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COVID-19 and governmental measures to support tourist guides

– a research note

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The paper provides an overview of the measures governments have taken to alleviate the negative economic impacts of the pandemic on the tourist guides as one of the hardest hit professions. Measures for entrepreneurs in general and specific measures for tourist guides are examined. Desirability of support measures is discussed and creative examples of best practice provided.

Keywords: tourist guides; coronavirus; COVID-19; economic measures; economic help

Subject classification codes: L83, Z31

1 Introduction

While the coronavirus pandemic of 2020 affected the whole global economy, one of the hardest hit sectors was undisputedly tourism. The countries tried to stop the spread of the virus by closing their borders and severely limiting air transportation, and as a consequence international (and to a certain extend also domestic) travel came to a virtual standstill. Tourist guides – typically working as freelancers (FEG, 2020) – were among the most severely impacted professions.

Several studies have already been published dealing with possible impacts of coronavirus on tourism. As the full extent of the pandemic is not yet known, they are mostly opinion-based (Assaf & Scuderi, 2020; Gössling et al., 2020; Romagosa, 2020). Those few which try to offer quantitative predictions (ICAO, 2020; OECD, 2020; UN

WTO, 2020) take into account extremely divergent scenarios. None of the studies focuses on tourist guides, even though the OECD (2020) report which tries to sum up world-wide tourism responses to coronavirus, mentions the profession on several occasions. The only exception is a survey administered by the European Federation of Tourist Guide Associations in April 2020 (FEG, 2020) which shows that average coronavirus-related income loss for European tourist guides rose from 523 euros in February to 2,360 euros in April.

The aim of the present research letter is to provide a brief assessment of the situation of tourist guides around the world, focusing on measures the governments have taken to alleviate the negative economic impacts of the pandemic.

2 Methods

The research is based on two approaches. First, we conducted an online search of national websites related to coronavirus to identify economic measures taken to support entrepreneurs in general and (if available) tourist guides specifically. The author of the paper speaks several languages; for websites written in other languages that had no English version Google Translator was used. Second, to complement the online search, we administered a survey in the form of a questionnaire among tourist guides all around the world, following the same goal. This was not supposed to be a representative survey, but rather one that would allow us to detect other measures we could have overlooked online. It was sent to tourist guide associations from six continents in July 2020 and generated 214 replies from 28 countries.

3 Results and discussion

The vast majority of the countries in the world, especially those from Africa, South America and the Pacific, took no measures to support entrepreneurs hit by the COVID-

19 crisis. Those governments which did usually applied the assistance broadly across economic sectors and did not limit it to tourism.

The most widely used measure was direct financial help, adopted by the majority of the EU members, USA, Canada and several countries in Asia. In some cases, such as in the USA, it was a one-off payment resembling “helicopter money”, not meant specifically for entrepreneurs but issued to households with certain level of annual income. A similar scheme was debated in New Zealand, but it seems unlikely to materialize. One-off grants managed on municipal level were also distributed in Finland.

Table 1. Measures adopted by governments to support entrepreneurs in general.

<i>Measure</i>	<i>Example of country</i>
Direct financial help	Numerous
Waiver or deferral of social/healthcare insurance payments	Numerous
Deferral of payment of income/corporate taxes	Numerous
Loans at low interest rates	Numerous
Extension of unemployment benefits to self-employed	USA
Tax relief	Kenya
Suspension of tax audits	Slovenia
Deferral of payment of invoices (electricity, gas etc.)	Bonaire, Spain
Deferral of loan repayments	Hungary
Financial help with rental payments	Slovakia

Source: own research.

For the bulk of the countries, financial help was paid on a monthly basis and was connected to a certain condition, such as a decrease in turnover (Slovakia), sales

(Poland) or earnings (Canada). It ranged from 75 euros in South Africa to 1,275 euros in Canada, averaging between 400 and 800 euros. In most cases it had a special temporary form of direct subsidy, but in some countries (Finland) it was an unemployment benefit, made possible by adding flexibility to the usually-applied rule of requiring entrepreneurs to suspend their business while receiving benefits. USA also relaxed the unemployment legislation and allowed payment of the benefits to self-employed individuals.

Other frequent measures included deferral of tax payments and deferral of social and/or healthcare insurance payments by several months. Some countries went even further and provided tax reliefs to certain entrepreneurs (Kenya) or waived some of the insurance payments while postponing others (Slovakia, Czechia, etc.). Almost all the countries launched a sort of small businesses and entrepreneurs loan programme with low interest rates (Slovakia, Turkey, etc.) or no interest at all if conditions are met (New Zealand).

Trying to limit possible spread of bankruptcies and secondary insolvency, Slovakia developed a scheme to help entrepreneurs with rental payments, where renter is expected to provide a discount from the rent, which will be then matched by the government; e.g. if the renter provides a 30-per-cent discount, 30-per-cent of the rent will be paid by the government and the remaining 40% by the tenant. Spain and Bonaire deferred utility payments and Hungary adopted compulsory deferral of loan repayments both for households and businesses.

From among non-financial measures, temporary suspension of tax audits was the most widely used one (Slovakia, Slovenia, etc.). Interestingly, many respondents of the questionnaire indicated that the measure that was of the most help to them was “providing fast and reliable information about coronavirus”.

While none of the above-mentioned actions was taken especially for tourist guides, they were mostly eligible to take advantage of them. Tourist guides are often overlooked as a part of the tourism industry, and the tourism response of governments was normally directed at hotels, restaurants and travel agencies. Only a few countries actually took measures specifically related to tourist guides (Table 2). These were usually of little financial value and included mostly waiver of licence fees, deferral of registration deadlines or organization of educational webinars and trainings. Where direct financial help was provided to tourist guides, it was considered very unsatisfactory by the guides themselves (e.g. approx. 75 euros in South Africa). Additionally, many governments decided to support domestic tourism either by means of marketing campaigns or tourism vouchers of various types, thus providing at least indirect support to the tourist guide community.

Table 2. Specific measures adopted by governments that support tourist guides.

<i>Measure</i>	<i>Example of country</i>
Waiver of licence fees	Azerbaijan, Singapore
Deferral of registration deadlines	Colombia, Czechia
Direct financial support for tourist guides	South Africa
Training allowance	Singapore
Professional educational webinars	Israel
Measures to support domestic tourism: vouchers	Croatia, Slovakia
Measures to support domestic tourism: campaign	Canada, New Zealand

Source: own research.

Some measures even go against the guides' interests. For example, in Korea the government sped up the development of new language versions of its "Digital Storytelling Service" application which is supposed to substitute "live" tourist guides. It is possible that as a result of the pandemic the adoption of similar applications will become more widespread.

It is important to note that tourist guides are just one of the many professions hit by the pandemic. In numbers and negotiating power they are easily dwarfed by other lobby groups and are often not considered the key element of tourism infrastructure, hence it cannot be reasonably expected that governments would take significant special measures for them. On the other hand, however, the argument goes that one of the guides' crucial roles is working as ambassadors of their country (Zhang & Chow, 2004), strengthening its image by means of story-telling and selectively disseminating positive information. In a way, they constitute a marketing channel that is almost costless for the governments and can be used in myriad of ways; it would therefore be logical to support this group in the times of pandemic. An interesting example was set by the Faroe Islands, where local tourist board equipped guides with cameras and sent them on a path that can be controlled by online viewers – the information made it to the news and attracted worldwide attention. Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia, launched a campaign called "tourist in one's own city", streaming short videos about the city's attractions, and once epidemiologic measures were relaxed also offering municipality-funded city tours. In a not-so-distant past, some socialist countries provided guided tours to high school students to complement their history education. Similar creative measures can be introduced to support the guides as well as a country's image instead of just providing direct payment without any equivalent; or not providing assistance at all.

4 Conclusions

It is obvious that the profession will have to adapt to a new reality where higher share of individual travel, higher share of proximity tourism, stronger emphasis on health and safety, and digital applications might become standard. It remains to be seen whether the measures adopted by governments will be sufficient to support the tourist guides and what percentage of the community will go out of business. If the measures are unsatisfactory and/or the pandemic lasts for too long, we could witness de-professionalization of the profession with more and more practitioners realizing that guiding cannot be one's only job, and other, more stable sources of income are necessary. Possible effect of the phenomenon on the quality of guided tours is difficult to assess, but can hardly be positive.

Further research should monitor the development of tourism-related governmental measures as the pandemic progresses, and focus on evaluating their financial and qualitative impact. However, any quantitative analysis will necessarily be only an "educated guess" until coronavirus vaccine is available.

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