above all, on appropriately structured destination management, which promotes the territory, supports the profit of local entrepreneurs and municipalities based on their potential, and also contributes to the sustainability of areas [33].

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on the cultural sector and the protection of cultural heritage. It is estimated that in 2020, more than 95% of the world's museums and 90% of world heritage sites were closed. The overall attendance at UNESCO sites globally decreased by 60% and cultural sites with admission fees by 52% compared to 2019. The effects of the restrictions have increased the use of digitization, but only 28% of European museums have staff with digital expertise and only half of the institutions devote more than 10% of their budget to digitization and communication [34,35].

The use of new technologies that can effectively connect tourism and culture can help adapt to unexpected changes and crises and has considerable potential in the future [36]. In the future, we can expect increasingly frequent use of digital technologies, which will enable a hybrid connection between visits to cultural monuments and events in which visitors can participate in person and online [37]. In the case of attendance monitoring, it is possible to use big data to capture the movement of participants by following a digital footprint [38]. On the other hand, the problem when using these data is primarily the sensitivity of personal data, including privacy protection. The potential for the future is primarily data freely available from social networks, web searches, and website traffic. In the case of evaluating the digital footprint of visitors, it is not only difficult to ensure security, but also processing big data requires advanced technology and knowledge from the IT field [39]. For this reason, the possibility of evaluating the attendance of cultural and natural monuments based on freely available statistical data was chosen for this research. An example of the use of modern technologies to capture the digital footprint of users is the study by Falk and Hagsten [40], which monitored the visitation of cultural heritage monuments through the analysis of Instagram posts.

The impacts of COVID-19 on nature tourism have reduced the negative impact of massive visits to popular nature destinations on natural ecosystems in places where the number of visitors has decreased [41]. On the other hand, the reduction in tourism contributed to the loss of tourism income and jobs, which had a particularly significant impact on countries dependent on inbound tourism, where tourism contributes significantly to GDP and represents an important employment sector. However, the number of visitors to individual natural locations in the world varies, and some natural attractions have even seen higher attendance during the COVID-19 era [42].

In Czechia, there are 16 tangible cultural monuments and 8 intangible cultural heritage monuments under UNESCO protection. In the South Moravian Region, there are two monuments of tangible cultural heritage: the Lednice–Valtice area and the Tugendhat villa in Brno. The tradition of intangible cultural heritage is linked to the entire South Moravian Region, where folklore is still maintained, including the Ride of the Kings, the folk dance verbuňk, and the tradition of blueprinting. Additionally, there are over 9600 cultural monuments in the South Moravian Region, from which 38 of the most important monuments were selected for research.

How global tourism will continue to develop after the disruption caused by COVID-19 can be predicted based on the analysis of tourism development to date, but also based on the opinions of experts. If we look at the longer-term forecast for the development of world tourism, we can expect a growth of international tourism at an average annual rate of 5.8%, which is more than twice the estimated average annual growth of the world economy in the amount of 2.7%. In the monitored period, it can be estimated that an additional 126 million jobs will be created in the field of tourism [43]. According to UNWTO experts, it ranks among the main world trends in short-distance travel and outdoor leisure activities based on exploring the landscape and nature, including rural tourism. Tourism development may be threatened by tensions in the economic sector, including high inflation, rising interest rates, energy, and food prices; health issues related to COVID-19, geopolitical tensions, and uncertainty arising from the Russian aggression in Ukraine are the key factors limiting the development of tourism [28].

Within Czechia's preliminary considerations on the impact of COVID-19 on rural tourism, several scenarios can be expected [44]. The first scenario assumes the return of tourism to the time before COVID-19, but it is necessary to consider that several tourist services (accommodation and catering establishments) could go bankrupt. The second scenario is the reduction in tourism because of the restrictions associated with COVID-19 on the functional vaccination and revaccination of the majority of the population, and the third scenario predicts a change in the orientation of tourism from foreign vacationers to a higher focus on domestic visitors. On the other hand, the ability of travel service providers to adapt to changed conditions due to COVID-19 will have a significant impact on the development of tourism [45]. It is recommended in connection with the restrictions in the context of COVID-19 to focus on the monitoring of the visitation of cultural and natural areas and the related proposal of suitable destination management, which should be protected from being disturbed by excessive tourist traffic [46]. However, the information obtained as part of the study capturing the development of tourism, including attendance at cultural and natural attractions, can help us visualize the current development trend and predict future development trends.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The aim of the research was to find out how the restriction of visitation to cultural monuments was reflected in the period of COVID-19 and how the visitation of important natural sites in the South Moravian Region developed compared to other regions in Czechia. The territory of the South Moravian Region was selected for research based on the occurrence of cultural and natural heritage, but also disadvantaged, rural, or peripheral areas where the development of tourism could have a special potential to support their sustainability in the future.

There are many ways to assess the impact of COVID-19. These can be the overall development of tourism, the resilience of individual types of destinations [47], the record of examples of good practice, the preferences of individual groups of tourists [48], the relationship between residents and tourists [49], and many others. Monitoring data on the number of visits to cultural and natural heritage is one of the important sources that can be used in the preparation of strategic documents for the development of tourism, destination management, or territorial development plans, which could effectively support the

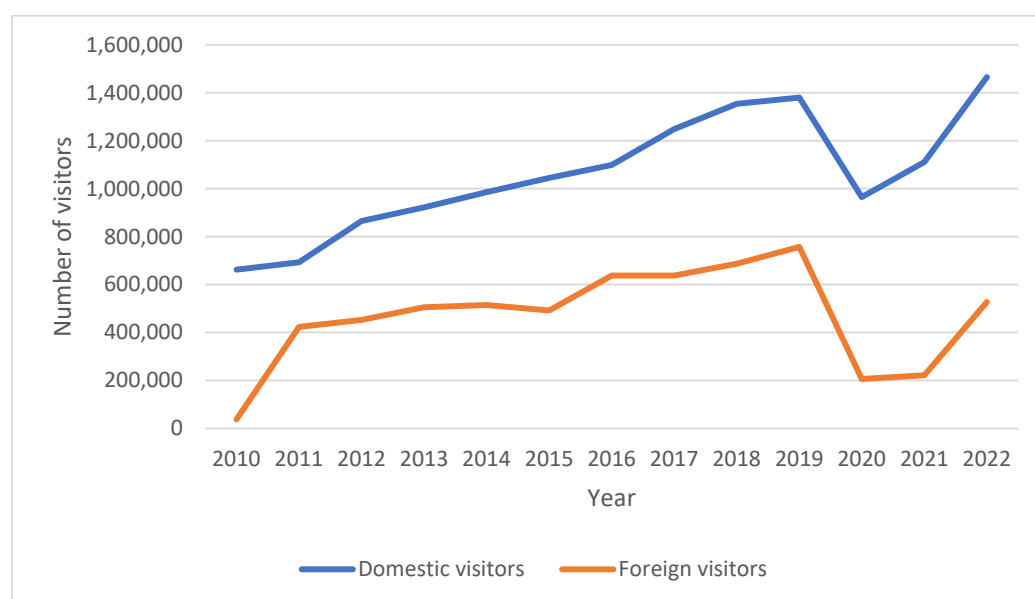
development of tourism in the regions [50]. For this research, an analysis of the total attendance, including the attendance of the most important cultural and natural heritage, based on the official statistical data of the national authorities was selected. The limit of this method is of course the fact that not all tourist activities can be statistically recorded.

Statistical data for the evaluation of the development of the investigated phenomenon were used. Data from the Czech Statistical Office [29] analyze the overall attendance of the South Moravian Region, which monitors attendance based on the number of overnight stays in mass accommodation facilities. Data from the National Information and Advisory Center for Culture [51] were used to obtain data on the number of visitors to cultural monuments, which monitors the number of visitors based on tickets sold, and data on the number of visitors to protected natural areas were obtained from monitoring through automatic counters located in the locations of the Thaya Valley National Park [52], Pavlovské vrchy Hills protected landscape area [53], and the Moravian Karst Caves [54]. The latest available data were used for the analysis.

The data were processed in the form of tables showing the development of the number of visitors to the South Moravian Region, the number of visitors to cultural monuments with admission and important natural areas, and a comparison of the total number of visitors and the share of visitors to cultural and natural monuments in the South Moravian Region in the period 2010–2022. The year-on-year change in attendance was calculated using the following mathematical formula:  $\text{growth rate} = (\text{current value} - \text{default value}) / \text{default value} * 100\%$ ; the year-on-year change in the number of visitors of cultural monuments in 2019 and 2020/2021/2022 was calculated; the year-on-year change in the number of visitors to monitored natural areas in 2019 and 2020/2021/2022 was calculated; the year-on-year change in the number of visitors in the regions of the Czech Republic in the period 2019–2022 was calculated; and the year-on-year change in the number of visitors to cultural monuments in the regions of the Czech Republic in the period 2019–2022 was calculated. As part of the research, a comparative method was used to compare the development of tourism in the South Moravian Region, including cultural and nature-oriented tourism in the monitored period of 2010–2022, which can be further used in the interpretation of how these processes influence the story we are investigating [55].

### 3. Results

The analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on cultural tourism in the South Moravian Region was based on an assessment of the total number of visitors in the South Moravian Region, including the number of visitors to important cultural and natural attractions in the period between 2010 and 2022. Part of the research was an evaluation of the annual change in the number of visitors in the South Moravian Region between 2019 and 2022, when tourism was limited in connection with COVID-19, and a comparison of attendance with other regions in the Czech Republic.



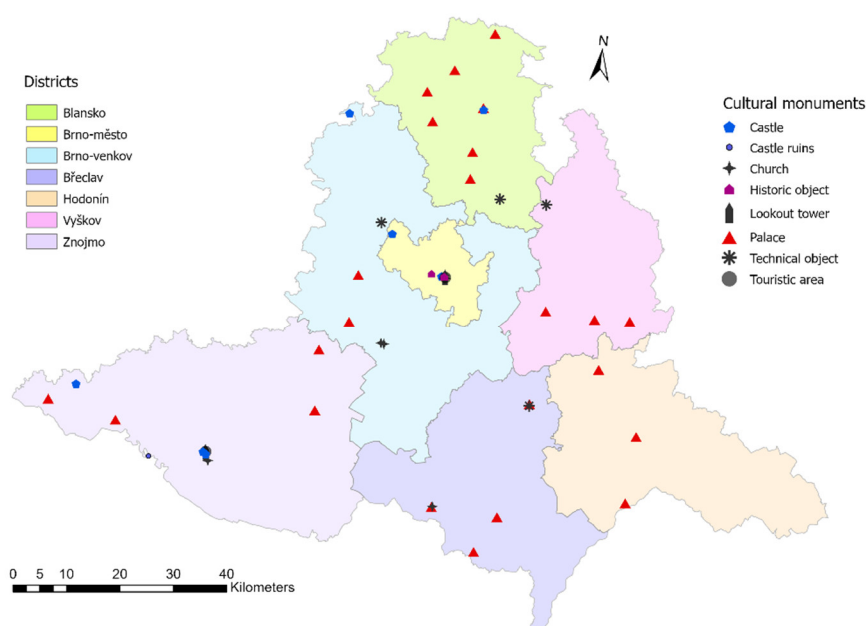
**Figure 1.** Development of visits to the South Moravian Region by domestic and foreign visitors in the period 2010–2022. Data: Czech Statistical Office, own elaboration

Figure 1 shows the number of visitors in the South Moravian Region in the period 2010–2022. Since the beginning of the monitored period, the number of visitors to the South Moravian Region had doubled by 2019. The highest number of visitors in the monitored period was in 2019, with a share of domestic visitors of 65%. In 2020, the total attendance dropped to the minimum for the monitored period. The total number of visitors fell by almost half compared to 2019, along with an increase in the share of domestic visitors to 82.5%. In 2021, attendance reached 1,331,887 visitors, which was still more than a third less than in 2019, and the ratio of domestic visitors increased even more (83.4%). The total attendance of the South Moravian Region in 2022 almost reached the pre-COVID attendance, and there was an increase in foreign visitors with a ratio of domestic visitors of 73.6%.

**Table 1.** Year-on-year change in the number of visitors in the South Moravian Region in the period 2019/2022.

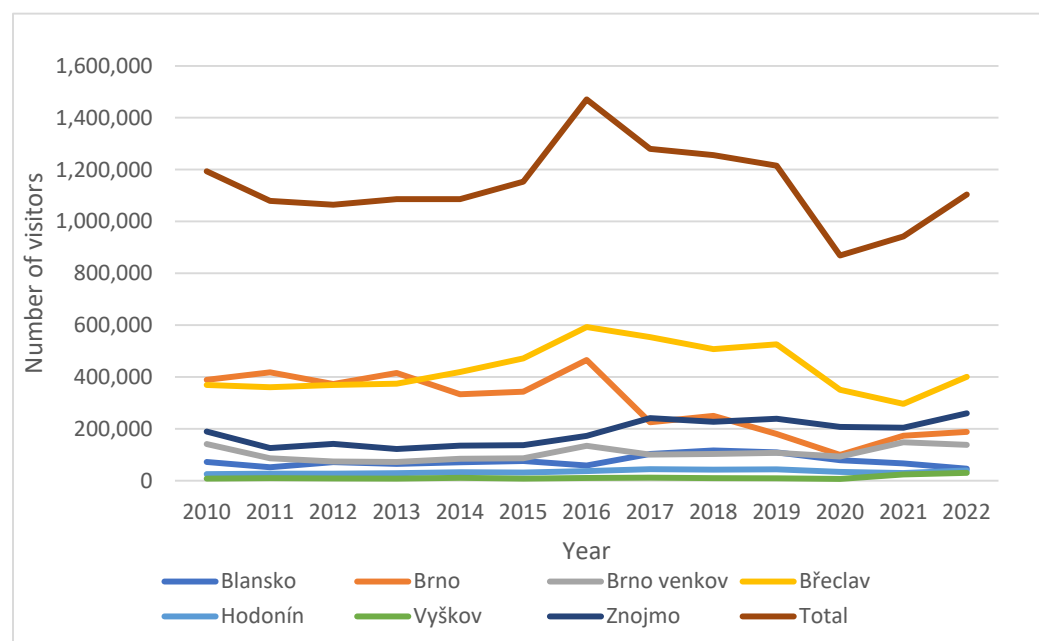
Type/Visitors	2019	2020	2021	2022	2019/2020 (%)	2019/2020 (%)	2019/2020 (%)
Residents	1,379,859	964,875	1,110,711	1,465,756	−30	−19,5	−6,2
Foreigners	757,400	205,898	221,176	526,923	−72,8	−70,8	−30,4
Total	2,137,259	1,170,773	1,331,887	1,992,679	−45,2	−37,7	−6,8

Based on the data in Table 1, it is evident that in the South Moravian Region, attendance in 2020 almost halved compared to 2019, with a tendency towards a gradual increase in attendance, with attendance in 2022 almost equaling the attendance before COVID-19. The number of foreign visitors in the South Moravian Region fell most significantly in the period between 2020 and 2021 by almost two-thirds compared to 2019. The number of domestic visitors to the South Moravian Region in 2020 decreased by one third of that in the previous year, and in 2021, the decrease was only one fifth. From the number of visitors in 2022, it is evident that the number of domestic visitors almost equaled the period in 2019, but the number of foreign visitors was still a third lower in 2020 than it was in 2019.



**Figure 2.** The cultural monuments with admission in the South Moravian Region [54]. Cartographic source: ©ArcCR500. ARCDATA PRAHA.

There are a total of 36 cultural monuments in the South Moravian Region, where attendance is monitored based on tickets sold. The distribution of cultural monuments in the South Moravian Region is shown in Figure 2. The development of the number of visitors to cultural monuments in the South Moravian Region was evaluated based on the total number of visitors, including the number of visitors to cultural monuments in individual districts in the period from 2010 to 2022, as shown in Figure 3.

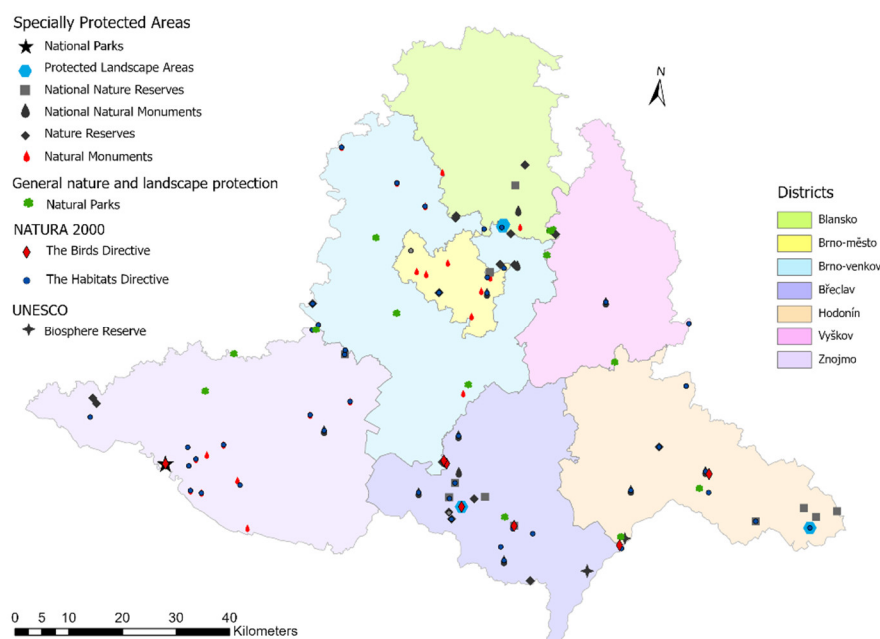


**Figure 3.** Attendance at monuments with an entrance fee in the districts of the South Moravian Region in the period 2009–2022 Data: National Advisory and Information Centre for Culture, own elaboration



Figure 3 shows the development of the total number of visits to monuments with an entrance fee in individual regions from 2010 to 2022 in the South Moravian Region. According to the available data, it is obvious that the total number of visits to monuments in the South Moravian Region has been increasing since 2013. The highest attendance at cultural monuments with an entrance fee was recorded in 2016 with 1.47 million visitors. In the period 2020/2021, a rapid decrease in attendance was recorded in connection with the closure/restriction of access to cultural monuments in connection with COVID-19.

The total number of visitors to cultural monuments with an entrance fee in the South Moravian Region in the period of 2019–2022 decreased by 28.5% in 2020 from 1.23 million visitors in 2019 to 868 thousand visitors in 2020. In 2021, the total number of visitors to cultural monuments in the South Moravian Region increased to 942 thousand visitors, but it was 22.5% less than in 2019. In 2022, there was a noticeable increase in the number of visitors to cultural monuments in the South Moravian Region to 1.1 million visitors, and their attendance reached 90% of the attendance in 2019. In the pre-COVID period, the cultural monuments of the Břeclav district, where the Lednice–Valtice area, which is part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site, is located, showed the greatest number of visitors and also an important decrease in relation to the COVID pandemic. In second place is Brno, a city with typical urban cultural monuments, which also experienced the biggest decline during the pandemic. This may be due to the limitation of overall tourism in Brno, including conference tourism, as visits to cultural establishments were also associated with it. On the contrary, the monuments of the Znojmo district, which combines cultural and natural monuments, took second place.

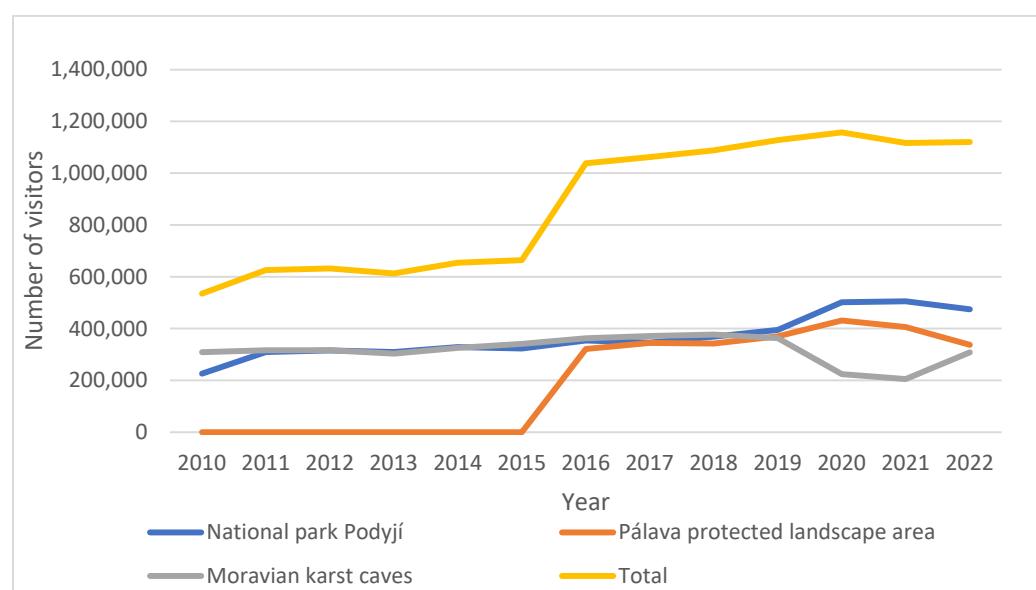


**Figure 4.** Location of the most important protected natural areas in the South Moravian Region [55]. Cartographic source: ©ArcCR500. ARCDATA PRAHA.

Figure 4 shows the location of the most important protected natural areas in the South Moravian Region, which are color-coded in the individual districts, and their type of protection is determined using markers in the map legend. There is a total of one national park (Thaya Valley National Park), three protected landscape areas (Moravian Karst, Pavlovské vrchy Hills, and White Carpathians Mts.), 16 national natural monuments, 17 national nature reserves, 219 natural monuments, and 91 nature reserves in the South Moravian Region. Within the European nature protection NATURA 2000, there are 8 sites of the Birds Directive and 203 sites of the Habitats Directive. There are also three

geoparks, two biosphere reserves, and twenty nature parks in the studied area. To evaluate the number of visitors to important natural areas, data were obtained by monitoring the number of visitors to the Thaya Valley National Park and the Pavlovské vrchy Hills protected area, based on sensors capturing the movement of visitors in the terrain and through tickets sold to the caves in the Moravian Karst, which are located in the Moravian Karst protected landscape area.

The evaluation of the attendance of monitored natural areas in the South Moravian Region in the period of 2010–2022 is shown in Figure 5. Attendance monitoring using automatic counters was started in 2010 in the Thaya Valley National Park and the Pavlovské vrchy Hills protected area in the Moravian Karst Caves based on tickets sold. The monitoring of visitors to the protected landscape area of the Pavlovské vrchy Hills protected area began in 2016.



**Figure 5.** Development of visitors' attendance to important natural sites in the South Moravian Region in the period 2010–2022. Data: Thaya Valley National Park Administration, Pavlovské vrchy Hills protected landscape area administration, Moravian Karst Caves Administration, own elaboration.

Figure 5 shows the total number of visitors to all three monitored natural sites. Since 2010, a gradual increase in attendance can be seen, with an increase of one third in attendance since 2016, when attendance began to be monitored in the Pavlovské vrchy protected landscape area. In the period between 2020 and 2022, there was a noticeable drop in attendance in the caves of the Moravian Karst—which were closed during the tourist season due to restrictions related to COVID-19—by almost a third (32%) compared to attendance in 2019, but attendance at Thaya Valley National Park increased by almost a quarter (23.3%) and attendance at the Pavlovské vrchy Hills protected landscape area increased by five percent (5.8%) compared to 2019 (Table 2). It is necessary to note that the number of visits to natural areas to which access was not restricted (Thaya Valley National Park and the Pavlovské vrchy Hills protected landscape area) increased the most in 2020 with a downward trend of decreasing traffic to 2022. On the contrary, attendance at the Moravian Karst Caves, which had restricted access due to their closure during the tourist season, dropped sharply in 2020 and increased again in 2022, when access restrictions were not significant.

**Table 2.** Year-on-year change in the number of visits to monitored natural areas in 2019/2022.

Type/Year	2019	2020	2021	2022	2019/2020 (%)	2019/2021 (%)	2019/2022 (%)
Thaya Valley	394,642	501,517	505,338	474,568	27.1	28.0	20.3
Pavlovské vrchy	369,942	431,332	405,720	337,382	16.6	9.7	−8.8
Moravian Karst	363,207	224,372	205,274	308,299	−38.2	−43.5	−15.1
Total	1,127,791	1,157,221	1,116,332	1,120,249	2.6	−1	−0.6

Table 3 shows the year-on-year percentage change in the number of visitors to the monitored protected natural areas in 2020/2022 compared to 2019, including the total number of visitors to all three areas of the monitored areas in the monitored period. The total number of visitors to all three protected natural areas in the South Moravian Region has hardly changed in the period after 2020. In 2020, the total number of visitors to the monitored natural sites increased by only 2.6%, and in the following year, 2021, the total number of visitors decreased by −1%, and in 2022, the total number of visitors decreased by −0.6% compared to the number of visitors in 2019. The long-term average annual attendance in all three areas was over 300,000 visitors per year. In the period between 2020 and 2021, the number of visitors to the Thaya Valley National Park reached over 500,000 visitors and the protected landscape area of Pavlovské vrchy Hills protected area reached 400,000 visitors. Visitation to the Moravian Karst Caves was maintained at over 200,000 visitors. In 2022, the number of visitors to the Thaya Valley National Park dropped to 475,000 visitors and the Pavlovské vrchy Hills protected landscape area dropped to 337,000 visitors. The number of visitors to the Moravian Karst Caves increased to 308,000 visitors. Based on these data, the increasing trend in the number of visitors to freely accessible natural areas after 2020 and the decrease in the number of visitors to areas to which access was restricted due to measures related to COVID-19 were confirmed.

**Table 3.** Year-on-year change in the number of visitors in the regions of Czechia in the period 2019–2022 [%]. Source: Czech Statistical Office, own elaboration.

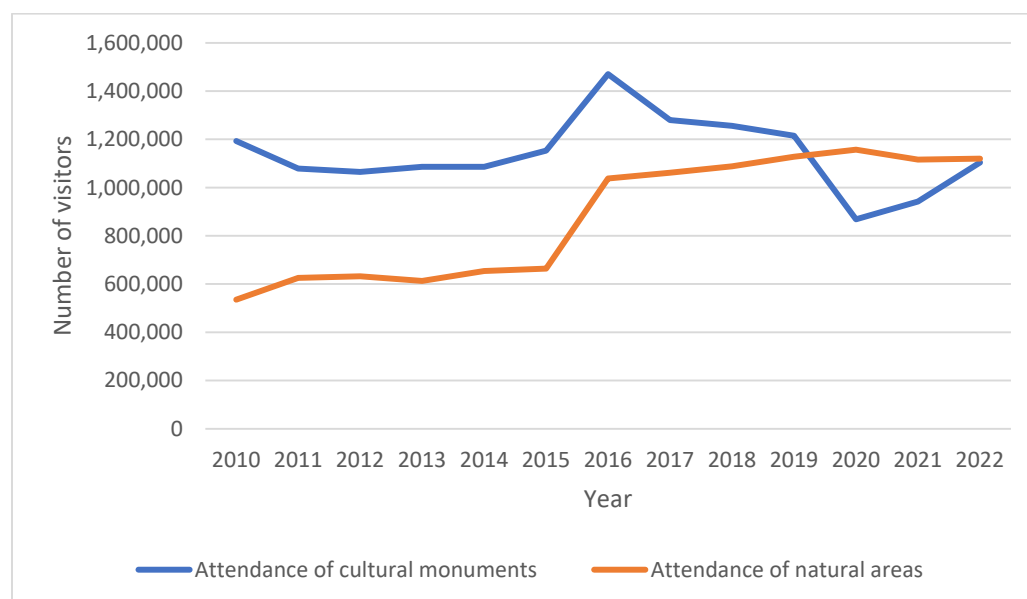
Region/Year	2019	2020	2021	2022	2019/2020 (%)	2019/2021 (%)	2019/2022 (%)
Prague	8,044,324	2,182,443	2,354,720	5,984,803	−72.8	−70.7	−25.6
South Bohemian Region	1,788,911	1,120,104	1,119,451	1,464,864	−37.3	−37.4	−18.1
South Moravian Region	2,137,259	1,170,773	1,331,887	1,990,371	−45	−37.6	−6.8
Karlovy Vary Region	1,190,296	677,441	710,460	1,157,945	−43	−40.3	−2.7
Vysočina Region	605,326	397,509	450,699	642,986	−34.3	−25.5	6.2
Hradec Králové Region	1,412,307	995,036	939,280	1,468,600	−29.5	−33.4	3.9
Liberec Region	1,048,651	774,683	722,461	1,113,981	−26.1	−31.1	6.2
Moravian-Silesian Region	1,015,746	612,681	645,902	993,183	−39.7	−36.4	−2.2
Olomouc Region	761,615	472,051	469,007	722,842	−38	−38.4	−5
Pardubice Region	480,520	322,270	351,261	503,879	−32.9	−26.8	4.8
Plzeň Region	871,893	533,620	554,582	840,789	−38.8	−36.3	−3.5
Central Bohemian Region	1,172,951	693,980	781,785	1,157,837	−40.8	−33.3	−1.2
Ústí nad Labem Region	659,902	383,341	396,878	580,023	−41.9	−39.8	−12
Zlín Region	808,451	500,512	555,228	802,061	−38	−31.3	−0.8
Total	21,998,366	10,836,444	11,383,601	19,424,164	−50.7	−48.2	−11.7

Table 4 shows that after 2020, in connection with restrictions limiting tourism, the number of visitors to the Prague region decreased the most, which was apparently influenced by the nature of tourism, primarily based on cultural tourism, and a significant portion of visitors to the region coming from abroad. In 2020, the South Moravian Region was the second most significantly affected region in the context of a decrease in total attendance, which was influenced by the nature of tourism, in which cultural tourism plays a significant role, but also professionally oriented tourism, including conference tourism. A similar situation was also in the Karlovy Vary region, where tourism is based on spa and recreational tourism and a significant portion of visitors come from abroad. A gradual recovery of attendance is evident in all regions of Czechia, including higher attendance in some regions than they achieved before COVID-19.

**Table 4.** Year-on-year change in the number of visitors to cultural monuments in the regions of the Czechia in the period 2019–2022. Source: National Information and Advisory Center for Culture.

Region/Year	2019	2020	2021	2022	2019/2020 (%)	2019/2021 (%)	2019/2022 (%)
Prague	4,688,763	1,001,878	1,544,007	3,312,579	−78.6	−67	−29.3
South Bohemian Region	1,400,998	961,555	976,277	1,112,030	−31.3	−30.3	−20.6
South Moravian Region	1,214,947	868,752	942,225	1,103,828	−28.5	−22.5	−9.1
Karlovy Vary Region	341,424	187,977	209,064	243,902	−44.9	−38.7	−28.5
Vysočina Region	345,044	220,635	236,003	228,380	−36	−31.6	−33.8
Hradec Králové Region	898,101	551,803	464,125	484,274	−38.5	−48.3	−46
Liberec Region	658,926	508,427	490,217	561,187	−22.8	−25.6	−14.8
Moravian-Silesian Region	367,978	253,498	234,501	363,253	−31.1	−36.2	−1.2
Olomouc Region	287,250	174,035	138,126	232,430	−39.4	−51.9	−19
Pardubice Region	375,502	119,216	282,369	357,317	−68.2	−24.8	−4.8
Plzeň Region	583,254	427,256	437,407	627,157	−26.7	−25	7.5
Central Bohemian Region	2,514,010	1,170,303	1,307,172	1,687,136	−53.4	−48	−32.8
Ústí nad Labem Region	431,942	319,763	276,951	364,711	−25.9	−35.8	−15.5
Zlín Region	692,134	414,754	509,298	665,328	−40	−26.4	−3.8
Total	14,895,920	7,251,634	8,057,448	1,1471,573	−51.3	−45.9	−22.9

As part of the comparison of the number of visitors to cultural monuments in individual regions of Czechia in the period between 2019 and 2022, it is evident that the most affected region in connection with COVID-19 was Prague, where the number of visitors to cultural monuments after 2020 decreased by more than 78%, which was influenced by the significant share of foreign visitors in the attendance of cultural monuments. A significant decrease in the number of visitors to cultural monuments was also recorded in the Pardubice region and in the Central Bohemian region, while attendance in the South Moravian Region fell by only a quarter. In most regions, the number of visitors to cultural monuments gradually recovered, with the exception of the Hradec Králové region. The total number of visitors to cultural monuments in Czechia dropped by more than half after 2020, and the recovery was noticeable only from 2022, when the number of visitors to cultural monuments in Czechia reached 80% of the number of visitors before COVID-19.



**Figure 6.** Development of visitor attendance in the South Moravian Region, including cultural and natural attractions in the period 2010–2022. Data source: Czech Statistical Office, National Advisory and Information Centre for Culture, Thaya Valley National Park Administration, Pavlovské vrchy Hills protected landscape area administration, Moravian Karst Caves Administration, own elaboration.

Figure 6 shows a comparison of the total attendance of cultural and natural monuments in the monitored period between 2010 and 2022. Since the beginning of the monitored period in 2010, attendance at cultural monuments has gradually increased from more than a million visitors and in 2016 reached its peak of 1.4 million. The average long-term annual attendance of the monitored cultural monuments was over 1,140,000 visitors during the monitored period. In the period between 2020 and 2021, there was a noticeable decrease in visitors in connection with the closure of the entrance to the monuments during the period of restrictions related to COVID-19. The total loss of attendance at cultural monuments was around a quarter of visitors compared to 2019. From 2022, the total attendance at cultural monuments almost equaled the values before COVID-19, with a loss of one-tenth of visitors than in 2019. The data, therefore, show the restoration of cultural tourism in the South Moravian Region.

The number of visitors to the monitored natural sites has gradually increased since the start of monitoring in 2010 and has increased by a third since 2016 when the Pavlovské vrchy Hills protected area was included in the monitoring. The long-term average annual attendance of natural sites is around 880,000 visitors per year. There was no decrease in total attendance at the monitored natural sites after 2020, which was also influenced by the fact that during the period of restrictions related to COVID-19, access to important natural sites was not restricted, the attendance of which was monitored based on automatic counters located in the field (Thaya Valley National Park and Pavlovské vrchy Hills protected area), and their attendance increased so much that it compensated for the loss of attendance at the caves of the Moravian Karst, which were temporarily restricted from entering in connection with COVID-19. In 2022, the number of visitors to cultural and natural attractions essentially leveled off.

Overall, it was confirmed that during the pandemic and anti-pandemic measures, the number of visits to cultural monuments fell most significantly, especially in the city of Brno and in the UNESCO World Heritage sites, while natural attractions more or less remained at a stable level and contributed the most to maintaining tourism in the region. It seems that both forms of tourism complement each other. Moreover, rural destinations have increased their attractiveness, and although this cannot be expected to be a permanent phenomenon, a certain trend in this direction could be maintained.

#### 4. Discussion

The impacts of COVID-19 on tourism in Czechia were moderate compared to the world or Europe. In 2020, the loss of tourism participants in Czechia did not exceed half of the number of visitors compared to 2019, and the number of visitors gradually increased to almost 90% of the level in 2022 that it had before COVID-19. The development of tourist attendance in the South Moravian Region after 2020 corresponds to the development of visitor numbers in the Czech Republic. While the number of visitors to cultural monuments in Czechia decreased in 2020 by almost half, in the South Moravian Region, the number of visitors to cultural monuments fell by only a quarter compared to the number in 2019.

Based on a national comparison of individual regions in the Czech Republic, it is evident that although the South Moravian Region was the region with the second highest drop in total attendance after 2020, by 2022, its attendance was restored almost to the original values it showed before COVID-19. On the contrary, in terms of the number of visitors to cultural monuments, the South Moravian Region was ranked among the less affected regions in a national comparison, and similarly to the total number of visitors, after 2022, it was possible to restore the number of visitors to cultural monuments to 90% of the number of visitors to cultural monuments before COVID-19.

A limiting factor of the research may be the selection of data used for analysis. This research used data obtained from statistical sources that capture tourist attendance based on entrance fees to cultural monuments and data capturing attendance at natural sites using automatic sensors placed in the field monitoring the movement of visitors. This data type was chosen because the data are freely available within national databases and there is no need to address the issue of data sensitivity or privacy. In the case of this research, data were available for the period from 2010 to 2022. However, it is necessary to mention that these data do not capture the actual number of tourism participants, but only track visitors to monuments who have purchased a ticket to a cultural monument or have been scanned by automatic counters in a natural location. More accurate data could be obtained by using modern technologies that track the digital footprint of tourism participants. This was also confirmed by Kalvet [39], who states that publicly available data on the attendance of cultural monuments and events often appear to be insufficient, as they capture only a narrow spectrum of visitors, often based on the sale of tickets to cultural monuments. In particular, these data do not affect small individual tourism, the importance of which is likely to grow and creates a counterbalance to important and sometimes congested destinations. It can therefore be assumed that, in the future, it will be possible to obtain more accurate and up-to-date data on tourism through digital technologies which of course have other limitations.

The preferences of tourism participants have changed in connection with COVID-19. In the context of COVID-19, there has been a visible increase in demand for rural tourism, nature tourism, and sustainable forms of tourism. At the same time, attendance in urban areas, for which cultural tourism based on sightseeing is typical, was lower in some countries after 2020 than before COVID-19 [56]. Restrictions on tourism related to COVID-19 contributed to a decrease in the number of participants in tourism, including foreign tourists visiting several popular tourist locations in Czechia. This led to a decrease in income from business activities in the tourism industry (accommodation, catering, and entertainment activities) and contributed to the loss of jobs in the field of tourism, but also to a decrease in the income of public budgets. In some tourist destinations, foreign visitors were replaced by domestic ones during the COVID-19 period, but in some destinations (Prague, Český Krumlov, and Karlovy Vary), the decrease in foreign visitors was critical for tourism service operators [57]. Travel service providers could choose to fight against the effects of COVID-19 on tourism with an adaptation strategy, which consists of adapting the offer to the changed conditions, or choose a latent strategy and comply with the restrictions associated with COVID-19, which means the complete closure or partial restriction of operations [58]. Based on this information, it can be concluded that the degree

of impact of COVID-19 on tourism is influenced, in addition to the number of visitors to tourist sites and cultural and natural monuments, by the operators of tourism services themselves, who could better adapt to the changed environmental conditions.

Kebza [59], dealing with the attendance of cultural monuments in Czechia, pointed out that the data on the attendance of cultural objects from the National Information and Advisory Center for Culture [54] statistics are based on the monitoring of the number of tickets sold, but the actual attendance of the monuments may differ. In terms of the number of visitors to cultural monuments, the results of this research correspond to the study by Dušek and Sagapova [60], which focused on the preferences of visitors to tourism sites in Czechia. Based on a questionnaire survey with more than 600 respondents, visitors were most interested in visiting leisure cultural and natural monuments, especially UNESCO monuments in the Lednice–Valtice area and Brno, and least interested in visiting objects with a mainly educational function (museums, galleries) in the summer of 2020 in South Moravian Region. According to the results of this research, an increase in attendance can be observed, especially at historical monuments (castles, chateaux), as well as a decrease in attendance, especially at monuments with a predominant educational function (museums, galleries, etc.).

According to the Strategy for the Development of the South Moravian Region [61], the goal in the field of tourism is to also increase the awareness of visitors about lesser-known cultural and natural attractions, which could lead to an increase in the number of visits to other tourist attractions and contribute to a reduction in the overcrowding of popular tourist destinations. In connection with the massive attendance of some monuments in the South Moravian Region, there is a risk of degradation of their cultural, historical, and natural significance. In addition to tangible cultural and natural heritage, tourism can also be based on intangible cultural heritage, local gastronomy, or recreational sports. The South Moravian Region has suitable conditions for the development of cycling tourism, wine tourism, and gastro tourism.

According to Binek et al. [62], as part of the development program of the South Moravian Region, the main tourist areas were determined as Brno, Moravian Karst, the Pavlovské vrchy Hills protected landscape area, the Lednice–Valtice area, Moravian Slovakia, Znojmo town, and the Thaya Valley National Park. According to the results of the analysis of cultural and natural tourism, the most important areas of tourism are the same, apart from Moravian Slovakia, where there is a low number of cultural monuments, but natural and intangible heritage is significant here. On the other hand, it is necessary to note that it is also suitable to evaluate attendance at other attractions. In terms of attendance at attractions in the South Moravian Region, there is high attendance at entertainment, sports–recreational, and educational activities, which, however, are not evaluated in culture statistics, but their attendance is recorded in Czech Tourism statistics [63].

According to Pachrová et al. [64], in the case of important natural sites with a specified degree of protection, data from automatic counters located in the field, which record the movement of visitors, can be used. However, these sensors are only found in some natural locations, usually with a higher degree of protection (national parks, protected landscape areas). In the case of natural objects with ticket sales (e.g., caves in the Moravian Karst), attendance data can be measured based on tickets sold. However, a combination of several types of monitoring appears to be the most effective (automatic counters, personal counting of visitors in the researched area, interviews with visitors, video monitoring, big data, geographic information systems, and other methods).

It is important to remember that the actual number of visitors to natural areas is usually higher than the one captured by the automatic counters, because the sensors capture only a certain location (they are often located at important tourist attractions or the entrance to the territory) and are used only in some natural locations. For example, the real number of visitors to the Pavlovské vrchy Hills protected area based on the counting of visitors in the field was up to three times higher than the data recorded by automatic counters [65]. It can therefore be expected that the actual number of visitors to natural

sites will be several times higher than the data from automatic counters. The data cannot even cover the phenomenon of second housing, which is significantly widespread in Czechia, especially in rural areas, and the hunger for recreation in cottages has increased significantly during the pandemic.

Automatic counters placed at important attractions in protected natural areas can record their attendance. Based on these data, the total annual attendance and attendance in individual months can be evaluated. In connection with COVID-19, there was an increase in visitors to Thaya Valley National Park outside the main tourist season during the restrictions associated with COVID-19, which limited the visits to cultural facilities, but increased the number of visitors to freely accessible natural sites. Based on these findings, it would be appropriate to focus on attendance in individual months as part of further research. However, within the statistics of other natural areas such as the Pavlovské vrchy Hills protected area and Moravian Karst Caves, data for individual months are not available. Together with the development of tourism, the importance of protecting cultural and natural heritage should not be forgotten to ensure its preservation for future generations. As the number of visitors to natural areas increases, so does the threat to natural and socio-cultural resources in a tourist destination if tourism is not properly planned and managed. Protected areas which are currently exposed to a high intensity of visitors are particularly at risk. Therefore, properly managed management is key, which disperses the flow of tourists to more areas, not only to cultural monuments but also to natural locations. It is possible to direct the flow of tourists by building an effectively connected service network at the local level, with the aim that tourism participants spend more time in the destination and at the same time use other tourism services (accommodation, meals, leisure activities, etc.). Based on this information, it can be assumed that the development of tourism is conditioned by a combination of several factors, and the mere presence of cultural and natural attractions is not enough without the appropriately managed development of infrastructure, services, and destination management.

The impact of the pandemic and anti-epidemic measures in connection with COVID-19 is addressed by a number of works from the global to the local scale. These works analyze the effects of the pandemic from economic, health, social, environmental, transportation, etc., points of view. They mostly consist of analyzing the situation and thinking about possible future developments. Only a few explore the design of future strategies and political implications. Ntounis et al. introduced the Business Resilience Composite Score [66], which characterizes the relative resilience of businesses after the COVID crisis in England. They found that although tourism was significantly sensitive to the crisis, some sectors (trade, personnel services) showed even greater dependence. However, this research was based on urban tourism and lacked a regional dimension. A sensitivity index was introduced by Duro et al. for Spain. They found higher sensitivity on the islands, the Mediterranean coast, and Madrid. It can be assumed that these were tourist destinations more visited by foreign tourists. Other research also confirms the necessity of moving tourist interest, at least partly, from overtourism destinations to freer ones [67]. However, our results do not seem to confirm the cautionary forecasts of other authors about a deep and long-term decline in tourism, as the data returned to pre-crisis levels relatively quickly. The ongoing decline in the previously most sought-after destinations is rather positive, as it relieves their congestion or enables revitalization.

Research in other countries confirms our findings that during the pandemic, tourists turned to domestic rural destinations, which experienced a low decline or even a slight increase in tourism [68,69]. However, these destinations are often not prepared for this in terms of the human factor, infrastructure, business environment and the like [70]. The shift in tourists to domestic cultural destinations and their longer stay in one place are also manifested in accordance with our findings in the cultural tourism segment [71]. In this context, the pandemic is discussed as an opportunity to limit the focus on cultural tourism as a source of profit, and to adopt more environmentally friendly procedures that can be associated with a higher involvement of rural destinations [72].



Currently, the important question is how quickly the entire tourism industry will return to normal and whether at least some of the changes caused by the pandemic period will be preserved. From the point of view of regional development, it would be ideal if the reduction in the number of visitors to tourist destinations facing excessive tourism was maintained (which is not very realistic) and if the trend in developing rural tourism towards less busy tourist destinations and undermining the sustainability of rural areas was at least partially maintained. To support and develop tourism, it would be appropriate to take measures at the local, regional, and national levels [73]. Less developed tourist areas could focus on the development of rural tourism, building the necessary infrastructure, digitization, and information support [74]. At the local level, it would be appropriate to activate LEADER program initiatives. The curtailment of tourism during the pandemic is seen by some experts as an opportunity to increase the responsibility and sustainability of the sector, while others are primarily concerned with restoring the economic importance of tourism [75]. Although, based on the analysis of the impact assessment of COVID-19, there is a noticeable revival of the tourism industry at the global, European, national, and regional levels; a turbulent restoration of the tourism industry to its original state cannot be expected. From the point of view of threats to the recovery of tourism, several factors can be identified that threaten world tourism. The world security system was disrupted by Russian aggression against Ukraine. The energy crisis is also triggering new measures in the field of tourism. High inflation attacks the savings of the middle classes, who are quantitatively the main consumers of tourism. In theory, the Green Deal should limit air travel. A recovering tourism industry should take all these threats into account. For that reason, it is important to monitor the entire process of tourism recovery. An important question is to what extent the focus on domestic tourism will be maintained, at least to a certain extent, even after the pandemic risks have subsided.

The results of the study are applicable to countries with similar conditions in terms of tourism. Among the most significant is the demand for domestic rural tourism, which is due to the large middle class and the interest of the vast majority of the population in spending their holidays traveling (in Czechia, this is about 78% of the population). Another condition is the necessary tourist and transport infrastructure of rural areas for tourism and the required level of security (in the Czech Republic, the intervention of an integrated rescue system within 15 min in the whole territory is guaranteed by law). At the same time, it should be taken into account that this form of tourism is less profitable, so it is not an optimal solution for countries with a high share of tourism in the creation of national income.

For countries oriented almost exclusively to mass foreign tourism on the coast, near UNESCO monuments, or other selected locations where intensive infrastructure is concentrated, this is more of a cautionary analysis. Intensively used destinations tend to be very sensitive to natural and man-made disasters, but also to economic development and fashion trends. Nevertheless, it would be appropriate that even in these countries, attention is paid to the possibility of dispersing tourists to rural areas under the condition of sustainability in order to eliminate problems in intensively used destinations. Incidentally, in developing countries, the middle class is also getting stronger and higher demand for traveling is expectable.

## 5. Conclusions

The results of the investigation into the impact of COVID-19 on tourism in the South Moravian Region confirmed that the visitation of cultural and natural sites contributes significantly to the total number of visitors in the South Moravian Region. Based on the results, however, it is evident that the effects of the restrictions associated with COVID-19 hit cultural tourism the most, especially because cultural monuments were temporarily closed to the public in 2020/2021. On the contrary, the number of visitors to the monitored natural sites, where access was not restricted, increased. The importance of tourism in the South Moravian Region was also confirmed in its comparison with other regions in

Czechia. The future direction of cultural tourism development can only be estimated at the moment. In the context of the unprecedented curtailment of world tourism related to COVID-19, the tourism and cultural industries are recovering from this event. However, based on the analysis of tourism in the South Moravian Region, in the case of suitable conditions for tourism in the future, it can be expected to resume its recovery, including the potential for new forms of tourism.

Based on the results of this research, an increase in interest in domestic tourism can be observed, especially in popular tourist destinations in the South Moravian Region. In the future, it can be expected that domestic tourism will play a significant role in the revival of cultural tourism. In the context of COVID-19, there has been a visible increase in demand for traveling shorter distances and close to home, and for exploring freely accessible cultural and natural monuments, outdoor activities in a natural environment, and rural tourism in the South Moravian Region. Based on this information, in the future, it will be possible to recommend the adaptation of the tourism offer to target customers and the support of quality-managed tourism with a sufficient range of services and activities in the tourism industry, which are not just dependent on foreign visitors, but are also attractive to domestic visitors who are interested in exploring the national monuments and their surroundings. The results of this research are therefore applicable not only in the scientific sphere but also practically in the preparation of tourism development plans or destination management.

Regarding the contribution to theory, this article brings hard empirical data on the impact of the COVID pandemic on tourism at the regional level and opens up a discussion to both improve the data collection methodology and further monitor the situation. The article also presents a case study of a region that lacks excellent locational and natural prerequisites for the development of tourism and whose attractiveness is based more on historical heritage and nature conservation. The share of tourism in the economy of the region is therefore smaller than in areas focused primarily on tourism. The article also confirms a certain turn in the focus of tourism towards a rural and environmentally friendly way and questions to what extent this turn will be permanent.

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