

COVID-19 and the emergence of quarantine tourism

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Abstract

During 2020, quarantine tourism, a new form of tourism, was born due to the political reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic. Those repatriated to their country of residence (often they were students studying abroad) were compelled to be quarantined (typically two weeks) in a hotel facility then monitored in order to slow the spread of the virus to the country's general population. In this article, the authors explore how this form of tourism came into being and how Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and the two political entities on the island of Cyprus dealt with people coming into the country and the organization of quarantines for those repatriated. The findings, based upon interviews with managers in the hospitality industry and secondary sources, show that governments in some cases took an active role, while local and central government activity varied a great deal in the cases investigated. However, all cases show that there was a strong sense of corporate social responsibility that made managers and owners feel compelled to assist in combatting the COVID-19 when assisting repatriated persons.

Key words: COVID-19, quarantine tourism, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Cyprus, corporate social responsibility

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Introduction

Quarantine tourism/hospitality is a field invention in which populations were repatriated to their countries of residence, but could not be allowed to roam around the country's general population for fear of spreading the infection of a new virus. Such a spread would be a real threat to public health in a globalized world (see, for example, Jamal & Budke, 2020; Hanrahan & Melly, 2019; Sönmez, Wiitala, & Apostolopoulos, 2019). Those repatriated (frequently students studying abroad) returned to their country of residence but were forced to spend some time (typically two weeks) in a hotel facility to be monitored, so reasonable measures could be taken to slow the spread of the virus. These precautions were strongly argued for by medical professionals (Chiew, Li & Lee, 2020) and quarantine hotel stays were also used to relieve pressure on hospitals (as shown by Kirst 2020 in Italy) and host frontline medical staff (Hilton 2020). Here, we look into how quarantine hospitality emerged in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and the two political entities on the island of Cyprus and make observations for Europe in a post vaccine era.

Literature Review

There is a substantial academic literature that deals with how various political, economic, and other shocks influence tourism flows and perceptions of destinations. This research also deals with how certain attributes of destinations (poor human rights, crime, political conflicts, terrorism) make tourists not want to go to those destinations (see, for example Llorca-Vivero, 2008; Neumayer, 2004). There is also a substantial literature that deals with how travel, tourism, and hospitality respond to crisis (see, for example Paraskevas *et al.*, 2013; Som *et al.*, 2014; Mair *et al.*, 2016; Alegre & Sard, 2015). Furthermore, there is a growing literature about biological threats that references medical conditions/diseases, such as Ebola, MERS, and SARS (see, for example; Novelli, Burgess, Jones & Ritchie, 2018; Joo, Maskery, Berro, Rotz, Lee & Brown, 2019) but we could only identify one paper linking the aforementioned crises to the role of the hotel industry as such (Hung, *et al.*, 2018). Finally, research is emerging on the specific COVID-19 crisis itself (Gössling, Scott, & Hall, 2020) whilst quarantine hospitality schemes have been identified in a wide range of places across the world (media reports mentioned cases in Italy, Norway, UK, Turkey, Tunisia, Qatar, India, Philippines, Thailand, South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, China, Australia and New Zealand to name a few).

One of the great lessons from the research on shocks and recovery is that in the worst of situations, management of industries seems to take leadership, displays a willingness to find practical and creative solutions to problems, and works with customers and suppliers to survive crises. The Crimean Crisis of 2013 is a case in point (Ivanov, Idzhylova & Webster, 2016; Ivanov, Sypchenko & Webster, 2017; Webster *et al.*, 2017). The current research contributes to the literature on crises and how managers work not only to sustain their enterprises but also work in ways consistent with a sense of civic responsibility and corporate social responsibility.

Methodology

The background research for this paper combines the collection of primary data through interviews with relevant actors (Republic of Cyprus, Kazakstan and Kyrgystan) and the analysis of secondary data (various media) when primary data could not be collected in the case of Northern Cyprus. Table 1 provides information about the data collection. Face-to-face and telephone interviews took place in Cyprus and Kazakhstan in July and August 2020 while face-to-face interviews in Kyrgyzstan were held in January 2021. Interviews typically lasted between 30 and 90 minutes.

Table 1. Characteristics of Respondents

Country	Respondent number	Type of establishment	Function of interviewee
Kazakhstan	R1	Hotel (3 star)	Manager
	R2	Hotel (unrated)	Manager
	R3	Hotel (unrated)	Owner
	R4	Vocational college	Principal
Kyrgyzstan	R5	State owned hotel (4 star)	Manager
	R6	City hotel (4 star)	Manager
	R7	City hotel (4 star)	Manager
Cyprus	R8	Mountain hotel (3 star)	General Manager
	R9	Seaside hotel (4 star)	General Manager
	R10	Seaside hotel (4 star)	Marketing Manager
	R11	Mountain hotel (3 star)	Owner
	R12	Government Department	Tourism Officer
	R13	Tourism NGO	Chairman
	R14	Professional Association	Chairman

Findings

Table 2 below illustrates the findings of the field research and the secondary data, showing that different political entities had very different experiences with quarantine tourism.

Table 2. Quarantine Tourism, Government, and Industry

	Level of coordination of actions between stakeholders	Role of the Central Government in Response to COVID-19 in Tourism	Role of the Local Governments in Response to COVID-19 in Tourism	Role of the Hoteliers/Hotel Managers in Response to COVID-19 in Tourism	Evidence of Corporate Social Responsibility / Citizen Activism
Kazakhstan	poor coordination	weak	strong	strong	yes
Kyrgyzstan	poor coordination	weak	weak	strong	yes
Northern Cyprus	collaboration between the Ministry of Health and hoteliers	strong	n/a	strong	yes
Republic of Cyprus	excellent collaboration between private and public actors	very strong well-funded	n/a	very strong	very significant

Our research in Kazakhstan was primarily focused on the two cities of Tekeli and Almaty. Several other hotels in the country were also concerned, namely in the capital Nur Sultan but a lack of resources did not allow us to investigate them. In the case of the small town of Tekeli, three hotels were involved in hosting medical staff; local citizens, administration and entrepreneurs were proactive and showed strong civic involvement and initiative as expressed by one of our Kazakh respondent:

Nothing was funded from the budget of the local administration, we relied on the resources of local entrepreneurs. Of course, they were not giving us cash but they were supplying us with products such as bread, milk, meat and so on ...later the local administration decided to support us, allocated a budget, and then started to pay us (R4).

The situation in Almaty was quite different; there, a lack of coordination and support at the local level led to disorderly outcomes (in which some hotels even had to close down). Thus, the absence of a specific action plan from the government and respective local administrations appears to have characterized the Kazakh situation. In Kyrgyzstan, the situation was managed through more coordinated actions between the public and private sectors. Whilst there were individual initiatives taking place in various regions of the country (like in the city of Osh), our research was focused around the capital Bishkek, where out of more than 140 hotels, only three hotels were allowed to operate during the pandemic. These larger luxury hotels hosted returning Kyrgyz citizens from Russia, Turkey and holiday destinations like Egypt and Thailand.

On the island of Cyprus, the situation was quite different. The scheme started in the Republic of Cyprus (hereafter Cyprus) under the authority of the Ministry of Health. After all incoming and outgoing flights ceased on March 21 2020, the government started to repatriate Cypriot citizens and permanent residents by special chartered flights (R12). The arrival of such flights meant that all incoming passengers had to be tested and quarantined by the public authorities. At that time, there was substantial pressure from parents to repatriate their children who were studying abroad. Thus, the Ministry of Health approached the Deputy Ministry for Tourism to seek help to plan and organize a large-scale repatriation scheme, the cost of which was entirely borne by the government. Each citizen interested in being repatriated had to register on a website and with Cypriot diplomatic missions abroad. Flights filled up to their optimal sanitary capacity of about 160 passengers. Since each passenger would then spend 14 nights at a designated hotel for which the government was paying €60 per night including, three meals, the total costs per flight would exceed €90,000 in addition to transfer and security costs (R12). The organization of the scheme was motivated solely to solve a public health issue. The Ministry of Health gave clear guidelines, but each hotel was free to implement the protocols the way they wanted. The scheme was clearly in the hands of the authorities as expressed by Respondent 8:

the presence of the army offered a sort of legitimization to the whole process, showing that there was a superior authority in charge of things (R8).

On the ground, the main idea was that there should be no contact between the hotel staff and the persons under quarantine:

We were working like in hospitals – whatever comes out of the kitchen is not allowed back in the kitchen. We organized a Taylor like production chain to pack the food into disposable containers, everything had to be packed separately. After each group left, we would disinfect the whole hotel (R8). We learned a lot; wearing masks, using gloves, washing hands, personal hygiene, we learned how to cook under such circumstances... it was a very educational (R9).

All surveyed hotels reported no difficulties in motivating their employees to participate in the joint effort (a similar situation was identified in Greece by Stergiou, Farmaki & Efthymiadoy 2020) as expressed by Respondent 9:

The first issue was fear: nobody knew at that time what was happening and the staff was afraid but we knew that they were on board and we found enough candidates to start (R9).

When the scheme finally concluded at the end of May 2020, a total of 37 hotels had participated (R12). Many hoteliers declared having joined for an altruistic reason, motivated by the desire to help their country in need. They considered it their moral duty and social responsibility. Participating in the scheme was not seen as a business transaction despite the difficult times, but rather a civic action as emphasized by our Cypriot respondents:

The government needed us; we had no choice than to help our nation ... we did not do this for business reasons (R8). This scheme allowed our hotel to stress again that we care for our local community, our staff and our customers. For us it is a matter of social responsibility and we come out stronger as a nation and more united (R10). We knew that at best we were going to just breakeven. Our motivation was not at all financial. It is a matter of ethics, civic and social responsibility, the company had to respond positively to the government when the country needed our services. The shareholders (who in some cases were refugees from occupied Cyprus) were all on board...(R9).

Last but not least, the collective experience of quarantine hospitality has allowed the members of the hotel community in Cyprus to get acquainted with some of the tools that will support the industry's competitive edge in a post-COVID-19 era or as Respondent 13 put it “*these hygiene protocols made us wiser*” (R13).

In Northern Cyprus, the phenomenon of “quarantine hospitality” happened somewhat by accident at the onset of the crisis in mid-March when a few infected guests were identified at a large beach hotel which was then subsequently totally sealed off (Rakoczy 2020). The authorities were thrown into the arena by urgent necessity and coordinated actions between public and private sectors followed (including public funds). This timely support was essential for a country where tourism and residential higher education are the sole pillars of a tiny island economy that otherwise depends on financial handouts from mainland Turkey.

Lessons Learned and Suggestions for the Future in the European context

We first reflect on how the process of vaccination is likely to influence quarantine hospitality. Even though the process of vaccination started early at the end of 2020 and with certain countries such as Israel and Bahrain leading the race, there were still many unanswered questions surrounding the process. While it is expected that developed countries may be able to vaccinate a sufficient proportion of their population to achieve herd immunity within 2021, the situation is still unclear when it comes to low-income countries which are also often important tourist destinations (Guarascio, 2020). Regarding international travel, it is expected that a system of “vaccine pass” will be introduced (similar to a tropical vaccination booklet) to facilitate peoples’ movement across the globe. Still, nobody clearly knows for how long the various vaccines will provide immunity to those who will have been inoculated. Other substantial challenges are the new strains of the virus that can suddenly surface like in the case of the UK, Brazil, and South Africa in December 2020. Incidentally, the discovery of these new strains led many countries to immediately suspend flights and impose compulsory quarantine in hotels. This was the

case in Cyprus where two sets of quarantine protocols operated concurrently; one for passengers coming from the UK and requiring isolation in dedicated hotels, and one for other passengers arriving from 'red zones' needing to quarantine themselves at home. This example shows how hotel quarantine schemes can be swiftly re-introduced in a context of heightened risk. In fact, hotel quarantines may be with us for quite some time; while vaccines may help people's body to fight the virus it may not stop vaccinated persons to pass on the virus. If this is the case, one will need to take the same precautions until there is a certain level of herd immunity. Thus, the coronavirus vaccines may not be enough to end hotel quarantine programs which will continue to exist under some form for at least two years if not longer (as it is the case in Thailand where authorities are maintaining quarantine requirements for vaccinated visitors). Besides, if people will need regular doses similar to flu shots, achieving worldwide coverage will be even more difficult. Given the many unknowns surrounding the global vaccination process, it is clear that governments will continue to relying on quarantine hospitality to control crises and fill gaps in the new safety nets that are being implemented.

The experiences with quarantine tourism in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Cyprus illustrate that there was strong evidence that the hotel industry responded to the crisis in very affirmative ways out of a sense of corporate social responsibility and took an active attitude towards the crisis in all cases investigated. This is very much in line with the literature discussed earlier in this paper. While the engagement of the hoteliers was noteworthy and may have at its root a sense of self-preservation, the hoteliers responded quickly and affirmatively to the crisis, creating solutions to the quickly emerging needs of housing and feeding of repatriated people. Industry reacted in other ways, as well, to support society in ways that can be understood as responding to social needs and are consistently the best interpretation of standards of corporate social responsibility, such as Hilton's donation of housing for medical staff (Hilton, 2020). We noted that there are some differences with regards to how governments responded to the crisis and the support for quarantine tourism. On the Island of Cyprus, the central government authorities gladly cooperated with hoteliers to create opportunities for quarantine tourism, supporting the industry with public funds while at the same time assisting in supporting the society's very real need to house and feed repatriated people in ways that would control the spread of the virus.

In terms of lessons for Europe, it appears that the coordination between government and hoteliers seems to be critical to support the needs of repatriated people. This suggests that the experience of the pandemic and the expectation of future pandemics and quarantines means that governments and hoteliers in Europe should work in ways to plan to transport, house, and feed repatriated people in emergency plans in the future. The best way to do this, as has been shown by the Republic of Cyprus, is to create organizational frameworks between governments and private industry, utilizing the financial need of industry to stay afloat as well as supporting the practical need to repatriate, house, and feed what can be thousands of people. As such, a *laissez-faire*/liberal approach to tourism organization may not have the strong and coordinated response that a more statist (whether social-democratic or mercantilist) may have (see, Webster, Ivanov & Illum, 2011). The rejection of *laissez-faire* approaches to solving the needs of quarantine tourism is key, as the creation of mandatory quarantine is a politically imposed solution, the reaction should be equally political and coordinated by the authorities who impose quarantines upon the population, as the best practices investigated in this research indicate.

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