

Article

Problems and Opportunities within the Wine Industry in Terms of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic has affected and still affects various sectors, including the agricultural sector. A specific industry deriving from agriculture is the wine industry. The purpose of this article is to find out and analyse the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the wine sector, especially regarding the Slovakia wine sector. To achieve this, a wide literary research study was conducted through which an overview of the global wine industry situation was obtained. Subsequently, the impact of COVID-19 on a selected wine business in the Slovak Republic was determined via interviewing. The findings were further analysed and compared with the situations of other Slovak and foreign wineries. It follows from the observations that both risk diversification within supplying and purchasing relations and the business's essential need to adapt to new circumstances under adverse conditions are very important factors. The article's contribution lies in a summarization of the problems and opportunities within the wineries as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, based on a wide literary research review and interviews with an employee of the large wine company, and the conclusions can also be applied to other agricultural industries.

Keywords: winery; agriculture; COVID-19; wine tourism; economics; logistics



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1. Introduction

Theoretical presumptions to manage the pandemic situation with the lowest losses possible include the business resilience supported by a simple organisational structure, flexibility, creativity, streamlined decision-making focused on the customers, and establishing good interrelationships [1–3]. The term “business resilience” means the ability of an organisation to survive, adapt, and prosper in the face of disruptions [4]. The ability of an organisation to adapt to new conditions is enhanced by a simple organisational structure or by a short management span. Such a requirement is often met by family businesses [5]. Flexibility and creativity enable the business to react to adverse circumstances by changes that, if promptly and correctly applied, can contribute to lower their negative impact or to eliminate them for the business's operation [6]. Focusing on the customers is important from the point of view that the business shall be oriented on those products and services that the customers demand [7]. As stated in the publication [8], a social capital helps the business to face the adverse circumstances. Diversification of products and marketing is also instrumental in the market situation during the pandemic [9]. The crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on many sectors, including agriculture, agricultural holdings, and the wine industry. The article pays attention to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the wine business. The introduction maps the global impact of COVID-19 on the wine industry. This is followed by information on a particular winemaker from the Slovak Republic in relation to marketing and logistics. Its economic performance, turnovers, and profits in recent years are compared with the economic performances of many other Slovak winemakers. In this way, it is possible to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the wineries of Slovakia. Based on the interview with an employee of the selected winery, the analysed impacts of COVID-19 on several aspects of the wine

business as well as the responses of the selected winery to such impacts are mentioned. Thus, the article gives comprehensive information and comparisons that can be applied to similar agricultural industries when any situation becomes worse. The article's benefit is to identify the business problems and challenges that occurred after the COVID-19 pandemic and to provide proper solutions.

The pandemic has affected national and, thus, global markets for drinks. International businesses together with domestic sales have been adversely influenced by a temporary departure from sale on site via social distancing measures, leading to closing the restaurants, bars, etc. [10]. The businessmen, in order to stay on the market and satisfy the customers' needs and demands, have had to innovate solutions. One of these was that the winemakers started to fill bottles, cans, etc. Closed restaurants and bars caused the majority of social and company meetings to be performed online, all leading to an increase in online wine degustation for which the glass bottles were a suitable solution. Although online wine purchasing had been considered as a trend before the pandemic, the restrictions made the online sale of wine significantly higher [11]. What is more, according to publication [12], the pandemic also affected the winegrowers who had the food or accommodation services and who supplied the restaurants and hotels with the majority of their production. Some winemakers were forced to find new ways of distribution for their wine products; the others were forced to change their business strategy or even close the establishment or some part of it. The winemakers undersold their wines, by special offers or by reducing the price.

In Australia, there was a fall in sales caused not only by a temporary decrease in consumer incomes but also by measures of social distancing and isolation that led to closing the bars, restaurants, cafés, and clubs. Such a fall has been partially cushioned by selling wines via e-shops and dispensing [13]. Besides the measures relating to the pandemic, the Australian market has been affected by the imposition of duties from China on bottled wines imported from Australia as well [14].

South Africa, as well as other countries, faced several coronavirus infection waves with various economic restrictions. Following from the publication, the measures also consisted of occasional prohibition on the sale of alcoholic beverages, which had a considerable impact on the wine sector. Due to the pandemic situation and measures that prohibited the sale of alcohol, wine sales were reduced in South Africa, and this resulted in large stocks of wine, leading to a considerable decrease in its price [15].

The publication [16] analysed consumers' behaviour when purchasing wine in a totally new and unexpected situation such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The results have shown that the coronavirus could change alcohol drinking habits. In general, consumers spent less money for wine during the restrictions since they felt uncertain in relation to their future income. Consequently, the consumers were worried about their incomes and future, and therefore, they focused more on purchasing staple foods and less on purchasing wine. In the study in [17], it is written that Spaniards drank wine for different reasons than Portuguese during the restrictions. The fear from isolation was a decisive factor for Spanish respondents when increasing the probability of higher wine drinking frequency. In Portugal, the fear from the economic crisis was a psychological factor leading to higher drinking frequency.

Concerning the French viticulture sector, according to study [18], a significant impact was seen in a fall in turnovers that depend on a type of wine and distribution channel. For instance, wines of premium and high quality were affected the most since the marketplaces were closed, i.e., restaurants, hotels, bars, conferences, and parties. On the other hand, the retailing of wines was less affected. The demand for wines was also impacted by a decrease in consumers' incomes. Demand reduction led to an increase in wine stocks, resulting in problems with the wine cellars since their storage place was limited. The businessmen aimed to reduce the wine stocks by lowering the production of wine in order to avoid the collapse in prices and to stabilise the market. As follows from publication [19], of selected

European countries, France had the lowest share of wineries that adopted online tools for wine degustation, despite high prestige on the market and rapid fall in prices of wine.

The coronavirus pandemic changed the way of selling Italian wines as well. The restaurants and bars were closed for a long time, or they were opened under strict conditions since Italy became the first European country proclaiming a nationwide lockdown toward coronavirus. Online retail sales of wine have increased; however, this is not enough to compensate for the recession and selling to the restaurants and bars, even though some retailers have switched to online sales [20]. Italian winemakers had already had a hard year before the pandemic, and they had been forced to deal with floods, heat, and thunderstorms. The following outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic and the related strict movement restriction and business closures affected the domestic market even more [21].

The pandemic situation also impacted the German wine sector. The article [22] mentions that not every sector experienced a fall owing to the pandemic. It brought some advantages to many as well. For example, some winemakers were selling predominantly to supermarkets and other food stores; meanwhile, the others, dependent only on the HORECA sector (the term abbreviated from HO (hotel), RE (restaurant), and CA (catering), covering the hotel industry and various types of food services), lost their profits due to restrictions and business closures. Online sales from the wineries' websites grew by 36.6% in the first wave. The publication [23] writes in turn that the volume of wine sales of retailers with foodstuffs grew in 2020 in comparison with the previous year by circa 6%, and the turnovers grew by 8%, as reported by the German Wine Institute. The growth of the wine sector in the food business has been mostly caused by a departure from the food and drink services that were closed because of the pandemic restrictions.

COVID-19 also affected the whole workings of Macedonian wineries and had a direct impact of a decrease in domestic sales and exports to international markets. The wine sector in Macedonia did not succeed in selling the scheduled quantities, as follows from publication [24].

According to a survey by The Wine-Grower's Fund of the Czech Republic, Slovakia's neighbour, involving 2000 wine producers, 91% of wineries experienced the impact of the pandemic situation. The highest impact was noticeable to those winegrowers who provide accommodation and food service or who supply their products mainly to the catering establishments. A risk factor is the wine tourism business as well. For some winemakers, the incomes from wine tourism represent up to 75%, and thus, they were largely affected by the COVID-19 crisis. The level of negative pandemic impacts on the wine sector, according to the survey from the Czech Republic, has been related not to the size of the wine-growing operation but to their orientation; 46% of winegrowers had to find new ways of distribution for their wines, 36% had to change their business strategies, and 32% had to close their establishment or some part of it. The quarter of winemakers sold the wines under special prices, and 20% of them had to reduce the prices considerably. The Wine-Grower's Fund to support the winegrowers has launched two campaigns—one to support online wine sales and another to support wine tourism. However, neither the growing interest in the online business for wine nor the prolonged wine season compensated for the loss caused by the COVID-19 pandemic [12].

Wine tourism as a developing part of agriculture is an important part of the wine industry [25,26]. According to [27], wine tourism is defined as travel attracted by wineries and wine countries and connected with visiting the wine cellars and festivals. As follows from previous and similar definitions mentioned in publications [28,29], this activity is usually performed at places with high concentration of people, and therefore, it was highly affected by the COVID-19 measures. Thus, during the pandemic, only individual wine tourism could be applicable, excluding mass events [30].

Publication [31], which focuses on wine tourism in Romania and Macedonia, concludes that the COVID-19 pandemic brought a change in the trend of wine tourism, from the foreign to the domestic one. There, a communication model based on social media, e-marketing, and virtual reality experiences is highly recommended. Publication [31]

considers the COVID-19 pandemic an opportunity to develop wine tourism connected to visiting UNESCO places, cycling, and nature walking significantly.

Wine tourism as an industry with development potential during the pandemic is also mentioned in publication [32]. Here the authors, focusing on wine tourism in southern Spain, give the advantages of wine tourism as a way of recreation in sparsely populated rural areas, and it can be connected to individual sports and hiking. They point out the need for cooperation and marketing synergy of wine companies with other businesses covering the tourist industry and agribusinesses of a given area. The need for greater cooperation of wine producers with other relevant businesses is also mentioned by the authors of publications [33–36].

However, wine tourism development sometimes raises concerns between the local residents about a higher concentration of people in a single place. Thus, they have a negative perception of wine tourism [37,38].

Globally, the measures to prevent or slow down the spread of COVID-19 have had a large impact on the wine sector.

In Slovakia, the situation in relation to the measures to avoid the spreading of COVID-19 was changeable [39].

The first case of infection was confirmed on 6 March 2020.

On 12 March 2020, the international airports were closed; railways and bus transportation were restricted; schools, bars, restaurants, and free-time activity establishments were closed; and shopping centres were opened under certain conditions.

The release from the measures was on 13 June 2020.

From 11 October 2020, there was a prohibition of mass events again, and the restaurants could dispense their food through the window. Drinks could be consumed at the opened restaurant terraces, not in closed areas. There had to be a limited number of customers in shops, and recreational enterprises had to be closed.

From 31 December 2020, a curfew entered into force with minimal exceptions. Traveling from district to district was possible only under clearly defined conditions [40,41].

Hotels could be opened from 19 April 2021; however, hotel restaurants could not operate, and they could only provide their food service for guests to their rooms. From this date, travelling outside the district was allowed as well [42,43].

Exterior catering terraces were opened on 26 April 2021, and a COVID-19 negative test not older than 7 days was necessary to enter the establishments.

The state of emergency and the majority of measures affecting the HORECA sector in Slovakia ended on 14 May 2022 [44–47].

Greater restrictions in the mobility of people and providing of services started again on 4 October 2021. According to a valid COVID automat, 13 of 79 districts of the Slovak Republic were in the second strictest phase, 39 districts were in the third, and 27 of them were in the fourth phase of five. The HORECA system was limited to a certain degree in each district, most significantly in the second and third phases [48].

Again, on 24 November 2021, a state of emergency entered into force. For all people, the only available shops were groceries and pharmacies.

From 10 December 2021, stores other than groceries and pharmacies were opened only for vaccinated citizens and for those who had recovered from COVID-19 disease in the last 90 days.

From 17 December, the curfew was limited only from 20:00 to 5:00. The exclusion from the curfew was travelling to a shop [49–51].

The significant release from the measures for the vaccinated, tested, or recovered impacting the HORECA system was on 18 January 2022. Without any limitation, hotels were allowed to accommodate, to provide restaurants, and, under certain conditions, to organise mass events. These were divided into three categories according to the riskiness on which the permitted capacity was based.

All the measures relating to COVID-19 were cancelled on 20 April 2022 [52–54].

As follows from the previous text, the measures against the spreading of the COVID-19 disease were changeable and highly difficult to predict in the Slovak Republic. Thus, the aim of this study was to determine and analyse the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the wine sector in Slovakia.

2. Materials and Methods

To determine and analyse COVID-19's impact on the wine sector in Slovakia, the data from the given area were observed and achieved from the scientific literature and interview.

First, for further comparison, the pandemic's effect on the world's wineries was analysed. For this, a wide literary research study, mainly from the database sources of Web of Science and Scopus, was conducted. The data were summarized, and the following findings were described.

Second, the selection process comprised choosing a Slovak wine producer that focused on wine production and domestic and foreign sales, as well as wine tourism. When choosing the winery, the fact that it included a hotel and restaurant was also considered since this field was significantly affected during the pandemic, and it provided a part of the winery's sales as well.

After the selection process according to the abovementioned criteria, a survey of data from available sources was conducted together with addressing the wine company's management and conducting an interview with a retail director who also knew the other business aspects. The interview covered topics such as the impact of the pandemic on the market, supply logistics, demand, and the formation of new branches. The information gained was couched and included in this document.

The selected wine company's turnovers and profits from 2015 to 2021 were compared with the courses of turnovers and profits of twenty other Slovak wine companies. The turnovers and profits were obtained from the online databases available, and they were further given in the form of graphs. Each wine company was divided according to the amount of its annual turnover.

The company chosen for this article, called "Company V", was established in 2002, and it was focused on producing and selling wines, distillates, and grape must. It managed a restaurant and hotel in the capital city of the Slovak Republic as well as owning a network of retail locations and an online shop. According to statistics, the company employed 50–99 employees by 2021 [55,56], and the exact number of employees depended on the season of the year and the weather. The company had a cellar equipped with modern technologies intended for wine production and storage, and in 2006, a new separate cellar was established to serve for wine ripening in oak and barrique barrels. Gradually, the company improved the mechanisms of the press and grape must preferment preparation. Wines from Company V were sold around the whole of Slovakia but also abroad, and they were awarded in international exhibitions and competitions worldwide. The company did not have its own vineyards, but it cooperated with winegrowers who regularly supplied raw materials for the production of wine and other products.

The company produced the following:

- Five collections of wine: vinum bozen, prediction, prestige, oak wood, and gold prestige;
- Liqueur wines;
- Noble wine distillates, such as brandy;
- Juices of 100% natural origin and must;
- Frozen 100% grape juice;
- New half-fermented wine;
- Other seasonal products.

The company had a wide range of products, and in relation to the winery, besides wines, it also offered sparkling wines, carbonated and liqueur wines, distillates, liqueurs, brandy, and non-alcoholic drinks, such as grape juice, also canned, and frozen grape juice in the form of ice lollies as well. Moreover, they sold products from other producers, such

as various distillates from around the world, as well as additional assortments including delicacies suitable not only with wine [55].

The company had one central warehouse, which was located in Pezinok, a small city in the west of Slovakia. The distance between the vineyards from which the company buys the grapes and the central warehouse for processing the grapes is given in Table 1.

Table 1. Distance of grape suppliers from the central warehouse.

Vineyard Location	Distance (km)
Grinava	4
Viničné	8
Chorvátsky Grob	10
Šenkvice	11
Hlohovec	59
Búč	130
Mužla	130

Despite the fact that the vineyards in Mužla were the farthest from the central warehouse, they were the largest suppliers because of their wide range of grape varieties. The vineyards of close cooperation together had approximately 120 hectares, but they processed grapes from up to 300 ha of the Malokarpatská and Južnoslovenská vinohradnícka oblasť. If demand fell, they purchased less from the suppliers, and thus, they still did not have to produce the same amount of wine. Therefore, the risk was partially taken by the wine suppliers.

The company had a network of its own and cooperative wine shops and stores. Figure 1 shows the map with wine shops and shops.



Figure 1. Shops, wine shops, and partnership wine shops of Company V in Slovakia [55].

Company V had 16 shops, 10 of its own wine shops, and four partnership wine shops.

Sales were also performed online. They sold wines, distillates, non-alcoholic drinks, gift parcels, and rarities. Their e-shop also offered novelties and bargain offers, which provided the customers with a discount after applying a certain disclosed code. A customer could choose the product through a filter, including options such as colour, type, year,

variety, product line, and residual sugar. When purchasing via the e-shop, the order was delivered in the course of 24–72 h. The minimum online order was six products or goods of a total value of at least EUR 25. The e-shop offered various types of delivery, and the customers could select the one that suited them the most. The goods ordered online were shipped within Slovakia and Czechia. Within Slovakia, delivery above EUR 50 was free, but when the order was less than EUR 50, the transport price was EUR 5, including VAT. Within the Czech Republic, the delivery above EUR 100 was free, but when the order was less than EUR 100, the transport price was EUR 9.90, including VAT. In both cases, the parcels were insured [55].

The company had a loyalty rewards scheme as well. When registering in this scheme for both stores and the e-shop, the customers were rewarded for each purchase with points that could be further applied to a subsequent purchase. The registration at stores was provided directly by a seller in any winery or shop, and the customer received a customer card, or they could be registered via a tablet computer and receive an electronic customer card. The purchase benefits were a 5% discount when registering, 3% credit per each purchase, and access to limited editions or exclusive gifts. After registering in the e-shop, the customers obtained one point for each 1 EUR, and each point had the value of 5 cents. The more points, the greater the discount. The sum of an order could be discounted at any time by the points the customer had [55].

Besides the products, restaurant, and accommodation services, the company also offered wine tourism connected to visits of the cellars, wine degustation, or balloon flights.

3. Results

3.1. Changes in Company V Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic

The number of grapes that were bought from the suppliers in 2020 and 2021 is given in Table 2. The suppliers are ordered according to the distance from the central warehouse. Since the company also bought grapes from many small suppliers from the Malokarpatská vinohradnícka oblasť (the Little Carpathian wine-growing area, in English) and Južnoslovenská vinohradnícka oblasť (the South Slovak wine-growing area), these are given in Tables 1 and 2 as “other areas”.

Table 2. Deliveries of grapes for 2020 and 2021 [55].

Vineyard Location	2020 (kg)	2021 (kg)	Difference between 2020 and 2021 (%)
Grinava	259,220	226,773	−12.52
Viničné	653,010	562,600	−13.85
Chorvátsky Grob	391,830	311,700	−20.45
Šenkvice	139,370	127,930	−8.21
Hlohovec	364,650	368,460	+1.00
Búč	206,850	180,861	−12.56
Mužla	510,713	408,733	−19.98
Other areas	682,006	416,739	−38.89
Total	3,207,649	2,603,533	−18.83

In 2021, the company bought 18% less grapes from the suppliers than in 2020. The largest drop in the supplies of grapes was seen from the small suppliers, as follows from Table 2. Based on the data from Table 2, it can be concluded that there was relatively high safety against the distortion of Company V’s supply chains since the company bought its main production raw material (grapes) from seven large suppliers and many smaller suppliers. Therefore, Company V was not forced to face the supply shortage of grapes, and it did not need to change its supply logistics since it had risk diversification adopted before the pandemic. The wine companies that did not need to change their supply chains significantly were 20% in Slovakia and 30% in the Czech Republic, as mentioned in publication [57]. The advantage of not owning the vineyards lies also in the possibility to

change the amount of grapes bought since after the pandemic, Slovak eating habits have changed as well [58].

The development of profits and turnovers of the company over the last years is shown in Figure 2. The dashed line represents the development of profit (on the left axis), and the continuous line represents the development of turnovers (on the right axis). The red box indicates the year in which the measures related to COVID 19 came into effect. This applies to all figures.

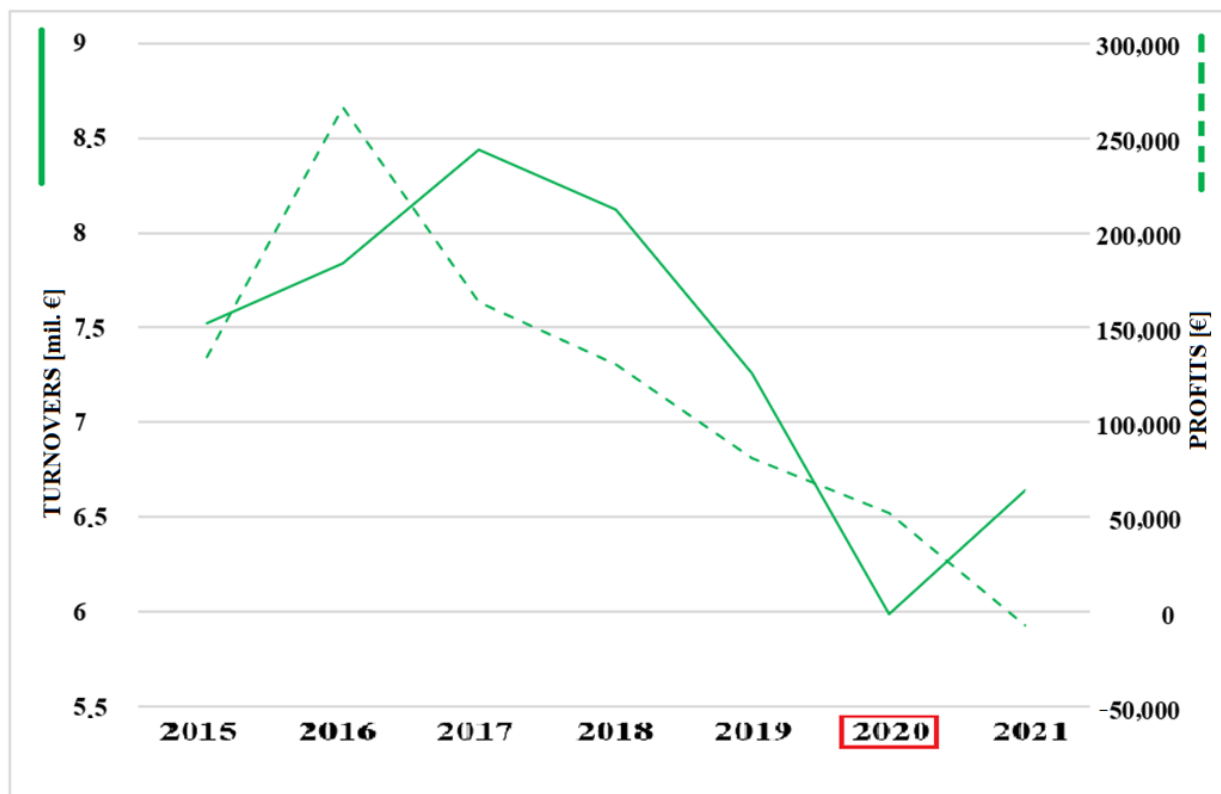


Figure 2. Development of profits and turnovers of Company V from 2015 to 2021 [56].

Company V had a profit of EUR 52,415 in 2020; however, in 2021, it experienced a loss of EUR −6.393 despite the fact that its turnover increased by 11% to EUR 6.637 million, as follows from Figure 2. Nevertheless, the company's profit has been falling from 2016.

3.2. Comparison of the Changes in Company V with Selected Wine Companies

For a comparison, the development of turnovers and profit of the largest Slovak wine producers is given in Figure 3. Like in Figure 2, in this case, the development of turnovers is represented by the continuous line (on the left axis), and the development of profit is represented by the dashed line (on the right axis).

The largest Slovak wine producer was also profitable in 2020 and 2021, although its profit was falling rapidly, as follows from Figure 3. In 2021, the largest wine producer experienced a fall in both profits and turnovers compared with 2020. It can be concluded that there is a strong correlation between the developments of profit and turnovers (Figure 3).

To better map the development of the Slovak wine companies in relation to their finances, Figures 4–7 show the turnovers and profits of selected Slovak wine producers from 2015 to 2021.

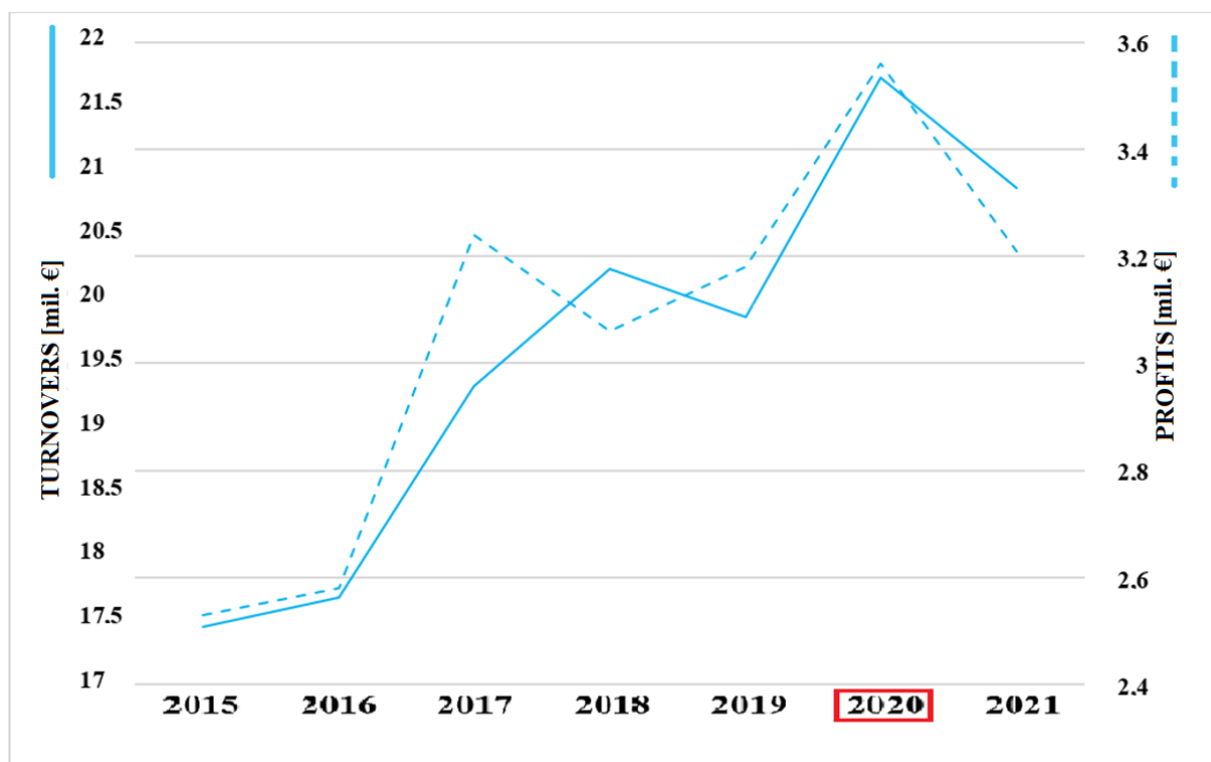


Figure 3. Development of profit and turnovers of the largest wine company in Slovakia [56].

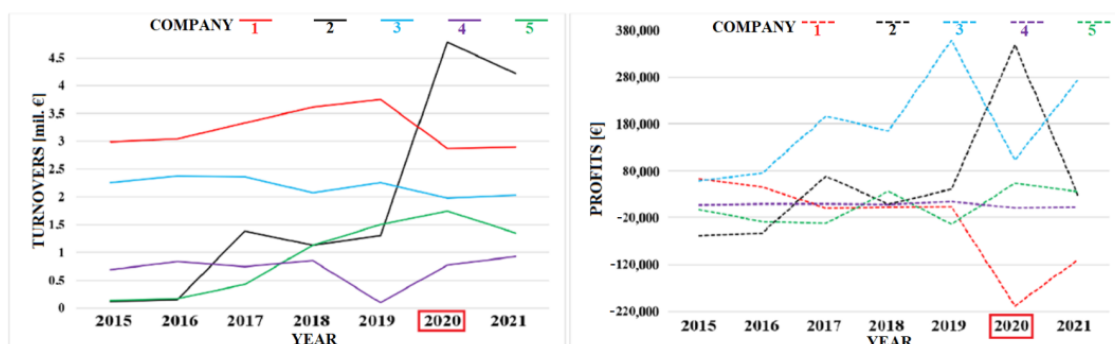


Figure 4. Development of turnovers and profits of wine producers having their profits of EUR 1 to 5 million annually [56].

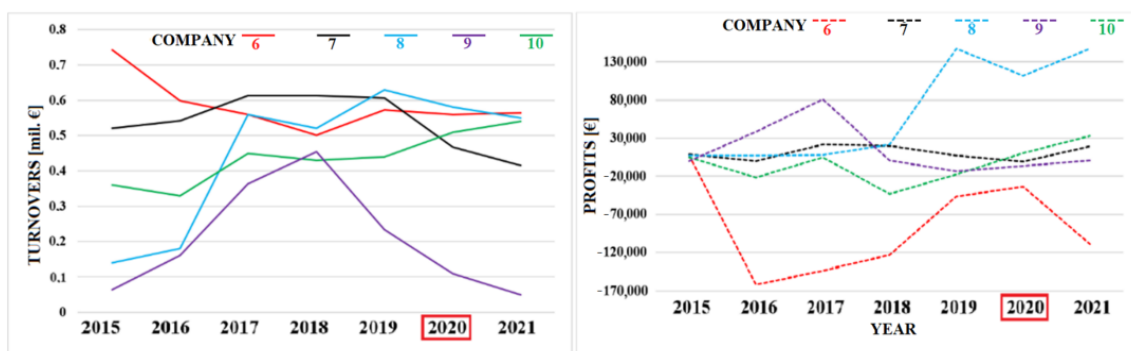


Figure 5. Development of turnovers and profits of the wine companies with turnovers of EUR 0.05 to 0.75 million annually [56].

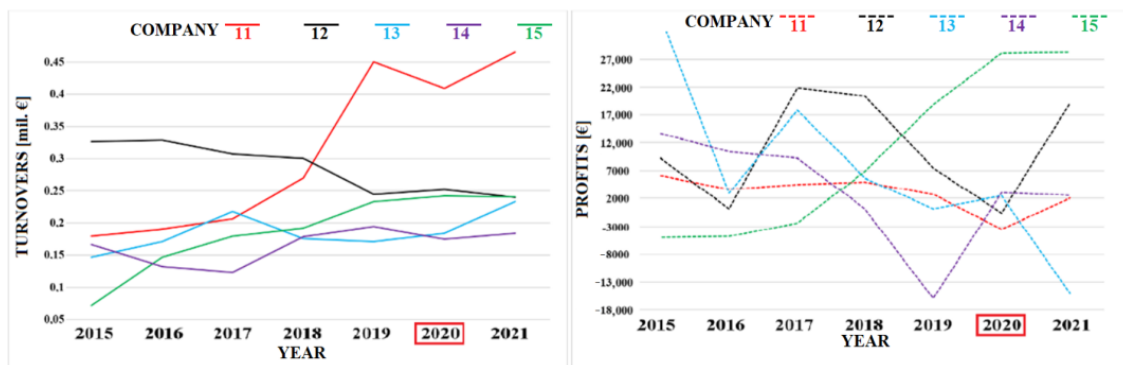


Figure 6. Development of turnovers and profits of the wine companies with turnovers of EUR 0.07 to 0.5 million annually [56].

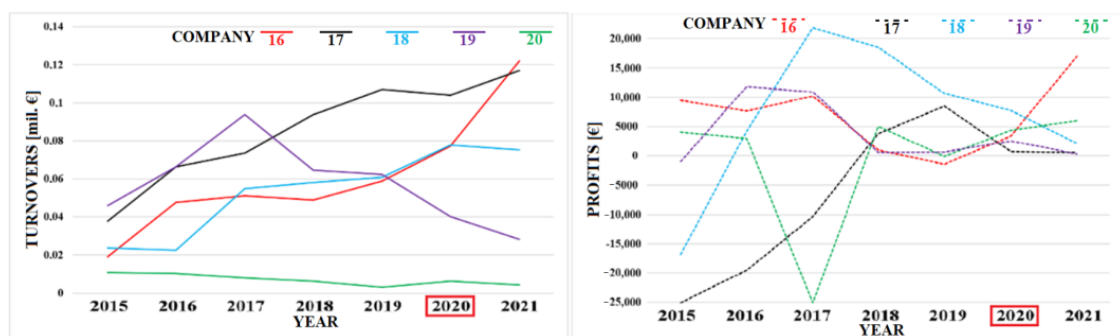


Figure 7. Development of turnovers and profits of the wine companies with turnovers of EUR 0.01 to 0.12 million annually [56].

The development of profits and turnovers of the Slovak wine producers with the average annual turnovers from EUR 1 million to EUR 5 million is shown in Figure 4. The left side of each figure shows the graph with the development of turnovers from 2015 to 2021, and the right side of each figure shows the development of profits for the same period. Each wine producer has the same coloured curve, i.e., if the wine producer has a red curve on the left side, it will have the same colour on the right side as well.

Amongst the wine producers with annual turnovers from EUR 1 million to EUR 5 million, the most considerable changes were experienced by the one with a black curve. It rapidly increased its turnovers between 2019 and 2020; however, between 2020 and 2021, it experienced a rapid drop in profits.

Figure 5 displays the turnovers and profits of the companies with turnovers from EUR 0.05 to 0.75 million.

The wine producer with a red curve was at a loss during almost its whole existence. However, even these wine companies received compensation from the state for loss of profits during the pandemic measures. Thus, some wineries and other businesses, which would have been closed earlier due to their unprofitability, went bankrupt only after the coronavirus crisis, after the government grants [40].

The development of turnovers and profits of the companies with turnovers from EUR 0.07 to 0.5 million is shown in Figure 6.

The turnovers and profits of selected companies with their turnovers from EUR 0.01 million to 0.12 million are given in Figure 7.

For better understanding, Figure 8 shows the average values of turnovers and profits obtained from the data in Figures 4–7. Each colour corresponds to the wine company's development of certain categories that are further divided into the average annual turnovers. The black curves correspond to the companies with their annual turnovers from EUR 1 to 5 million (Figure 4), the red curves correspond to the companies with their annual turnovers from EUR 0.05 million to 0.75 million (Figure 5), and so on.

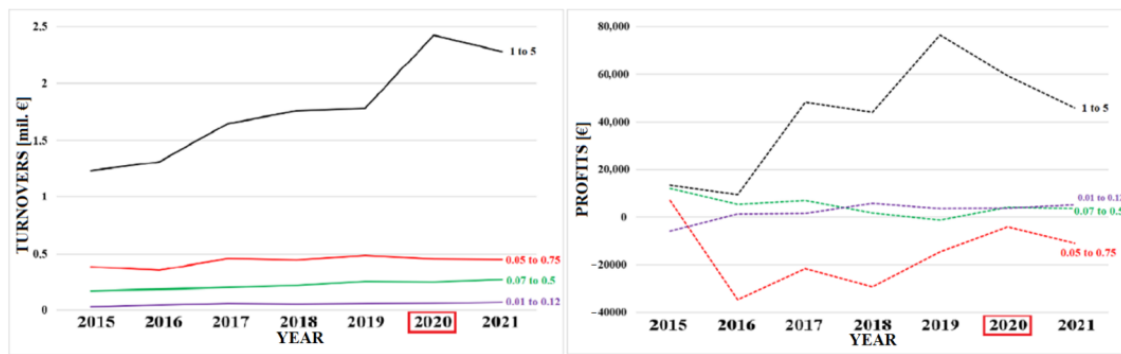


Figure 8. Development of the average turnovers and profits of selected wine companies [56].

The wine producers with annual turnovers of EUR 1 to 5 million have been profitable in recent years, excluding in 2020 and 2021, when it led to a slight decrease in their turnovers (Figure 8, black curve). The development of turnovers of the remaining wine producers with fewer turnovers has not been affected markedly. On average, the wine companies with turnovers from EUR 0.07 million to 0.5 million experienced a slight increase. Since there are no considerable drops seen, it can be assumed that although parties with a higher number of people were forbidden during the pandemic and the restaurants' operation was limited, the wine sector in Slovakia was not affected significantly in terms of the turnovers.

The average profits of the wine companies with turnovers from EUR 1 to 5 million have been falling after the pandemic, as also seen from Figure 8 (black curve). However, the wine producers with average annual turnovers from EUR 0.05 million to 0.75 million have experienced a loss over the whole period monitored, but these results are mainly affected by the only one wine company, as also follows from Figure 5. The size of the wine company was not a key factor affecting the greatness of the COVID-19 pandemic's impact, as also given in publication [12].

Although the turnovers of Slovak wine companies are relatively stable (Figure 8), wine consumption in Europe has had a downward trend in recent years (Figure 9) [58]. The vertical axis displays the percentages, and the wine consumption in 2015 corresponds to the value of 100%. The horizontal axis displays the years. The values were determined for particular months, as given below the horizontal axis.

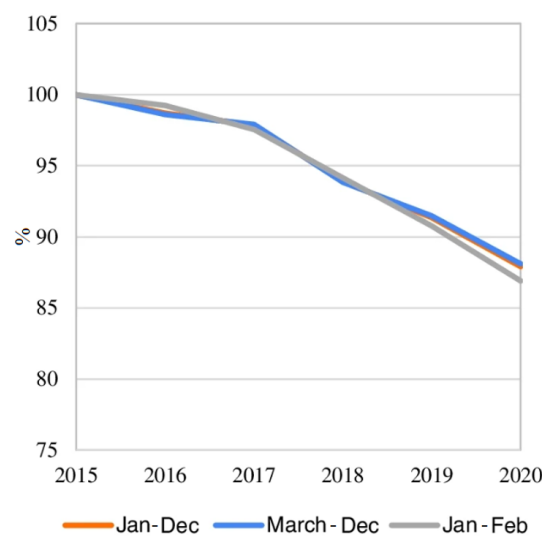


Figure 9. Development of wine consumption in Europe in recent years [59].

Wine consumption in Europe decreased by more than 10% from 2015 to 2020 regardless the wine price. If the total amount of wine consumption decreased, but the consumption of expensive wine increased, the wine sales could have a rising trend, though [60].

For the comparison of the wine market with other segments on the market, Figure 10 displays the development of turnovers and profits of the five largest Slovak companies focusing on the production and sales of alcoholic beverages with the alcoholic strength of more than 40% vol.

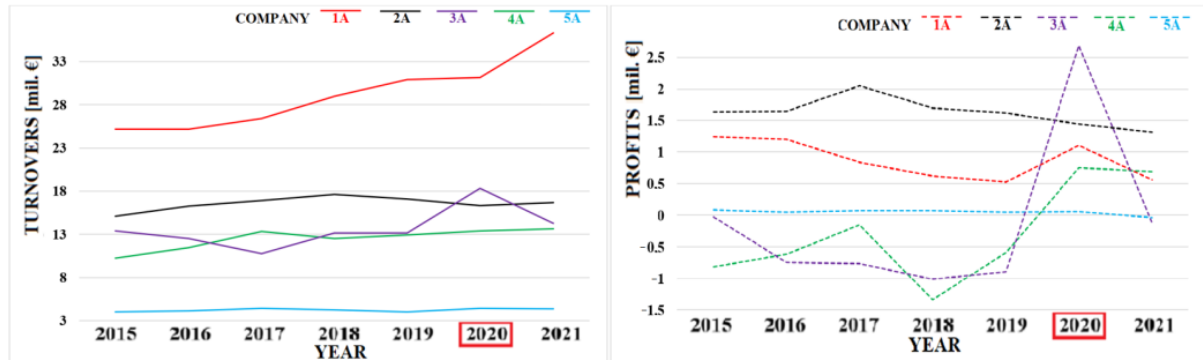


Figure 10. Development of turnovers and profits of the largest Slovak producers of alcoholic beverages [56].

The turnovers of the largest Slovak producer of alcoholic beverages (Figure 10, red solid curve) were rising continuously, during the pandemic as well. Between 2020 and 2021, it led even to a significant increase in turnovers; however, the profits decreased (Figure 10, red dashed curve). Concerning the other producers, it did not lead to a significant change due to the pandemic situation. The profits of the third largest company (Figure 10, purple dashed curve) emerged from losses from minus EUR 1 million to more than EUR 2.5 million. However, in 2021, the company experienced a loss again, albeit very slight. The course of the data in Figure 9 corresponds to the conclusions mentioned in publications [61,62], according to which the amount of alcohol consumed did not change for 53% of Slovak men and 69% of Slovak women during the pandemic.

The development of alcohol consumption, in relation to spirits, in Europe from 2015 to 2020 is shown in Figure 11. Like in the previous case (Figure 9), the development in publication [59] was determined for certain months.

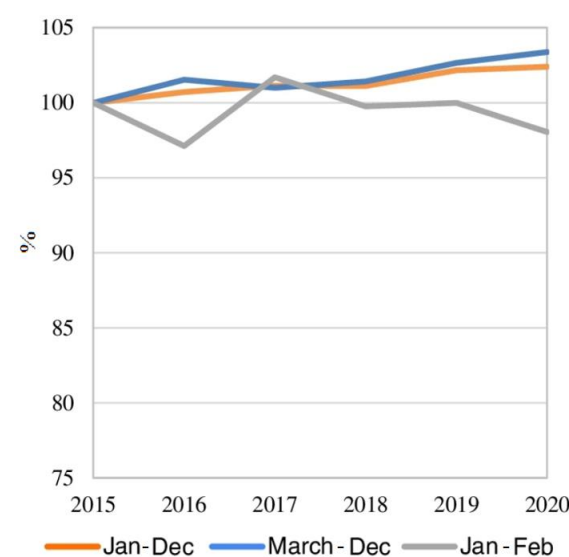


Figure 11. Development of alcohol consumption in Europe in recent years [59].

As opposed to wine consumption (Figure 9), alcohol consumption increased (Figure 11). A decrease can be seen only in the months of January–February.

3.3. Information on Company V and the COVID-19 Pandemic Based on the Interview

The following part includes the information obtained from the interview conducted with an employee of Company V.

3.3.1. Covering the Market in Terms of Geography and Suppliers and the Change Due to COVID-19

As mentioned, Company V exports wines also outside of Slovakia, to Europe, USA, China, and the United Arab Emirates. The company does not have its own stores abroad; however, in Poland, within Krakow, it has started to cooperate with shopping centres in which a kiosk (a small open-fronted shop) is located in the vestibules offering the company's assortment. The kiosks are located in five Polish shopping centres. During the pandemic situation, the export to Poland was also disrupted, and as mentioned in the interview, there were no goods exported.

The export to China was not disrupted, and the company continues to supply grape juice there. The export could have been also affected by a duty imposed on Australian imports, as mentioned in the Introduction as well [14].

3.3.2. Delivery Logistics and the Change Due to COVID-19

Company V does not have only one supplier, but it cooperates with several winegrowers from the Malkokarpatská vinohradnícka oblasť and Južnoslovenská vinohradnícka oblasť. It follows that in the absence of one supplier, for example, because of the weather or lack of workers, the company purchases from other suppliers, and thus, the supply chain is not disrupted. The business had no problem with goods supplies or their availability during the pandemic. Again, as follows from the Introduction, the supply chains should be flexible enough to react to challenges, such as COVID-19. It is also favourable to have the businesses of various suppliers, not only of a single one, in order to avoid the disruption of the whole supply chain if there is an absence of any supplier.

The company's central warehouse in Pezinok serves as a place of distribution to other stores by its own vehicles. To supply the retailers of wholesale purchasers, an external company is used.

Since demand had a falling character during the COVID-19 pandemic, the wine stocks of some winemakers were accumulated, and the warehouses were further overfilled, as also mentioned in publication [18]. Company V solved this situation by purchasing fewer grapes and reducing the wine production. The French market also experienced a similar situation, as mentioned in the previous section [19].

Supplying the company's stores is done on a regular basis, every week. The stores purchase the goods according to the demand in the previous period and further adapted the demand for the following week.

As a worker for the company, the absences of employees during the pandemic as a result of frequent incapacity for work, treatment of a family member, quarantine, and the like did not endanger the business production and operation since the employees were substituted or shifted operatively. However, this is not possible in all cases. As mentioned in publication [63], shifting the employees from one working place to another requires their financial motivation, education, and responsibility for the business operation. In this case, Company V benefited due to its family business status, i.e., the employees are more willing to work beyond their normal working routines [64–67].

3.3.3. Demand and the Change Due to COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected Company V as well. In some sales channels the impact has been higher but not as high as for small winegrowers that depend on the HORECA segment. The network of stores and wineries could be opened like the food retailers during the pandemic restrictions as well. Thanks to that, the company was not affected as much as the wine companies that run or supply their goods only to restaurants, hotels, etc. The advantage of Company V is that it is not dependent entirely on the HORECA

segment since it has its own network of stores and wineries that could be opened during the pandemic.

Despite this fact, the company also experienced a decrease in consumers because of the measures and movement restrictions when people less frequently visited the shopping centres in which the company had its establishments. This was also reflected in the sales revenue of their products, as mentioned in the business economic indicators shown in Figure 2, when the turnovers in 2020 decreased in comparison with 2019 by 27.93%. According to [68], a similar situation occurred in Spanish wine companies since the authors concluded that in average terms, margin and turnover have significantly worsened between 2019 and 2020, while debt maturity has increased.

On the other hand, the abovementioned restrictions and their consequences were reflected in the company's e-shop, and there was a 20% increase in sales. Since it was forbidden to move from one district to another for a certain period of time during the pandemic, the products could be purchased only via the e-shop, if customers wanted to buy something in the company's store. The e-shop prices remained the same during the pandemic, and at the same time, they are the same as in the stores. The increase in online wine sales is also mentioned in publication [69] in which the authors, on the other hand, based on the mathematical model, presuppose that the main way of wine sales still remains as brick and mortar. To encourage online sales, the authors of publication [68] recommend, according to their quantitative survey, including the chat box on the websites. The mere presence of social cues (i.e., a chat box) on a wine seller's online platform positively affects the intention to purchase wine from this online store because social cues elicit perceptions of social presence that translate into trust in the online store and brand trust.

As also shown in Figure 2, the demand in society was slightly decreasing partially due to a fall in customers' incomes since they were concerned about their salaries and focused more on basic foodstuffs and less on wines. According to [70], mainly the older generation has reduced food and drink expenses even by 13% during the pandemic.

Company V has also monitored the differences in sales between the regions. The West Slovak region had 60% from the turnover, and the East Slovak region had 20% from the turnover.

The purchasers of the company are final customers and wholesale warehouses. The goods are also supplied to social events, weddings, and parties but only via retail establishments, and the customer can order the wedding wine without labels, for instance. Wine sales for wedding events during the pandemic situation decreased, especially in the first half of 2020. After that, the sales slightly increased because people continually found their own way for purchasing with or without breaking the pandemic measures [71].

The measures mentioned in this publication had an impact on Company V as well. Its restaurant and hotel had to be closed for a certain period of time. Therefore, the demand in this business activity decreased. A similar situation in hotels and restaurants also occurred in Spain, Italy, and Portugal, where the sector experienced its heyday in 2019. However, a sharp drop happened there in 2020 [72]. The employees of Company V's restaurant and hotel were not dismissed during the pandemic, and this resulted in increasing costs and decreasing turnovers and profits. The aid from the state did not cover the costs enough, and the company had to donate this sphere. By realising the measures gradually, the restaurant and hotel could be opened again under certain conditions, such as a limited number of persons inside, customers wearing face masks, the regular disinfection of tables, rearranged seating for adequate distance, a limited number of guests around the table, and so on. Currently, the hotel is open, and March 2022 has been the first profitable month from the pandemic. The restaurant was renovated during the pandemic, and it was opened again from 1 March 2022. In 2022, the restaurant started to reduce its loss, and it is assumed that in 2023, it will have a sufficient profit. Thus, Company V used the pandemic time to renovate its hotel and restaurant, which were therefore closed for most of the time. In publication [73], it is recommended to train the employees in this sector to avoid food wastage and offer the customers various discounts. Furthermore, in publication [74], the

authors recommend a product innovation, new services, and the prolongation of open hours, but this was not possible in Slovakia since the open hours were limited several times, as mentioned in the Introduction.

Due to various measures, wine tourism for Company V was largely restricted since it was connected with mass events. The wine degustation in the wine cellars, i.e., in enclosed areas, was strictly limited, and greater possibilities were allowed only in the open-air areas. Company V did not pay attention to innovating its wine tourism. In Company V's neighbouring region, Morava in the Czech Republic, a survey focused on customers' satisfaction with wine tourism was conducted. Based on its results, the authors of publication [75] list the main factors of satisfaction in relation to wine tourism. These are the wine quality, information on wines, opportunities for relaxation, friendly welcome by local people, and vineyard excursions. Even 84% of Slovak people considering a visit to a certain destination search the online information on the websites [76]. However, Company V did not introduce any new information about its local region during the pandemic. Although the company can also influence the other abovementioned factors in order to attract more customers, its employee concluded that there was not any special action taken to improve wine tourism, so it was relatively strangled during the pandemic. The reason may be the fact that Company V is oriented to other business activities as well as problems relating to the innovation of wine tourism since it includes cooperation with the public administration. This is perceived by 91.7% of Slovak business representatives as the main obstacle in businesses [77], and such problems are expected more in the pandemic period.

3.3.4. Emergence of New Branches and Their Operation during the Pandemic

The company manages 30 branches over the whole Slovakia. During the pandemic, 10 new stores emerged in these cities: Prešov, Košice, Poprad, Žilina, Trenčín, Malacky, Trnava, Senec, Nitra, and Bratislava.

Despite the stores and wineries being open during the pandemic like groceries, they had to oblige certain conditions to avoid the virus spreading. At the beginning of the pandemic, the purchasing organisation in the stores was changed according to the Decree of the Public Health Authority of the Slovak Republic, laying down measures. These included the following:

- Entering the store being permitted only for customers with face masks (surgical or respirators according to the rules);
- Keeping the minimum distance of 2 m between persons;
- Limited number of customers depending on the size of the store;
- Disinfectants located at the entry;
- Disinfection of objects and spaces.

There were no changes during the third wave of the pandemic compared with the first and second waves since the food services could be still open.

3.4. The Company's e-Shop

To find out how the e-shop works, some products were ordered from Company V. The order was conducted on 4 April 2022 and delivered on 6 April 2022. Based on the condition of a minimum order of six products when purchasing online, the order included two wines, one bottled grape juice, two canned grape juices, and one gift packaging.

A discount voucher was also used, and after applying the code, a sum of EUR 2 was discounted. From several online payment options, a payment by card was chosen. As mentioned, when ordering above EUR 50, the delivery is free. However, the order did not exceed EUR 50; therefore, the price of transport by a courier was EUR 5. The final price of the order included 20% VAT. When registered in the e-shop, one point was obtained for each 1 EUR. In total, 21 points were obtained for ordering with the sum of EUR 21.07. The authors of publication [78], which focuses on wine sales in Hungary, a Slovak neighbour, mention that the majority of online wine sales are covered by the five largest Hungarian wine companies. A factor that increases online wine selling is social media, i.e., by posting

new information. Company V is also active on social media and posts on average four times a month.

There were no problems with ordering and delivering. The products were delivered undamaged, packed in a protective foil, and labelled as fragile. After delivery, the package was wet, but the products remained untouched.

4. Conclusions

The aim of this study was to find out and analyse the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the selected wine company in Slovakia. To achieve this, a situation concerning wine companies and producers abroad was observed and further compared with the situation in relation to the Slovak wine company.

As follows from the analysis of Company V and interviews with its representative, the important factor in managing a company is a diversification of suppliers and product ranges, as well as marketing. The diversification in this company is present even when purchasing the basic raw material, grapes, as seen from Tables 1 and 2. It can also be visible in the products and services, as well as the operation on the market. Thus, the risk diversification was probably one of the important factors when managing the changes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and it contributed to the mitigation of negative impacts of the pandemic on the company's economic activities since there were large differences in the morbidity and absences of the working force due to, for example, treatment of a family member, as well as in measures affecting the HORECA sector between the regions and districts.

As follows from the interviews, the company used the period during the pandemic, when its restaurants and hotels were significantly restricted, to reconstruct them. Such reconstruction would also require an interruption of hotels' and restaurants' operation in another time, so it was possible to obtain financial resources as compensation for the ban of the provision of services given by the state. The company used the time during the pandemic to spread its branches since in that time, there was a somewhat smaller demand for business places resulting in higher offers and lower prices. Company V acted as described in the Introduction of this article, and so it adapted to new conditions.

Based on the findings from other scientific and specific publications that focus on a wine sector and the findings obtained from Company V, it can be suggested to companies to pay attention to risk diversification in terms of supply logistics and market. If there is a shortage in suppliers or customers, it will be possible to reduce the negative impacts operatively.

Concerning Company V, there were some weaknesses identified, predominantly in relation to marketing and wine tourism. Its website does not have up-to-date information, and there is only one post on average in two months. Contact with customers who do not use social media should be encouraged by posting news on the website as well. It is also suggested to include the chat box on the website to give customers advice when visiting the website for the first time. If a reference to social media were placed on the website, its turnout would be higher, and the customer would receive more up-to-date information. In relation to online purchases, it is recommended to bear in mind the packaging and handling with parcels since there are cases when they were wet and crumpled. The positive side of the website is the possibility to receive information via e-mail about events, e.g., available dates for wine degustation. This service has the potential to increase wine degustation attendance, and it can be extended by including information about pandemic measures to inform customers about the safety of events, rules, number of attendants, and the like.

Company V, as mentioned previously, sells wines and grape juice not only in glass bottles but also canned. It produces and sells frozen fruit pulp during the summer. Canned wine and fruit juice with a volume of 250 millilitres is particularly suitable in the pandemic period to avoid spreading the COVID-19 disease as opposed to many people drinking from one glass bottle. This is also recommended not only to wine producers but also to producers

of other beverages. However, innovations in packaging and assortments are positive also outside the pandemic period since it is a kind of advantage over the competitors.

The conclusions and recommendations from this study can be applied to management of wine companies not only in Slovakia but also in other countries worldwide, while taking into consideration the specifications of the country. After certain adaptations, these recommendations may be applied to areas outside wine production.

It has been observed from the analysis and comparison that some Slovak wine companies were in a loss for the whole time, outside the time of state capital injections as a compensation for losses. Such injections did not cover the operational costs for the hotel and restaurant of Company V, and it was forced to donate those funds from other segments of the company. Following from the findings, there is a question of proper state aid allocation during the pandemic. However, the solutions to such extensive and complex issues cannot be covered by this study. A limitation of this study is therefore state aid for wineries.

After the decline in the problems from COVID-19, the problems with inflation and increase in prices of electric energy and natural gas are emerging. Therefore, wine producers are facing new challenges when the problems relating to the pandemic have not disappeared at all. Further research could be to find out and analyse the situation in the wine sector in combination with factors relating to COVID-19 and increased energy costs as well as price increases due to inflation.

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