

## **Small Hotel Industry in Ajara: Main Aspects of the Post-Pandemic Recovery**

### **Abstract**

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a substantial negative impact on the tourism economy in the Autonomous Republic of Ajara. A comprehensive scientific study examining the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on tourism in the region, specifically focusing on the small hotel industry and the subsequent recovery phase, has not been carried out to date. This paper is the first attempt to fill this gap. The study was carried out in July and November 2021-2023 within the scope of the targeted scientific-research grant project of the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences at Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University. Ajara is a unique region in Georgia that has experienced significant tourism growth since the country won independence. Prior to the pandemic, tourists' influx to Ajara in 2018-2019 stood at approximately 2 million visitors while in 2020, this figure decreased by 4 times and more. In 2022 post-COVID 19 period, the number of foreigners reached 4,7 million, surpassing the previous year's total by 173%. However, the number of visitors would not be so large if it were not for the high international mobility of the population from our neighboring Slavic countries due to Russia's military aggression against Ukraine. The *objectives* of the study were to identify the main strategy for the post-pandemic recovery of the tourism industry in Ajara, the effectiveness of government support and changes in the activities of small hotels in the region. The *subject* of the study is the small hotels of Ajara, which are located in the coastal area of the region – city of Batumi, town of Kobuleti and the resort settlement of Gonio. The paper uses a qualitative research *method* in the form of in-depth interviews and discourse analysis. The *research tool* is a discussion plan for target groups - owners/managers of small hotels. The study found that neither the central government nor the government of the autonomous republic could develop a post-pandemic tourist recovery strategy. However, the recovery of tourism occurred rapidly, partly due to the flow of tens of thousands of residents from the warring nations and Belarus into Georgia as a consequence of the Russia-Ukraine war. While a portion of them have departed the country, the remaining individuals have established their own bubbles (including in the tourism industry), serving specifically their ethnic segment. Consequently, the entrepreneurial activity of Georgian citizens is significantly impaired. Tourism in Georgia has

primarily evolved in an unplanned manner. Insufficient focus is given to the introduction of business innovations or the engagement of all stakeholders in the field. This is particularly evident in the small hotel industry. The enactment of the Law on Agents of Foreign Influence in May 2024 prompted the mobilization of large-scale demonstrations in Tbilisi, Batumi and other urban centers across the nation. The Georgian tourism sector's rehabilitation process can be severely hindered by political instability, potentially causing serious harm.

**Key words:** Covid-19 pandemic, small hotels, tourism recovery, Ajara, Georgia.

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## **Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic, which emerged in late 2019 had a profound impact on the world, resulting in significant human losses and global damage to the economy. Every sector has been affected by the diverse restrictive regulations implemented during the pandemic. This holds particularly true for the travel and hospitality sector. Global tourism experienced a loss of 1,3 trillion USD in 2020, as reported by the World Tourism Organization (2020: Worst Year in Tourism History..., 2020).

Overall, the initial surge of the pandemic in Georgia proceeded without significant complications. During the spring season of 2020, the number of COVID-19 cases reached several hundred. It seemed that Georgia was unaffected by the first wave of the pandemic. However, following the lifting of the bans during the summer season of the same year, a large influx of people came to the seaside resorts. Therefore, it did not take long for the consequences to manifest - starting from September, the influx of infected local visitors returning from the beach resorts of Ajara to their permanent residences, has significantly facilitated the transmission of the coronavirus throughout the country (Gogsadze *et al.*, 2022: 1782-1783).

In the year 2020-2021, there has been a substantial decline in tourist traffic, particularly in foreign tourism, which has been partially substituted by domestic travel (GNTA, 2022). Following the imposition of restrictions on international travel in the spring of 2020, it became clear that the tourist sector would be the most severely impacted among all sectors of the Georgian economy. It is worth mentioning that in 2019 foreign tourism accounted for 71% of all tourism profits in the country (WTTC, 2022).

### **Tourism Sector in Ajara Autonomous Republic**

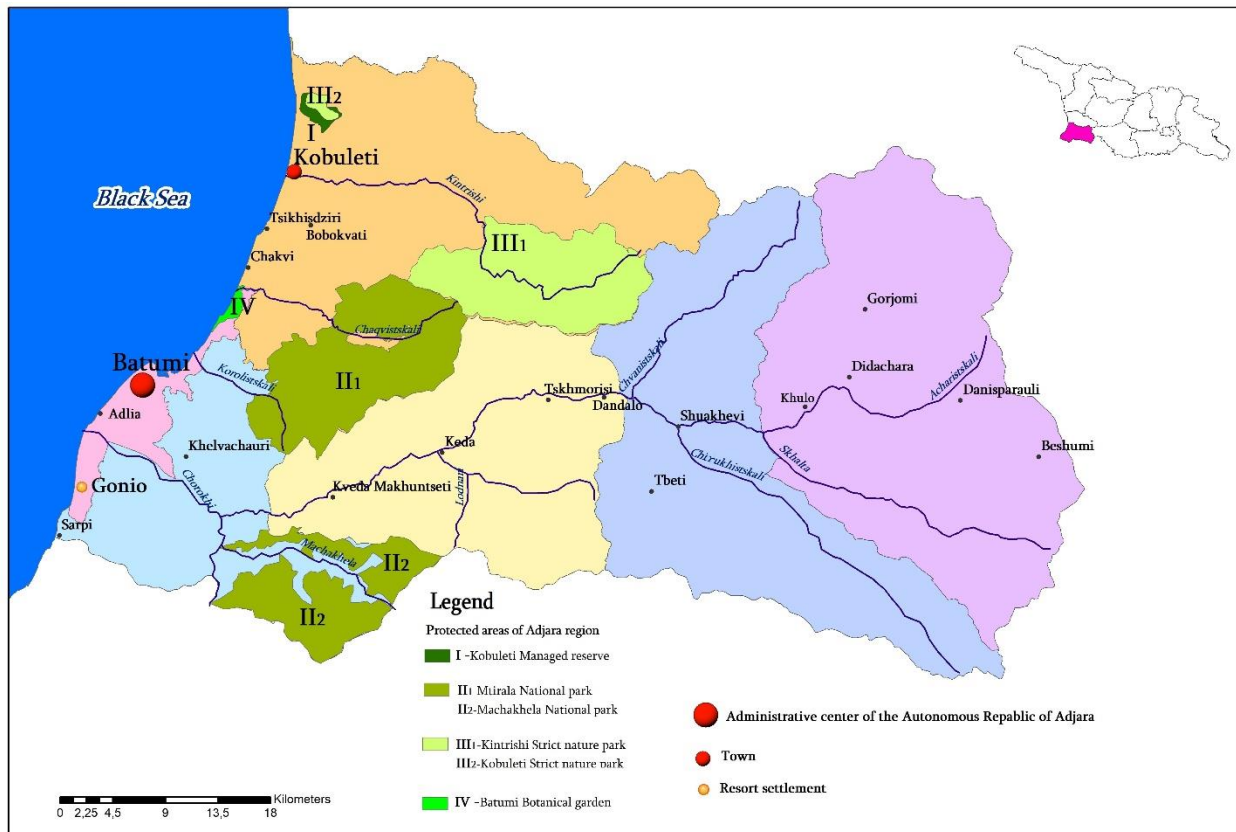
Seaside tourism is one of the popular choices for vacationers seeking recreational activities. In Georgia, the coastal areas of Abkhazia and Ajara Autonomous Republics were home to the original beach resorts of Gagra and Kobuleti, which were established even before the Sovietization period. The leisure sector in these regions was thriving and experiencing successful development (Khokhobaia & Gugushvili, 2021: 3). Abkhazia attracted a greater number of tourists than Ajara due to several factors, such as lower levels of precipitation during the season and a more environmentally friendly ecosystem. By the late 1980s, Abkhazia and Ajara had accumulated a substantial portion of the bed capacity in Georgian tourism establishments, accounting for 33% and 11% respectively (Pavliashvili *et al.*, 2022: 5). However, Russia's aggression, which started in

the 1990s, ultimately culminated in the annexation of two areas of Georgia, namely Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region. Meanwhile, Ajara emerged as the primary destination for maritime leisure activities among the country's population.

Tourism in Ajara Autonomous Republic has experienced substantial development following the country's independence. During the Soviet era, it was significant that vacationers primarily visited the destination during the sea season. Currently, the region has developed both summer and winter forms of tourism. Furthermore, the autonomous republic's economy greatly benefits from both MICE<sup>1</sup> and gambling tourism, which are not affected by seasonal fluctuations.

Figure 1

Protected Areas of Ajara



Map is prepared by Pikria Jinjikhadze based on data obtained at the Georgian National Agency of Protected Areas (APA) and the Vakhushti Bagrationi Institute of Geography.

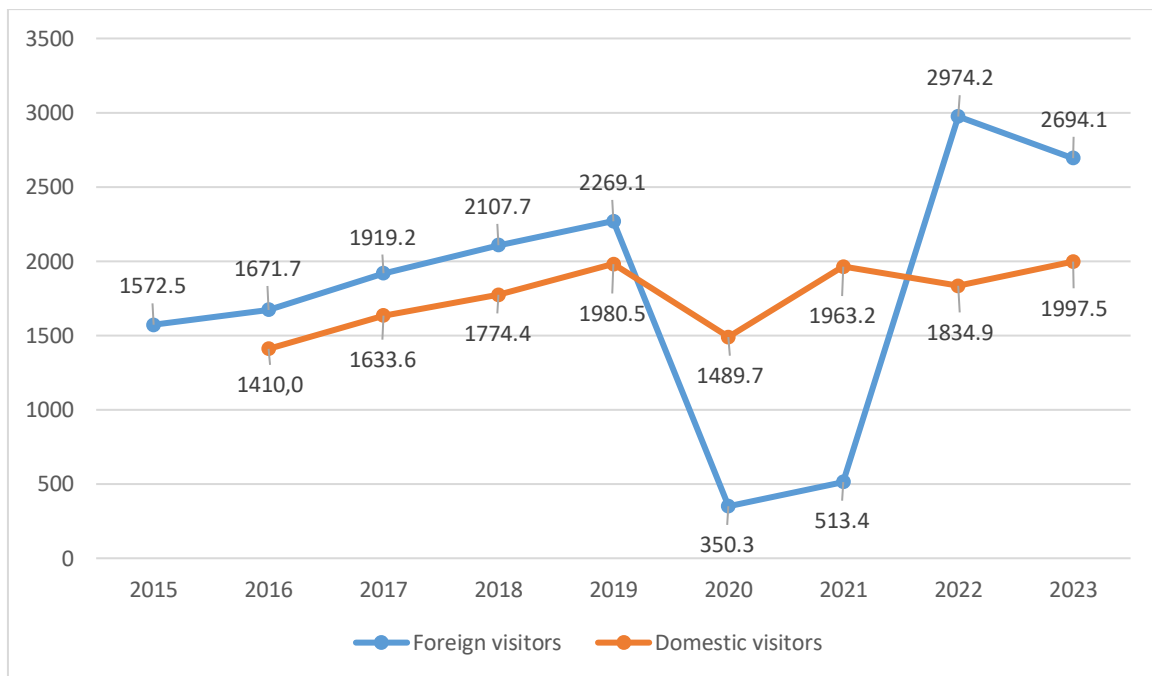
<sup>1</sup> The acronym MICE is used for Meetings, Incentive events, Conferences, and Exhibitions/Events, including trade fairs.

Ajara attracts visitors not only thanks to the sea, but also its wonderful nature – rivers, lakes, mineral springs, woods, etc. It is important to emphasize that the area has a number of distinctive protected areas that are well-liked by tourists, such the Kobuleti and Kintrishi Strict Nature Parks, the Mtirala and Machakhela National Parks, and the Batumi Botanical Garden (see figure 1).

Over the past decade or so, there has been a significant rise in the number of tourists visiting Ajara. However, naturally, the COVID-19 pandemic has had adverse effects on this region. In the pre-pandemic year of 2018-19, the tourist inflow to Ajara amounted to approximately 2 million visitors. In 2020, this number drastically declined by more than fourfold to 350 thousand. In 2021, there was a small increase as the figure slightly surpassed half a million, specifically, reaching 513,4 thousand visitors (Pavliashvili, *et al.*, 2022: 5). Figure 2 demonstrates a significant decrease in the number of foreigners in Ajara during the pandemic, although the loss in local tourists was less dramatic. By 2021 the number of individuals has nearly reached the pre-pandemic level.

Figure 2

Number of Visitors in Ajara in 2015-2023 (in thousands)



Own work based on data provided by the following sources: Pavliashvili, *et al.*, 2022 and GEOSTAT, 2023.

In 2022, Tbilisi continues to be the primary choice for tourists coming to Georgia, with Ajara firmly holding the second position. Slightly less than half of tourists (45,1%) visited this region. Following Tbilisi, the city of Batumi ranks second in terms of popularity, with a visit rate of 43,8% (Georgian Tourism in Figures, 2022: 9).

As for foreign tourists in Georgia, their number experienced a significant surge in 2023, reaching 4,7 million, a remarkable rise of 28% compared to the previous year. Their expenditure in the country amounted to 4,1 billion dollars, representing a considerable increase of 17,3% compared to the previous year's total (Georgian Tourism in Figures, 2023: 5; 25).

Georgia currently has a total of 3198 housing establishments, offering a combined total of 53759 rooms and 128015 beds. Ajara plays a significant role in the total number of hotels in the country. The capital city of Tbilisi and the area of Ajara in Georgia are ranked first and second, respectively, with nearly identical performance statistics. In total, they comprise almost half of the overall quantity of rooms and beds in the country's hotels (53,8% and 51,6%, respectively). These two regions constitute for one-third of the entire number of hotels. Specifically, Tbilisi has 544 lodgings, while Ajara has 490, making up 32,3% of the whole hotel count (GNTA, 2024).

Following the restoration of independence in 1991, the development of tourism in Georgia has been accompanied by scholarly research in this field. Georgian scientists and specialists from several professions actively engage in the survey of tourist matters. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has posed novel obstacles for academia. A comprehensive scientific study examining the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on tourism in Ajara, with a specific focus on the small hotel industry and the subsequent recovery phase, has not yet been undertaken. This work is the initial endeavor to fill this gap.

### **The Goal, Research Questions, Methodology and the Theoretical Framework**

The *goal* of the paper is to outline the distinctive characteristics of the post-pandemic recovery process of the small hotels industry in Ajara.

The paper will address the following research questions:

- What was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism sector of Georgia from 2020 to 2021?
- What was the government's response to combating the pandemic and what was its level of effectiveness?

- What are the socio-economic and geographical features of Ajara's small hotel industry in the post-pandemic rehabilitation process?
- What changes can be observed in the influx of domestic and international tourists throughout the duration of the study?

The field of tourism lacks significant variation in its theoretical framework and the conceptual aspect of tourism studies primarily encompasses economic and social theories (Cooper, *et al.*, 2008). Development theory, Complexity theory and Social Exchange theory are notable examples.

*The theory of development* is a longstanding socio-economic theory that has experienced significant transformations over the past 6-7 decades (Harrison, 2015). Initially, the modernization paradigm, which highlighted the superiority of developed nations, was dominant. With the evolving socio-economic landscape, the concept of development has also undergone a paradigm shift. Presently, post-structuralist methodologies have gained prominence. Currently, in the field of development studies, greater attention is given to global issues such as poverty, climate change and microeconomic strategies. As a result of increased globalization, both highly developed and developing countries have significant roles in development.

The current progress in the tourism sector is based on the idea that advanced nations' tourism industries are no longer the dominant driving forces (Milne & Ateljevic, 2001). Moreover, tourism experiences greater growth in the "underdeveloped South" compared to the "developed North". However, proponents of the theory argue that mass tourism continues to hold a dominant position in the tourism sector and predict that this tendency will persist for an extended period of time (Harrison, 2015).

The *complexity theory* implies that the world is characterized by interrelated events and processes. Put simply, our planet is a complex system that operates in a non-linear manner. This means that any change in one part of the system will cause other aspects to undergo transformation (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002; Burnes, 2005; Boulton *et al.*, 2015). The epidemic has resulted in the closure of borders and a substantial limitation on the gathering of individuals. This had an adverse effect on the functioning of tourist amenities. Specifically, their earnings declined, resulting in a substantial rise in the unemployment rate within this industry. From our perspective, the theory of complexity has proven to be the most applicable when considering the effects of the pandemic on tourism in Ajara. The theory of *Social Exchange*, formulated by the American scholar George

Homans (1964), posits that individuals' prosperity is dependent upon the advantages they accrue via their interactions. Homans's fundamental approach is entirely behaviorist. He believes that individuals strive to maximize their gains and minimize their losses in regard to one another. This viewpoint is in direct opposition to structural functionalism, as it prioritizes the individual over the system.

Even though, COVID-19 was not the first pandemic in human history, its rapid transmission and global reach were unprecedented. As a result, governments, economic circles, ordinary people and even scientists were ill-equipped to face the difficulties posed by this situation. The COVID-19 epidemic can be categorized as a catastrophe for the worldwide tourism sector, as the industry had limited authority over the consequences of the outbreak and the swift dissemination of the virus. The COVID-19 pandemic is distinct in its origin, scope, and complexity. It encompasses elements of a socio-economic crisis, political crisis, natural disaster and tourism demand problem (Zenker & Kock, 2020).

Although numerous scientific studies have been published on the COVID-19 pandemic in the past 2-3 years, a comprehensive social theory specifically addressing this issue has not yet been developed (e.g., Crane & Matten, 2021). Accomplishing this task within a limited timeframe is challenging, especially considering that the issue with Coronavirus is predominantly the responsibility of the health sector. The pandemic has had a partial impact on the current theoretical framework in the sphere of tourism, including the aforementioned theories. As a result, certain scientists analyzed the problems of the COVID-19 through the lens of "risk management" theories. As Faulkner (2001) notes, the scope of the crisis management conceptual framework is restricted to overarching principles. Concreteness begins when it comes to crisis management in various domains, such as the economy (including tourism), politics, and society. Organizational-level crisis management tactics are highly effective. This example focuses on organizational learning, strategic decision-making, efficient utilization of labor resources and the establishment of a new competitive environment (Mitroff, *et al.*, 1987).

The theoretical framework of our work incorporates crisis management principles, methodologies and ideas that have been created by international organizations and academia. The COVID-19 brought attention to the challenges faced by the tourism industry, particularly the small hotel sector. It became imperative to find measures to mitigate the financial losses, decrease in number of customers, and reduction of hotel staff. Le and Phi (2021: 2) used a concept map created



by Leximancer in order to highlight hotels' pandemic management practices. The map includes the following key areas: (a) immediate alteration, (b) economic activity innovation, (c) services modification and adjustment, (d) health and safety procedures, (e) adverse effect, (f) rehabilitation strategies and (g) the state/local authority policies.

The map and its components served as the foundation for the analysis conducted in our study and the subsequent formulation of findings. The indicated issues were incorporated into the discussion plan of our qualitative sociological research, serving as the foundation for the research problem.

At the end of 2020, a study by the company Galt & Taggart was published, highlighting the detrimental effects of the pandemic on Georgia's tourism economy. Specifically, the challenges faced by the tourism industry include:

- the cancellation of hotel reservations;
- decreased revenues in the tourism sector, leading to a reduction in the number of employees;
- suspension of investments in the tourism field;
- increased difficulty in paying income and utility taxes for tourism entities;
- the burden of repaying bank loans (Tourism Challenges..., 2020).

The research of the presented topic was carried out in 2021 and 2023. During the first year of the research a total of 32 small hotels, each with a maximum of 50 rooms were examined in Ajara – 11 in Batumi, 14 in Kobuleti, and 7 in Gonio. The study technique included a discussion plan that encompassed inquiries regarding the functioning of hotels between 2019 and 2021, the occupancy ratio, fluctuations in employee numbers, state or other institutional support and challenges encountered during the pandemic. Analyzing the matter enabled us to outline the primary obstacles that the COVID-19 outbreak has posed for the small hotel sector in Ajara. The research was intended to continue during the post-pandemic period.

In 2022, Georgia initiated the recovery of its tourism industry for two primary reasons: *firstly*, the lifting of pandemic restrictions resulted in a significant inflow of tourists to the Ajara seacoast; and *secondly*, the escalation of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine prompted a high level of international mobility among the population of these countries, including an increase in the number of asylum seekers. It further contributed to the rise in tourist numbers in Ajara.

The key findings of the 2023 study are derived from the examination of the outcomes of the conducted sociological survey during the second phase.

The research employed a qualitative *methodology*, namely utilizing in-depth interviews and discourse analysis. Both the 2021 and 2023 surveys consisted of two phases: the first phase took place in July during the peak tourist season, while the second one occurred in November, after the season ended. Each interview lasted around 45-60 minutes.

As *a research tool*, we employed a discussion plan to conduct interviews with owners/managers of small hotels. The discussion plan comprised questions that were categorized into 6 distinct blocks: 1. Overview of the hotel's basic details; 2. Occupancy rates and employee fluctuations from 2019 to 2021 and 2022 - 2023; 3. Support received from the government or other institutions during the same time frame; 4. Key challenges faced during the pandemic and post-pandemic period; 5. Implementation of new services to prevent the spread of the pandemic; and 6. Major measures taken to recover hotel operations in the last two years.

The cities of Batumi, town of Kobuleti as well as Gonio resort area (Khelvachauri municipality) were selected as the *target destinations* of the research. This is the primary location where the majority of modest hotels in Ajara are clustered.

*The subject* of the research is the small hotels in Ajara, which constitute 92% (GNTA, 2024) of the accommodations in the region. In 2023, the survey was done among the owners/managers of 49 small hotels in the Autonomous Republic. There were 16-17 hotels studied in each of the above mentioned settlements.

The World Tourism Organization does not have a universally acknowledged definition for small hotels at the international level. The scientific literature has several techniques, which can be generalized to identify numerous fundamental requirements. The consensus among scholars is that a small hotel is a business venture with a maximum of 100 rooms (e.g., How many rooms..., 2024; Lacalle, 2022), however other researchers argue that this number should not exceed 30 (Baker and Crompton, 2000). One of the commonly utilized factors is the quantity of employees. European academics have suggested that small hotels should have a workforce of fewer than 50 individuals (e.g., Thomas *et al.*, 1997: 9). This criterion aligns with the European Union standard that is employed to define small enterprises (The New SME Definition..., 2005).

Georgia's strategy differs slightly from the European one. Our legislation determines the classification of firms based on two factors: the number of employees and the volume of capital

turnover. Similarly to Europe, in Georgia, a business is classified as small if it employs less than 50 individuals in a single fiscal year. However, in contrast to the European standard, the capital turnover in Georgia is below 12 million GEL (about 4 million EUR) (Strategy for the Development..., 2021), while in Europe, it is below 10 million euros (The New SME Definition..., 2005).

*The target groups* of the research are hotel owners/managers. Each respondent represented a single hotel. The poll of hotel representatives was conducted in two phases. Initially, the respondents were interviewed based on targeted sampling. For this particular instance, we reached out to the proprietors/administrators of the hotels where we carried out our survey in 2021. To the extent that presented research is more extensive than in 2021, we employed the "snowball sampling" method, specifically relying on hotel managers interviewed in July to facilitate connections with their peers. We employed discourse analysis method to process the obtained empirical data.

After the sociological research in July, a telephone poll was done in November with the hotel owners/managers who had taken part in the in-depth interviews. During this phase, an analysis was carried out to determine the outcome of the post-pandemic season of 2023 for hotels. The objectives were to assess whether there was an increase in the number of tourists compared to the pre-pandemic period, determine the ratio between foreign and local tourists, evaluate the income generated from both groups and measure the extent to which local tourists contributed to balancing the losses incurred during the pandemic.

One of the methods of the research involves searching for pre-existing statistical material, making generalization, analyzing the data and evaluating the results. Much of the statistical data related to the COVID-19 pandemic in Georgia, may be accessed through the reports published by the National Center for Disease Control and Public Health of Georgia for the years 2020 to 2022 (One Year with COVID-19, 2021; COVID-19 In Georgia, 2022). A certain part of these works is devoted to the analysis of the measures implemented by the Georgian government in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Using the data gathered from interviews, we evaluated the government's decisions on pandemic-related restrictions and financial support.

An important *objective* was to establish a conceptual framework for the research and facilitate a scholarly discussion. Significant emphasis was placed on thoroughly examining and

evaluating the current scientific literature in the relevant topic together with the reports from the international organizations.

## **Discussion and Results**

The presented research provided a comprehensive understanding of the effects of the COVID-19 epidemic on the local small hotel industry in Ajara. In our paper, the depth and scale of this problem are highlighted along with the crucial aspects that must be considered – *firstly*, in regards to effectively managing this kind of crisis and *secondly*, in terms of recovering tourism in Ajara after the pandemic. According to the complexity theory, events and processes occurring at the micro level are tightly connected to the macro level, indicating a distinct interdependence between the local and global scales (e.g., Cheer *et al.*, 2021).

### ***The government response and the policy measures***

The COVID-19 outbreak, beyond a health crisis, caused a significant economic disaster soon. The global pandemic has presented governments worldwide with a crucial dilemma: prioritize the health of their population or safeguard socio-economic welfare? Various nations had selected different strategies to address the problem (Krish, 2020).

In order to minimize the negative consequences of the pandemic, Georgia's government introduced a certain business support package back in May 2020, which included the certain benefits, such were: a delay of property and income taxes for a period of four months; small hotels have received state subsidies to cover 80% of their bank interest payments for a duration of six months; additionally, businesses got the opportunity to request a restructuring of their bank loans; employees who have lost their jobs were eligible to receive a monthly payment of 200 Georgian GEL (less than 100 USD) for a period of six months; self-employed individuals who have lost their jobs were eligible for a one-time cash assistance of 300 GEL (about 100 USD); furthermore, the guest accommodation segment was exempt from property tax for the year 2020 and had a deferred income tax until the end of 2020 (Measures implemented by the Government..., 2020, 46-49).

In order to minimize visitors' sense of risk, it is crucial to establish effective collaboration among hotels, government entities and other components of the travel industry. This collaboration should focus on delivering consistent messages to guests (TRINET, 2020). Effective crisis

management requires complexity and the involvement of multiple parties. Only the state's role in encouraging the tourism sector of Ajara hotels was emphasized in this context. A significant number of hotel managers we interviewed expressed a lack of help from non-governmental or international organizations. The respondents identified the co-financing of 6 months of bank loan interest, simplified loan restructuring and exemption from property tax as the most successful benefits established by the Georgian government. However, we believe that these measures, while important, were not sufficient in providing assistance.

*"I anticipated receiving certain advantages from the government in terms of credit, but unfortunately, I did not get them"* (A male, small hotel manager, Gonio).

However, our research highlighted that only a fraction of the small hotels in Ajara received direct financial aid from the national, autonomous republic or local government authorities.

Declaring certain accommodation facilities as hotels and quarantine spaces was a beneficial approach in combating the epidemic. This initiative of the central government had a dual impact: *firstly*, the hotels participating in the program generated revenue and *secondly*, they made significant contributions to the pandemic management. The government entirely sponsored the housing of patients in COVID hotels, which included a three-course meal. The manager of one of the hotels in Batumi noted: *"The assistance was crucial as we were operating as a COVID-19 hotel and generating revenue."*

Many studies support the need of including all relevant parties (stakeholders) in the decision-making process while facing a crisis. Their cooperation is a prerequisite for successful crisis management (e.g., Gössling *et al.*, 2020; Pappas, 2018; Pappas & Glyptou, 2021). During the pandemic, only the actions started by the central government of Georgia were executed in the territory of the Autonomous Republic of Ajara. Tourism is a prominent sector in the region, characterized by its unique features. Thus, it was anticipated that the authorities of the autonomous republic would enact various legal and socio-economic policies within their jurisdiction, distinct from those implemented by the central authorities. The absence of such a practice, in our opinion, shows that the issue of decentralization is problematic in the country.

Until now, there is no existing anti-crisis strategy in place for the tourism industry, despite the previous announcement in 2021 that a plan for tourism recovery would be established soon. It would have been beneficial to have experts from foreign organizations involved in this issue.

*Challenges caused by the pandemic*

The Ajara Autonomous Republic had the worst characteristics among the Georgian regions in terms of infected by coronavirus population (see figure 2) The sea resorts of Georgia, specifically, the researched three settlements of Ajara – Batumi, Kobuleti and Gonio, have been severely impacted by the COVID-19 outbreak. Despite the end of the pandemic, enhancing the current scenario remains challenging as the majority of small hotels have not yet regained their pre-pandemic level of performance.

The absence of visitors, particularly international tourists, resulted in financial difficulties. Consequently, there was a decline in revenue as international tourists in contrast to locals, have longer journey durations, are not discouraged by rainy weather and they do not change their mind on duration of stay (as they have already purchased round-trip tickets) and exhibit higher spending habits. As a result of the pandemic, a significant number of small hotels and catering establishments turned out at risk of shutting down. Consequently, the proprietors of the establishments were confronted with a challenging decision – how to preserve the business and the employees. As our respondents noted:

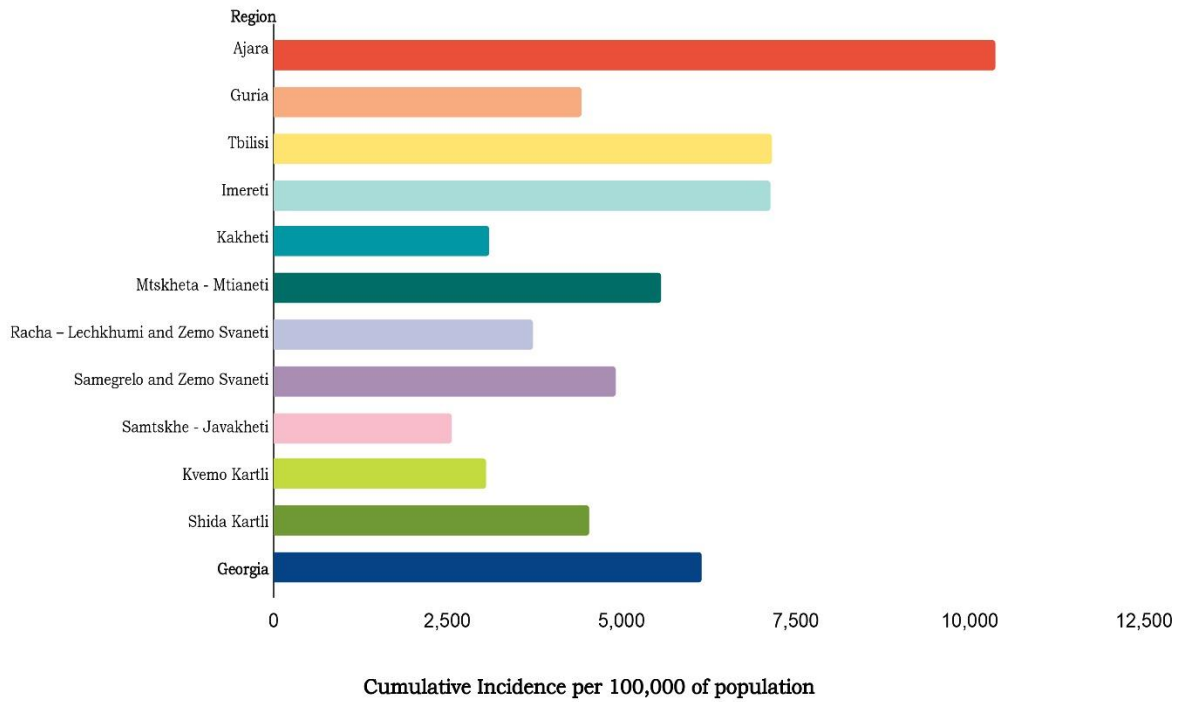
*"As the number of tourists decreased, the income decreased as well. As a result, we had problems in repaying the bank loan"* (A male, small hotel manager, Gonio);

*"Due to the regulations, two rooms were closed for me, which resulted in big expenses"* (A female, small hotel manager, Kobuleti).

*"Acquiring a substantial quantity of sanitary facilities required significant expenses. I lacked sufficient funds in my bank account and interest was added to the deferred payment"* (A male, small hotel manager, Gonio).

Figure 3

COVID-19 cumulative incidence rate by regions of Georgia in 2020



Own work based on data from following source: One Year with COVID-19 (2021).

The closing of numerous small hotels and restaurants has substantially increased the unemployment rate. Throughout Georgia tens of thousands of people lost their jobs in the hospitality sector during the pandemic. The number of employees at most hotels in Ajara has been reduced by half or even more. Currently, there is a shortage of staff in the specified sector of the country as the employees who were terminated during the epidemic have either secured alternative employment or departed Georgia in pursuit of it.

During our research, we observed that the small hotels in the region saw a high occupancy rate of 90-100% during the tourist season before the COVID-19. However, during the pandemic, the respondents reported that the occupancy rate fluctuated between 10-45%.

The epidemic has presented significant obstacles to worldwide schooling. Similarly, Georgia is also susceptible to the long-lasting consequences of the COVID-19 disaster. Georgia was among the first countries to swiftly respond and halt the spread of the infection at an early stage. Due to the emergency circumstances, on March 4th, instruction was halted at all educational institutions. The Government prioritized the universal accessibility of education and implemented online classes to ensure ongoing instruction. Since March 30th, all educational institutions have

implemented online teaching. A total of 56327 teachers participated in this online process (Measures Implemented by the Government of Georgia..., 2020). Consequently, the pupils and students completed the semester and can get over to the next grades (The Ministry of Education..., 2020; Measures Implemented by the Government of Georgia..., 2020).

Based on the research findings, we have reached the primary conclusion that the „excessive“ focus on population health and its negative impact on the economy pose a significant threat to the country's development. In 2021, there was a partial improvement in the epidemic scenario. Despite the lack of success for small hotel owners this year, the socio-economic measures implemented during the second phase of the epidemic, specifically the removal of most prohibitions, enabled the tourism industry to produce some revenue. Furthermore, within this timeframe, the foundation for the economic recovery, mostly centered around tourism, was established. Our survey conducted among managers and owners of small hotels in Ajara showed that the successful operation of facilities in this particular sector of lodging, may be attributed to the relaxation of limitations.

*“Reopening of borders and the resumption of foreign flights in 2021 resulted in increased income. In contrast, in 2020, it was challenging to cover even the hotel's utility bills”* (A male, small hotel owner, Batumi).

Ensuring traveler safety is a crucial need for the growth and progress of the tourism industry (Tourism Policy Responses..., 2020). This matter is not just influenced by the criminogenic nature of the state. The situation in Ajara is currently deemed to be normal. Tourists prioritize the country's political stability. Our research found that the political turmoil in Georgia or in the nearby regions adversely affects potential visitors.

In 2023, an event occurred in Ajara that significantly hindered the progress of tourism recovery, highlighting the vulnerability of the sector. Specifically, due to the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, the Kakhovka dam in Ukraine was destroyed on June 6th. There were rumors circulating that the Dnieper River had introduced toxic compounds into the Black Sea, resulting in significant pollution. Consequently, this led to a decline in the number of tourists visiting the coastal resorts of Georgia. Our research revealed that the abovementioned fact did not adversely affect the majority of hotels in Batumi, however the issue had a significant impact on the fluctuation of tourist numbers in Kobuleti and Gonio, as a large number of reservations were cancelled. Moreover, Georgians were more prone to cancelling reservations compared to



foreigners. Thus, the rumor had a greater impact on Georgians compared to outsiders. According to the female proprietor of a small hotel in Kobuleti:

*“Information of the sea pollution has been highly disturbing, particularly for Georgians, to the extent that holidaymakers are refraining from entering the sea...”*.

The female, owner of one of the Gonio hotels also mentioned:

*"They are reluctant to take children (into the sea)"*.

*"The detrimental impact on tourists (information about sea pollution) was so significant that I decided to create a pond as a result"* (A male, small hotel owner, Kobuleti).

*“The Black Sea water possesses a natural mechanism for purifying itself. However, despite this inherent ability, the dissemination of false information regarding water pollution still has an impact on the fluctuation of tourist numbers”* (A female, owner of small hotel in Kobuleti).

The Georgian tourism sector's recovery may suffer an irreparable setback due to political uncertainty in the country. Indications of this phenomenon are already apparent: based on official data, due to Georgia's citizens' fair protests against the Russian Law of Agents during the Spring 2024, foreign direct investment in the first half of the year decreased by 64% compared to the corresponding period in 2023 (Benson, 2024).

The issue of selling and leasing flats in the multifunctional complexes of the construction companies "Orbi" and "Alliance" in Batumi to both foreign nationals and Georgian citizens, is primarily a significant concern for Batumi tourism industry and especially for the neighboring hotels. Our research found that this fact did not have an influence on the segment of medium and branded hotels, however, it negatively affected both the workload and the price of small hotels. This is because hundreds of apartments are rented in them every year at a reasonable price. An experienced hotel proprietor with over two decades of expertise in hotel business indicates an inverse relationship between the number of apartments sold in these complexes and the number of holidaymakers visiting small hotels:

*"The more apartments (in these complexes) are sold, the less (our) vacationers are"* (A male, small hotel owner, Batumi).

In 2022-23, due to Russia-Ukraine war a significant number of individuals who migrated from Russia to Georgia to evade military mobilization and/or economic penalties imposed on the country, also had a negative impact on the workload of small hotels in Ajara. A large number of them obtained

either temporary or permanent resident status in our country. In addition, a significant amount of refugees arrived from Ukraine and Belarus. A substantial portion of Russian immigrants comprises financially affluent individuals, leading to the initiation of a new surge of remittances and investments in our nation. Georgia experienced a significant gain in its Gross Domestic Product (GDP), with a growth rate of 10% in the year 2022. In December 2022, remittances from Russia to Georgia averaged \$317 million, likely representing salaries given by enterprises to their employees residing in the country (Kucera, 2024). This has consequently provided a certain stimulus to the economic expansion of the country (The impact of..., 2024). It is worth mentioning that individuals of Slavic descent primarily established themselves in major urban areas, particularly in Tbilisi and Batumi. As early as 2019, the majority of real estate transactions in Batumi amounting to 69%, were made by foreigners, with a significant portion being citizens of Russia and Ukraine. In contrast, residents of Georgia accounted for just 31% of apartment purchases. Foreign individuals purchase apartments as a means of investing their money. 69 percent of bank loans in Batumi were granted to foreign citizens as well (Kordzaia & Chiligashvili, 2019). The population of short- and medium-term occupants, especially freelancers who own second residences, is growing among apartment owners. "Residential tourism" refers to a seasonal or long-term stay in a new place of residence (Benson & O'Reilly, 2009: 621). Consequently, a significant influx of Russian, Belarusian and Ukrainian visitors who possess apartments in Batumi occurs, resulting in their extended stays throughout the summer. Tourists are very at ease in this location due to the favorable climate, picturesque terrain and the population's tolerant disposition towards them, which contributes to a sense of security. Additionally, a significant number of Slavic people engage in entrepreneurial endeavors within the urban areas of Georgia and particularly in Batumi (Sitchinava, 2024). However, it must be mentioned that the Russians created their bubbles. They set up their own businesses and serve Russian tourists themselves with acquired apartments, restaurants, beauty salons and other establishments. In other words, Georgian stakeholders lost this particular group of tourists resulting in significant damage of both their businesses and the country's economy (Jokes, grievances and demonstrations..., 2023; Lomsadze, 2023).

It is important to highlight that in the years following the pandemic, the disparity in cost between small and high-class hotels has notably diminished. As a result, travelers now tend to go for high-class hotels.

*“The primary challenge faced by small hotels is the entrance of larger hotels into the market. The disparity in pricing between the two types of hotels is not significant, leading tourists to favor larger establishments”* (A male, small hotel financial manager, Gonio).

### ***Recovery process***

During the post-pandemic recovery phase, there is a significant emphasis placed on the preservation and enhancement of the hotel staff's skills and qualifications (Serrano-Baena *et al.*)

The credentials required for employment in most hotels in Batumi have been elevated, resulting in an increase in employee compensation. The majority of personnel in Kobuleti and Gonio did not experience a significant increase in their qualifications. However, in order to retain skilled employees, our respondents mentioned that they raised the salaries of their workforce.

The primary issue cited in all three settlements pertained to the hotel staff, specifically, the lack of qualified professionals. Amidst the epidemic, a substantial portion of skilled individuals either transitioned to a different industry or departed the country entirely, resulting in a shortage of competent professionals.

*"The staff is currently unavailable as they are overseas"* (A female, small hotel owner, Gonio).

*“(Now), it is challenging to recruit employees, although it was comparatively easier before the pandemic”* (A male, small hotel manager, Batumi).

In addition, the issue was highlighted due to the staff's insistence on receiving substantial compensation.

*"Unfortunately, I was forced to fire, because they requested to increase the salary”* (A male, small hotel manager, Batumi).

Out of the individuals we interviewed, just one hotel female proprietor in Kobuleti mentioned:

*"I retain the existing staff as the primary difficulties arise from a shortage of personnel and inadequate expertise".*

As an exception, at those hotels where family members were engaged in the business, they did not encounter any personnel-related issues.

The success of the post-pandemic recovery process is heavily contingent upon the influx of international tourists. The extent to which the proportion of foreigners among tourists in Ajara has increased during this period, varies depending on the specific research destinations. Based on the responses of most interviewees, there is a favorable trend in Batumi and Kobuleti in this aspect while there has been no observed increase in Gonio following the pandemic. Conversely, as reported by the respondents, the proportion of domestic visitors surpassed that of international tourists in 2023. Gonio is a popular destination among Georgians for its quiet and clean surroundings, although foreigners tend to favor more urbanized locations.

Discovering the desired type of tourists for small hotel owners/managers, whether local or foreign, was intriguing. In Gonio, this matter was settled in favor of local holidaymakers (owing to the lack of a language barrier, *"Georgians have a preference for family hotels", "there is greater trust in locals"*). However, in Batumi and Kobuleti the overwhelming majority of respondents opt for foreigners and they approach this matter from a commercial standpoint. The hosts mention internationals' substantial financial capacity and their tendency to refrain from canceling reservations, as they possess return tickets.

*"Georgian holidaymakers exhibit a lack of stability, frequently canceling their reservations, while foreigners are unpretentious and stable"* (A female, small hotel owner, Kobuleti).

*"Foreigners are charged higher rates, exhibit more discipline and are less pretentious. Furthermore, they do not request a discount"* (A female, small hotel manager, Batumi).

*"It is easy to meet the needs of foreign tourists"* (A female, boutique hotel owner, Kobuleti).

There are several challenges that are specific to small hotels in the post-pandemic period:

*"Taxes ought to be minimized. The government should prioritize the facilitation of international visitor influx and actively foster the growth of domestic tourism"* (A male, small hotel manager, Batumi);

*"It is preferable to organize the infrastructure in order to comply with the standards. Not even entertaining is here"* (A female, small hotel owner, Kobuleti).

*"You need to advertise in the target countries and train your staff"* (A male, small hotel owner, Kobuleti);

*"We set high prices ourselves"* (A male, small hotel manager, Gonio);

*„Effective hotel management involves careful planning and accurate marketing analysis, especially in terms of promoting the hotel in the market, delivering exceptional service to tourists and fostering trust. A hotel's primary focus should be on attracting and retaining visitors who have previously stayed at the hotel“ (A male, small hotel manager, Batumi);*

*"To make seaside recreation affordable for Georgians, it is imperative to enhance tourist influx and directly decrease prices within the city, including shops and dining establishments” (A female, small hotel manager, Batumi);*

## **Conclusions**

To summarize, it could be said:

Regarding the government's effectiveness, it is important to acknowledge that the actions performed during the initial phase of the pandemic were more successful than those implemented during the subsequent recovery period.

The management of the COVID-19 outbreak in Georgia, as in other places, demonstrated that the prioritization of the economy over public health was the eventual decision adopted.

Regrettably, the government of Ajara lacks a notable level of autonomy in both the tourism sector and socio-economic growth. The local authorities shown a lack of involvement during the epidemic and are displaying passivity in the post-pandemic recovery efforts. We consider that the weak state of decentralization in Georgia is the primary factor contributing to this situation.

It is worth mentioning that the pre-pandemic pattern of tourist arrivals by nation of origin remained largely the same in Ajara, with the exception of a notable increase in the number of tourists from Russia, particularly in Kobuleti and Batumi. Historically, a large proportion of Russian visitors preferred to spend their vacations in the Krasnodar region and Crimea. However, the ongoing conflict in Ukraine has rendered Crimea an unsafe destination for traveling. Starting in 2022, a specific portion of Russian tourists visit Ajara. Approximately 110 thousand Russian individuals relocated to Georgia in the year 2022.

The Georgian government has not imposed any restrictions on Russian citizens in terms of entry, residency and conducting business in the country, leading to favorable economic outcomes. However, a substantial proportion of Russians have already departed from Georgia. By December 2023, their amount decreased significantly and money transferred from Russia dropped to \$71

million (Kucera, 2024). This development is a significant setback for the Georgian economy. The replacement of Russian tourists, particularly the cash generated by them, does not appear to be feasible.

The reintroduction of the Foreign Agents Law in May 2024 prompted the mobilization of large-scale demonstrations in Tbilisi and other prominent urban centers across the nation. This significantly damages the county's political and economic life (Avdaliani, 2024) as well as its tourism sector by deterring international tourists and disrupting the influx of local vacationers to popular tourist spots like seaside resorts of Ajara.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused extensive economic, social, psychological and cultural harm on the tourism industry. Furthermore, it is believed by experts that the tourism industry in Georgia will need a significant amount of time to recover to its pre-2019 status (e.g., Abbas, et al. 2021; Lee & Phi, 2021; Kaushal and Srivastava, 2021).

Recovery methods, effective legislation, and sustainable finance are essential for the revival of the tourism industry. Tourism in Georgia has predominantly evolved spontaneously. The introduction of business innovations in tourism and cooperation with all stakeholders receive insufficient attention. This is particularly evident in the small hotel sector. It is important to point out that the government, despite its commitment, did not implement an efficient anti-crisis plan for the tourism industry.

In the coming years, it will be valuable to conduct research to examine the success of the post-pandemic recovery process in both small and large hotels across various regions of Georgia. In addition, it is important to find out the underlying reasons behind the failure of the formulation and implementation of the tourism recovery strategy in Georgia, specifically in Ajara.

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