

**Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on 'Europe, the world's No 1 tourist destination: a new political framework for tourism in Europe'**

(2011/C 104/03)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- welcomes the Commission's desire to deal with the tourism policy in a coordinated and integrated fashion, linking it to other policies such as transport, agriculture and environmental protection policies, information and communication technologies, social policy, culture, etc;
- stresses the important role played by local and regional authorities in relation to the sustainable management of tourist destinations. Their initiatives, and those of the European regional networks, are pioneering in terms of the development of sustainable tourism models and it is crucial to make the best possible use of their experience and knowledge, by promoting local and regional cooperation throughout the EU. In this regard, the Commission's approach of integrating tourism into the different European policies is to be welcomed;
- welcomes the Commission's desire to promote an active policy to promote competitiveness and sustainable development; The challenges faced by the European tourism sector demonstrate the importance of anticipating changes and responding sufficiently quickly to increasing competition in a constantly-evolving sector;
- notes the introduction of a European heritage label and a European 'Qualité Tourisme' brand, since they are intended to encourage destinations to employ sustainable practices, and enhance Europe's image as a high-quality tourist destination. However, the added value of this mark needs to be more closely analysed and illustrated, and its award should be subject to strict criteria in order to maintain its prestige;
- notes with concern the potential impact of structural problems such as climate change and the shortage of water and energy resources in European tourist destinations, particularly in the islands and outermost regions. These problems can be overcome only if sustainability is much more intensively promoted within the tourism strategy of the regions in question. The effects of climate change should be prevented through the protection and recovery of natural areas, and by incorporating tourism into Integrated Coastal Zone Management.

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## I. GENERAL COMMENTS

1. The growing importance of the tourism sector to the European economy is illustrated by its contribution to gross domestic product and its capacity to generate more employment than other economic sectors. As the European Commission points out in its Communication <sup>(1)</sup>, the European tourism industry directly employs more than 5 % of the EU's workforce and generates around 5 % of its GDP <sup>(2)</sup>, particularly in certain European regions. However, although Europe is still the world's No 1 tourist destination, receiving some 40 % of its arrivals <sup>(3)</sup>, the sector shrank by 5.6 % during 2009 <sup>(4)</sup>.

2. European tourism is facing many challenges: the world economic crisis, greater competition from other destinations, the impact of climate change and seasonal variations. Other challenges, such as demographic change in Europe, the diversification of tourism products, and the growing impact of information and communication technologies, offer opportunities which should be explored in cooperation with regional and local authorities.

3. Furthermore, the habits of tourists are changing (more and more people are travelling independently, the Internet is being used more, and more people are travelling 'low cost' but also increased demand for sustainable tourism etc.) and factors which until a few years ago were not so decisive, are now crucial: high quality, sustainability, permanent innovation, training etc.

4. In this context, emphasis must be placed on the enormous growth potential of the European tourism sector and the close connection with regional administrative, socio-economic and logistical structures, particularly in relation to the development of the transport sector, and above all improved connectivity of tourist destinations, the development of regional airports and the promotion of maritime links, which would encourage greater multimodality and ensure sustainable transport. It is particularly important to bear in mind the specific situation of the islands and peripheral outermost regions, which are totally dependent on air and sea transport and where the

services sector, built around tourism, provides the main source of wealth and economic activity for many of these regions. Europe has many competitive advantages: not just the wealth of its landscape, but also the enormous opportunities for tourism growth based on its heritage (cultural, gastronomic, religious, sporting, etc.). Growth potential also exists in the important events, congress and business sectors of tourism.

Europe's worth in terms of heritage is a strategic factor in its development and it is particularly rich in this regard, since there are many European regions which either have immense tourism potential, although they are still at an early stage in their development as tourist destinations or have developed significant tourist activity. Particularly worthy of consideration are those areas that have specialised in tourism and, as mature destinations, need restructuring and rehabilitation in order to compete, in terms of quality and innovation, with the increasing global presence of emerging countries. In order to take into account the senior and disabled travel markets, destinations will need to adjust and to remove barriers.

5. The entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty provides an opportunity to enhance the competitiveness of the European tourism sector, thereby contributing to the new Europe 2020 Strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, particularly its flagship initiative 'An industrial policy for the globalisation era'.

6. Tourism is therefore a vital source of income and employment. It is crucial to many regions of Europe, and for some of them it is absolutely essential, since it offers them a key means of achieving greater competitiveness. Actions resulting from European tourism policies will therefore have a significant impact on the development of many regions, given that the tourist industry drives and interacts with other economic sectors in the region. A European industrial policy on tourism should therefore be implemented together with an EU investment policy aimed at the development of Europe and its socio-economic structure, in order to ensure that the regions concerned have every opportunity to implement a sustainable competitiveness strategy.

<sup>(1)</sup> COM(2010) 352

<sup>(2)</sup> Study on the Competitiveness of the EU's Tourism Industry, September 2009

<sup>(3)</sup> WTO World Tourism Barometer, Volume 8, January 2010.

<sup>(4)</sup> idem.

7. The Lisbon Treaty includes, amongst the Union's objectives together with economic and social cohesion, a new territorial dimension and foresees that particular attention shall be paid to rural areas, areas affected by industrial transition, and regions which suffer from severe and permanent natural or demographic handicaps such as the northernmost regions with very low population density and island, cross border and mountain regions. Article 349 also considers the particular situation of the outermost regions. The specific characteristics of these areas should therefore be taken into account when drawing up a European framework for the tourism sector.

8. The new Article 195 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union provides for the implementation of actions aimed at promoting the competitiveness of the sector's companies, promoting cooperation and the exchange of good practice, and developing an integrated approach to tourism. The Commission's Communication proposes various actions aimed at increasing the competitiveness of the EU's tourism industry. In order to achieve effective results, EU action should support the initiatives of the Member States or the European regions. Also important is the Commission's desire to prevent any measures adopted from imposing additional administrative burdens on national, local and regional authorities. In this regard, the Communication respects the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality.

#### THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

#### II. A NEW EU ACTION FRAMEWORK FOR EUROPEAN TOURISM

9. welcomes the Commission's desire to deal with the tourism policy in a coordinated and integrated fashion, linking it to other policies such as transport, agriculture and environmental protection policies, information and communication technologies, social policy, culture, etc. Tourism should be understood as the network of relations engendered by persons travelling to and staying in places away from their usual place of residence temporarily and on a non-habitual basis for at least one night;

10. supports the general objective of coordinating efforts and initiatives relating to tourism in order to create a competitive, modern, sustainable and responsible tourism sector;

11. calls for all proposals for measures at EU level to be examined and justified in the light of EU powers and the subsidiarity and proportionality principles, before the comprehensive action plan to promote tourism is submitted, so that the impetus and advantages of EU measures, as opposed to national, regional or local measures, can be clearly identified;

12. agrees in particular with the belief that tourism should be developed on the basis of competitiveness and sustainability, which can be divided into three key categories:

- a. economic sustainability, ensuring fair and efficient economic development, enabling future generations of Europeans to develop;
- b. socio-cultural sustainability, which is compatible with the culture, values and identity of the European regions;
- c. environmental sustainability, ensuring that development is compatible with maintaining essential processes, biological diversity and biological resources. Tourism must be developed on the basis of sustainability, ensuring that there is no wastage of natural resources and no harm to the environment <sup>(5)</sup>;

13. stresses the important role played by local and regional authorities in relation to the sustainable management of tourist destinations. Their initiatives, and those of the European regional networks, are pioneering in terms of the development of sustainable tourism models and it is crucial to make the best possible use of their experience and knowledge, by promoting local and regional cooperation throughout the EU. In this regard, the Commission's approach of integrating tourism into the different European policies is to be welcomed;

14. welcomes the conclusions of the Competitiveness Council of 12 October 2010 inviting Member States to participate actively and in a spirit of partnership, and acting at European, national, regional and local level, in actions aimed at increasing the competitiveness of the European tourism industry <sup>(6)</sup>;

15. welcomes the Commission's desire to promote an active policy to promote competitiveness and sustainable development; The challenges faced by the European tourism sector demonstrate the importance of anticipating changes and responding sufficiently quickly to increasing competition in a constantly-evolving sector;

16. agrees that, given that companies in the tourism sector are primarily SMEs, although there are also many micro enterprises, it would be advisable to promote their development by means of clustering. Equally, aid aimed at boosting productivity, competitiveness, training and quality can play a very important role;

<sup>(5)</sup> CdR 83/2009 fin

<sup>(6)</sup> Conclusions on a new political framework for tourism in Europe. Competitiveness Council, 12 October 2010

17. recommends the development of instruments to support tourism SMEs, particularly with regard to the training of their staff. It is important to bear in mind the key role played by the tourism sector in job creation, and that a large proportion of the jobs created are aimed at young people. These jobs enable them to employ certain skills which are very useful to their professional development, and also enable them to improve their knowledge of foreign languages. A high-quality tourism industry focused on new markets and sectors of demand (such as disabled or senior travellers) needs a highly qualified workforce trained to deal with the new requirements and the new technologies applied to tourism. Furthermore, much of the knowledge acquired in the tourism sector should be directly transferrable to other economic activities;

18. notes with concern the potential impact of structural problems such as climate change and the shortage of water and energy resources in European tourist destinations, particularly in the islands and outermost regions. These problems can be overcome only if sustainability is much more intensively promoted within the tourism strategy of the regions in question. The effects of climate change should be prevented through the protection and recovery of natural areas, and by incorporating tourism into Integrated Coastal Zone Management;

19. rejects the plans for a publicly financed tourism exchange mechanism aimed at ensuring a more even distribution of holiday travel over the year. In tabling this proposal, the Commission has revealed its ignorance of the workings of the market, which itself already ensure a distribution over time of holiday travel, particularly by cutting prices in the low season. The peaks that occur during the summer season are not due to any 'failure' of the market but are caused by the school holidays, which are fixed on the basis of official decisions, and the weather conditions prevailing at holiday destinations. A tourism exchange mechanism would not have an impact on any of these factors. The young and the elderly, who are not constrained by school holidays, can already travel during the low season. If they do not, it is clearly because they have no wish to do so. Furthermore, the proposal to coordinate school holidays in the Member States goes beyond the competences of the European Union;

### III. FOUR PRIORITIES FOR ACTION

#### **Stimulating competitiveness in the European tourism sector**

20. believes that stimulating competitiveness in the tourism sector is crucial, since tourism, being a horizontal activity, requires a raft of actions which deal with different areas and policies; in this regard, agrees with the opinion of European ministers, expressed in the Declaration of Madrid, concerning the need for a strategy based on excellence in tourism, aided by the creation of networks of experts and destinations to allow

the creation, sharing and dissemination of knowledge, innovation, research and technological development, with a view to maintaining competitiveness in the tourism sector (7);

21. supports in particular the Commission's proposals regarding the diversification of tourism products, making the most of Europe's heritage, and the launch of the 'ICT and tourism' platform and, in the medium term, the idea of a 'virtual tourism observatory', the task of which would be both to study supply, and to improve knowledge of demand, market trends and short- and medium-term forecasts. The regional authorities have enormous experience and it is crucial that this experience be exploited through regional cooperation within the EU in order to make the most of these policies;

22. believes that the exchange of good practices must be encouraged amongst the European regions and that their contributions in relation to the EU initiatives proposed should be taken into account. In this context, the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC), the Interreg programmes and/or macro-regional strategies could be employed as a framework for developing coordinated tourism strategies;

23. considers that, with a view to tackling the problem of seasonality, efforts should be made to promote more varied and high-quality stays, which will require greater diversification of tourist services with an emphasis on cultural, historical/religious, sporting, gastronomic and other forms of tourism with enormous growth potential; stresses that diversifying holiday periods and regional spreading are done according to national competences;

24. highlights the potential of social tourism ('Tourism for all') which promotes social inclusion with the possibility of mobility by ensuring cross-cultural exchanges for all social groups, including young people, families, senior citizens and people with reduced mobility; regrets that the Commission Communication does not sufficiently address this potential;

#### **Promoting the development of sustainable, responsible and high-quality tourism**

25. strongly supports the development of a system of indicators for the sustainable management of destinations and believes that, in this field, the experience of regional authorities, such as that provided by the Network of European Regions for a sustainable and competitive European tourism (NECSTouR), is invaluable;

(7) Declaration of Madrid within the scope of the informal meeting of tourism ministers under the Spanish Presidency held in Madrid in April 2010, under the motto 'Towards a socially responsible tourism model'.

26. notes the introduction of a European heritage label and a European 'Qualité Tourisme' brand, since they are intended to encourage destinations to employ sustainable practices, and enhance Europe's image as a high-quality tourist destination. However, the added value of this mark needs to be more closely analysed and illustrated, and its award should be subject to strict criteria in order to maintain its prestige;

27. considers that local and regional authorities, and NECSTouR in particular, should be involved in the development of these criteria, in order to safeguard the credibility of the initiatives. As the EU's assembly of regional and local representatives, the Committee of the Regions should be represented within the body responsible for awarding quality labels;

28. stresses that the quality of all services should be increased in order to give European tourist destinations a clear competitive advantage and to help enhance Europe's image as a place of high-quality destinations. One group to be taken into account in particular are older tourists (by 2020, over 20 % of Europe's population is expected to be over 65 years old) as well as people with disabilities<sup>(8)</sup>;

29. calls upon the European Commission to strengthen consumer protection systems when drawing up this new political framework for European tourism;

30. highlights the need to enhance cooperation between the European Union and the major existing and potential markets (USA, China, Russia, India and Brazil) and with neighbouring countries, in particular the Mediterranean nations, in order to promote sustainable tourism models and a culture of environmental preservation, since a positive impact can only be achieved by acting jointly and with the same commitment and sense of responsibility;

#### **Consolidating the image and profile of Europe**

31. agrees with the Commission that Europe's image and profile must be strengthened for the sake of tourism's competi-

tiveness and supports the objective of improving Europe's reputation through sustainability and high quality and measures including the creation of a true 'Europe brand', alongside the Member States' national brands, to complement promotional efforts at national and regional levels;

32. calls upon the European Commission to set up specific measures concerning the external promotion of the 'Europe brand' which however shall in no way lead to distortion of competition between intra-European destinations;

33. supports the promotion of the visiteurope.com website and, in particular, joint participation in international events and tourism fairs, etc., involving all relevant regional and local actors;

#### **Maximising the potential of EU policies and instruments for developing tourism**

34. agrees with the Commission on the need to maximise the potential of the EU's funding instruments in the field of tourism. In the case of rural areas, consideration should be given to the possibilities provided by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), since tourism offers a genuine opportunity to create new jobs and revenue for the regions in question. It is also important to make use of the European Social Fund (ESF) for the training of the staff involved;

35. also believes that this consideration should be taken up in the debates on the future regional policy and its possible application should take account of each region's specialisation in the development of thematic tourism products, including social, natural, rural, business, health and cultural tourism, amongst others. The latter, cultural tourism, may best characterise the European Union as a whole, where architectural, ethnographical and industrial heritage are part of each region's economic fabric. It is essential to ensure the coordination and effectiveness of the various sources of funding in order to prevent overlapping and contradictions.

Brussels, 27 January 2011.

*The President  
of the Committee of the Regions*  
Mercedes BRESSO

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<sup>(8)</sup> EUROPE 2020 - A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth – March 2010.