

NAVIGATING TOURISM INNOVATIONS IN THE POST-COVID-19 ERA: A CASE STUDY OF LITHUANIA

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ABSTRACT: The goal of this article is to uncover the innovative changes that have emerged in Tourist Information Centres (TICs) in Lithuania as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The article is based on the assessment of primary research data collected through completed in-depth questionnaires. The research results revealed that a significant number of TICs transformed their activities while adapting them to local tourists. TICs introduced new products, attractions, and services, updated webpages and mobile applications, and created online souvenir shops. The research results indicated that, because of the lockdown, some state tourism institutions in the regions, along with local service providers, experienced a ‘renaissance’ and a successful period. New products and services were essential for the tourism sector’s survival, and the majority of them continue to be used in the post-COVID reality, providing opportunities for greater resilience and reduced dependence on unexpected circumstances in the future. This article addresses discussion points related to general changes in tourism services in the context of resilience and the application of innovations. Additionally, the article introduces the concept of *Re-tourism*, which adds value to the development of the theoretical framework for post-COVID tourism.

KEYWORDS: tourism innovations, Tourist Information Centre, COVID-19 pandemic, post-COVID-19 era, re-tourism conception, Lithuania

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Introduction

The tourism sector was one of the fastest-growing economic sectors in the 21st century, significantly contributing to job creation, socio-economic and cultural development in Lithuania, Europe and worldwide (McCabe, Qiao 2020; Abbas et al. 2021). However, 2020 became a ‘shock’ year when the COVID-19 virus spread globally, leading to a stagnation in travel and tourism (Aldao

et al. 2021; Gössling et al. 2021; Škare et al. 2021; Yeh 2021).

The pandemic had a negative impact on tourism worldwide, but the scale of the impact varied among countries. For instance, on average, during the pandemic period, the number of inbound tourism trips decreased by 69% in Europe, with a decrease of 74% in Northern Europe (UNWTO 2022b). Some recovery in tourism was observed in all European Union (EU) countries in 2022; however, this recovery was highly

spatially polarised. There was a 57% growth in the Southern Mediterranean countries, while further decreases were evident in Northern and Western Europe (UNWTO 2022a, b).

In the case of Lithuania, trends in inbound tourism trips were similar to those in other North European countries (–73% in 2020) (Statistics Lithuania n.d., UNWTO 2022a). During the ‘shock’ period in 2020, the number of foreign tourists decreased by more than three times (from 1.74 million to 0.53 million). By contrast, the decrease in the number of Lithuanian tourists was only 15%. This mainly meant that, in order to survive, the tourism sector had to rely on domestic tourists and adapt to their needs (Statistics Lithuania n.d.).

In this article, we focus on tourism innovations. Our research objects are Lithuanian Tourist Information Centres (hereinafter referred to as TICs) located throughout Lithuania, including in the cities and peripheral regions. TICs serve as the primary institutions providing in-depth information about the region. Additionally, they generate travel ideas and act as intermediaries between visitors, local residents, businesses, artists and local authorities, and they offer souvenirs and fulfil other minor functions (Činga 2020; Lithuanian Travel, 2023). Generally, tourism experts working in TICs have very clear ideas on tourism innovations and local destination development, and are constantly thinking about relevant opportunities and challenges.

The goal of this article is to uncover the innovative changes that have emerged in the TICs in Lithuania as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Considerable emphasis was put on both technological and non-technological innovations, as well as new services and products that have been implemented within domestic state tourism institutions in response to changing living and operational conditions.

Lithuania, a relatively small country, has recently become attractive to tourists. Consequently, there is a lack of scientific studies presenting the Lithuanian tourism sector to the international community. With this article, we aim to expand the knowledge base concerning the tourism sector in one of the Baltic Sea region countries, with a specific focus on tourism innovations. Additionally, the article introduces the concept of Re-tourism, which adds value to the

development of the theoretical framework for post-COVID tourism.

Our article is grounded in the following hypothesis questions: (a) Was the adoption of innovations a key factor in surviving the COVID-19 pandemic with minimal losses? (b) Do the innovations introduced serve as an impetus for progress in the post-pandemic period?

Literature review

The global tourism industry has undergone a transformative change driven by a range of innovative concepts and technologies. The pandemic has significantly impacted the tourism ecosystem, affecting travellers, businesses, local communities and the environment. Between 2020 and 2022, various researches were carried out. Studies covering the topic of COVID-19 and researching the impact of the pandemic on tourism and possible transformations and introduction of innovations in the tourism sector started at the beginning of 2020. Initially, these studies primarily examined the pandemic’s impact on the tourism sector (Hall et al. 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles 2020; Seyfi, Hall 2020; Gössling et al. 2021; Karsokienė, Dromantienė 2021a; Škare et al. 2021; Liutikas et al. 2023), also naming issues of the accommodation sector (Napierala et al. 2020; Kriaučiūnas et al. 2023). Additionally, numerous research into tourism explored crisis management and the resilience of various activities following the COVID-19 pandemic (Higgins-Desbiolles 2020; Reddy et al. 2020; Rastegar et al. 2021a, b; Sharma et al. 2021a; Rice et al. 2022). Scholars also examined the measures introduced in pandemic-affected countries to reduce the spread of the virus (Capano et al. 2020; Cheng et al. 2020; Moon 2020; Hale et al. 2022; Pociūtė-Sereikienė et al. 2022).

Subsequently, scholars turned their attention to tourism trends and renewal scenarios after the end of the COVID-19 pandemic (Nair, Sinha 2020; Brouder 2020; Haywood 2020; Zhang et al. 2021; Lew et al. 2022) and examined changes in traveller behaviour (Karsokienė, Dromantienė 2021b; Pappas 2021; Dogramadjieva, Terziyska 2022; Kırlar-Can, Ertaş 2022; Shin et al. 2022). Identifying issues in the post-pandemic tourism sector has played a significant role in the international literature as well (Hussain, Fustè-Fornè

2021; Sharma et al. 2021a; Borges et al. 2022; El-Said, Aziz 2022).

Conversely, it is acknowledged that challenging times present not only problems but also opportunities for change. Building upon this idea, many international researchers (Benjamin et al. 2020; Brouder 2020; Niewiadomski 2020; Romagosa 2020; Abbas et al. 2021; O'Connor, Assaker 2021; Gössling, Schweiggart 2022) argue that the pandemic presents an opportunity to shift away from previous trends and make tourism more sustainable and environmentally friendly.

Adapting to changed life circumstances and recognising opportunities during the COVID-19 pandemic is a relevant global topic (Gretzel et al. 2020; Collins-Kreiner, Ram 2021; Liutikas 2021). Our article also focuses on adaptation, specifically through the lens of applied innovations. The introduction of innovations as a means of surviving the pandemic is a prominent point in scholarly research as well. For example, de Freitas (2021) and de Quadros Martins et al. (2021) analysed the shift from live to virtual sports events, Hanafiah et al. (2022) examined the use of social media in vacation planning and Minor et al. (2021) presented the methodology of using artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics to enhance the visitor experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, Shin and Kang (2020) and Sharma et al. (2021b) researched and assessed the utility of innovations introduced in hotel services, and a survey by Rastegar et al. (2021a, b) emphasised the importance of expanding the network of self-service kiosks in quick-service restaurants. Furthermore, findings from El-Said and Aziz (2022), and Sarkady et al. (2021) suggest that tourists actively use virtual reality (VR) as a travel substitute during and after the pandemic.

Nunes and Cooke (2021) noted that innovation had become an integral component of the evolution of societies, even those facing challenges or decadence. This evolution has led to changes in territorial applications, relational dynamics and political-institutional functions (Nunes, Cooke 2021). Casais et al. (2020) highlighted the importance of co-creation in the future of tourism. Within shared accommodation services, the value of co-creation is realised through ongoing interactions, forming the foundation of dynamic relationships. Trunfio and Campana

(2019) argued that specific local contexts are crucial in destination innovations. The destination's potential for innovativeness depends on various factors, including destination management organisations.

Scholars unanimously agree that implementing innovations presents challenges but is viewed positively as the best alternative, especially during the lockdown period of the pandemic. The results of our research align with the international context, emphasising the significance of innovations during and after the pandemic and contributing to research on adaptation to changed circumstances.

Data and methods

The article is based on the assessment of primary research data collected through completed in-depth questionnaires. The questionnaire survey was conducted in two ways: in person at the tourism exhibition 'Adventur' (28–30 January 2022; 15 questionnaires completed) and via email (from January to May 2022; 35 questionnaires completed). The research involved TICs and other state institutions that provide tourism information in Lithuania's regions. As a final sample (including live at the exhibition-filled questionnaires and received by email), 50 completed questionnaires were received, compiled in Excel and SPSS spreadsheets, and analysed. The respondents' answers were grouped and clustered into tables. This clustering helped us identify similarities and differences in respondents' opinions, calculate the percentage of answers and present them in tables in the subsequent sections of this paper.

Initially, before distributing the questionnaire, we aimed to compile a comprehensive list of TICs. However, we encountered challenges in creating such a list because tourism information in different regions of Lithuania is provided not only by state institutions specifically named 'Tourist Information Centres' but also by museums (e.g., Pasvalys Regional Museum), cultural centres (e.g., Kražiai Motiejaus Kazimiero Sarbievijaus Cultural Centre), national libraries (e.g., Radviliškis District Municipality Public Library Tourist Information Centre) or state business information centres (e.g., Pakruojis

Business Information Centre), which also serve as information providers for tourists. To create a comprehensive list of potential respondents, we analysed official information on municipal websites (as most official municipal websites have direct links to city/region tourism information providers). We also included institutions that are members of the Lithuanian Tourism Information Centres' Association. Therefore, in this article, when we refer to the term 'Tourist Information Centre' (TIC), we encompass all state institutions, including information centres, museums and libraries that officially provide information for tourists and are state-run.

Regarding the research, we believe that our list, comprising 57 (sample size) state institutions providing tourism information, is almost entirely complete. In this case, we consider our research highly representative, as it involved 50 out of the 57 eligible state tourism information providers (which accounts for 87.7% of eligible state tourism information providers). Some institutions declined to complete the questionnaire for various reasons. Some cited its length and comprehensiveness, while others mentioned the start of the tourist season and the busy period after COVID-19 as the main reasons for refusal.

The questionnaire comprised five groups of questions: general evaluation of the situation, government aid, innovations, local tourism and regions, sustainability and climate change. It consisted of 38 questions, including seven closed-ended, 12 semi-closed and 19 open-ended questions. In line with the goal of the article presented in the Introduction, our paper places greatest emphasis

on the question groups concerning the general evaluation of the situation and the innovations introduced by TICs in recent years.

Research results

TIC's adaptation to the pandemic situation

The survey aimed to identify the general impact of the pandemic on the services of TICs. The results were gratifying, showing that TICs made efforts to adapt to the changed circumstances. The survey revealed that the majority (70%, 35 responses) of TICs partially changed their activities, while another 18% (9 responses) completely changed their operations. Only 8% (4 responses) of the respondents indicated that their activities remained unchanged. Two TICs skipped the question about the changes.

To assess the extent of adaptation, the survey focused on products that had been either renewed or created and offered to tourists since the beginning of the pandemic (Table 1). The analysed data revealed that new products primarily revolved around the creation of new routes for walking, biking, driving or water transport (e.g., solo hikes, which were the most popular, and audio-guided routes). Additionally, the pandemic provided an opportunity to renovate existing sites and introduce new ones for visitors to explore. During the lockdown, many tourism signboards near points of interest were either renewed or newly installed (e.g., educational boards with QR codes). Furthermore, TICs were

Table 1. New tourism products developed and offered to tourists (attractions, itineraries, services) (since 16 March 2020, the beginning of the pandemic).

New tourism products and services	
Most popular (more than 10 percent mentions in TICs' answers)	Others (less than 10 per cent mentions in TICs' answers)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - new routes (e.g., solo hikes) - renovated touristic objects, new objects - new tours - new brochures (printed and/or electronic versions) - installed or updated information boards (e.g., installed QR code reader) - new or renewed educational programmes and tools - orientation games, active entertainment (sports entertainment, climbing park) - virtual tours - updated website 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - new pedestrian and bicycle paths - remote guide systems, audio guides - mobile applications (APPS) - interactive information boards - virtual reality (3D glasses) - digitalised maps (interactive) - video material to attract tourists - communication, publicity on Internet/social networks

Source: authors' own calculations based on the survey carried out in TICs.

actively developing new tours and trips, including a variety of themed tours. They also offered active entertainment and educational programmes and resources. Numerous incubators and workshops were established, both indoors and outdoors. The survey findings also indicated that TICs were preparing for the post-pandemic period by engaging in marketing activities, such as creating new printed and/or electronic brochures and advertisements.

In summary, when examining the impact of the pandemic that led to the development of new products and services, it becomes evident that the shift from physical to virtual spaces and the adoption of new technologies were the primary innovations resulting from the pandemic.

Technological and non-technological innovations

Various technological and non-technological innovations were implemented in TICs to maintain their attractiveness to tourists (Table 2). A significant portion of the funding for these innovations came from state aid programmes aimed at mitigating the consequences of the

pandemic (for detailed information on the state aid programmes issued for the tourism sector, see Pociūtė-Sereikienė et al. 2022). The results of the study showed that as many as 80% of the institutions that participated in the survey have embraced innovations (Table 2). The most frequently mentioned technological innovation was the development and enhancement of websites. These websites featured user-friendly interfaces, incorporated chatbots for online communication, offered VR experiences of destinations, and integrated content from various institutions and service providers. Furthermore, TICs introduced mobile applications (APPS), digitalised routes and information, created virtual and interactive tours, and installed information terminals and interactive boards. In essence, employees at TICs transitioned into ‘remote helpers’ and providers of online services.

In addition to technological innovations, TICs, in most cases, adopted various non-technological innovations as well. This observation suggests that TICs made considerable efforts to adapt to the changed situation, aiming not only to survive but also to continue developing tourism activities.

Table 2. Application of technological and non-technological innovations (since 16 March 2020, the beginning of the pandemic), calculated from positive answers (total of 40).

Expressed opinion	Number of mentions in answers (units)	Proportion of answers (%)
Application of technological or non-technological innovations	40	80.0
Technological or non-technological innovations were not applied	9	18.0
Answers were not provided	1	2.0
Total	50	100.0
Technological or non-technological innovations mentioned (counted from positive answers, n = 40)		
Developed and improved website	11	27.5
Digitalised information and routes, creation of virtual and interactive tours	9	22.5
New or improved mobile applications (APPS)	9	22.5
Information terminals, interactive boards	6	15.0
Non-technological innovations	5	12.5
Transfer to virtual trainings, conferences, video broadcasts, communication with visitors (e.g., via Zoom, Teams)	5	12.5
New and/or improved online store	4	10.0
Contactless payment for goods and services, vending machines, scanners (e.g., scanning tickets using QR codes)	3	7.5
Others (individual and region-specific innovations)	3	7.5
Audio guides	2	5.0
Presence on social networks (e.g., Facebook, TikTok)	2	5.0
New and/or improved online movies and games	2	5.0
Interactive and 3D games (e.g., virtual reality with 3D glasses, interactive game walls)	2	5.0

Source: authors’ own calculations based on the survey carried out in TICs.

To assess the effectiveness of the introduced innovations, TICs were asked to identify the most essential virtual and/or digital products and services (or the lack thereof) for tourists that they observed during the pandemic (Table 3). As expected, the survey highlighted that the most popular and relevant digital offerings for users included digital routes, virtual tours and online guides. Another category of significant products for tourists was marketing materials, such as video review films, photos and mobile applications promoting various destinations. These virtual marketing materials allow visitors to explore places of interest before their arrival and provide additional information, including historical backgrounds and interesting facts.

Additionally, respondents mentioned a few specific needs, such as the ability to leave reviews about trips and services in the virtual space, access to online menus of cafes and restaurants, and real-time traffic monitoring.

The questionnaire responses revealed a wide range of relevant virtual products. However, the most crucial ones appeared to be related to gathering information about planned trips. In this context, respondents emphasised that travellers still encountered difficulties when planning trips owing to the lack of high-quality, freely accessible and easily obtainable tourism information.

When comparing the actual implementation of innovations in TICs with the identified customer needs, it becomes evident that there are notable similarities. This suggests that information

centres are making efforts to adapt to the needs of their customers and travellers.

A glimpse into future plans

The survey showed that TICs were actively applying innovations during the pandemic period. Furthermore, we sought to understand whether the pandemic was the only stimulation for novelty or the aspiration for continuous improvement had become a new trend in TIC. Therefore, in the questionnaire we placed a question about future plans to adopt any technological/non-technological innovations.

The results of the study revealed that TICs were cautious about future innovations and are planning to introduce some in the future (Table 4). Installation of information terminals or interactive boards, digitalisation of routes, creation of virtual tours and attractions using 3D glasses were the most often mentioned future innovations (Table 4). Meanwhile, some interesting and extraordinary region-specific future plans were introduced, such as to create 3D printing laboratory, apply robots and install a 'talking' bench.

When summarising the results of the survey concerning the use and application of technological and/or non-technological innovations, it can be stated that during the pandemic, technological innovations were mainly created to be adapted to the changed conditions and to facilitate individual and independent travelling. The innovations that are planned to be implemented in the

Table 3. Virtual (digital) products and services indicated as the most relevant for tourists.

Expressed opinion	Number of mentions in answers (units)	Proportion of answers (%)
Digital routes, virtual tours, virtual guides	15	30.0
User-friendly websites (easy to find tourism information)	11	22.0
Video review films and photos that promote and attract tourists	8	16.0
Mobile applications (APPS)	6	12.0
Others (individual and region-specific products and services)	6	12.0
Answers were not provided	6	12.0
Digital/interactive maps	5	10.0
Electronic services (shops, payments, reservations, etc.)	4	8.0
Games (virtual/digital) for computer, phone	4	8.0
Interactive boards, apps, links	3	6.0
Possibility of planning trip/route	2	4.0
Virtual reality (3D glasses)	2	4.0
No opinion	2	4.0

Source: authors' own calculations based on the survey carried out in TICs.

Table 4. Technological/non-technological innovations planned to be applied in the future, calculated from positive answers (total of 32).

Expressed opinion	Number of mentions in answers (units)	Proportion of answers (%)
Technological/non-technological innovations planned to be applied in future (3 TICs did not specify which ones)	32	64.0
No plans to apply technological/non-technological innovations in future	3	6.0
No opinion	12	24.0
Answers were not provided	3	6.0
Total	50	100.0
Future technological or non-technological innovations mentioned (counted from positive answers, n=32)		
Information terminals, interactive boards/objects	10	31.3
Digitised routes, virtual tours	8	25.0
Others (individual and region-specific products and services)	8	25.0
Virtual reality equipment (3D glasses)	4	12.5
Non-technological innovations	4	12.5
Mobile applications (APPS)	3	9.4
New and/or improved website	3	9.4
Audio guides	3	9.4
New and/or improved online movies and games	3	9.4

Source: authors' own calculations based on the survey carried out in TICs.

future have been stimulated by the pandemic as well and are associated with technologies that would allow tourists to travel remotely and more independently.

Re-tourism as a path to tourism innovations

The post-COVID scenarios include tourism renewal ideas developed during the pandemic. Re-tourism conception (Liutikas 2023) concerns the restart and renewal of the tourism sector. The discussion about the ways in which travel and tourism may be re-created and re-invented in the post-COVID period is based on the analysis of the ideas presented and changes in the operations of Lithuanian TICs.

The conception of Re-tourism is driven by societal, technological and environmental innovations (Fig. 1). Innovative business models related to tourism include the approaches of sustainability, green and circular economy, and digitalisation. These changes could create significant effects on travel organisations and the propositions of tourism value.

Social innovations in the realm of tourism encompass a spectrum of novel offerings tailored for travellers, reconfigurations of service processes and shifts in tourist behaviour, often influenced by technological advancements. The convergence of technological progress and human

interactions has sparked changes in how tourists engage with destinations. Tourists, like cultural catalysts, possess the potential to catalyse the emergence of new technologies (Liutikas 2023).

One of the most prominent areas of innovation in tourism is the utilisation of informational and communicational technologies to enhance the overall travel experience. Augmented reality (AR) and VR applications have enabled travellers to virtually immerse themselves in potential destinations. Not only do they aid planning but also add a new layer of engagement to the pre-trip phase.

The Lithuanian tourism innovation sector still lacks the integration of advanced robotics. The integration of robotics within the accommodation and dining landscape introduces another dimension of innovation. From aiding guests in lodging facilities to facilitating the seamless arrangement of tourism services, robotics streamlines various aspects of travel experience. GPS-based mapping programmes have likewise revolutionised navigation for tourists, offering the convenience of pinpointing attractions and efficient route planning while circumventing traffic congestion. Furthermore, real-time language translation and audio tourism guides have emerged as a groundbreaking innovation, facilitating communication across language barriers and fostering more immersive interactions between travellers and locals.

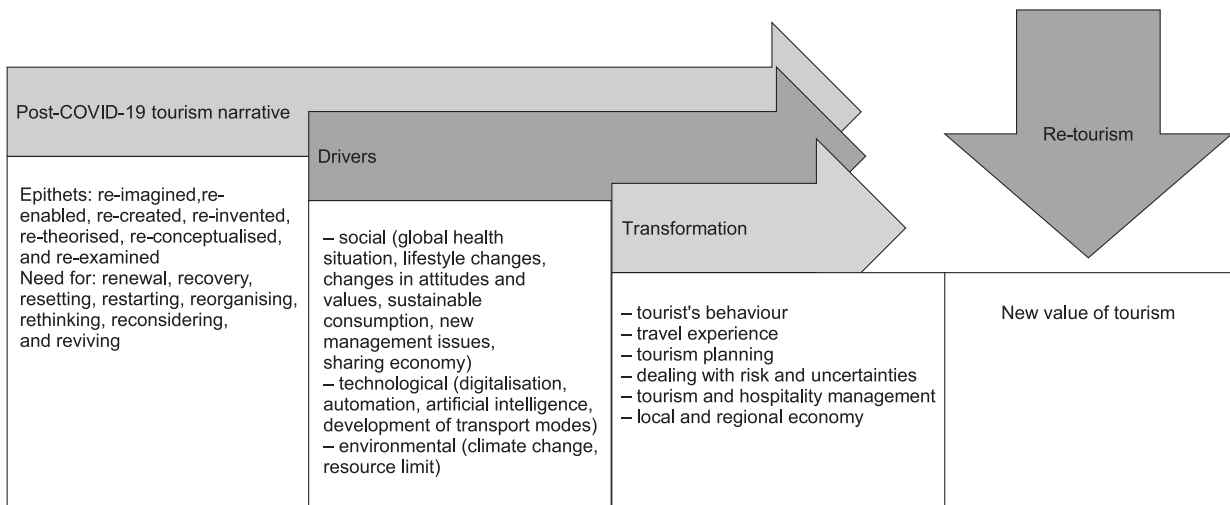


Fig. 1. Re-tourism concept.

Source: Liutikas (2023).

As the tourism industry continues to evolve, the fusion of novel technologies and human agency holds the potential to reshape the way we explore, experience and contribute to the places we visit. The rise of the sharing economy and platforms like Airbnb and Uber has fundamentally altered the accommodations and transport sectors. These innovations have empowered travellers to explore more personalised and authentic experiences, often connecting them with local communities, which can provide additional knowledge and unique perspectives.

Sustainability and responsible tourism have also seen a surge in innovation. With growing concerns about the environmental impact of travel, the industry has responded with eco-friendly initiatives, green accommodations and carbon offset programmes. This shift towards sustainable practices not only appeals to conscientious travellers but also ensures the longevity of the destinations themselves.

Re-tourism is based on such epithets as re-imagined, re-enabled, re-created, re-invented, re-theorised, re-conceptualised and re-examined. If you put such descriptions of tourism in relation to COVID-19 in search engines, you would find more than one answer. Re-tourism also involves renewal, recovery, resetting, restarting, reorganising, rethinking, reconsidering and reviving. It is based on improved knowledge and pandemic experience. It involves adaptation and mitigation of negative impact, flexibility and dynamic, change and transformation. Re-tourism could be understood as a response to possible future crises. In

general, the pandemic made it possible to look more broadly and to link different concepts such as resilience, digital innovations, sustainability, accessibility and new business management ideas into unified scenarios for the future development of tourism.

Discussion and conclusion

The unexpected COVID-19 pandemic disrupted peaceful life, shattered plans, shook businesses, and froze local and international relations. Society had to adapt to new life conditions. The results of our survey show that one of the most attractive and successful aid programmes offered by the Lithuanian government was the 'Tourism Innovations' programme (Ministry of the Economy and Innovation 2020). This programme aimed to transform the tourism sector by encouraging the adoption of innovations and digital technologies to stay competitive during the COVID-19 outbreak and offer new experiences after the pandemic (Minister of the Economy and Innovation 2021). TICs were among the most active participants in the 'Tourism Innovations' programme, introducing various innovations, both technological and non-technological. Financial support was used creatively, resulting in a variety of new products, attractions and services (virtual routes and tours, exhibitions, audio guides, etc.). However, the majority of these 'innovations' were centred around website and mobile application updates, the creation of

online souvenir shops, or the enhancement of information boards for tourists. TICs primarily adapted virtual and interactive services, enabling everything to be done without leaving home and without direct contact with people. These transformations may not appear highly innovative, but they were essential for adapting to changed circumstances and surviving the pandemic.

Another exceptionally interesting and innovative programme aimed at attracting foreign tourists, particularly from Latvia and Estonia, was the 'Baltic Travel Bubble' initiated by the Government in 2020 (Ministry of the Economy and Innovation 2021a, b). Despite its relatively short duration, the programme was deemed highly beneficial for accommodation, catering and other tourism service providers. However, with increased opportunities for travel across Europe in 2021, Lithuania saw a decline in its popularity among Latvian and Estonian visitors the following year. The proposal to reintroduce the Baltic Bubble in 2021 was rejected by the Lithuanian government (Macius 2021).

The findings of the research serve as a catalyst for broader discussions on the requisites for promoting innovation and value co-creation within governmental institutions. The research conducted in Lithuania offers valuable insights. The study shows that for faster diffusion of innovations, there is a need for governmental support, the positive examples in business and a network of innovators who can advertise the implemented innovations (in the Lithuanian case Tourism Information Centres). This is particularly relevant as the principles of the implementation of innovations might diverge across cultures, with different destination marketing organisations potentially influencing its dynamics. Furthermore, examining the interplay between the inclination to innovate and the integration of outcomes from value co-creation sheds more light on the rapid transformation of the tourism sector.

In recent years, the tourism industry has resembled a 'playground' where the winners were those who invested more in marketing and attracting potential tourists by offering 'something new', innovative and tempting to try. In the Lithuanian case, when comparing the vitality of TICs and tourism businesses, the obvious winners were the TICs. TICs more easily adapted to changed circumstances because they became

'points of attraction' for local residents when country borders were closed, internal tourism was restricted and residents were tired of spending months indoors.

Respondents spoke enthusiastically about the prospects of implementing more innovations in the future. However, we believe that these intentions should be well thought out, and their necessity should be assessed because after 'virtual years', people are longing for real experiences. The last summer of 2023 showed that the attractiveness of TICs was decreasing because residents had already explored Lithuanian regions to a considerable extent and were eager for new 'real' adventures abroad.

The survey revealed that the implementation of innovations could be seen as an impetus for reconsidering the further functions of destination management organisations in the post-pandemic period. Lithuanian TICs are gradually evolving from TICs that focus solely on information provision to multifunctional visitor centres offering more comprehensive services (ETFI 2021). We believe that the future framework for TICs could be expanded to include more functions, particularly based on technological innovations. Functions such as destination marketing organisation, data collection and tourism research, implementation of strategic tourism projects and organisation of cultural events could become part of TICs everyday work.

Moreover, the period defined by the pandemic has acted as a catalyst for a comprehensive reimagining of the future of tourism, prompting a re-evaluation of core tourism values. As exemplified by the concept of Re-tourism, the pandemic-induced disruption has instigated a shift towards developing new values in tourism. This shift has not only stimulated the sector to undergo transformative changes but has also encouraged the introduction of innovative and sustainable products and services.

The lessons learned from COVID-19 allow us to contemplate new forms of travel, new criteria for the attractiveness of local tourism destinations and to rethink the post-COVID tourism concept in general. In conclusion, the landscape of tourism is continually shaped by innovative ideas and technologies. These innovations have enriched how we travel the world, fostering connections between cultures, individuals and

landscapes. As the tourism industry moves forward, finding a balance between embracing these innovations and upholding the essence of the travel experience will be pivotal in shaping the journeys of tomorrow.

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Author’s contribution

GP-S: conceptualisation of the article and communication, methodology and data, formal analysis, writing: original draft, review and editing, visualisation; **VB:** methodology and data, formal analysis, writing – original draft, review and editing, visualisation; **DL:** writing – original draft, review and editing, visualisation.

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