

## IMPACT OF THE GLOBAL COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE SLOVAK ECONOMY (TOURISM AND EDUCATION)

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**Aim.** The aim of the contribution is to evaluate the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Slovak economy. We analyzed the pertinent data relating to Slovakia's economy, tourism, and education infrastructures, and also the measures introduced during the pandemic which affected them.

**Methods.** The paper is mainly based on descriptive, analytical and statistical methods, and based on global statistics data, studies, and research conducted in this field.

**Results.** In 2020, the Slovak economy decreased by 9.3%. The reason was not only domestic measures against the spread of the coronavirus, but also a slump in foreign demand. The growth of the Slovak economy had already slowed during 2019, even before the onset of the COVID-19 disease. Extensive travel restrictions, especially at the international level, fundamentally affected the total number of visitors, in particular during the period March to August 2021. Almost 1.6 million visitors stayed in hotels, boarding houses, and other accommodation facilities in Slovakia during this period of the pandemic, which represented a decrease of almost 54% when compared to the pre-pandemic year of 2019.

**Conclusion.** The significant deterioration of the economy was the result of a large number of significant restrictive measures taken to stop the spread of the COVID-19 disease. The factor of the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the future of tourism and education, bringing changes to their direction and economic benefits. This pandemic has significantly affected education in Slovakia and worldwide, and we are following its transformation.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, economy, education, non-formal education, tourism, Slovakia

**INTRODUCTION**

The domestic Slovak economy is experiencing a historic decline in its performance, mirroring the general pattern of the global economy. The effects of the pandemic are society-wide affecting households, businesses and schools, and they are gradually negatively impacting on the Slovak financial sector. In addition, the spread of the COVID-19 disease adversely affected the Slovak economy, and its recovery was and still is affected by the length and scope of the quarantine and the restrictions adopted both at home and in the world. The pandemic also had a great influence on the quality of life (Petrovič & Maturkanič, 2022; Murgaš et al., 2022, Tvrdoň et al., 2022a; Tvrdoň et al., 2022b). This crisis is significantly different from the

previous global crisis of 2008 to 2010 because, unlike the previous crisis, its source is not primarily in the financial sector but rooted in the real economy. The significant deterioration of the economy resulted from a large number of restrictive measures taken to stop the spread of the COVID-19 disease. It was expected that the economy would experience a temporary significant slump but its functioning could be quickly restored after the crisis; however, many businesses, employees and self-employed people lost a substantial part of their income, putting pressure on their financial situation and resulting in complications with debt repayment, necessitating the use of savings. The initial shock that affected the real economy subsequently affected the financial system and its stability. In 2020, the Slovak economy decreased by 9.3% (or in the interval from 5.8% to 13.5%) due to a slump in foreign demand as well as domestic measures against the spread of the coronavirus. Influenced by weakening global demand the growth of the Slovak economy had already slowed during 2019 before the onset of the COVID-19 disease, starting this year at 3% and finishing it at 2%. Economic growth was thus based on domestic demand; households in particular made a stable contribution to economic growth with their consumption, while in the second half of 2019 both the growth of the economy and investments added significantly. Factors such as the radical changes that occurred in the development of the economy as a result of the pandemic, domestic measures taken against the spread of the coronavirus, and a significant weakening of foreign demand due to the adoption of similar restrictive measures in countries that are important from the point of view of Slovak exports, caused the Slovak economy to go into recession (Matijová & Onuferová, 2020).

Currently, we see that the tourism industry has reacted very sensitively to fluctuations in national economies, political developments, or security. The pandemic points to the fact that tourism positively affects economic development, reduces unemployment, and increases the competitiveness of economies, but only during periods of economic growth. Economic fluctuations caused by the COVID-19 pandemic draw attention to globalisation and its effects. Several economic sectors were affected to a great extent, but the tourism sector was especially threatened, not only in Slovakia but also in Europe. This fact draws attention to the necessity of changes in the structure of the national economy.

Tourism is a part of the national economy and belongs to the tertiary sector (service sector); it has direct bearing on many different areas and as such affects several sectors of the economy. Thus, tourism represents an interdepartmental sector that also directly falls into the sphere of economy, industry, trade, finance, transport, culture, healthcare, education, regional development, sport, environmental protection, and employment (Babinský, 2012). The factors affecting tourism and the tourism destination currently include access to information - internalisation of society, the shift of interest from services to experiences, economic distance, demographic

development, motorisation, safety, free time and money, environment, healthy lifestyle, social networks, mobile communication and applications, growth in the level of 'travel experiences', hospitality and community, and sustainable development (Goeldner & Richie 2014). The factor of the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the future of tourism and education, bringing changes to their direction and economic benefits. Education in Slovakia and worldwide was significantly affected by the pandemic, and we are following its transformation. With the introduction of the epidemic measures, education was taken online and switched to a form of distance learning, allowing teachers to decide whether to use the offline mode or switch to the online mode (Haskova et al., 2021; Kondrla et al., 2022; Králik et al., 2018; Tkáčová et al., 2023). In addition to the distance form, some subjects could be taught in an external environment in the field (Grežo & Petrovič, 2019; Petrikovičová et al., 2021; Rychnová et al., 2022; Vallo et al., 2019).

## THE PANDEMIC AND TOURISM

The world today faces the greatest economic challenge since the end of World War II. The cause of the critical development was the outbreak of the dangerous disease COVID-19. The individual governments of countries around the world responded to the threat by introducing strict quarantine measures in an attempt to reduce the transmission of the COVID-19 disease and protect the health of the population. The measures taken brought a toll in the form of an immediate and very significant slowdown in economic activity. A large number of businesses, entrepreneurs and employees found themselves unable to earn an income, with a subsequent impact on their overall financial condition and ability to pay their obligations. The pandemic also had a significant impact on the tourism industry, until now considered the largest service sector, leading to many social and economic changes.

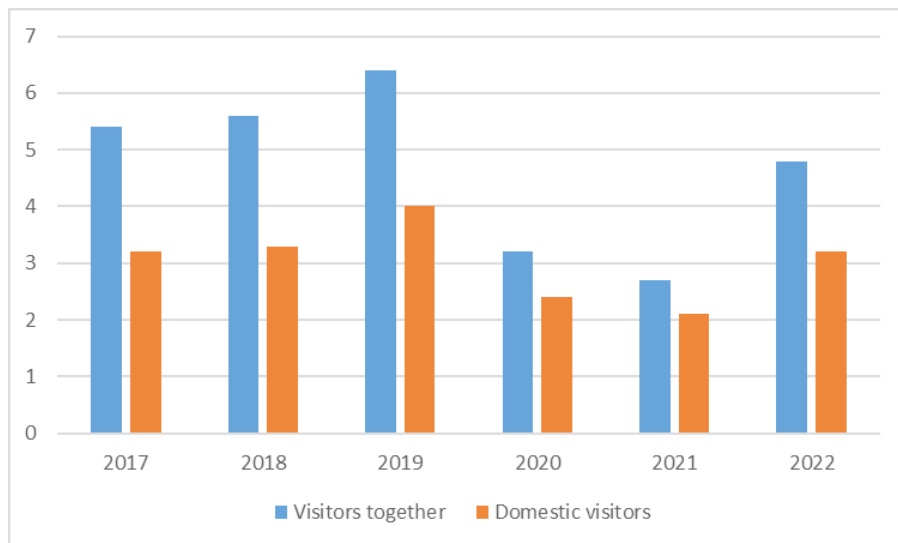
In 2018, World Health Organization (WHO) published a list of infectious diseases that pose a threat to human health. First on the list were viral hemorrhagic fevers (Ebola, Marburg disease, Lassa fever, Crimean-Congo hemorrhagic fever), followed by infections caused by the coronavirus (MERS and SARS) and disease X (a disease from a pathogen that is not yet known, is of animal origin and viral etiology). At the end of 2019, disease X was revealed to be the disease COVID-19, which is caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. This epidemic broke out in central China in the province of Hubei in the city of Wuhan.

The first problem that was observed during the coronavirus pandemic was its resistance to health protection and the rapid increase of patients who required constant medical attention. Rich countries such as Italy, France, the United States and Japan were not able to prevent this virus from spreading, and therefore it could not be expected that it would be possible

to prevent the spread in poorer countries where health care is poorly developed. Such countries are often tourist destinations e.g., Thailand, Mexico, Tunisia, and Morocco. Therefore, we could not expect that the health systems that were affected by the pandemic would be able to provide tourists with proper protection against the existing threats to their health.

Extensive travel restrictions during the pandemic, especially at the international level, fundamentally affected the total number of visitors, in particular during the period March to August 2021. Almost 1.6 million visitors stayed in hotels, boarding houses, and other accommodation facilities in Slovakia during this period of the pandemic, which represented a decrease of almost 54% when compared to the pre-pandemic year of 2019. Of these visitors, 75.5% were domestic, a decrease of 42% from 2019, and 24.5% were foreigners, a decrease of 71%. In July 2020, roughly 570,000 visitors stayed in hotels, boarding houses, and Slovak accommodation facilities (20% less than in July 2019), the majority of whom were domestic tourists. Logically, the number of domestic visitors in the months of July and August (2020) exceeded the numbers of the successful summer season (before the pandemic) in 2019, because travel abroad was not possible, hence their number increased by 2.2% to more than 424,000 in July. However, there were only 145,000 foreign visitors registered in Slovak accommodation facilities in the same period; this is a large reduction when compared to almost 300,000 registered foreign visitors in July 2019 (the summer before the pandemic) and it indicates that hotels frequented by tourists were hit hardest by the crisis. In August 2020, almost 684,000 visitors stayed in hotels, boarding houses, and other Slovak accommodation facilities, which was 13.6% less than in August 2019. In 2021 in August, the number of visitors to hotels, boarding houses, and other tourism facilities almost exceeded 800 thousand people. The number of guests in August 2021 thus came closer to the level of August 2018, when 673,000 guests stayed in Slovakia. Almost 2.6 million visitors were accommodated in tourism facilities during the year 2021, which represented a year-on-year decrease of 41%. Of these, 71.5% were domestic visitors and 28.5% were foreigners. The length of stays did not change during the whole pandemic period, averaging 3.1 nights. According to the latest data as of August 2021, a total of 4,361 accommodation facilities served the tourism industry. There were 72.5 thousand rooms and 190.7 thousand beds available. Compared to August 2019, the number of rooms decreased by 2.4 thousand (by 3.3%) and the number of beds by 6.2 thousand (by 3.2%) (Figure 1) (Štatistický úrad SR, 2023).

Worldwide, according to The United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) (2023), there is a similar overall decrease. International tourist arrivals fell from nearly 1.5 billion in 2019 to around 380 million in 2020, a 74 percent decline. This represents a loss of an estimated US\$1.3 trillion in international tourism spending, about 11 times the loss from the global crisis in 2009. The Asia Pacific region saw the largest decline (down 84%), followed by the Middle East and Africa (75%).



**Figure 1**

*Visitors in tourism accommodation facilities in 2017-2022 (in mil.)*

Source. Štatistický úrad SR, 2023

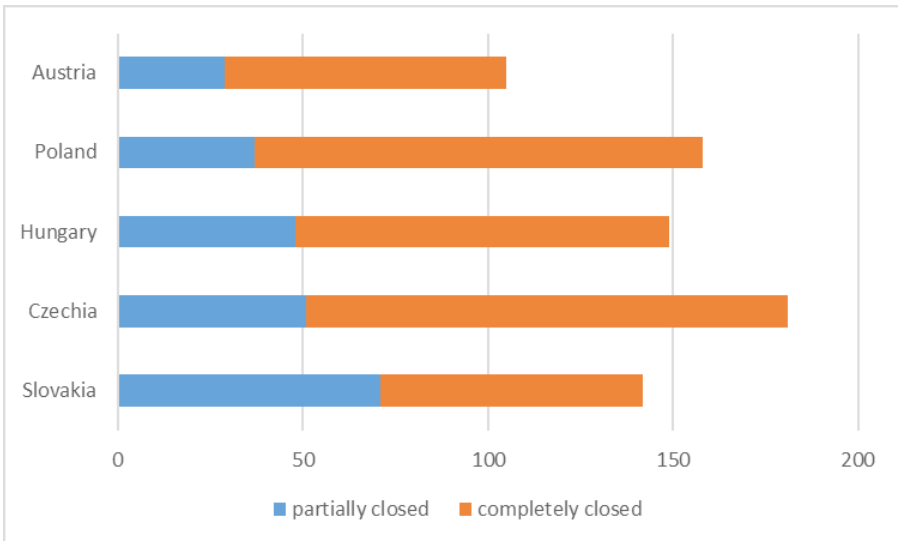
## THE PANDEMIC AND EDUCATION

In Slovakia, schools were partially closed on March 9<sup>th</sup> 2020, and all over the world from March 16<sup>th</sup> 2020. Their closure in Slovakia was a reaction to the first discovered case of the new coronavirus in the country and was implemented despite the fact that the number of people infected during this period did not indicate that it was an epidemic in the sense of the population being overrun by the virus. Even with a relatively very low number of infected people, the widespread closure of schools in Slovakia lasted until the end of May 2020. By 25<sup>th</sup> May 2020, almost a million pupils and students, i.e., around a fifth of the population, were learning remotely (or not learning at all) (Figure 2). The most affected group, almost half of all students, were high school students. Almost 52,000 primary and secondary school pupils lost access to education in this year (7.5% of the pupil population). Up to 8.2% of primary school students and 5% of secondary school students did not have to participate in formal education (Ostertágová & Čokyna, 2020).

In addition to the impact on children's education and social skills, school closures also have an impact on their future economic situation and earnings. The World Bank estimates that with the loss of 0.6 years of effective schooling, the current cohort of first- and second-grade primary school students could lose 872 Euros of income per month, which represents a total

of 16,000 Euros over the years of work. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), each additional year of schooling increases living income by an average of 7.5% to 10%. Using these figures, it could be calculated that, since elementary and secondary school students missed a third of the school year, their earnings could be 3% lower than if they had not. In Slovakia, as a result of the closure of schools during the first wave, the future salary of children at the primary and secondary level of education would be reduced by 0.3 to 0.9%, during their entire working life (Hellebrandt, 2020).

Learning from home cannot directly and fully replace school attendance; Wößmann et al. (2020), studying a sample of children from Germany, stated that children reduced the time used for learning by 50% compared to the period before the pandemic. The number of hours spent in education, therefore, dropped from an average of 7.4 in a formal setting to 3.6 hours spent learning at home. In addition, one must also consider the fact that even these 3.6 hours are not necessarily spent engaged in actual learning by all children; on the contrary, up to 38% of children do not spend more than 2 hours a day studying. Inevitably, the time spent watching TV or playing on tablets increased, up to an average of 5.2 hours per day. Such a scenario is very likely to apply to pupils in Slovakia.



**Figure 2**

*Comparison of the number of days schools were partially or completely closed in V4 countries in 2020*

Source. Ministerstvo školstva, vedy, výskumu a športu SR, 2023



## PANDEMIC MEASURES

Due to the impact of the pandemic, international and domestic tourism was significantly limited. According to the UNWTO report in April 2020, up to 96% of countries took measures to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus, and global measures appertaining to international travel were manifested in four areas. The first entailed closing or partially closing the borders to tourists. The second measure referred to a travel restriction for a specific destination, when passengers could only transit through a territory. The third measure related to the suspension of flights. The fourth restriction was quarantine, isolation, the introduction of visa measures, and travel bans for tourists coming from certain areas. In December 2020, up to 70% of destinations relaxed these travel restrictions, but the situation in tourism remained critical. In order to inhibit the spread of the virus, the activity of some businesses in the tourism industry was restricted or banned, therefore it was appropriate for these enterprises to receive help from the state. The Ministry of Transport and Construction of the Slovak Republic thus developed a proposal to support the tourist industry, with the intention of mitigating the negative consequences caused by the pandemic (Šebová & Dula, 2021).

When the first positive case of infection with the new coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 appeared in the Slovak Republic in the spring of 2020, the Slovak government took account of the development of the situation abroad and gradually adopted several restrictive measures that led to the suppression of economic, social and cultural life (Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020; Leite et al., 2020; Petrovič et al., 2021). Borders, schools, and businesses were closed, movement was restricted, and work was transferred to the online environment (Blahušiaková, 2021). From the end of April 2020, in connection with the improvement of the situation, there was a gradual relaxation of these measures.

Although the summer months of 2020 brought complete freedom from the measures, in the autumn of 2020 the situation began to deteriorate again and Slovakia was hit by the second wave of the pandemic, which led to the adoption of even stricter restrictive measures, which continued into the spring of 2021. Already the first estimates of the effects of the government's restrictive measures (ZMPS, 2020; Finstat, 2020; Janko, 2020) spoke of a huge drop in the gross domestic product and sales as well as an increase in unemployment (Bečka, 2020), including announcements of several mass layoffs. The impact of the closure of the economy was manifested by the deterioration of the financial situation and profitability of a large number of business and non-business entities (Blahušiaková, 2020; Kordošová, 2021; Memon et al., 2021; Gomes, 2021; Shen et al., 2020). Since the restrictive measures aimed at limiting the spread of the virus and protecting human health severely affected all the services within the tourism industry, the sector was identified as the one on which the lockdown had the greatest



negative impact (Kullová, 2020). The situation in the gastro sector, the so-called HoReCa (hotels, restaurants, cafes) sector was critical. According to a survey conducted in February 2021 on the #StaleMameChut platform (Slašťanová, 2021), which brings together 14 organisations and initiatives united to save the gastro sector in Slovakia (e.g. Association of Hotels and Restaurants of Slovakia, Association of Small Independent Breweries of Slovakia, Let's Save Gastro Initiative, Help for Gastro, Food Chamber of Slovakia, Slovak Association of Cooks and Confectioners, Slovak Association of Meat Processors, etc.), more than 80% of the respondents applied for assistance for the period April to October 2020 from the scheme for tourism managed by the Ministry of Transport and Construction of the Slovak Republic. However, almost two-thirds of them had not received an answer in respect of their application at the time of the survey (February 12, 2021 - February 18, 2021), and up to 78% of the applicants among the survey participants had not received any funds. The greatest interest was shown in the first period of assistance for employment support from the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, and Family of the Slovak Republic, which was requested by 87% of the respondents of the survey. Only 43.7% of respondents asked for assistance from the Ministry of Economy of the Slovak Republic to reimburse part of their rent in the form of a subsidy; 20% of establishments operate on their own premises and could not use this assistance, and 15% of establishments did not reach an agreement with their landlord. The closure of establishments, the ban on outdoor terraces, and the impossibility of functioning other than through delivery, made the gastro sector the most affected area of the Slovak economy (Blahušiaková, 2020, 2021). In the autumn of 2020, approximately 60% of establishments announced that they would have to close their operations if they did not receive help in the form of loans or state aid. In approximately 68.2% of establishments, attendance dropped to a quarter of the normal level.

According to a survey conducted at the beginning of July 2021 by the signatories of the "Pomoc pro gastro" initiative on a sample of 500 restaurants (TASR, 2021), up to 52% of gastro enterprises would not survive the next wave of the coronavirus if the aid from the state was the same as in the previous crisis period. According to the results of the survey, 9% of businesses did not open after the second wave of the corona crisis, over 60% of entrepreneurs operating in the gastro sector had already started to lay off employees in the first wave of the pandemic, 80% of entrepreneurs got into debt and had to resort to loans, 60% of businesses lack qualified staff and 45% of gastro businesses reported fewer guests than before the pandemic. For more than 40% of businesses the basis of sales was the daily lunch menu which, however, could not be offered during the pandemic. The results of the survey also showed that companies would be helped by encouraging consumption in the form of food vouchers.

As a result of the massive cancellation or postponement of trips, vacations, and the suspension of international transport, we can state that the

crisis associated with COVID-19 has significantly changed the tourism industry (Cohen, 2020; Gallego et al., 2020). As in the case of previous economic crises (Pawlicz, 2012; Ivanov & Stavrinoudis, 2018; Judák, Mahrik et al., 2022), the reduced interest of tourists resulted in a decrease in occupancy and sales in the hotel industry and, as a result, in a decrease in employment and a deterioration of living conditions in local communities.

Closing schools seemed at first glance to be an effective way to prevent the spread of COVID-19, but United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) (2020) points out that the benefits of keeping schools open far outweigh the costs of closing them, and the widespread closure of schools did not help in the fight against the coronavirus pandemic. In order to maintain a safe environment in schools, the Ministry of Education compiled a manual called *The School Traffic Light* in the 2021/2022 school year, setting out the basic operating conditions of schools and school facilities, including the specifics of compliance with anti-pandemic measures and recommendations during the COVID-19 pandemic. The green phase represented a state where the school has no pupils or employees who had been confirmed to have COVID-19. The orange phase captured the situation when the school had a pupil or employee with a confirmed COVID-19 disease. The red phase contained a list of measures in case of positivity of several students or workers (epidemic occurrence). The Ministry did not close entire schools when it was not necessary, and only the affected individual classes were switched to distance learning. When starting school for the first time, and after each interruption of school attendance that lasted for three or more consecutive days (including weekends and holidays), the parent of a pupil or an adult student submitted a "Written Declaration of No Symptoms" to the school. This declaration was also handed to the class teacher on arrival at the school after the summer vacation, on September 2<sup>nd</sup> 2021. In the event that the student met the conditions for exemption from quarantine, a separate notice would also be given to the class teacher. In 2022, all measures were abolished.

## TOURISM IN THE POST-PANDEMIC PERIOD

The programme statement of the government for the period 2020 - 2024 also includes strategies for coping with the negative consequences of the pandemic, including those relating to employment and competitiveness in the tourism industry. After the end of the pandemic, the government used the recreation allowance, a benefit already in place, to restart tourism, thus trying to stimulate demand for domestic tourism. The industry is also being supported by marketing activities to encourage tourists to spend their free time and holidays using the tourist facilities in Slovakia.

Immediately after the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government supported tourism by considering a VAT reduction for all services in the

tourism industry. They prepared a proposal for support based on tax measures and financial support from the public administration budget for renting private rooms in family houses with up to 10 beds in rural tourist areas of Slovakia (Trexima, 2020).

UNWTO said that tourism would not return to pre-coronavirus levels until 2024 at the earliest. In early 2022, the Omicron variant disrupted the recovery of the tourism industry. The tourism industry in 2021 saw an increase of 4% compared to 2020. In the first year of the pandemic, i.e., 2020, revenues from tourism fell by 72%. The UNWTO said that the pace of tourism recovery remained slow and uneven in different regions of the world, due to restrictions on mobility, vaccination, and tourists' concerns with the conditions of travel and safety. In 2021, compared to 2020, the number of foreign visitors in Europe increased by 19%, and in America by 17%. In 2021, the number of tourists in the Middle East fell by 24%, and in the Asia-Pacific region the number of visitors fell by up to 65%. There are many countries that are dependent on tourism and are anxiously waiting to get back to normal. The UNWTO reports that in 2021, the economic contribution of tourism was estimated at USD 1.9 trillion (EUR 1.67 trillion), an increase from 2020 when it was 1.6 trillion USD (more than 1.4 trillion euros), but still significantly below the value that was there before the pandemic, namely 3.5 trillion USD (more than 3 trillion euros) (Spravy RtvS, 2022).

The revival of the activity of travel agencies and the achievement of revenues from the pre-crisis period is expected by 2030 at the latest, but only if several prerequisites are met. Comprehensive tourism support must be strategically oriented and include marketing, financial and legislative support. Experts point out that the development of the activities of travel agencies requires targeted financial support to stabilise the present situation in order to create the conditions for development in a later period (Macháč, 2021).

## EDUCATION IN THE POST-PANDEMIC PERIOD

Long-term loss of income is not only a problem for the individuals directly affected. This loss also affects the overall economy of the country, which, due to the limitation of schooling, will progress with a less skilled workforce, which in turn will lead to lower economic growth. OECD calculations (2020) forecast that an annual decline in GDP could be as high as 1.5% in its member countries, which represents 0.4 to 1.4 billion euros (0.45% to 1.45% of GDP) when applied to Slovakia (Openiazoch, 2020). In Slovakia there are currently thousands of pupils and students who have practically lost a year of fully-fledged education, and there is currently no plan in place to address these losses. The neglect of mitigating the consequences of the pandemic is also confirmed by a study in collaboration with UNESCO, UNICEF, and the

World Bank (2020), which shows that over 15% of countries do not provide students and pupils with additional support and opportunities to catch up on missed lessons after the reopening of schools. Slovakia is also among these countries. In addition, the study points out that gaps in education deepen not only differences between population groups within countries but also internationally. Several authors have devoted themselves to education and research on the perception of the post-COVID situation (Budayová & Ludvigh Cintulová, 2023; Bajan et al. 2023; Judák, Akimjak et al., 2022; Jarmoch et al., 2022; Kardis et al., 2023; Králik et al., 2022; Králik et al., 2023).

In the school year 2022/2023, schools functioned as they did before the COVID-19 pandemic, without major restrictions. Pupils sat at the desks without the need to wear masks and respirators, and isolation was only applicable for a person testing positive. Testing is no longer mandatory in schools. However, voluntary self-testing is available in schools which have ten percent of their students confirmed with the coronavirus.

## CONCLUSION

Even the winter tourist season in Slovakia suffered due to pandemic measures, but thanks to the clear and predictable rules it was possible to start accepting foreign tourists. These pandemic measures were finally relaxed at the end of 2021; however, the war in Ukraine, a neighbouring country to Slovakia, began to complicate the situation in respect to tourism.

Slovakia is part of the V4 group of countries, a cultural and political alliance promoting cooperation between the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia. Thus, in 2021, these countries agreed to jointly support tourism by starting to promote tourism abroad together under the "Discover Central Europe" brand. These countries have a common marketing budget, common activities and common goals. The conference that took place in Budapest was at the highest level, and involved discussion about the conflict in Ukraine with respect to the effect it has on tourism in the region, especially as the V4 countries are perceived as countries that are on the border of this military conflict in Ukraine. If it were not for this conflict, tourism would have developed quite promisingly, especially considering the fact that, unlike the previous year, it was possible to create conditions for planning a vacation in Slovakia (Trend, 2022).

The factor of the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the future of tourism and education, bringing changes to their direction and economic benefits. Education in Slovakia, but also worldwide, was significantly affected by the pandemic, and we are following its transformation. Just as the coronavirus is changeable, so is the situation that education must face. In recent times, the so-called hybrid teaching, where certain activities would take place online and others in person, has become more common. Such a solution has its justification, but it requires rigorous teaching planning.

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