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One year later: shifts and endurances in travel intentions of Bulgarian residents in the time of pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic brought significant changes in all spheres of public life. Economically, as well as in terms of behavioural change, tourism has been one of the most affected sectors and nearly two years after the crisis began, the future is still unclear. This paper focuses on changes in tourist behaviour by tracking the shifts and persisting patterns within a one-year period. The study is based on two surveys conducted online in April 2020 and April 2021 and display the trends for a very specific and understudied context – a European country characterized by general distrust to the severity of the virus as well as towards imposed measures against the disease distribution at both national and international levels. Our findings question the wide-spread assumption that health-related concerns are the primary factor affecting tourist behaviour in the pandemic and identify travel restrictions and income as having major significance. Another important observation is the lack of significant changes within the study period, which examines two different situations: the onset of the pandemic that brought a great shock at all levels and a year later, when both objective circumstances and subjective perceptions were not expected to be the same.

Keywords: travel intentions, tourist behaviour, COVID-19, Bulgaria

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic that unexpectedly befell humankind in the early 2020 was accompanied by unprecedented restrictive measures that literally turned upside down life as we knew it. The shock produced at all levels could be seen even in the 'new language' used to describe political responses to the virus introducing words like 'lockdown', 'social distancing', and 'staycation'. The severity of restrictions imposed, complemented by objective data on the spread of the infection, alarming messages from official bodies, and media coverage of the crisis had a paralyzing effect on social life and global economy.

The travel and tourism industry was among the hardest hit sectors (World Bank Group, 2020), facing such an extensive and devastating crisis for the first time in the modern era (Pappas, 2021). From the very beginning it was impossible to predict neither the crisis duration, nor the amount of damage caused, and it is still very hard to do so. Yet, it was quickly anticipated that the pandemic would bring deep transformations in the previously existing models of tourism consumption, doing business, and management at all levels (Gössling, Scott, and Hall, 2020; Lew, Cheer, Haywood, Brouder, and Salazar, 2020; Sigala, 2020; Ateljevic, 2020).

Specifically, COVID-19 was expected to have far-reaching impacts on travel intentions and tourist behaviour (Zenker & Kock, 2020), with implications within the short to medium term being 'both unknown and potentially catastrophic' (Matiza, 2020). Customer perceptions, intentions to travel, and expected changes in tourists' preferences were seen as leading research topics in the field of tourism because of their fundamental importance to the sector recovery (Gössling *et al*., 2020; Lew *et al*., 2020; Matiza, 2020). The demand-side focus was first ensured by desktop research based on previous crises-related experience (Peters, Peters & Peters, 2020; Zenker & Kock, 2020; Wen, Kozak, Yang and Liu, 2020; Matiza, 2020), followed by what Rogerson & Rogerson (2021) called 'an avalanche' of empirical studies undertaken in different countries to understand COVID-19 induced travel intentions and preferences. Some authors considered that the tourism industry recovery would all depend on the mindset of tourists (Wachyuni & Kusumaningrum, 2020) while many others highlighted a variety of factors influencing risk perceptions and travel decision making: psychographic and demographic characteristics, cultural background, knowledge, past travel experience, fear of contraction, media coverage, and public opinions (Neuburger & Egger, 2020; Bae & Chang, 2020; Das & Tiwari, 2020; Perić, Dramićanin, and Conić, 2021; Peluso & Pichierri, 2021; Li & Ito, 2021; Golets, Farias, Pilati, and Costa, 2021; Bhati, Mohammadi, Agarwal, Kamble & Donough-Tan, 2021). Relatively less attention has been paid on the economic and political factors determining customer decisions and preferences, with some empirical studies outlining income, severity of measures against the spread of infection, trust in the health system or distrust in the risk of contamination as significant predictors of the willingness to travel (Boto-Garcia & Leoni, 2021; Perić *et al*., 2021; Terziyska & Dogramadjieva, 2021; Godovykh, Pizam and Bahja, 2021). Few studies have focused explicitly on the combination of economic and psychological factors determining travel intentions in the time of pandemic (Jin, Bao & Tang, 2021; Pappas, 2021).

Since it was initially assumed that the pandemic would not last long, most publications referred to travel intentions and preferences following the relaxation of travel bans and restrictions *after* the pandemic. More recently, customer perceptions, attitudes, and intentions have been examined in the context of the "new reality" seen as existing *parallel* to the pandemic rather than as a post-pandemic phenomenon (Pappas, 2021; Sánchez-Cañizares, Cabeza-Ramírez, Muñoz-Fernández & Fuentes-García, 2021). A recent study by Talwar, Srivastava, Sakashita, Islam, & Dhir (2022) examines travel intentions *during* and *after* the pandemic in relation to personality traits, trying to assess if the fear has only short-term effects or is likely to resonate long into the future.

While few studies specifically tackle the dynamic nature of risk perceptions and travel intentions during the Covid-19 crisis (Neuburger & Egger, 2020; Li & Ito, 2021) and / or customers' cultural background (Li & Ito, 2021; Golets *et al*., 2021; Williams, Chen, Li, & Balaz, 2022), almost all authors call for longitudinal studies to capture possible changes at different stages of the pandemic, as well as for conducting research in different geographical and cultural contexts. Such studies are needed to create a sound empirical basis for wider-scope and longer-term analyses that would not only contribute to the body of knowledge but also meet the industry and policy making needs in the still lasting uncertainty. Yet, nearly two years after the start of the corona-crisis, longitudinal academic studies are scarce, while present empirical research refers mainly to Australia, China, South Korea, UK and USA (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021), i.e. concentrates on the largest and strongest hit by the pandemic countries.

This paper deals with customer perceptions and travel intentions of Bulgarian residents, thus focusing on a country that is relatively unknown to the international audience but represents an interesting case to study because of the specific way in which the COVID-19 situation developed there as well as due to its specific cultural, political, and economic context which is presented in a separate section. The study reveals how travel and behavioural intentions of Bulgarian residents changed during the pandemic for a one-year period from April 2020 to April 2021. Consequences of the COVID-19 crisis as perceived by the respondents are compared within the study period and observed shifts and endurances in travel priorities, decision-taking factors, and expected changes in behavioural patterns are analysed. The authors believe that the study results will contribute to both widening the knowledge base (by shedding light on not-so-typical customer reactions at a country-specific market) and solving the broader research question if an essential change in tourist consumption will result from the current pandemic in a longer run, or just short-term shifts will be temporarily observed that will melt away after lifting restrictions and overcoming the crisis in its health and economic aspects.

2. Literature review

2.1. Confirmed expectations and unexpected results from empirical studies

As mentioned above, early publications regarding travel intentions related to COVID-19 (Peters *et al*., 2020; Zenker & Kock, 2020; Wen *et al*., 2020; Matiza, 2020) analysed results of previous studies on consumer response to various crises (health, economic, natural disasters) and made predictions based on past observations. Key initial expectations could be summarised in several aspects: 1) high risk perceptions and limited desire to travel in the short term; 2) preferences for domestic tourism and short distance travel; 3) avoiding congested destinations; 4) preferences to travel alone or in small groups; 5) avoidance of public transport; 6) growing interest in outdoor activities, nature-based and health tourism; 7) critical importance of hygiene and health safety.

Empirical studies conducted in different parts of the world during the corona-crisis brought either expected and unexpected findings of potentially high interest for the business, academics, and tourism policy makers. For example, a survey among Chinese population completed in February 2020 (Li, Yang, Dou, Wang, Zhang, and Lin, 2020) showed that the public's emotional and behavioural reactions were slightly affected by the outbreak of COVID-19, though people actively engaged in protective behaviour. Another survey in China performed in the early stage of the pandemic (Li, Nguyen, and Coca-Stefaniak, 2020) outlined tourists almost equally divided between crisis-resistant and crisis-sensitive ones, with a slight prevalence of crisis-resistant respondents. A two-stage study conducted in DACH Region in March 2020 (Neuburger & Egger, 2020) revealed a sharp change in travel intentions in a very short period of time after the state of emergency had been declared, which was explained not only by the deteriorating health situation and the travel restrictions imposed, but also with the media coverage of the crisis. On the other hand, evidence from Spain (Boto-Garcia & Leoni, 2021) indicated that both

inhabiting a zone with a worse epidemiological situation and having personally suffered COVID-19 symptoms increased the willingness to travel, thus suggesting that positive emotions produced by tourism could outweigh the risks associated with travel. Similar conclusions were drawn in regard to the Dutch market, with survey results pointing that the pandemic does not only work as a barrier to travel intentions but can serve as a motivator for travelling, once the restrictions are lifted (Isaac & Keijzer, 2020). A larger scale study of 36,000 respondents from Europe's top ten tourism source markets revealed a resilient sentiment toward travel among European consumers, with over half of the respondents planning to travel in the near future (Ketter, 2021). The above observations were confirmed in a systematic literature review focussed on psychological consequences of COVID-19 in the tourism sector (Rokny, 2021), where despite the significant influence of fear and anxiety caused by the pandemic, social and mental benefits of tourism have been highlighted as strong motivators to take the risk of traveling even during the global disease outbreak.

In a similar vein, a comparative study of surveys conducted during the first wave of the pandemic in twelve European and Asian countries (Dogramadjieva, 2021) has shown that despite the considerable risk perceptions and travel anxiety, the desire to travel generally prevailed, with a clear preference for short-distance travel as well as increased attention to hygiene and health safety accompanied by the implementation of various personal strategies to reduce the risk of infection (Bae & Chang, 2020; Das & Tiwari, 2020; Naumov, Varadzhakova & Naydenov, 2020). In most countries the leading factors in travel decision-making were the perceived health and psychological risks. However, specific results exposed that - in the case of Bulgaria - travel decisions during the first wave of the pandemic were mainly influenced by administrative constraints with an expected increasing role of economic factors in the future while the fear of infection had a much lower effect (Terziyska & Dogramadjieva, 2021). Consequently, Bulgarians intended to change their usual tourist behaviour only to a slight extent (Dogramadjieva & Terziyska, 2020). Another aspect is that almost all studies confirmed the expected preferences to domestic tourism vs. traveling abroad in the time of pandemic. Yet, Perić *et al.* (2021) disclosed that - in the case of Serbia - an increase in health risk assessment increased the chance of traveling abroad, meaning that Serbians perceived the health risk as being lower abroad than in their home country. Thus, the 'home-is-safer-than-abroad' bias outlined by Das & Tiwari (2020) has also been challenged in a specific country context.

All in all, various studies have shown that COVID-19 has had a much more devastating effect on travel intentions and tourism industry than previous crises of various types, as it affected not only particular regions, but all markets and destinations at a global scale. Such an effect is seen as a consequence of the combination of health concerns, projected economic loss, and mandatory travel restrictions (Jin *et al.*, 2021). The following sections reveal how these major groups of factors are tackled in academic literature.

2.2. Factors affecting travel decision

2.2.1. COVID-19 risk perceptions and travel intentions

Types of risk and risk perceptions associated with travel intentions and tourism have been a subject of increasing interest over the last thirty years because travellers' risk perceptions have a strong impact on patterns of tourism demand (Seabra *et al.*, 2013). Before the COVID-19 pandemic terrorism, political instability, health, crime, cultural and language difficulties as well as natural disasters were considered risks of major importance for tourism (Reisinger & Mavondo, 2006). Other risk dimensions put under study, particularly with the reference to leisure tourism, included financial, psychological, satisfaction, and time risks (Roehl & Fesenmaier, 1992; Sönmez, 1998).

Risk perceptions are specific to each situation (Dowling, 1986 cited in Seabra *et al*., 2013) and the current pandemic that is unprecedented in terms of magnitude and outreach enforces various kinds of risk perceptions, with three types - health, psychological and social risk perceptions – being regarded most relevant to the likelihood of tourists to travel (Matiza, 2020). Among them, health risk perceptions are considered critical to travel decision-making, which is illustrated by the rapidly increased academic interest in the topic that had not received much attention in previous tourism research (Novelli *et al*., 2018; Godovykh *et al*., 2021). In the present situation, travel intentions and expected changes in tourist behaviour are mostly seen as outcomes of (health) risk perceptions that determine not only the decision where, how, and when to travel, but above all, whether to travel at all (Neuburger & Egger, 2020; Perić *et al*., 2021). In this regard, Rogerson & Rogerson (2021) claim that travel intentions and tourist preferences are currently dictated by pandemic-related health concerns – a conclusion which is based on a literature review of academic surveys completed in over twenty countries on six continents.

Yet, risk perceptions are interpretations of the world (Cori, Bianchi, Cadum and Anthonj, 2020), so they are different from actual risks and influence people's decisions irrespective of the magnitude of real risks (Reisinger & Mavondo, 2006; Seabra *et al*, 2013; Godovykh *et al*., 2021). In case of highly perceived risks customers behave carefully even if real risks are minimal, while unperceived risks do not affect behaviour even if real risks are significant (Godovykh *et al*., 2021). In addition, there are different reactions to the COVID-19 threat, some of them comprising ignoration of recommendations or imposed safety measures, regardless of the benefits they might bring (Kirk & Rifkin, 2020). Such a rejective behaviour is likely to occur when safety measures employ fear inducing messages, commonly used in public health campaigns (Kirk & Rifkin, 2020). Boto-Garcia & Leoni (2021) note that people might become information-averse in regard to the flood of news about the pandemic in order to limit its negative emotional impact. Such kind of behaviour can also be associated with maladaptive perceptions implying rejection of the threat as a personal strategy to reduce fear by not even attempting to avoid risky situations and/or behaviours (Wang *et al*., 2019). Still, these perspectives on risk perceptions and consequent customer behaviour are commonly overlooked in tourism research and are vaguely covered in COVID-19 related studies of travel intentions and preferences.

It is well-known that risk perceptions in general and health risk perceptions in particular are highly subjective and depend on various factors, such as demographics, personality traits, cultural background, travel experience, level of knowledge and media coverage, trust in institutions, etc. (Seabra *et al*., 2013; Cori *et al*., 2020; Dryhurst *et al*., 2020; Godovykh *et al*., 2021). Major predictors of tourists' risk perceptions are categorised by Godovykh *et al*. (2021) in four groups - cognitive, affective, contextual, and individual - with tourism providers and various institutions having no real influence on individual characteristics that determine tourists' subjective evaluations of risk. This is confirmed by the study of Talwar *et al*. (2022) indicating that although the pandemic has generally made people more cautious and even wary of travelling, the level of caution varies within individual personality traits.

Based on different sensitivity to external risks, the existence of crisis-resistant tourists has been proved and it is these tourists that acquire exceptional significance in times of crises (Hajibaba *et al*., 2015). In the COVID-19 context, findings from different studies are not unanimous regarding the profile of crisis-resistant tourists. According to Li *et al*. (2020) these are likely to be older, with a higher level of education, and less likely to be living with dependants. On the other hand, Neuburger & Egger (2020) found that in the unfolding corona-crisis travel risk perception increased with age but decreased with previous travel frequency. The work of Peluso & Pichierri (2021) revealed that older individuals and those in a poorer health status had a decreased sense of control which in turn decreased their travel intention. Yet, Golets *et al*. (2021) did not find a significant relationship between age and travel

intentions during the pandemic. Numerous studies have outlined females as perceiving higher travel risks than men (Bae & Chang, 2020; Boto-Garcia & Leoni, 2021; Das & Tiwari, 2020; Neuburger & Egger, 2020; Pappas, 2021; Williams *et al*., 2022). Furthermore, higher levels of risk perception are usually associated with lower levels of trust in those managing the risk (Cori *et al*., 2020). However, the cross-country study results of Dryhurst *et al*. (2020) suggest that in many countries COVID-19 risk perceptions are not strongly related to how much people trust their government and politicians. Finally, cultural influence on COVID-19 risk perceptions and travel intentions seems obvious in some studies (Li & Ito, 2021), while in others (Golets *et al*., 2021) it is suggested that unexpected results for certain countries (e.g. Brazil) might be due to cultural differences compared to western, educated, industrialized, wealthy, and democratic (WEIRD) societies (after Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010), where most of the claims about customer behaviour come from. On the other hand, Williams *et al*. (2022) note that not only cultural differences (regarding both general travel habits and dealing with risk, uncertainty and ambiguity), but also different stages of the pandemic and different travel restriction policies are likely to contribute to the differences in travel intention found among countries.

Since COVID-19 risk perceptions and related travel intentions are dynamic in nature, they are not likely to remain the same as the crisis unfolds. The negative effect of perceived risk on travel intentions can accelerate in a very short period of time (Neuburger & Egger, 2020) but it also might be temporarily manifested and end quickly after lockdown restrictions are lifted (Li & Ito, 2021). In addition, the expected duration of the outbreak is found to be in a reverse relation to travel intentions, i.e. the longer the pandemic is expected to last, the stronger risk perceptions and the weaker travel intentions tend to be (Li *et al*, 2020; Golets *et al*., 2021).

2.2.2. Economic impacts of COVID-19 and travel intentions

One of the main factors influencing the intention to travel, not only in times of crisis, is the disposable income and expectations for the overall economic development (Djeri, Armenski, Jovanovic, & Dragin, 2014). Especially during recessions, customers' financial standing becomes critical for tourism consumption, since traveling gives way to other more essential needs (Morley, 1992; Crouch *et al*., 2007). Recent studies confirm this relation is also valid in the current situation: individuals with higher income show stronger travel intention and are more likely to travel in the post-pandemic period (Golets *et al*., 2021; Jin *et al*., 2021; Ivanova, Ivanov and Ivanov, 2020) or even during the pandemic (Perić *et al*., 2021). Although the number of studies dealing with economic factors (and the level of personal income in particular) is rather limited, most results show that income is a strong predictor of traveling, especially abroad (Perić *et al*., 2021; Williams *et al*., 2022). Furthermore, significant differences regarding respondents' cost concerns and perceived control are found based on income (Jin *et al*., 2021): the higher the income, the lower concerns over costs and the higher perceived control. Consequently, respondents with higher income and optimistic expectations about national economy and their personal wealth form a market segment that is likely to be a sound basis for the rebound in tourism post-COVID-19 (Jin *et al*., 2021).

The above results are quite logical, as COVID-19 does not only create health concerns among potential travellers, but also makes people uncertain about their income and solvency, i.e. if they will be able to travel due to economic reasons (Pappas, 2021). In fact, economic devastation caused by the pandemic could have greater and longer-lasting impact on travel intentions than health risk perceptions, since health-related concerns can subside relatively quickly (Li & Ito, 2021) while recovery from the economic crisis is likely to take more time. Additionally, the volume of tourism demand - either for domestic or international travel - in those countries that are in a worse economic situation is closer related to the performance of national economy (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021; Pappas, 2021) because disposable income

of customers there is highly vulnerable. It is also important that economic perceptions and expectations and the related travel intentions depend on the time of data collection (Jin *et al.*, 2021), so they can rapidly shift under changed circumstances.

2.2.3. COVID-19 related restrictions and travel intentions

It has happened in the past that health crises provoked political responses in the form of severe travel restrictions that were detrimental to the tourism industry, though being later assessed as 'over-reactions' to the real public health threat (McKercher & Chon, 2004). For example, disproportionate global response to the SARS outbreak in 2003 was grounded in the unknown origin, transmission, and treatment of the disease, and the resulting panic, which spread faster than the disease itself (McKercher & Chon, 2004).

Currently, it is still not known how the unprecedented COVID-19 induced lockdowns and other travel restrictions, in many cases regarding not only international visitors but also domestic tourists, will be assessed in the future. Yet, it is clear they have strongly affected travel intentions, although as indicated above, much more attention in academic studies has been paid on other decision-making factors. A limited number of publications deals with perceptions about freshly enforced administrative barriers to tourism and their impact on customers' travel intentions and preferences. However, some studies revealed that official bans dominated among all other reasons for not taking a trip in 2020 (Terziyska & Dogramadjieva, 2021) while those respondents who had suffered mobility restrictions for a longer period were more likely to travel in the summer of 2020 (Boto-Garcia & Leoni, 2021). In a similar vein, Zhang, Lingyi, Peixue, Lu, & Zhang (2021) found that consumers' interest in tourism increased during the pandemic and assumed that travel attitudes could be positively affected by compensatory consumption when travel is restricted by infectious diseases. On the other hand, based on a survey of travel intentions, Kourgiantakis, Apostolakis & Dimou (2020) came to the conclusion that due to the imposed strict restrictions on international mobility and flights, domestic tourism was likely to be the only alternative, at least in a short term.

Some studies from 2021 deal with recent attempts to control the pandemic by vaccination and introduction of the COVID-19 health passport and how these measures are linked to the willingness to travel (Ram, Collins-Kreiner, Gozansky, Moscona, Okon-Singer, 2021; Cabeza-Ramírez & Sánchez-Cañizares, 2021; Williams, Nguyen, Del Chiappa, Fedeli, & Wassler, 2021). Considering that the above measures are intended to reduce quarantines at destinations and lift travel restrictions on people who are deemed protected from the disease, as well as the assumptions they will be perceived as a relaxation of travel barriers and positively related to travel intentions, survey results from Israel and Spain are quite surprising. For example, findings of Ram *et al.* (2021) reveal that vaccination is not the main factor to resume both domestic and international travel; the mere desire to start travelling again is. In a similar vein, Cabeza-Ramírez & Sánchez-Cañizares (2021) expose that accepting the EU health passport and demonstrating confidence in preventive measures that restrict international arrivals is negatively related to respondents' travel intentions while a positive attitude towards travel has a negative effect on the acceptance of restrictions. Meanwhile, study results from Italy (Williams *et al.*, 2021) suggest that respondents' COVID-19 vaccine confidence level does not significantly affect their intentions to travel abroad; yet the high confidence group is much more willing to resume domestic travel, possibly being more prone to business trips and seeing vaccination as a tool to overcome existing travel barriers.

3. The context: COVID-19 and Bulgaria

3.1. Outbreak and subsequent stages of the pandemic

Bulgaria is an interesting case in terms of the course and management of the COVID-19 pandemic for two main reasons - at the very beginning it was among the least affected countries in Europe, but later found itself at the bottom as in terms of crisis management and mortality rates. It is also important to note that for the whole period Bulgaria has implemented some of the most liberal anti-pandemic measures in Europe.

The first reported case of COVID-19 in Bulgaria was on March 8, and a few days later - on March 13, a state of emergency was declared, and a lockdown was imposed, including a travel ban - people were allowed to leave their place of residence only for a serious reason. During this period the disease was kept under control and the first wave did not de facto take place - unlike other European countries the number of daily cases was less than 30, or 0,4 per 100,000 population (Worldometer, 2021). Severe restrictions were lifted on 13 May 2020, but the COVID-19 situation remained relatively calm for the next several months, with daily cases varying between 100 and 300 until the end of September 2020. Unfortunately, this changed during the October-December 2020 and February-April 2021 waves, when daily cases jumped to 5,000 / 72 per 100,000 population (Worldometer, 2021). The most alarming change was in the COVID-19 death rate –since November 2020 Bulgaria has been at the top of COVID-19 mortality rates in the world (Statista, n.d.a). Nevertheless, according to a European-wide study on the perceived effect of COVID-19 published in September 2021, Bulgaria ranked close to the average, with 41% reporting they were impacted by the illness (Leonard, 2021).

3.2. Attitudes towards COVID-19 and the vaccination

Apart from the factual situation, when consumer intentions and behaviour are at hand, it is important to consider the attitudes towards the pandemics and vaccination. There are several studies, that point to a high share of Bulgarians not being too concerned by the decease or even not believing real danger even exists. Right at the onset of the pandemic, a few days before declaring the state of emergency, nearly one-third of Bulgarians were not worried at all by the spread of the virus, and only 18% intended to restrict their travel (Bulgarian National Television, 2020). Right after the lifting of the relatively strict restrictions, in June 2020, 66% of respondents in a nationwide representative survey reported that they had returned to their usual way of living, with 23% believing the coronavirus did not actually exist and was a fraud (Trend, 2020). Several months later, during the second wave in October-December 2020, more than one-third of Bulgarians were not afraid of getting infected and 31% thought the threat from COVID-19 was overrated (*Public attitudes on issues related to COVID-19*, 2020). Public attitudes towards vaccination are also predominantly negative, and as a consequence, by the autumn of 2021 Bulgaria ranged last in the European Union with only 49,99 doses per 100,000 population (Statista, n.d.b).

One of the explanations for this low level of vaccination and the relatively high level of skepticism towards the threat of the virus is the low trust in state institutions – a survey from June 2020 reports a share of 61% of Bulgarian residents do not trust the Parliament, and 55% do not trust the government (Market Links, 2020). In a more general context, according to Paunov (2020) the level of social trust in Bulgaria is the lowest in Europe and one of the lowest in the world. Most probably, this has affected not only attitudes towards COVID-19 and the vaccination but also consumer behaviour and travel intentions, as seen outside the scope of the restrictions imposed.

3.3. Economic impact of the pandemic

As a country of the so-called Eastern European Bloc, Bulgaria went through a difficult and controversial transition period in the years after 1989. Despite being a member of the EU since 2007, economically

the country is usually at the bottom of the rankings - with the lowest GDP, the lowest Gross National Income per capita (The World Bank, n.d. (a)) and the highest multidimensional poverty headcount ratio (The World Bank, n.d. (b)).

The economic consequences of the lockdown posed further challenges. A lot of businesses were closed and more than 170,000 people lost their jobs from March to June 2020 (National Employment Agency, 2020). In the end of March 2020, the focus of public attention in Bulgaria had already been shifted from preventive health measures to limit the spread of infection, to the economic consequences of the pandemic. Almost 90% of the respondents in a nation-wide survey agreed with the statement that a financial and economic crisis was imminent, and more than half of the employed survey participants were afraid of losing their jobs, which indicated significant change in the consumer behavior of Bulgarians (Market Links, 2020).

Yet, the scale of the economic crisis in the initial stage of the pandemic was lower than anticipated (Nikolov, 2020) and the situation improved in the following months. By April 2021 unemployment rates fell by 2.8 percentage points on a yearly basis (National Employment Agency, 2021). Moreover, from September 2020 the salaries in the public sector were increased by up to 30% by a governmental decision that was heavily criticized for being a political move aimed at 'buying' more electoral support though disguised as an anti-crisis measure (Petrova, 2020). Thus, the average gross monthly salary in the country considerably grew and at the end of March 2021 it was 14% above the level of the previous year, with a more pronounced increase in the public than in the private sector (Ignatova, 2021).

Considering the above developments, it is not so surprising that the National Statistical Institute data did not reveal reduced consumption of Bulgarian citizens in 2020 (National Statistical Institute, 2021). This was confirmed in a study conducted by Market Links in May 2021 and was explained not only by the relatively good solvency in the country during the first year of the pandemic, but also by the increased desire to consume in order to compensate the COVID-19 induced stress (Bulgarian National Radio, May 2021).

Regarding the overall economic situation in Bulgaria, despite the decline of 4.2% in 2020, in 2021 there was a certain recovery, expressed in "robust growth in export, consumption, and investment" (The World Bank, 2021). This recovery is expected to continue, but the main obstacles would be possible political instability, import inflation, and low level of vaccination (The World Bank, 2021). All these became more pronounced in the autumn of 2021 and might lead to shifts in perceived economic impact and consequently – to a change in consumer behaviour and travel intentions.

4. Study methods

4.1. Aim of the study and overview of the surveys under comparison

The current study aims to find out if there is a change in travel intentions of Bulgarians one year after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. To this end, the results from two surveys are compared - the first one, conducted in the period 9-16 April 2020, at the very beginning of the crisis, and the second - a year later, when the pandemic underwent some development (9 April – 5 May 2021). Both surveys explored COVID-19 induced changes regarding domestic and outbound trips as well as leisure and business trips of Bulgarian residents. Overall, they both strived to uncover respondents' perceptions, actual behaviour and future travel intentions with regard to three major research questions: 1) to what extent people had already been affected by the corona crisis at the time of study and how strong effects on their work and income they expected in the future; 2) how did the pandemic affect their travel intentions by period,

purpose, and destination of travel; 3) in which aspects and to what extent would the COVID-19 crisis change their usual behaviour on future trips.

The two surveys were not fully identical in content as issues of interest changed over time. The first survey was longer (25 questions), with part of the questions focussing specifically on the main reasons for travel cancellations / postponements at the time of study (2020) and changes regarding the reservation period and the use of intermediaries in the future. The second survey dealt in more detail with travel preferences during the pandemic (2021), especially in terms of destination choice, preferred accommodation, mode of travel, and time of travel. Yet, there were questions allowing direct comparison between the two years. These questions were united in three thematic groups: (1) respondents' assessment of the crisis impact on their income and the expected impact in the future; (2) intended priority trips and factors affecting travel decision, and (3) anticipated changes in different aspects of usual travel behaviour related to the pandemic.

Both surveys comprised a section of eights questions to reveal respondents' profile. Along with age and gender, respondents were asked about their place of residence, field of professional activity, employment status (employed, self-employed and unemployed), and self-assessed living standard (high, medium, or low). These questions were considered relevant not only because various risk perceptions as well as travel intentions are influenced by various demographic and economic factors (Djeri *et al*., 2014; Golets *et al*., 2021; Jin *et al*., 2021; Ivanova *et al*., 2020; Perić *et al*., 2021), but also because the authors assumed that different parts of the country, fields of activity, types of employment, and levels of living standard would be differently hit by the corona-crisis. Respondents were also asked about being engaged with a partner and having kid(s), since living alone or with dependants affects risk perceptions and travel intentions, especially when it comes to health crises (Li *et al*., 2020; Peluso & Pichierri, 2021).

4.2. Sampling method and sample sizes

The questionnaires were distributed online through social media, using a combination of convenience and snowball sampling methods, resulting in 654 valid questionnaires for the 2020 survey, and 350 for the one in 2021. The considerable difference between the two sample sizes could be explained by the changed circumstances in the one-year period. People were much more open to participate in surveys in April 2020 when they were locked home soon after the pandemic had been announced. One year later, when the initial shock of the COVID-19 crisis had passed and restrictions had been substantially relaxed, many people in Bulgaria had returned, at least partly, to their daily routine and were more reluctant to get involved in surveys.

Table 1. *Checking the validity of sample sizes*

	Study 1 (April 2020)	**Study 2 (April 2021)**
Bulgarian population > 15 years (NSI, 2020)	5 917 534	5 917 534
Recommended Sample Size	385	385
Achieved Sample Size	654	350
Expected Margin of Error	3.83%	5.24%

Source: http://www.raosoft.com/samplesize.html

Although both surveys were based on non-probability sampling, the Raosoft sample size calculator was applied to check the appropriateness of sample sizes. Data on Table 1 reveals that in the 2020 survey, with a considerably bigger sample than the recommended minimum size, the expected margin of error would be 3.83% at a level of confidence 95% and a conservative response format of 50:50%. The smaller

sample size achieved in 2021 is slightly below the recommended minimum number of respondents, thus suggesting a margin of error 5.24% at the same level of confidence and response format.

4.3. Sample structures

Both samples are dominated by females (Table 2), which is not uncommon in surveys and confirms existing observations that women in general are more willing to participate than men (Curtin, Presser, and Singer, 2000). The few respondents who preferred not to state their gender were excluded from the analysis, but this did not change the sample structures for the two years. Study samples cover all age groups of adults, with most respondents concentrated in the 26-45 years group followed by the 46-65 years group and those of less than 25 years of age. The share of participants older than 65 years is very small, which generally corresponds to the real situation in Bulgaria in terms of people who travel.

Table 2. *Demographic profile of respondents*

		Study 1 (April 2020)		**Study 2 (April 2021)**		**Tested differences in the structure of the two samples**
		No of valid respondents	Share (%)	No of valid respondents	Share (%)	
Gender	Male	152	23.2	82	23.4	$\chi2$=0.1253 (df=2, p=0.939)
	Female	497	76.0	266	76.0	
	I'd rather not answer	5	0.8	2	0.6	
Age group	Up to 25 years	90	13.8	73	20.9	$\chi2$=11.2762 (df=3, p=0.010)
	26-45 years	366	56.0	172	49.1	
	46 - 65 years	188	28.7	95	27.1	
	66 years and over	10	1.5	10	2.9	
Place of residence	Capital city	349	55.4	198	56.6	$\chi2$ = 6.7069 (df=3, p=0.082)
	Big city	190	30.2	118	33.7	
	Medium-sized town	48	7.6	13	3.7	
	Small town/village	43	6.8	21	6.0	
Field of professional activity	Public sector	182	27.8	94	26.9	$\chi2$=13.8522 (df=3, p=0.003)
	Private sector	392	59.9	183	52.3	
	NGO	21	3.2	22	6.3	
	Unemployed	59	9.0	51	14.6	
Employment status	Employed	480	73.4	262	74.9	$\chi2$=11.7094 (df=2, p=0.003)
	Self-employed	106	16.2	34	9.7	
	Unemployed	68	10.4	54	15.4	
Living standard	Lower than the average	65	9.9	45	12.9	$\chi2$=2.1580 (df=2, p=0.340)
	Average	486	74.3	255	72.9	
	Higher than the average	103	15.7	50	14.3	
Living with a partner	Yes	455	69.6	213	60.9	$\chi2$=7.7763 (df=1, p=0.005)
	No	199	30.4	137	39.1	
Living with children	Yes	380	58.1	126	36.0	$\chi2$=44.5595 (df=1, p=0.000)
	No	274	41.9	224	64.0	

Source for the Chi-square tests calculation: https://www.icalcu.com/stat/chisqtest.html

Both samples are dominated by residents of the capital city and big cities, though medium-sized and small settlements are represented as well. Furthermore, respondents' socio-demographic profile comprises various fields of professional activity, employment status, and living standard. Study participants living with a partner predominate in both samples, while those who have kids form a majority in the 2020 survey and a minority in the 2021 survey (Table 2).

Although it is impossible to achieve identical demographic profiles of respondents in both surveys using virtual snow-ball sampling technique (Baltar & Brunet, 2012), the structure of the two samples is similar, with Chi-square tests showing no significant differences in terms of place of residence, gender, and living standard (Table 2). Significant differences are found in rest of the categories, which indicates certain distortion in the samples.

4.4. Questions subjected to analysis and mode of analysis employed

Findings presented in this paper reveal only one part of all available data from the two surveys. Data is selected on the basis of full or partial comparability of the questions used in 2020 and 2021. These are five questions, regarding (1) already perceived and (2) expected future impact of the pandemic on respondents' personal income; (3) intended priority travel; (4) factors affecting travel decision, and (5) anticipated COVID-19 induced changes in tourist behaviour.

All five questions were partly adopted from literature and existing research prior to the pandemic. Yet, they were largely based on authors' personal observations and reflections on what was going on during the pandemic. For example, given the negative impact of the corona-crisis on national economies, respondents were asked to assess on a 5-point Likert scale the degree to which it affected their personal income and what the expected changes in this regard were. These two questions originated from the well-known postulate that disposable income and expectations about overall economic development strongly influence travel intentions and become of even more critical importance during recessions (Morley, 1992; Crouch *et al*., 2007; Djeri *et al*., 2014). In addition, previous research has shown that even in normal circumstances, travel intentions of Bulgarians are strongly dependent on financial constraints and therefore, characterized by high price sensitivity and vulnerability in time of crisis (Marinov, Dogramadjieva, and Assenova, 2010). This is the reason why economic aspects were considered in other questions, too.

Regarding priority travel, a multiple response question was asked that employed the checkboxes structure of responses. Provided options referred to the destination of travel (Bulgaria or abroad) and to the aim of travel (business, leisure, VFR, or other personal aim). A possibility to check 'lack of intention to travel in the foreseeable future' was included as well.

The last two questions – regarding factors affecting travel decision and anticipated changes in tourist behaviour – asked respondents to indicate the strength of pre-defined factors and aspects of anticipated change on a 5-point Likert scale varying from 'not at all' (1) to 'very strong' (5). Enumerated factors comprised ten items referring to economic considerations, health concerns, logistical constraints, and the resumption of the normal activity of different tourism-related sectors. These items were not taken from previous research but drawn from observing the specific COVID-19 situation. Considering the results of the first study, the set of items was slightly modified in the 2021 study to explicitly juxtapose administrative travel constraints to health risk perceptions by including the items 'official requirements / bans' and 'fear of infection / illnesses. In addition, the item 'invention of a COVID-19 vaccine / medicine' used in 2020 was modified to 'course of vaccination' in 2021 to indicate the changed situation within the one-year period.

The question regarding anticipated changes in respondents' usual tourist behaviour comprised twelve items referring to various aspects of change such as planning and organisation of the trip; activities during the trip; preferred destinations, mode of travel, types of accommodation, and eating options; time and money spent on travel, as well as visiting attractions, and cultural / sports, or business events attendance. These options were partly adopted from literature and previous research, considering either internationally or nationally observed travel preferences and behaviours in times of crisis (The Gallup Organisation, 2010; Marinov *et al.*, 2010; Bronner & de Hoog, 2012; Hajibaba *et al.*, 2015; Peters *et al.*, 2020).

Considering the aim of the paper, which is to find out if a change in travel intentions of Bulgarians has taken place one year after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, descriptive data analysis was employed to outline observed shifts and endurances, interpret them within the specific country context and with the reference to findings from other relevant studies. Data was coded and processed using SPSS software. Despite the non-probability nature of both samples, inferential statistics was applied to test the quality of results and get oriented if they could be generalized. Significant differences in the means derived from the 5-point rating scale questions were found by running the non-parametric tests of Mann-Whitney and Kruskal-Wallis, which were deemed appropriate considering the use of ordinal data (Finn *et al.*, 2000). The relationship between variables in the multiple-response question was found through the chi-square test of independence. Only results that proved significant at least at the 0.05 level for at least one of the years were included in the analysis.

As for the last two questions, our primary aim was not to identify correlations or causality, but to compare the strength of factors and the intensity of expected changes in tourist behaviour within the study period. Therefore, shifts in stated importance/degree of anticipated change were analysed as opposed to the method of derived importance (Grigoroudis & Spyridaki, 2003). To this end, the Mann-Whitney U-test was applied to check the significance of observed changes as directly reported by the respondents in 2020 and 2021.

5. Results

5.1. Perceived and expected impact of the pandemic on the personal income of Bulgarian residents

The majority of respondents reported moderate to no change regarding both the degree to which the pandemic had already affected their personal income and what the expected changes were. Moreover, results clearly indicate that the level of concern was higher in the beginning of the pandemic while in April 2021 people seem to have calmed down.

As seen in Figure 1, in April 2020 roughly one-fifth of respondents reported a very strong impact, but one year later this share was almost twice smaller. On the other hand, the share of respondents who reported moderate to no impact had increased significantly by 16 percentage points, with the most noticeable difference observed in those who felt no impact – an increase of 9 percentage points, thus forming one-third of all respondents.

The decrease of perceived impact is also noticeable through the means in the two surveys (Table 3). In April 2020 it was close to moderate (2.96), while a year later – almost 0.50 points down (2.50) on a 5-point scale. This lower level one year after the beginning of the pandemic was observed in all groups of respondents, with breakdowns revealing statistically significant differences by age group, field of professional activity, employment status, and living standard. Logically, the strength of the crisis impact in both surveys appeared inversely proportional to the living standard, with slight differences in the level of perception among the low standard group and considerable decline among the high standard

group in 2021. Furthermore, COVID-19 effects on personal income were felt stronger in the private than in the public sector and NGOs, as well as by self-employed rather than employed. On the other hand, they were least pronounced and slightly changed for a one-year-period in the highest age group (65+) that consists predominantly of retired people.

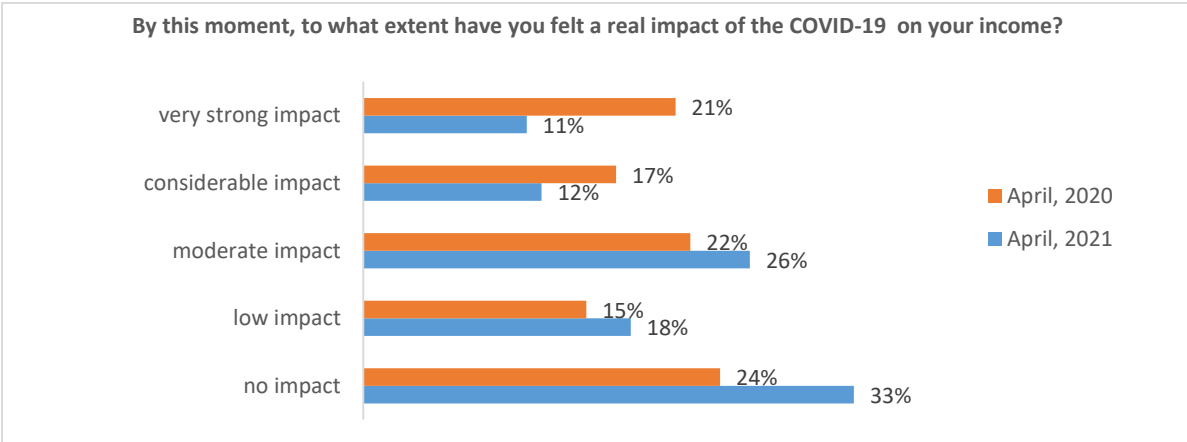


Figure 1. *Perceived impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the income of Bulgarian citizens – share of respondents, April 2020 vs April 2021.*

Table 3. *Perceived impact of the Covid-19 crisis on personal income at the time of study - means (1- no impact, 5 -very strong impact).*

		April 2020				April 2021			
		Mean	N	SD	Significance statistics	Mean	N	SD	Significance statistics
	Total	**2.96**	**654**	**1.467**		**2.50**	**350**	**1.349**	
Age group	< 25 years	2.93	90	1.467	χ2=3.580 (df=3, p=0.311)	2.79	73	1.343	χ2=8.031 (df=3, p=0.045)
	26-45 years	2.97	366	1.468		2.49	172	1.370	
	46 - 65 years	2.99	188	1.457		2.35	95	1.278	
	> 65 years	2.10	10	1.595		1.80	10	1.398	
Field of professional activity	Public sector	2.55	182	1.311	χ2=27.131 (df=3, p=0.000)	2.30	94	1.374	χ2=8.535 (df=3, p=0.036)
	Private sector	3.20	392	1.489		2.67	183	1.356	
	NGO	2.86	21	1.276		1.95	22	0.899	
	I do not work	2.66	59	1.538		2.49	51	1.362	
Employment status	Employed	2.80	480	1.445	χ2=31.532 (df=2, p=0.000)	2.40	262	1.335	χ2=7.982 (df=2, 0.018)
	Self-employed	3.69	106	1.275		3.06	34	1.254	
	I do not work	2.91	68	1.581		2.59	54	1.408	
Living standard	Low	3.32	65	1.448	χ2=5.495 (df=2, p=0.064)	3.13	45	1.408	χ2=28.671 (df=2, p=0.000)
	Medium	2.95	486	1.455		2.54	255	1.297	
	High	2.79	103	1.512		1.72	50	1.213	

Note: Significance statistics as measured by the Kruskal-Wallis' chi-square test

The above trend is also observed in the expectations for the pandemic's impact on income in the foreseeable future (Figure 2). Here the changes are even greater, with the share of respondents anticipating a very big change dropping from 25% to 8% within a year. More than 3/4 of respondents in 2021 expected moderate to no change in sharp contrast to the situation in April 2020, when this share was slightly above 50%.

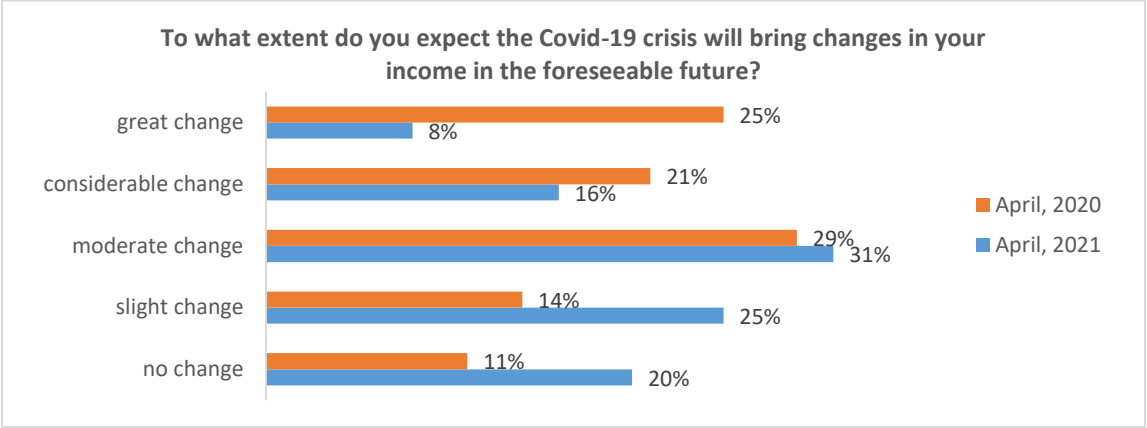


Figure 2. *Expected impact of the pandemic on the income of Bulgarian citizens – share of respondents, April 2020 vs April 2021.*

In April 2021, the mean of the expected future impact was down by 0.67 points (2.67), compared to 3.34 in the survey carried out in April 2020. Statistically significant differences among respondents were found in terms of their field of professional activity, employment status, and living standard (Table 4), revealing similar relations as those regarding already perceived COVID-19 effects (Table 3). Despite that the observed relaxation in 2021 refers to all groups of respondents, self-employed and those working in the private sector still revealed a higher level of concern compared to employed and those working in the public sector. Once again, the lower the living standard, the higher the expected impact of the crisis on personal income, with changes for a one-year period indicating much stronger relief among the high standard group – mean 2.10 in 2021 vs. 3.14 in 2020.

Table 4. *Expected impact of the Covid-19 crisis on personal income in the near future - means (1- no impact; 5 - very strong impact).*

		April 2020				April 2021			
		Mean	N	SD	Significance statistics	Mean	N	SD	Significance statistics
	Total	**3.34**	**654**	**1.299**		**2.67**	**350**	**1.191**	
Field of professional activity	Public sector	2.96	182	1.259	$\chi2$=27.131 (df=3, p=0.000)	2.30	94	1.243	$\chi2$=15.953 (df=3, p=0.001)
	Private sector	3.53	392	1.289		2.87	183	1.195	
	NGO	3.48	21	1.030		2.50	22	0.964	
	I do not work	3.22	59	1.340		2.71	51	1.006	
Employment status	Employed	3.20	480	1.287	$\chi2$=28.993 (df=2, p=0.000)	2.59	262	1.231	$\chi2$=8.915 (df=2, p=0.012)
	Self-empolyed	3.93	106	1.165		3.15	34	0.925	
	I do not work	3.38	68	1.339		2.78	54	1.076	
Living standard	Low	3.71	65	1.221	$\chi2$=7.968 (df=2, p=0.019)	3.29	45	1.014	$\chi2$=25.345 (df=2; p=0.000)
	Medium	3.33	486	1.296		2.67	255	1.167	
	High	3.14	103	1.329		2.10	50	1.199	

Note: Significance statistics as measured by the Kruskal-Wallis' chi-square test

5.2. Priority travel

The pattern of travel prioritization has not significantly altered within the observed period with the most popular options in both surveys being leisure and domestic trips, followed by VFR travel. Yet, there are some changes in the priority trips that the respondents would take in 2021 compared to 2020 (Table 5). Overall, the share of leisure trips has increased by 13 percentage points (from 61% to 74%),

while the share of people prioritizing visiting friends and relatives has fallen by 8 percentage points. There is an increase in the prioritization of domestic travel (from 77% in 2020 to 82% in 2021), while the share of respondents that would travel abroad or on business has slightly decreased. The share of respondents who stated that they did not intend to travel at all (3%) remained unchanged. Such a decision was rather caused by COVID-19 than a usual behaviour, since more than 80% of these respondents had usually travelled at least once a year and almost 2/3 of them had travelled more than three times a year before the pandemic.

Breakdowns by groups of respondents reveal statistically significant differences in terms of age, gender, and living standard (Table 5). For the studied period, domestic and leisure travel intentions have decreased only in the highest age group (65+) while for all other ages they have considerably increased. For people of all ages, visiting friends and relatives appeared a less important priority in 2021 than in 2020 and so were travel intentions for other personal purposes or business. Intentions for travelling abroad notably dropped among the youngest respondents and those in the age group 46-65, but remained unchanged in the 26-45 age group, and even increased in the 65+ group. The share of people who did not intend to travel remained roughly unchanged among all respondents up to 65 years of age, but in the 65+ age group it has increased from 0% to 10%.

Table 5. *Priority travel of Bulgarian citizens – share of respondents (April 2020 vs April2021).*

		Age group				**Gender**		**Living standard**		
	Total	< 25 years	26-45 years	46-65 years	> 65 years	Male	Female	Low	Average	High
April 2020										
Domestic travel	**77%**	72%	78%	78%	89%	83%	75%	70%	78%	76%
Leisure travel	**61%**	66%	60%	57%	100%	61%	60%	46%	61%	66%
Visiting friends and relatives	**57%**	62%	59%	51%	33%	60%	55%	48%	59%	50%
Travel abroad	**38%**	46%	35%	40%	44%	43%	37%	30%	36%	54%
Business travel	**32%**	29%	30%	38%	0%	38%	30%	40%	32%	28%
Other personal aim of travel	**26%**	33%	22%	28%	56%	28%	25%	37%	25%	20%
I would not travel in the	**3%**	2%	3%	5%	0%	3%	4%	10%	3%	3%
Number of valid respondents	**643**	89	360	185	9	149	489	63	479	101
Chi-square test statistics		$\chi2$=38.489 (df=21, p=0.011)				$\chi2$=10.797 (df=7, p=0.148)		$\chi2$=45.563 (df=14, p=0.000)		
April 2021										
Domestic travel	**82%**	79%	87%	77%	80%	87%	81%	76%	83%	84%
Leisure travel	**74%**	79%	75%	67%	80%	78%	73%	60%	75%	80%
Visiting friends and relatives	**49%**	59%	53%	38%	10%	50%	48%	60%	51%	30%
Travel abroad	**33%**	33%	35%	28%	60%	45%	30%	24%	33%	46%
Business travel	**29%**	25%	31%	28%	20%	38%	26%	40%	26%	32%
Other personal aim of travel	**25%**	30%	24%	23%	0%	29%	23%	29%	24%	24%
I would not travel in the	**3%**	1%	3%	4%	10%	4%	3%	4%	3%	2%
Number of valid respondents	**350**	73	172	95	10	82	266	45	255	50
Chi-square test statistics		$\chi2$=36.102 (df=21, p=0.021)				$\chi2$=14.657 (df=7, p=0.041)		$\chi2$=27.072 (df=14, p=0.019)		

Note: A multiple response question - the sum of column percentages exceeds 100%

In both surveys, stronger intention for all types of travel was observed among men than among women, although gender differences were statistically significant only in the 2021 survey. Domestic and leisure travel intentions have increased in 2021 among both males and females. Travelling abroad enjoyed a slightly increased interest from males in 2021, while a smaller share of females pointed it as a priority compared to 2020.

Generally, increased intentions for domestic travel in 2021 were not affected by the living standard, since such an increase was observed among all respondent groups by this variable. The same, even more so, applies to leisure travel intentions that grew by 14 percentage points in 2021 not only among the high and medium standard groups, but also among people of low living standard. Visiting friends and relatives increased its share as a priority travel among the low standard group but went into the background in 2021 for people of medium to high standard. Intentions to travel abroad decreased in all standard groups but remained considerably better pronounced among the most solvent respondents. Business travel remained most popular among the low standard group, with no change in the share of respondents who pointed it as a priority in both surveys (40%). However, an increased interest in business travel was observed in 2021 from the high standard group while the medium standard group appeared more restrained in taking such trips compared to 2020. Based on these findings it seems that despite the pandemic, business travel has remained a necessity for the low standard group while, after a period of strong hesitation in 2020, the most affluent customers have been gradually returning to it as well.

5.3. Factors affecting travel decisions

It is difficult to provide a direct comparison of the factors affecting travel decisions in 2020 and 2021, because the answer options listed in the two surveys slightly differed. The decision for this alteration and the choice of factors was informed by the replies of an open-ended question in the first survey. It is however possible to outline the overarching trend and juxtapose the values for the factors that were present in both studies.

Table 6. *Factors affecting travel decisions – means (1- no impact, 5 – very strong impact) and ranks in April 2021 vs April 2020.*

	April 2020			**April 2021**			**Differences in means 2021-2020**
	Mean	SD	Rank	Mean	SD	Rank	
Official requirements / bans	-	-	-	3.96	1.292	1	n.a.
Increasing / maintaining my personal income	3.68	1.389	1	3.12	1.378	2	-0.56*
Overall economic stabilization	3.31	1.418	3	-	-	-	n.a.
Resumption of cultural events (festivals, concerts,	3.25	1.430	4	3.05	1.416	3	-0.21*
Resumption of normal operation of air carriers	3.49	1.428	2	2.98	1.420	4	-0.50*
Convenient opportunities for online reservations	3.14	1.427	5	2.71	1.431	5	-0.43*
Fear of infection / illness	-	-	-	2.65	1.385	6	n.a.
Invention of COVID-19 medicine / Course of	2.91	1.641	6	2.60	1.501	7	-0.31*
Resumption of business events	2.87	1.514	7	2.46	1.405	8	-0.41*
Resumption of the normal activity of the tour	2.53	1.465	9	2.42	1.425	9	-0.12
Resumption of sporting events	2.54	1.535	8	2.28	1.369	10	-0.26*
Provided voucher for already paid but unrealized	2.43	1.555	10	-	-	-	n.a.

**Statistically significant changes in the means at p<0.05, Mann-Whitney U test*

Starting with the obvious similarities, almost no changes in the way factors were ranged at the very beginning of the pandemic (April 2020) and a year later have been observed. In 2021, the most important

inhibiting factor were official requirements / bans, followed by income, resumption of cultural events and the normal operation of air carriers. Bans / official requirements for entering and staying in a foreign country were not included as a possible answer in the 2020 survey, but all the other factors were ranged in almost the same way (Table 6), though with some differences in the significance that was attributed to them. All of them were rated by 0.12 to 0.56 points higher in the 2020 survey, probably because of the greater level of stress and uncertainty and the much heavier restrictions, as in the early stage of the pandemic international and even domestic travel was practically impossible and most flights were suspended. The two-tailed Mann-Whitney U-test showed all changes, except for the resumption of the normal activity of the tour operators, were statistically significant.

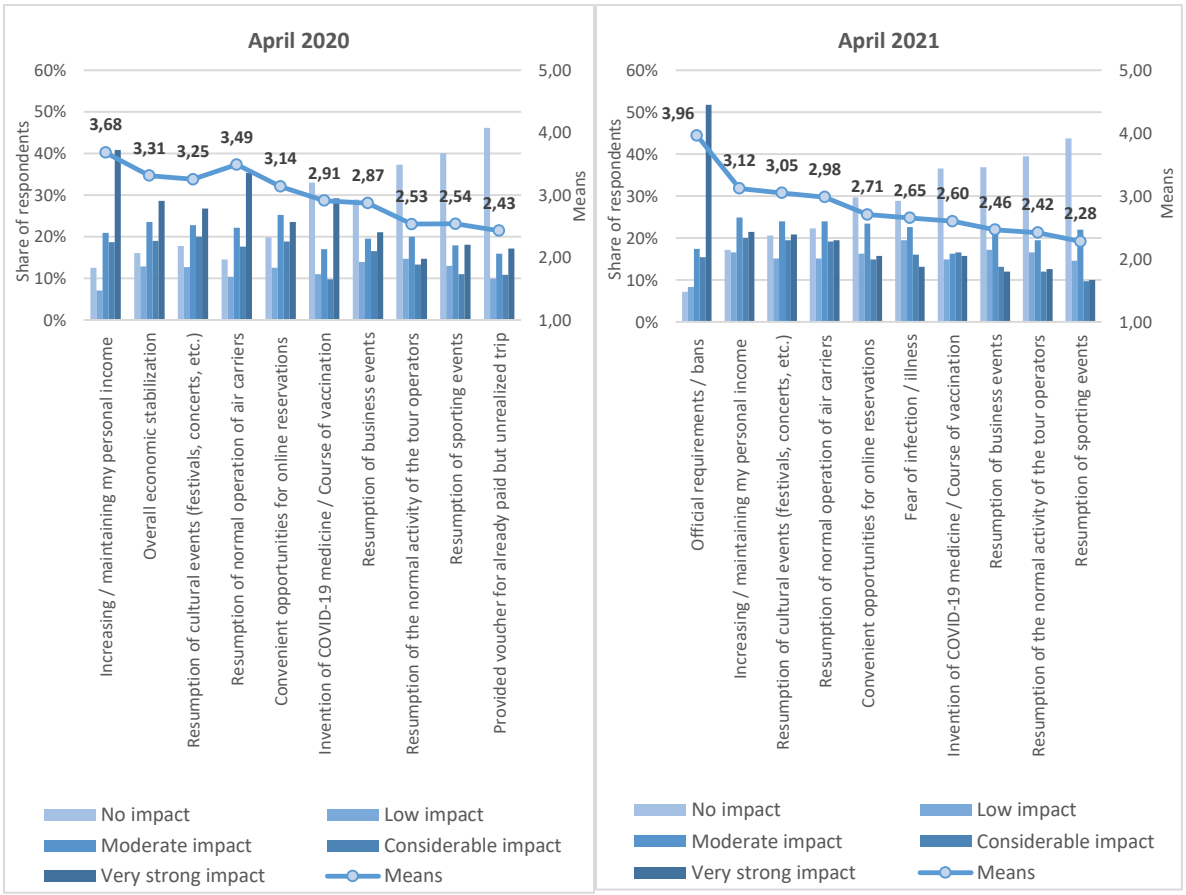


Figure 3. *Factors affecting travel decisions, April 2021 vs April 2020 - share of respondents and means (1- no impact, 5 - very strong impact).*

A more detailed information about the study findings is revealed on Fig. 3 where both means and frequencies of answers to the question can be seen. In line with the above discussed perceptions of the COVID-19 economic impact, personal income concerns have declined in April 2021, with the share of respondents considering income would strongly affect their travel decisions dropping from 41% down to 21%. Health-related concerns, such as fear of infection and invention of COVID-19 medicine / course of vaccination were not rated high in terms of importance – their means are below 3.0 on a 5-point scale, with a statistically significant decrease of 0.31 points for the latter at the end of the studied period. One

year after the onset of the pandemic, fear of infection was reported as a very important factor by only 13% of respondents, and the course of vaccination – by 16%. On the other hand, official requirements / bans absolutely dominated among all other factors, with more than half of the respondents stating administrative constraints would have a very strong impact on their travel decisions.

5.4. Expected pandemic-induced changes in tourist behaviour

Regarding the expected changes in the tourist behaviour caused by COVID-19, several main trends can be identified. Both in April 2020, and a year later, none of the changes was anticipated to become significantly pronounced – the mean of each of the studied aspects in both surveys was below 3.0 (moderate change). At the same time, for all of them there was a certain increase in intensity, which is statistically significant at the 0.05 level, except for the change in travel budget (Table 7).

Table 7. *Expected COVID-19 induced changes in tourist behaviour, means on a 5-point scale (1- no change at all, 5 – significant change) and ranks in April 2021 vs April 2020.*

	April 2020			**April 2021**			**Differences in means 2021-2020**
	Mean	SD	Rank	**Mean**	SD	Rank	
Planning and organisation of the trip	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	**2.93**	1.479	1	n.a.
Cultural / sport events attendance	**2.10**	1.328	4	**2.74**	1.460	2	0.64*
Activities during the trip	**2.04**	1.317	7	**2.65**	1.417	3	0.61*
Preferred destinations	**2.07**	1.373	6	**2.54**	1.483	4	0.47*
Time spent on travel	**2.15**	1.332	3	**2.51**	1.406	5	0.36*
Travel budget	**2.35**	1.397	1	**2.49**	1.327	6	0.14
Attractions visited	**2.08**	1.309	5	**2.49**	1.470	7	0.40*
Preferred accommodation	**2.01**	1.326	11	**2.47**	1.394	8	0.46*
Means of transport used	**2.02**	1.367	9	**2.46**	1.467	9	0.44*
Eating preferences during the trip	**2.29**	1.419	2	**2.45**	1.401	10	0.16*
Business events attendance	**2.03**	1.309	8	**2.43**	1.459	11	0.41*
Distance travelled	**2.02**	1.286	10	**2.31**	1.392	12	0.29*

**Statistically significant changes in the means at p<0.05, Mann-Whitney U test*

Unlike the factors influencing the decision to travel, where in 2021 a decrease in significance was observed compared to 2020, here the opposite trend could be outlined. In all aspects of the journey, there has been a slight increase in the expected change stated in April 2021. However, all values remained below 3.0 (moderate change) with the highest level of anticipated change regarding planning and organization of the trip (2.93). Compared to 2020, the highest changes in 2021 referred to activities during the trip (+0.61) and particularly to intended attendance of cultural / sports events (+0.64). Moderate changes were observed in the choice of destination (+0.47), preferred accommodation (+0.46) and means of transport used (+0.44). With smaller differences in values between 2020 and 2021 followed the time spent on travel (+0.36) and the distance travelled (+0.29). The amount of money spent on travel (+0.14) and the usual way of eating during the trip (+0.16), which were on the top of expected changes in travel behaviour in the 2020 survey, had changed the least in the last year and ranked sixth and tenth respectively in the 2021 survey.

Yet, the means indicating a small change in intended travel behaviour due to the pandemic, both in the initial period and one year later, might be somewhat misleading. Looking at Fig. 4, where means and frequencies are revealed together, it becomes clear that quite a significant change in people's intentions has taken place between April 2020 and April 2021. The share of respondents who had not at all considered a change in their behaviour in 2020 dropped substantially in 2021, and this refers to all

studied aspects of behaviour. Respectively, the share of those expecting a considerable to very strong change in their behaviour raised from 15-20% in the 2020 survey to 25-37% in the 2021 survey.

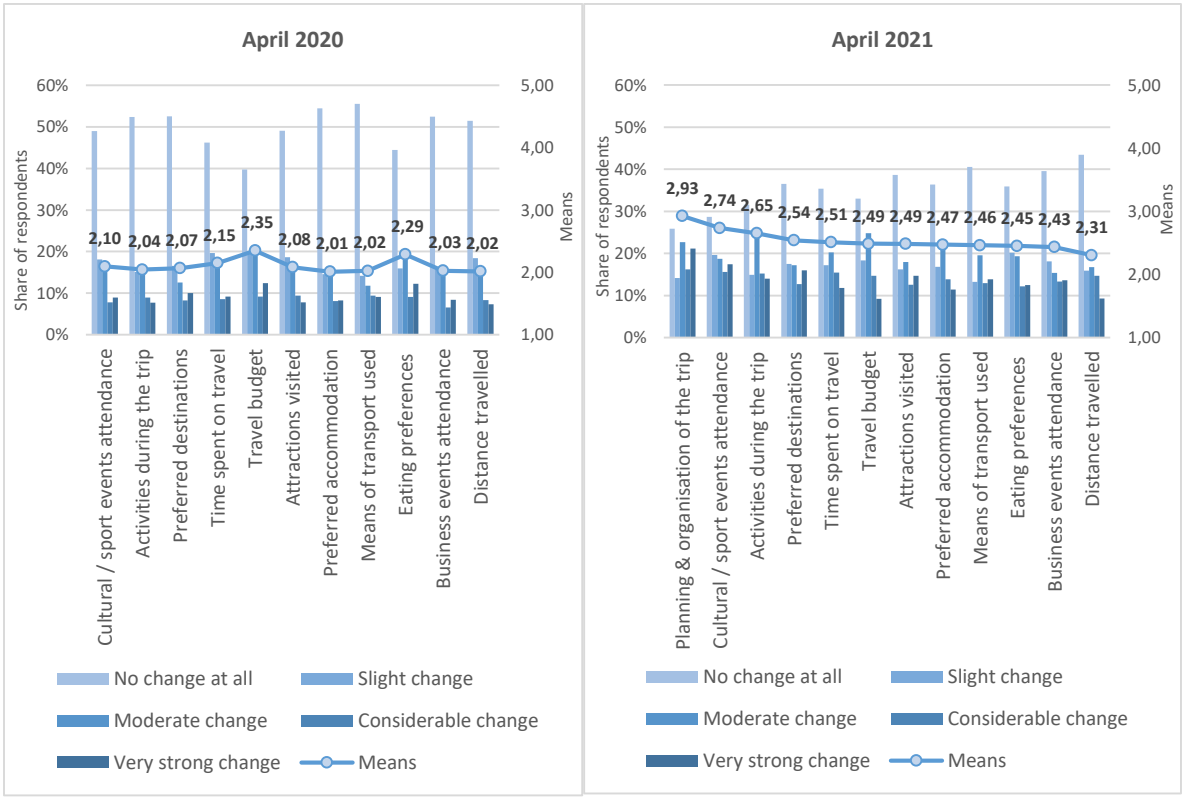


Figure 4. *Expected COVID-19 induced changes in tourist behaviour, April 2021 vs April 2020 - share of respondents and means (1- no change at all, 5 – significant change).*

6. Discussion

One of the expected consequences of the pandemic was an economic crisis and a reduction in the income of the population, which would have had a direct impact on tourist behaviour. According to the survey results, these expectations were only partially justified - a more significant economic effect was felt by a relatively small share of respondents, and at the end of the one-year period after the crisis, this share was even smaller. These findings are similar to the ones reported in a study conducted in Greece, where the mean of the perceived impact of COVID-19 on personal income was slightly above moderate, with a downward trend for 2021 (Pappas, 2021). Unlike this, a study carried out in the Netherlands in June 2020 presented a different situation, with half of respondents experiencing a significant impact of the COVID-19 crisis on their work and life, and another 31 per cent – a slightly significant impact (Isaac & Keijzer, 2021).

The generally low and declining levels of both currently perceived and expected future impacts of COVID-19 on respondents' income in the first year of the pandemic might seem a bit illogical, given the evidence and forecasts of a deepening economic crisis, both in Bulgaria and worldwide (The World Bank, 2020). They are however in line with statistical data that shows an increase of 2% in the consumption of Bulgarians in the first nine months of 2020 (Stoyanov, N., 2021). Obviously, by the time

of our second survey (April 2021), there has been considerable relief about the negative economic effects of the crisis, which could be explained by both objective economic indicators pointing to a gradual recovery (Kralcheva, 2021) and temporary political decisions resulting in raised income, especially of public sector employees, as explained earlier in the context section.

In terms of types of travel, the results of both surveys are in line with previous research (Ivanova *et al.*, 2021, Isaac & Keijzer, 2021) and the actual travel statistics (Eurostat, n.d.). International travel is negatively affected by crises (Cró & Martins, 2017) and this is confirmed by the findings of this study. A year after the first months of the pandemic, domestic and leisure travel were still the priority ones, and this trend had slightly deepened. Intentions related to business trips, visiting friends and relatives and travel abroad, on the other hand, have seen a downturn.

As far as the factors affecting travel decisions are concerned, one of the surprising findings in both surveys is the attitude towards the invention of a medicine / vaccine against COVID-19, which was one of the listed factors in the 2020 survey, and the fear of infection and the course of vaccination in 2021. According to both studies, these were rated as having no or low impact by the majority of respondents. This could, of course be a phenomenon specific to Bulgaria, where there has been a high degree of scepticism towards both the coronavirus and the vaccines. Yet, another study implies a similar pattern: it has identified a weak relation between severity of contracting COVID-19 at the destination, risk of infection and transmitting SARS-CoV-2 upon returning from travel and higher levels of travel avoidance (Morar *et al.*, 2021). Our findings are also in line with a study conducted in March 2020 in China, which reports similar rates of travel fear (Zheng, Luo, & Ritchie, 2021). What is interesting is that for two of the aspects (feeling frightened and feeling anxious travelling in a post-COVID period), no significant difference between high and low infected areas was found (Zheng *et al.*, 2021).

In addition, the course of the vaccination has been reported to have different effects on travel intentions in its stages. According to a study performed between February and May 2021 in the USA (Gursoy, Can, Williams, & Ekinci, 2021), in the early stages it impacts negatively the travel intentions of those who consider taking a vaccine, while those who restrain from vaccinating tend to not change their travel plan. As the process advances, both vaccinated and the ones not willing to do so would take a trip, provided the restrictions are eased (Gursoy *et al.*, 2021). This dependence is relevant to the context of the present study, which was conducted when vaccination in Bulgaria was already underway, although in its initial phase. As mentioned above, a significant part of the Bulgarian population was not planning to take a vaccine, hence did not perceive the course of vaccination as a significant factor for their travel plans. On the other hand, the other (smaller) share of people who had pro-vaccine attitudes, by April 2021 had been able to get vaccinated through the so-called "green corridors".

The three factors that were reported as least significant in both studies are resumption of business events, resumption of the normal activity of tour operators (group travel was banned in periods of higher infection rates), and the resumption of sporting events. As far as tour operators are concerned, this finding corresponds to a trend for choosing individual or small group travel instead of the conventional larger group tours (Chebli & Ben Said, 2020).

Official COVID-19 requirements or bans stand out as the most significant inhibiting factor, followed by income, resumption of cultural events, and normal operation of air carriers. Fear of infection and the course of vaccination are perceived as less important and are not expected to have a significant impact on travel decisions. Such a finding opposes the widespread perception of health-related concerns being the primary driver of consumer behaviour in times of pandemic, since almost all authors report a

significant impact of COVID-19 induced fear and anxiety (Rokni, 2021). Yet, it goes in line with the conclusion of Ram *et al*. (2021) that variables previously considered critical to the restart of tourism such as health risk perceptions and vaccination, have little or no influence on future demand, at least in the case of Israel. This may also call into question the assumptions of lasting changes in consumer behaviour that were expressed in the beginning of the crisis (Gössling *et al*., 2020; Lew *et al*., 2020; Sigala, 2020; Ateljevic, 2020).

The COVID-19 crisis has led to changes of tourism behaviour in terms of distance travelled, choice of accommodation, duration of the trip, etc., beliefs, which can be attributed to both objective (official travel restrictions and health measures) and subjective factors (COVID-19 beliefs and risk perceptions) (Bratić *et al*., 2021). What our study reveals is that the degree of these expected changes for Bulgarians is relatively low – the mean of the expected change for all variables is below moderate, i.e. despite the stress during the first year of the pandemic, at least in the short term, it did not significantly change preferred destinations, travel time, budget, choice of accommodation or attractions visited. The process of planning and organizing the trip is the most affected, but the degree of expected change is still below moderate. Unlike the perceived impact of travel-related factors, where no significant changes through the one-year period were observed, for the study period there is a tendency of an increase in the above-mentioned COVID-19 induced changes in tourist behaviour, attested by statistically important differences in the means of all variables for the two surveys.

Overall, our results show a relatively low level of intended change in the studied key aspects of the trip both in April 2020 and April 2021. Although one year after the start of the pandemic Bulgarians seemed to had better realised that changes in their previous travel behaviour were inevitable, for most aspects, about one-third of the respondents still reported there would be no change.

7. Conclusion

In the context of a pandemic that has significantly changed the way of life and the conditions in which the tourism sector operates, the identification of consumer attitudes, including the factors influencing decision-making and the changing parameters of tourism behaviour, are of great importance for both short and long-term decisions taken by the tourism businesses, DMOs, and state and local authorities. The crisis is characterized by a significant rate of dynamics, instability and unpredictability, which translates into probable changes in travel behaviour over time.

The study was focused on a specific context – the attitudes and travel intentions of Bulgarians, and its findings portray a picture that differs from other parts of the world. It has identified the changes and persisting patterns in certain aspects of consumer behaviour by comparing the results from two surveys, the first of which was conducted in April 2020, and the other – a year later. The following parameters were studied: perceived and expected impact of the crisis on personal income, priority types of travel, factors influencing the decision to travel in a pandemic, and expected changes in tourist behaviour. In general, both unchanged general patterns and slight alterations in the degree of expression were reported.

In general, our study results reveal that by the spring of 2021 the COVID-19 crisis had already affected and was expected to have a significant impact on a relatively small part of the Bulgarian population, with official requirements and bans being the most prominent factor, while health risk factors ranked only sixth with a low degree of stated significance. Despite the relatively favourable economic situation in the country at the time of study, people seem concerned about their ability to travel in terms of solvency: increasing or maintaining personal income ranked high among other travel decision making

factors, occupying the first position in 2020 and the second position in 2021. This finding challenges Senbeto & Hon (2018) who put that health crises influence travel intentions stronger than economic ones because they affect all consumers, regardless of their socio-demographic status, suggesting that economic consequences of COVID-19 have a greater and possibly longer-lasting impact on travel intentions than health concerns. Furthermore, it indicates that, at least in the case of Bulgaria, the so-called structural travel constraints (Crawford & Godbey, 1987) play a crucial role in shaping tourist behaviour during the pandemic.

In terms of tourism behaviour dynamics, the progress of the crisis has slightly deepened the changes in consumer attitudes and intention within the one-year period from April 2020 to April 2021. However, the autumn of 2021 seems to portend a serious rise in inflation and a deepening economic crisis at both national and international levels (National statistical institute, n.d.). Considering the overall low economic performance of the country and the highly vulnerable disposable income of Bulgarian citizens, more pronounced changes in travel intentions and tourist behaviour could be expected in the future. Most probably, these will be additionally intensified by various travel requirements and restrictions for unvaccinated tourists that are likely to become stricter and more inclusive.

From a managerial point of view, the findings can be beneficial for policy-makers, DMOs and the tourism business in decision-taking and effective management in a fast-changing and unpredicted environment. By the time of study, tourist demand in the country was rather artificially suppressed and people seemed ready to return to their usual travel behaviour as soon as restrictions were lifted. Based on our findings and general observations, we anticipate that future changes will remain much stronger influenced by financial factors and administrative constraints than by perceived health risk and COVID-19 induced travel fear or anxiety.

The main limitations of the study refer to the non-probability sampling method applied, and the smaller number of respondents reached in 2021. Although not fully representative, results are indicative for the perceptions and intentions of Bulgarian residents and fully comply with what has been observed as a real behaviour of this particular market during the pandemic. Furthermore, our findings refer to a single country, which means the results might not be applicable to other cases. Being a limitation of the study, this is also a contribution to the better understanding of the multifaceted changes in tourist behaviour, which are also dependent on the specific cultural, economic and political context.

Given the dynamics and the high degree of uncertainty in the development of the COVID-19 crisis, research on changes in tourist behaviour will be needed in the future. Analysing possible differences arising from national characteristics in terms of pandemic policies, as well as characteristics of people's psychology and attitudes towards COVID-19 would complement the findings of both this study and other research focused on a specific tourism market.

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Appendix. Skewness and kurtosis values of the 5-point Likert scale items complementing the data in tables 3, 4, 6 and 7.

	April 2020				April 2021			
	Skewness		Kurtosis		Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
Perceived and expected impact of the COVID-19 crisis on personal income								
Perceived impact of the Covid-19 crisis on personal income at the time of study	0.010	0.096	-1.352	0.191	0.428	0.130	-0.976	0.260
Expected impact of the Covid-19 crisis on personal income in the near future	-0.275	0.096	-0.963	0.191	0.217	0.130	-0.797	0.260
Factors affecting travel decisions								
Official requirements / bans					-0.965	0.130	-0.286	0.260
Increasing / maintaining my personal income	-0.704	0.096	-0.752	0.191	-0.118	0.130	-1.182	0.260
Overall economic stabilization	-0.298	0.096	-1.179	0.191				
Resumption of cultural events (festivals, concerts, etc.)	-0.267	0.096	-1.217	0.191	-0.080	0.130	-1.254	0.260
Resumption of normal operation of air carriers	-0.469	0.096	-1.082	0.191	-0.030	0.130	-1.268	0.260
Convenient opportunities for online reservations	-0.165	0.096	-1.234	0.191	0.239	0.130	-1.243	0.260
Fear of infection / illness					0.285	0.130	-1.165	0.260
Invention of COVID-19 medicine / Course of vaccination	0.090	0.096	-1.596	0.191	0.330	0.130	-1.362	0.260
Resumption of business events	0.086	0.096	-1.430	0.191	0.472	0.130	-1.084	0.260
Resumption of the normal activity of the tour operators	0.407	0.096	-1.228	0.191	0.539	0.130	-1.057	0.260
Resumption of sporting events	0.435	0.096	-1.305	0.191	0.662	0.130	-0.825	0.260
Provided voucher for already paid but unrealized trip	0.538	0.096	-1.267	0.191				
Expected COVID-19 induced changes in tourist behaviour								
Planning and organisation of the trip					0.039	0.132	-1.361	0.264
Cultural / sport events attendance	0.947	0.100	-0.345	0.199	0.249	0.136	-1.310	0.271
Activities during the trip	0.966	0.098	-0.348	0.195	0.259	0.133	-1.218	0.265
Preferred destinations	1.008	0.098	-0.348	0.195	0.441	0.134	-1.232	0.267
Time spent on travel	0.881	0.098	-0.457	0.196	0.402	0.134	-1.161	0.267
Travel budget	0.660	0.098	-0.849	0.196	0.387	0.135	-1.024	0.269
Attractions visited	0.935	0.098	-0.368	0.196	0.481	0.133	-1.182	0.266
Preferred accommodation	1.040	0.097	-0.219	0.194	0.445	0.134	-1.093	0.266
Means of transport used	1.036	0.098	-0.330	0.195	0.471	0.134	-1.193	0.266
Eating preferences during the trip	0.708	0.098	-0.850	0.195	0.526	0.133	-1.018	0.265
Business events attendance	1.033	0.101	-0.151	0.202	0.542	0.142	-1.130	0.284
Distance travelled	1.036	0.099	-0.138	0.197	0.605	0.133	-1.011	0.266