

IS TRAVELLING CURRENTLY A RISK? THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 AND WAR IN UKRAINE

VAI CEĻOŠANA PAŠLAIK IR RISKANTA? COVID-19 PANDĒMIJAS UN UKRAINAS KARA IETEKME

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Abstract

The aim of the study is to examine how regular travellers' behaviour and views regarding international travel have changed as a result of the Covid-19 pandemics and the war in Ukraine. The study includes three research questions 1) how much is travel missed and how do pandemics affect international travel behaviour? 2) how do regular travellers view the danger associated with pandemics and the war in Ukraine? 3) to what extent are future travels perceived as risky? The research is based on statistical data on outgoing tourism and domestic visitor monitoring data analysis, and interviews with 33 regular Latvian travellers. The interviews were conducted during the first quarter of 2022.

According to the findings, regular travellers currently feel a lack of excitement about planning trips or international travel experiences. Those who frequently travel for business report a lower level of longing for this experience. The habit of travelling locally has increased due to the lack of international alternatives during the pandemic with restrictions on global mobility. Regular travellers accept the inconveniences caused by the Covid-19 restrictions, but they were afraid and applied self-protection strategies, or even refused to travel entirely, during the first month of the war in Ukraine. Finally, regular travellers are not going to refrain from taking multiple journeys overseas or to Western European countries in the next six months but will avoid travels to zones of military conflict.

Keywords: travel, mobility, risk, COVID-19, the war in Ukraine

Introduction

The global pandemic Covid-19, since 2020, and the war in Ukraine in 2022 are the two most notable recent crisis events. War is an exceptional human tragedy, but both events have a significant negative influence on various economic sectors, and on tourism particularly. Initially, according to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), it was estimated that it would take 10–35 months for the tourism industry to return to pre-crisis numbers (Faus, 2020). However, political conditions have reshuffled the expected return to normal, particularly in Latvia and the whole Baltic region, which shares borders with Russia and Belarus. According to the UN World Tourism Organisation, international tourism resumed its comeback in January 2022, with substantially stronger performance than the poor start in 2021. However, the

Russian invasion of Ukraine adds to the already-existing economic uncertainty, as do various Covid-related travel restrictions. Overall confidence may suffer, impeding the revival of tourism (UNWTO, 2022). Covid-19 has had a multifaceted impact, including economic losses, environmental advantages (through reduced transportation consumption) and effects on health and wellbeing (Yang et al. 2021).

Tourist behaviour is defined as the interaction of internal (motivation, attitudes, beliefs, etc.) and external (environmental) elements (economic environment, security, socio-cultural environment, etc.) (Andrades, Dimanche & Ilkevich 2015). Previous studies have shown that tourist behaviour analysis is crucial for tourism development, since it helps to determine travel motivation, destination selection, evaluation and future travel intentions (Augustine and Balachandran 2021). Travel volumes have reduced globally, and journeys have become less frequent since the start of the pandemic (Abdullah et al. 2020). The epidemic has a detrimental impact on respondents' daily routines, reducing visits to any hospitality or cultural sites and frequently suspending the operation of such places. The epidemic appears to cause fear and uncertainty in various facets of consumers' daily lives, including their travel habits (Kourgiantakis et al. 2021). However, many tourists are looking for alternatives, visiting places in their home countries, and emphasising the safety and cleanliness of destinations, hotels, restaurants and other establishments. People are more anxious about their health and safety before trips (Augustine and Balachandran 2021) – even more so since February 2022 – and physical safety has also come to urgent attention. Tourists prefer expensive accommodation as a proxy for safety, excellent cleanliness standards, and privacy (e.g. in Airbnb accommodation), and have an increased preference for more independent travel arrangements over traditional scheduled travel (Kourgiantakis et al. 2021). In studies published in 2020, it was already estimated that the Covid-19 situation would impact tourists' propensity to travel in groups and their willingness to buy tour packages. Travellers would be more concerned with the cleanliness of airports, public spaces and tourist attractions or services, and the accessibility and quality of treatment at the destination. Health standards and subjective perceptions about the performance of the host countries' health systems influence travellers' decisions. Another projected trend is a decrease in money set aside for vacations. Covid-19 is affecting purchasing power (Chebli et al. 2020). Business travel is increasingly replaced with digital meetings and could stay partially digital in the future, being combined with on-site business events (Bukovska et al. 2021).

Travellers express a desire to focus more on short-distance tourist attractions in the country or neighbouring countries (Eichelberger et al. 2021). This represents a significant shift towards localism in tourism consumption (Kourgiantakis et al. 2021;

Marchezini 2019). Among crucial elements to consider when selecting a holiday destination are a low degree of crowding and sanitary standards. Tourists choose outdoor activities that allow them to engage with nature (Gursoy and Chi 2020).

The goal of this timely study is to examine how travellers’ behaviour and views regarding international travel have changed as a result of the Covid-19 pandemics and the war in Ukraine, by answering these key questions: 1) How much is travel missed and how have pandemics affected prior international travelling habits? 2) How do regular travellers view the uncertainties associated with the pandemics and the war in Ukraine? 3) To what extent is future travel perceived as risky?

Data and methods

The study is based on a mixed-method approach. It includes a general overview of the decrease in international travel during Covid-19, monitoring increased domestic travel activities as well as in-depth views from regular travellers. The qualitative part of the study included semi-structured face-to-face or online interviews with 33 regular travellers, which were conducted in the first quarter of 2022. The ages of the interview respondents (19 women and 14 men) in the sample vary from 19 to 58, and most often they prefer travel on leisure trips with friends or family.

Table 1. **Interviewee characteristics**

Variable	Criteria	Number
Gender	Woman	19
	Men	14
Place of residence	Urban	26
	Rural	6
Family status	Married	5
	Unmarried	27

The sampling technique includes a random sample of interviewees. An important limitation for participation was the selection of those who perceive themselves as regular travellers and travel at least three times a year. The interview template consisted of 18 questions. The interviewees were informed about data protection and anonymity procedures and asked to consent to the interview being recorded. The interview length varied from 21 to 30 minutes. The interviews were transcribed and analysed using an Excel spreadsheet. The content analysis allowed us to identify similar and/or contrary views regarding core issues relevant to the research questions. The presented citations illustrated the main trends of travel motivation and behaviour changes, risks associated with the pandemic and war, and future travel

plans. Data obtained from the interviews were placed in the quantitative data frame characterising current travel trends (outgoing and domestic).

Travel decline in Latvia since the Covid-19 pandemic

A decrease in international mobility reducing travel activities because of Covid-19 is evident from the statistics from Riga International Airport (see Figure 1). Curve of increasing passenger numbers fell fourfold in the following year. A slow recovery (+17%) was noticed in 2021, not stabilising the situation much. Recent data indicate that over 220,000 passengers used Riga International Airport in February 2022, representing an increase of ~10% compared to February last year.

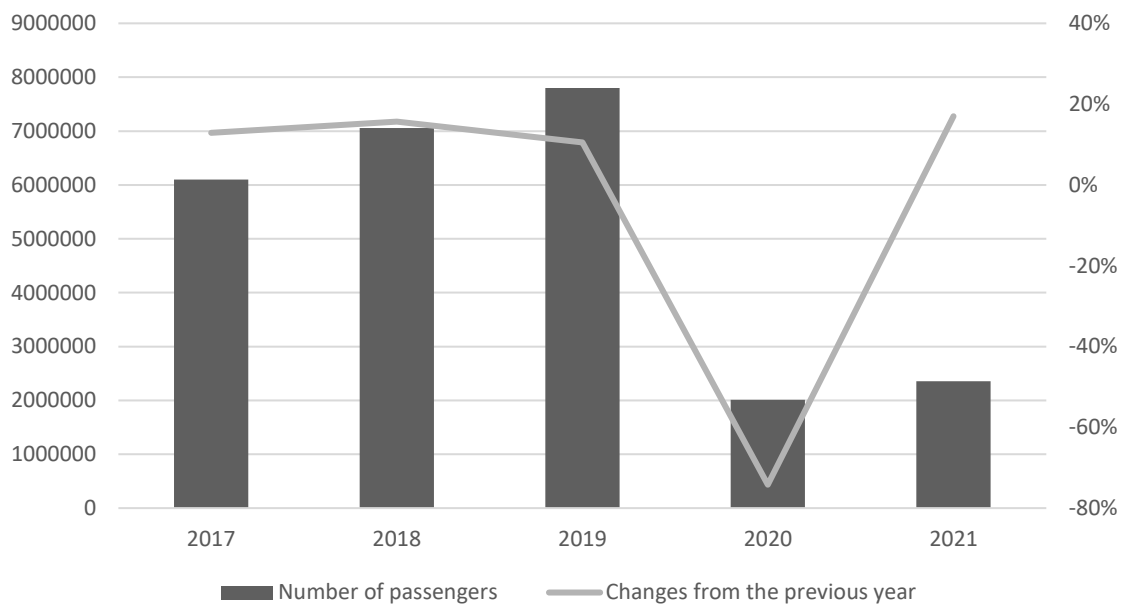


Figure 1. **Riga International Airport passenger turnover and changes from the previous year** (authors’ figure based on Riga International Airport data)

Travel restrictions related to the Russian military invasion in Ukraine concern transfer passengers at Riga International Airport and overall incoming tourism trends in Latvia. In early 2022, there were massively accommodation booking cancellations by regular travellers from Western Europe and Scandinavian countries. The accommodation sector experienced negative trends even though travel restrictions in the two years of the pandemic boosted local nature tourism, producing for many smaller rural tourism accommodations an even bigger turnover than before Covid-19. Large hotels were affected the most. In total, 1.3 million international and local tourists stayed overnight in 2021, which was 10% less than in 2020 and 54% less than in 2019 (CSB 2022).

Russia’s war in Ukraine presents new challenges for the hospitality industry, as tourism ties with Russia are unlikely to resume. The number of Russian tourists in Latvia decreased significantly in previous years – in 2020 by 74%, while last year it was even 93% less than in the year before the pandemic (CSB 2022), and it was similar for outbound travel habits.

Changes in travelling behaviour and longing for travel

An analysis of the results from the interview materials suggests that, in general, the willingness to travel has not changed much (see Table 2), but it has created much more inconvenience due to restrictions (e.g., the wearing of masks, and each country's demands for Covid-19 conditions) and has changed certain decision-making factors. Among respondents, safety has become an increasingly important need during travel and tourism experiences. The war in Ukraine has divided travel attitudes in two ways: either travel attitudes have not changed, or there is now less or no desire to travel because of fears, insecurities, or even feeling guilty for wanting to have fun while people are suffering from war elsewhere. Some choose not to travel to distant places but to closer destination countries or internally. For most, Covid-19 is no longer a concern compared to military action in Ukraine. Some people do not miss travel, but most respondents do indicate a deferred desire for it. The majority (24 respondents) already know where they want to travel in the next six months; some are reviewing provisions for the potential case of a wider war crisis escalation.

Table 2. **Travel behaviour and plans for travel** (based on data from interview material)

Travel behaviour due to COVID-19	Has changed	14
	Has not changed	18
Travel behaviour due to war in Ukraine	Has changed	16
	Has not changed	16
Plans for travel within next 6 months	Intends to travel	24
	No travel plans	8

Since the Covid-19 pandemic every trip has become more memorable and has increased the longing for this experience. In addition to the inconvenience associated with displaying vaccination certificates and complying with new safety standards, the costs of the trips have fluctuated (some providing larger discounts to avoid even greater losses, some compensating for the reduction in visitor numbers by increasing the price). Still, meanwhile, the total number of tourists for international travel has become lower.

"I think a lot more about travelling. In addition, when choosing a destination, I think about the risks of Covid and its effects more. I think which countries would be safe; what the rules and restrictions in place are; which travel routes would be more in nature (fresh air); whether there will be a lot of crowding; whether the route includes popular tourist attraction sites where very large crowds cannot be avoided" (Woman, 1964, regional city)

"Habits have not changed much. During the pandemic I was exploring current restrictions in the destination country. This was done before the pandemic, but during the pandemic, more attention was paid to using masks when visiting public places" (Woman, 1992, Riga)

People feel longing and sadness about the limited opportunities to travel regularly, similar to that indicated in other studies. The reasons for concern are both economic and safety reasons. Perception of personal safety risks seems to be something a person can manage and do some work to prevent. However economic uncertainty in the longer term seems unpredictable and is seen as an obstacle to future travels. International travel is referred to as a reward for hard work.

"I miss it, yes, because it's my main hobby in life, where I spend my money and the way I relax. I'm afraid that my income may be lower and therefore travel less often." (Female, 1991, Riga)

"I do miss travelling. A lot. Because there is a lot of hard work daily, and travelling is a reward for it all" (Woman, 1996, Riga)

As an alternative to international travel, local tourism has developed, and the extent to which local rural and natural resources are used has significantly increased – e.g. on several Latvian nature trails, according to the regular monitoring data based on visitor counter data, the number of visits has increased by up to 10 times; some beach sites were visited during the wintertime with the same intensity as in the high season of summer, although this also increased the environmental load. Some nature sites were continuously visited even after they had been formally closed because of an excessively large anthropogenic load on environment and the entire public nature and recreation system has been put under visitor flow “capacity tests” due to constant demand for long walks outdoors (Klepers and Krumina, forthcoming).

“Considering that travel volume has decreased in the last two years, international travel was replaced by local tourism during the pandemic – I got to know Latvia. I went to places where I had not been before. However, I miss international travel (Man, 1998, Riga)

“No, I don't miss it, there are many other things I can do in my leisure time. I am filling it with things that interest me. I even drive around close surroundings in Latvia. When will there be a calmer time I will think and plan my future travels” (Woman, 1964, Jekabpils)

Few respondents have not noticed any changes in their travel frequency, which depends on their occupation, travel experience, and other factors.

“Yes, I miss it. Before the pandemic, I travelled very often, which I have not been able to do in a pandemic. When I had a trip recently, I felt completely ecstatic because I hadn't been anywhere in a long time” (Woman, 2002, Riga)

Travelling during the pandemic and war in Ukraine

Individual choices vary regarding whether or not to travel during the pandemic and the war. Views vary from acceptance and compliance with inconveniences caused by the Covid-19 restrictions to fear, self-protection strategies and refusal to travel during unsettled times. However, travelling behaviour and destination choices have inevitably changed significantly for travellers from Latvia.

“I have never been afraid of Covid-19. As a doctor, I look at it a little differently. I both got sick and vaccinated myself. I have my own opinion on all of this, but it's something entirely different about the threat of war. This is something completely different and incomparable. I take the threat of war very seriously because if Force Major starts somewhere and it is impossible to get home, atomic bombs are flying somewhere, it is a danger. These are genuine dangers. I am worried about Covid; if suddenly I cannot get home, I would have to stay in quarantine and spend money on rent. Life gets complicated, and money is lost. But in a war situation, money no longer matters.” (Woman, 1996, Riga)

While Covid-19 caused inconvenience and, possibly, unplanned financial losses, the ongoing war significantly changed the geography of travel destinations for Latvians.

"Covid-19 is not a reason for me not to travel. I have been vaccinated, so my fear of getting sick is minimal, but the war situation in Ukraine is a significant reason for me to choose to stay at home or travel very close to the northern borders of Ukraine" (Woman, 2002, Riga)

They try to protect themselves, for example, by not going to risky places:

"I am not afraid of getting Covid-19 because safety measures are in place, such as wearing masks, vaccinations, etc. The war does not scare me because I feel safe in my country – Latvia – and we are in NATO. I do not travel to places of war or high risk." (Man, 1999, Carnikava)

"The desire to see new places is much greater than the fear of getting Covid because I understand that we can't always influence where we catch the virus; even if we are cautious, there is a risk. But I do not feel the threat of war, only extreme empathy and compassion for those currently experiencing it, but I do not feel threatened myself, at least for now." (Woman, 2003, Talsi)

More categorical views on travel were observed in the interviews of seven respondents. They expressed that they categorically do not travel during periods of uncertainty and unforeseen circumstances:

"We did not travel during the pandemic. We did not want to endanger our health. There is no point in travelling if you can get sick during the trip and miss everything. It is not worth challenging your destiny!" (Man, 1963, Madona)

"The threat posed by the war does not allow us to think about travel because the future seems too unpredictable at the moment" (Man, 1987, Riga)

Travel plans for the near future

Interview material suggests three main trends regarding international trips in near future. Those whose employment involves regular business trips are sure about their future travels despite research predicting that some business trips will be replaced by online meetings in the future. Most regular travellers (22 respondents) also plan to travel in the current political and economic situation and are ready to accept potential risks. There are specific plans for some future trips within the following six months. They have particular and already planned leisure trips to Western European, Asian or other destinations overseas.

"I plan to visit countries with mountains because I like an active lifestyle and regularly on my holidays go out of town to the nearest mountains. I would also like to visit the Netherlands, Norway (especially the fjords), and I want to travel to a more distant corner of the Earth, for example, New Zealand, but this is only at the level of ideas." (Women, 1992, Riga)

Despite those who remained frequent travellers going on either business or leisure trips, numerous travellers from Latvia refrain from travelling. Among those not planning to travel within the next six months, the main concern relates to an escalation connected to the situation in Ukraine.

"There are no further specific plans because the situation in Ukraine has now stifled the desire to take risks, both with money and with other things. And if the situation changes radically, there will be no travelling at all." (Woman, 1996, Riga)

"There is a lot to plan for, but the current circumstances, situation and general mood do not lead to grandiose plans. I'm likely to be more open to a variety of nearby and safer destinations." (Woman, 1964, Jekabpils)

Conclusions

According to the findings, regular travellers lack excitement in planning trips and actual international travel experience. Those who frequently travel for business report a lesser level of longing for this experience. Based on the study results, there is passion and hope that tourism will recover faster because most respondents in this study have planned when and where they will travel immediately – 0-6 months – after the Covid-19 pandemic ends. Moreover, regular travellers are not refraining from taking multiple journeys in the next six months but would certainly avoid travelling to military conflict zones.

Travellers' opinions vary regarding Covid-19 and the risks of the war in Ukraine. Overall, the period since restricted travel and the risk of infection has made travellers get used to this. However, in the case of the war in Ukraine, travels toward the EU external border are limited, and the level of danger and unpredictability is much higher. This study has been able to reflect a period of significant negative events that since the beginning of 2020 have massively affected the tourism industry and travellers' tolerance towards risk and travel plans. This research does not include any specific analysis of support trips to/from Ukraine, but further studies would be vital.

The sample analysed was too small to draw any quantitative conclusions about the travel differences between various lifestyle segments or demographics.

As a response to the limitation of international travel, local nature tourism has substantiated its position as the most popular attraction with significant levels of safety, cleanliness and beauty to fulfil tourist demand, and confirms the study assumptions made by Wachyuni and Kusumaningrum at the very beginning of the pandemic. During the pandemic, nature tourism has increased enormously, providing benefits for mental and physical health, but also creating a more significant anthropogenic load on vulnerable nature sites. Despite the critical role tourism plays in satisfying the needs of self-improvement in humans' lives, in a crisis, "tourism is neither a priority nor a necessity" (Baba et al. 2020). In 2022, travellers' behaviour patterns and desire for international mobility have not changed dramatically; but due to the pandemic and war the number of actual trips has decreased, with travel plans postponed for a later date. Reasonable risk-taking is justified by the satisfaction and reward international travel ensures.

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Kopsavilkums

Pētījuma mērķis ir noskaidrot, kā COVID-19 pandēmijas un Ukrainas kara ietekmē mainījies ierastā ceļotāju uzvedība un domas par starptautiskajiem ceļojumiem. Darbā izvirzīti trīs pētnieciskie jautājumi: 1) kā pandēmija ir ietekmējusi regulāro ceļotāju starptautiskos ceļošanas paradumus un vai ceļošanas pietrūkst; 2) kā regulārie ceļotāji raugās uz briesmām, kas saistītas ar pandēmiju un karu Ukrainā? 3) cik lielā mērā nākotnes ceļojumi tiek uztverti kā riskanti? Pētījuma pamatā ir intervijas ar 33 regulāriem Latvijas ceļotājiem, pieejamiem statistikas datiem, un apmeklētāju uzskaites datiem Latvijā. Intervijas veiktas 2022. gada pirmajā ceturksnī.

Kā liecina rezultāti, pastāvīgajiem ceļotājiem ilgojas pēc ceļojumu plānošanas, kā arī viņiem pietrūkst reālās starptautiskās ceļojumu pieredzes, kas savukārt neattiecas uz tiem, kuri regulāri dodas komandējumos. Pandēmijas periodā ir palielinājusies aktivitāte vietējā tūrisma jomā, kas ir alternatīva starptautiskai ceļošanai, īpaši palielinoties pieprasījumam pēc dabas tūrisma vietām. Regulārie ceļotāji samierinās ar neērtībām, ko rada COVID-19 ierobežojumi, taču viņi baidās un izmanto paš aizsardzības stratēģiju vai pat atsakās ceļot militārā iebrukuma laikā Ukrainā. Visbeidzot, regulārie ceļotāji, lai gan apstākļi nav skaidri un pastāv risks, turpmāko sešu mēnešu laikā plāno doties ārvalstu braucienos uz Rietumeiropas valstīm vai citviet pasaulē, taču atsakās no iespējas doties uz valstīm, kas iesaistītas militārajā konfliktā.

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