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FROM GROWTH TO SUSTAINABILITY? ASSESSING ALBANIAN TOURISM THROUGH MEDITERRANEAN BENCHMARKING

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Abstract

Tourism is considered one of the most important sectors of the global economy, making a substantial contribution to economic growth and diversification. Over the past decade, according to international data, Albania has become one of the fastest-growing tourism destinations in Europe. The aim of this study is to investigate whether the country's rapid tourism expansion represents a sustainable transformation or is merely a period of accelerated quantitative growth. Based on secondary data from national and international statistics, the study examines tourism trends and benchmarks Albania against other Mediterranean destinations, such as Croatia, Greece, and Spain. The comparative results demonstrate strong and rapid tourism growth in Albania, as well as increased competitiveness as a Mediterranean destination. However, some sustainability challenges, such as environmental pressures and tourism seasonality, must be addressed. The study offers valuable insights and recommendations for policymakers aiming to balance tourism growth with long-term sustainability.

Key Words: *tourism, growth, sustainable development, benchmarking*

Jel classification: *Z32, R58, Q01*

Introduction

Tourism is considered one of the most dynamic sectors of the global economy, with a significant contribution to employment and economic and regional development in both developed and emerging economies

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(OECD, 2024). The Mediterranean has become one of the world's most competitive tourism regions, attracting hundreds of millions of international visitors annually (UNWTO, 2024). Within this broader context, the Western Balkans have also experienced strong tourism growth, with Albania emerging as one of the fastest-growing destinations in Europe. Tourism now plays an increasingly important role in Albania's economic growth and employment (WTTC, 2024). According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (2024), the tourism sector accounts for a considerable portion of total employment and investment in the country, highlighting its strategic importance for Albania's economic transformation. Government policies have also increasingly prioritized tourism as a central component of national development strategies, particularly through initiatives to promote Albania as a Mediterranean destination and to improve tourism infrastructure (Tourism Development Strategy, 2025). In this context, Albania represents an important case of a tourism destination transitioning from rapid growth toward emerging sustainability challenges. Through comparative benchmarking with Balkan and Mediterranean destinations, the study evaluates tourism performance, sustainability practices, and policy approaches, contributing to the literature on tourism development and sustainable growth in emerging Mediterranean economies.

Literature Review

In recent years, emerging tourism destinations in Southeast Europe have experienced rapid tourism growth, positioning themselves as alternative Mediterranean destinations for international travelers (UNWTO, 2024). Countries such as Albania, Montenegro, and Croatia are increasingly positioned as attractive alternatives to more saturated Mediterranean destinations, benefiting from a favorable climate, cultural heritage, and well-developed tourism infrastructure (Dodds & Butler, 2019). As a result, tourism is considered one of the most dynamic sectors of the economy, contributing significantly to economic growth, employment, and regional development across both developed and emerging destinations (Gössling et al., 2019). Albania represents one of the most notable examples of this trend, experiencing substantial growth in international tourist arrivals and tourism-related investments over the past decade. This rapid expansion, particularly after the pandemic recovery period (WTTC, 2024), has positioned Albania among the fastest-growing tourism destinations in the Mediterranean. However, it has also increased concerns related to environmental degradation, overtourism, and pressure

on local infrastructure and communities (Milano et al., 2019). Sustainable tourism has become a central concept in tourism research, emphasizing the need to balance economic growth with environmental protection and social well-being. Mediterranean destinations have increasingly adopted sustainability-oriented tourism policies to address the pressures of mass tourism (Dodds & Butler, 2019), implementing measures focused on environmental management, coastal regulation, and tourism diversification, reflecting a broader shift from volume-based growth toward more sustainable tourism models (Hall, 2019). From a comparative perspective, Western Balkan countries still lag behind more mature Mediterranean destinations in terms of sustainability governance and tourism management practices (Krstić et al., 2015). Emerging destinations like Albania are still in the early stages of implementing comprehensive sustainability frameworks (Bregu & Domi, 2021). In Albania, tourism has become a key driver of economic growth and employment (Toma, 2025). However, despite strong increases in tourist arrivals and tourism revenues, the sector continues to face challenges related to environmental management and governance capacity (Berisha et al., 2025). Rapid tourism development in these coastal destinations has raised concerns related to ecosystem degradation, waste management, infrastructure pressure, and the seasonal concentration of tourism demand (Hoda & Angjeli, 2024). This is consistent with findings in other emerging destinations, where tourism expansion tends to outpace regulatory frameworks and sustainability policies (Mihalič, 2022).

Methodology

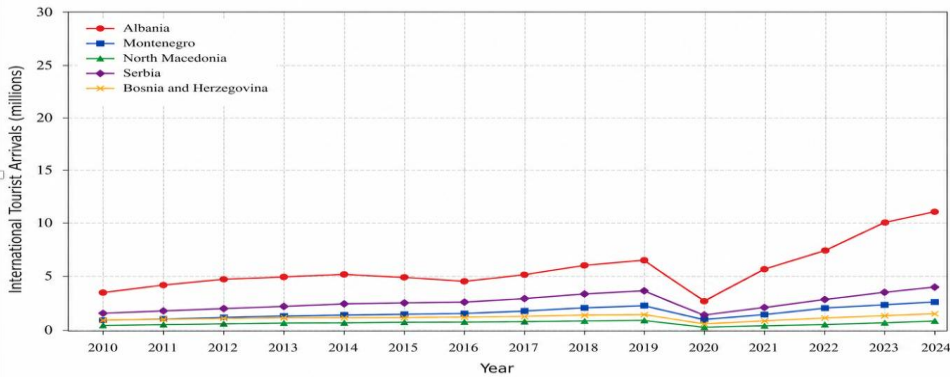
The study employs a descriptive comparative trend analysis to evaluate tourism development patterns across countries. Tourism indicators are analyzed over time to identify key growth trends and structural changes in Albania's tourism sector and compare them with benchmark Western Balkan and Mediterranean destinations. The methodological approach combines secondary data analysis with cross-country benchmarking to assess Albania's tourism transformation and its sustainability implications. In addition, a tourism sustainability matrix based on tourism dependence and tourism intensity indicators is used to provide a broader assessment of growth patterns and sustainability pressures beyond descriptive data.

Results

Over the last decade, Albania has experienced a remarkable increase in international tourist arrivals, rising from approximately 3.5 million in 2014 to over 10 million annually by 2023–2024 (INSTAT, 2024). This growth, illustrated in Figure 1, became particularly pronounced in the post-pandemic period, when Albania experienced one of Europe’s fastest tourism recoveries (UNWTO, 2024). Tourist arrivals reached approximately 10.1 million in 2023 and 11.7 million in 2024, more than 80% above pre-pandemic levels.

Albania has outperformed the Western Balkans average in tourism growth since 2021, particularly in terms of tourist arrivals and GDP contribution. As illustrated in Figure 1, Following the pandemic-induced decline in 2020, Albania demonstrated a significantly faster recovery than neighboring countries, surpassing Montenegro (~2.5 million arrivals) and North Macedonia (~1.5 million) in absolute visitor numbers. This rapid growth has also increased tourism intensity compared to the regional average, indicating rising sustainability pressures toward a high-intensity tourism model.

Figure 1: *Albania's tourism growth compared to the Western Balkans (2010-2024)*

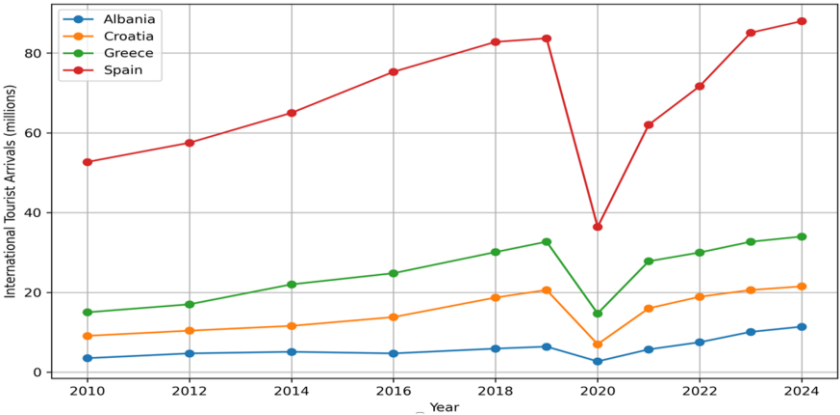


Source: *Authors’ calculation based on INSTAT (2024), UNWTO (2024), and OECD (2024)*

Tourism revenues exceeded €4 billion in 2023 and continued to rise in 2024, reinforcing tourism’s growing role in Albania’s economy. As shown in Figure 2, tourism’s contribution to GDP has steadily increased, surpassing the Western Balkans’ average after 2018, widening the gap in

the post-pandemic period, and highlighting the country’s increasing economic dependence on tourism, reinforcing the importance of sustainable development policies.

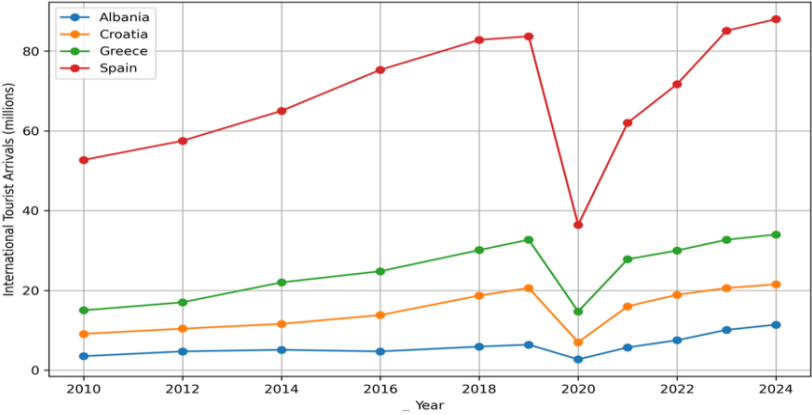
Figure 2: *Tourism Contribution to GDP in Albania and the Western Balkans (2010-2014)*



Source: *Authors’ calculation based on INSTAT (2024), UNWTO (2024)*

Comparison of international tourist arrivals between Albania and selected Mediterranean destinations, including Croatia, Greece, and Spain. Figure 3 illustrates the relative scale of tourism demand across countries and highlights Albania’s rapid growth as an emerging Mediterranean tourism destination, although its tourism volume remains significantly lower than that of established destinations such as Spain and Greece.

Figure 3: *Tourism Growth in Albania versus Mediterranean Destinations*



Source: *Author's calculation based on INSTAT (2024), UNWTO(2024)*

As Figure 3 illustrates, Albania is significantly smaller in scale, with Spain receiving approximately 85 million tourists in 2023, Greece around 33 million, and Croatia about 21 million visitors annually. While Albania’s absolute tourism numbers remain lower, its growth rate has been significantly faster, particularly in the post-pandemic period, highlighting its rapid emergence as a competitive Mediterranean destination.

Mediterranean Tourism Sustainability

To better understand Albania’s position within the Mediterranean tourism landscape, this study employs a tourism sustainability matrix based on two key indicators: tourism dependence (measured by tourism contribution to GDP) and tourism intensity (measured by tourist arrivals per capita). The matrix(Figure 4) enables comparison between emerging and mature tourism economies and helps assess whether Albania’s tourism trajectory is converging toward established Mediterranean patterns.

Figure 4: *Mediterranean Tourism Sustainability Index*



Source: *Authors’ calculation based on UNWTO (2024); WTTC (2024)*

The matrix shows clear differences in tourism sustainability across Mediterranean destinations. Spain, with around 12% tourism contribution to GDP and low intensity (~1.8 tourists per capita), reflects a balanced and diversified tourism model. Greece occupies a mid-position with approximately 20% GDP contribution and intensity of ~3.1, indicating increasing pressure. Croatia stands out with the highest values, reaching about 25% GDP contribution and very high intensity (~5.3), suggesting

strong dependence and overtourism risks. Albania, with around 24% GDP contribution and intensity of ~3.6, is positioned between Greece and Croatia, indicating rapid growth but also rising sustainability pressures.

To better assess Albania’s tourism development in a regional context, Table 1 presents a comparative sustainability benchmark between Albania and selected Mediterranean destinations using commonly applied tourism sustainability indicators.

Table 1: *Mediterranean Tourism Sustainability Indicators (2023)*

Country	Tourist Arrivals (millions)	Tourism Contribution to GDP (%)	Tourism Intensity (Arrivals / Population)	Seasonality Pressure	Sustainability Policy Maturity
Albania	10.1	~24%	3.6	High	Emerging
Croatia	20.6	~25%	5.3	Very High	Advanced
Greece	32.7	~20%	3.1	High	Advanced
Spain	85.1	~12%	1.8	Moderate	Highly Advanced

Source: Author’s calculations based on *UNWTO (2024)*; *WTTC (2024)*; *OECD (2022)*.

The comparative analysis indicates that Albania’s tourism intensity is relatively high compared to its population size. Tourism revenues have steadily increased due to rising visitor numbers and longer average stays, particularly along the southern coastline (World Bank, 2023). As a result, tourism has become an important driver of economic diversification and regional development, especially in coastal destinations such as the Albanian Riviera (European Commission, 2024). However, this rapid expansion also suggests increasing pressure on infrastructure and coastal ecosystems. Similar patterns can be observed in Croatia and Greece, where tourism plays a highly dominant economic role. In contrast, Spain represents a more diversified tourism economy, characterized by lower tourism intensity and more advanced sustainability governance, including policies focused on environmental protection, urban tourism regulation, and seasonality management.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Albania’s tourism sector has experienced exceptional growth over the past decade. While this expansion offers significant economic

opportunities, long-term sustainability will depend on improved governance, environmental protection, and diversification of tourism products. The evidence suggests that Albania is in a transitional phase, moving from rapid tourism growth toward a more sustainability-oriented model. While economic benefits are evident, long-term success will depend on improving environmental management, strengthening governance capacity, reducing seasonality, and diversifying tourism products. These findings indicate that Albania currently occupies an intermediate stage of tourism development, characterized by rapid growth combined with emerging sustainability pressures. Strengthening governance frameworks, environmental management, and sustainable tourism policies will therefore be essential to ensure that tourism growth remains compatible with long-term economic and environmental sustainability.

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