

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the ‘Communication from the Commission: Agenda for a sustainable and competitive European tourism’

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(2009/C 27/03)

On 19 October 2007, the European Commission decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the

Communication from the Commission — Agenda for a sustainable and competitive European tourism.

The Section for the Single Market, Production and Consumption, which was responsible for preparing the Committee’s work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 13 June 2008. The rapporteur was **Mr Mendoza Castro**.

At its 446th plenary session, held on 9 and 10 July 2008 (meeting of 10 July), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 108 votes in favour, with five abstentions.

1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1 The European Economic and Social Committee welcomes and commends the Commission communication entitled ‘**Agenda for a sustainable and competitive European tourism**’. It supports the Commission’s pledge to consolidate tourism policy and strategy for the next few years in a coherent manner by means of the Agenda, thereby enabling them to be put into practice on a daily basis. This new policy has already been set out previously, in the Commission communication entitled ‘**A renewed EU Tourism Policy — Towards a stronger partnership for European Tourism**’.

1.2 The Committee appreciates the Commission’s effort to summarise briefly a large number of documents, opinions and debates. The result is a satisfactory and clear description for the general public of the outcome of the work of the Tourism Sustainability Group, of the experts who drew up the report and the results of the ensuing public consultation exercise.

1.3 The Commission is correct to tie this new tourism policy in with the renewed Lisbon strategy and to set improving competitiveness and sustainability as its general objectives, as well as the more specific objectives of economic prosperity, social equity and cohesion, and environmental and cultural protection.

1.4 We also endorse the challenges identified in the Commission communication and the proposed means of addressing them. The proposed approach is for all players to be involved through various means of collaboration and competitive collaboration, and this involvement is considered the cornerstone of the new tourism policy and of its implementing Agenda. The scale of the challenges referred to in the Commission communication is clear and the ongoing study of greenhouse gases’ implications for sustainability should in future be used as a key element for the Agenda.

1.5 The Committee considers the Commission’s undertaking to implement this new policy through dialogue, collaboration, new support measures and coordination between stakeholders to be appropriate. The ‘**Agenda for a sustainable and competitive European tourism**’ is the extension of the concrete approach and implementing measures proposed for all stakeholders in European tourism. Nevertheless, the Committee believes that the Commission, in the shape of DG Enterprise, can and must play a more active role and must take the lead in

introducing a large number of Europe-wide initiatives, such as social tourism, tourism for all and training in the field of tourism, for example. In particular, the Commission and the other institutions should make greater efforts to involve small, medium-sized and micro businesses in the task of making tourism sustainable and in the Agenda for implementing and achieving this goal. The EESC welcomes the Commission initiative to establish ‘European destinations of excellence’ as examples of good practice and of what can be achieved.

1.6 The Committee once again proposes and recommends boosting the European Tourism Forum and pushing forwards with discussions and a study on setting up a **European Tourism Board** and a **European Tourism Agency**. These two bodies could perhaps provide forums in which the tourism authorities and the different stakeholders in the tourism industry could come together to improve and distribute information on sustainable and competitive tourism, to monitor compliance with the policy and the European tourism agenda and in particular to attempt to discern trends in tourism and draw up the measures that need to be taken. In particular, climate change, its implications for tourism and the corresponding steps to be taken could form goals for the two bodies referred to above.

1.7 The Committee warmly welcomes the Commission’s intention to improve use of the available financial instruments. One specific example is social tourism where the Committee feels that there is already sufficient scope for initiating some cross-border pooling of experience in the form of a pilot project. Examples of such measures include social tourism and ‘tourism for all’, better human resources, product development and market penetration. The Committee considers that there is already sufficient scope to bring together cross-border experiences in the form of pilot projects in these fields.

1.8 The EESC is pleased to note the culmination of the work carried out on Agenda 21 for tourism, the results of which, set out in the Commission communication entitled ‘**Agenda for a sustainable and competitive European tourism**’, complete and consolidate the general policy of sustainability in European tourism. In fact, the technical document drawn up by the body created for this purpose forms the basis for and complements the Commission communication, and these two documents should, therefore, be considered in conjunction with one another.

1.9 With respect to statistics, the Committee welcomes the call for proposals launched by the Commission — and also requested by the European Economic and Social Committee — with regard to setting up a network of tourism observatories that would provide not only sectoral data, but also a strategic and forward-looking vision, anticipating and shaping future action.

1.10 The Committee is prepared to continue working on tourism along the lines set out in the Commission communication on the Agenda, and invites the other European institutions, the Member States, local and regional authorities, and sectoral stakeholders — businesses and trade unions — and the general public to be involved in understanding and supporting tourism as a universal right and economic activity with strategic importance for Europe's future. What is also needed is for stakeholders and consumers to act responsibly, in order to make tourism more sustainable and competitive.

1.11 Although the Commission communication takes account of the social factors that shape tourism, the Committee regrets the absence of any reference to the concept and reality of European citizenship; in fact tourism could go much further than it already does to help different cultures and social groups to cohere around the notion of European citizenship, which it is everyone's duty to promote and build on. The variety and diversity of cultures, languages and natural and cultural heritage in Europe's different Member States constitutes an enormous asset that can and should be used and enjoyed as a means of understanding one another and of acknowledging our rights as European citizens. Another aspect to which considerable importance should be attached in European-level discussions and documents on tourism is that of culture, given the synergies that can exist between tourism and culture, as was stated in an earlier EESC opinion.

1.12 In the process of making tourism more competitive and sustainable, account should be taken of destinations' specific features. The Committee recommends that attention be paid to the specific features of those Member States that are heavily dependent on tourism. Appropriate account should be taken of the needs of the different regions when drawing up tourism-related policies and proposals. It is recommended that the Commission's impact assessments take into consideration the potential disproportionate impact on different regions and sectors, for example, on destinations such as islands, which are heavily dependent on air transport and have no other means of transport or depend almost exclusively on air transport.

1.13 The EESC considers that the set of principles and values detailed in the Commission communication, covering sustainability, social welfare, competitiveness, cooperation, partnership, profitability, security, quality of employment, etc., actually constitute a European Tourism Model, not because they form a set of rules but because these principles and values are widely implemented throughout the European Union.

1.14 The Committee wishes to encourage the Commission to forge ahead in conjunction with other organisations on the European-level certification of knowledge and skills in the field of tourism in order to improve the quantity and quality of jobs in the industry. Support should be given to the Europe-wide Europass (covering the EU, EFTA/EEA and the candidate countries), which is a means of presenting, in a simple and easy-to-understand way, the personal skills and qualities of hard-

working job-seekers who are willing to move elsewhere in Europe for the purpose of work.

2. Commission communication

To better appreciate and understand what the Commission wishes to communicate to all European actors and institutions, we will briefly summarise the text of the communication and its main points.

2.1 Introduction to the communication

2.1.1 The challenge of striking a balance between sustainability and competitiveness. Section 1 of the Commission communication acknowledges first of all the key role of tourism in Europe's economy and its strategic importance, based not only on quantitative data but also on tourism's ability to create jobs and thus meet the objective of the renewed Lisbon strategy. It is worth mentioning the predicted growth rate of above 3 %, which clearly makes a sound contribution to the aims for employment, but which — in some cases and in the long term — could also lead to the limits imposed by sustainability requirements being exceeded.

2.1.2 Competitiveness and sustainability: two compatible requirements. The Commission communication clearly states that competitiveness depends on the sustainability and quality of the tourism experience and makes an explicit reference to the demands that climate change is making on the tourism industry. Corporate social responsibility can make a decisive contribution, by adopting measures to adapt to and combat climate change whilst promoting innovation and the value of tourism products for a world facing major challenges at the global level.

2.2 Substance of the Agenda. With its communication, the Commission proposes to strike a new balance between the welfare of tourists, the environment and the competitiveness of companies and destinations. This is a balance that needs to be achieved by all the stakeholders concerned.

2.2.1 Objectives and challenges. As a guideline for the action of all stakeholders concerned, the communication puts forward three basic objectives for the Agenda: economic prosperity, social equity and cohesion, and environmental protection.

The communication lists some of the major challenges that will have to be addressed if these aims are to be achieved:

- sustainable management of natural and cultural resources;
- minimising resource use and pollution;
- managing change in the interests of the well-being of the community;
- reducing the seasonality of demand;
- addressing the environmental impact of transport;
- making tourism accessible to all;
- improving the quality of jobs in tourism;
- ensuring the safety of tourists and of the communities where tourism services are offered.

This list of challenges is open and fluid and should be continually updated, prioritised and managed by the various stakeholders in a spirit of cooperation.

2.2.2 A framework for action. The communication suggests that coherent measures to meet the aims and challenges will involve securing the collaboration and responsible management of destinations, businesses and tourists and sets out the conditions for achieving this coherence.

2.2.3 Principles. The communication puts forward a total of nine principles that need to be complied with if this sustainable and competitive tourism is to be achieved. Three of them should be highlighted:

- Respect the limits that can be set for carrying capacity, facilities and the volume of tourist flows.
- Achieve a pace and rhythm of development that is appropriate to the natural, cultural and social resources available at any given time.
- Implement long-term planning as a prerequisite for striking a balance between sustainability and competitiveness.

2.3 Moving forward together. In this section, the Commission underlines the need for all stakeholders in the sector to unite their efforts and work on a voluntary and continuous basis. The model proposed is based on respecting the principle of subsidiarity, with action ideally being taken by the destinations themselves but with support from the national and European levels. The communication therefore highlights both the role of the different stakeholders in the sector and that of the European Commission, in light of the Treaty.

2.3.1 The role of stakeholders. Following up the conclusions of the Tourism Sustainability Group, the communication assigns broad responsibilities and specific roles for the three areas of action: destinations, businesses and tourists. Particular reference is made to the need to express and convey to micro-businesses the core message of achieving a balance between sustainability and competitiveness.

2.3.2 The role of the European Commission. The Commission acknowledges its responsibilities to act in accordance with the Treaty and undertakes to launch and boost a number of different initiatives at Community level within the framework provided by the Agenda and beyond. Amongst these initiatives, four groups of action warrant special attention:

- Mobilising actors to produce and share knowledge, with the aim of striking a balance between sustainability and competitiveness. The European Tourism Forum is a good example of how ideas and experiences can be exchanged.
- Promoting and supporting European destinations of excellence as examples of good practice and publicising these as networks of destinations committed to sustainability and competitiveness.
- Making use of the EU's highly diverse financial instruments. The Commission undertakes to disseminate information on improving their use in the field of tourism.
- Mainstreaming sustainability and competitiveness into Commission policies and applying these to the wide range of regions with very different concerns and needs: coastal regions, mountainous regions, rural areas and urban zones.

2.4 Conclusion of the communication

The communication concludes by calling for full collaboration between all public and private players in the adoption and practical implementation of the Agenda. Once more, the recommendation that collaboration should be established at every level is a precondition for improving competitiveness, which will ensure an attractive and sustainable European tourism sector in the long term. The Commission recommends 2011 as the date for evaluating the action plan set out in the Agenda. The Commission's objective in presenting the communication is thus quite clear.

3. General comments

3.1 Tourism and its strategic importance for the European economy have been recognised by all the European institutions in both formal and informal statements on the subject, thus strengthening its role, conveying the message to all stakeholders and providing a major boost to the sector. Tourism's importance transcends purely economic considerations because it is central in social terms to constructing a citizens' Europe. Whilst recognising the boost provided by the communication, much remains to be done to ensure that tourism takes on this key role in European policy, both now and in the future.

3.2 It is particularly crucial to point out that the new Lisbon Treaty acknowledges tourism's importance to Europe and gives the European Union further options to help develop the sector. This Treaty confers on the EU the authority and the duty to support, coordinate or complement the action of the Member States and the objectives of encouraging the creation of a favourable environment for the development of undertakings in this sector and of promoting the exchange of good practice.

3.3 Tourism has been addressed in the different European institutions as follows.

- The **European Parliament** has adopted a series of very different resolutions on tourism and its impact on employment and the economy, for instance the Resolution on 'Tourism and Development' and the Resolution on 'Prospects and new challenges for sustainable European tourism'.
- The **Council of the European Union** has addressed tourism on a number of occasions in conclusions and action plans, basically to emphasise the need for sustainability, competitiveness and job creation in tourism. Special mention should be made of the Council conclusions of 7 July 2006 on the Commission communication on the new EU tourism policy; the Council welcomes this policy and calls on the Commission to play an active role in coordinating various policies.
- The **European Commission** has published various communications, especially the communication of March 2006 outlining the new EU tourism policy; set up, consolidated and managed the European Tourism Forums; held conferences on various topics, such as social tourism and the Agenda 21 for European Tourism; and organised many other activities, such as the pilot project entitled 'European Destinations of Excellence', which recognises and promotes good practices carried out in EU Member States and in the candidate countries.

- The **Committee of the Regions** has presented opinions, for example on the Commission communications 'Working together for the future of European tourism' and 'Basic orientations for the sustainability of European tourism'.
- The **European Economic and Social Committee** has always taken and continues to take a particular interest in tourism-related matters, as evidenced by some 11 opinions adopted on tourism since 1999, the Committee's active participation in various European Tourism Forums convened by the Commission, and its involvement and promotion of numerous events on various aspects of tourism. Of particular interest is the cooperation between the EESC and other bodies on all the initiatives that they have launched in relation to tourism.

3.4 The present EESC opinion is intended to be an evaluation of the communication's contributions to policy and the way in which it is managed; it also aims to make proposals that enrich if not the text itself, then at least the debate on it.

3.5 Similarly to the EESC opinion INT/317 on the Commission communication on the renewed tourism policy, this opinion wishes once again to state that:

- tourism is a right of every citizen, as set out in the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism, and brings with it an obligation to conform to good practice;
- it is a right that also generates direct and indirect wealth and profitability, in particular for small and medium-sized businesses, and is thus a strategic industry for Europe which has proved sound;
- the quality of services provided by operators in the sector and the responsibility of users towards local communities are values that we must maintain as the basis for its continuing existence;
- tourism has, or should have, a positive impact on local and regional economies, as well as on social, cultural and environmental conditions and the urban environment, and thus provides a means of understanding other cultures and different ways of being and behaving; it also acts as an instrument for interregional cooperation;
- tourism is a dynamic sector and major source of employment now and for the future, with the potential to create good quality, stable jobs with social rights;
- tourism is not immune from problems such as overcrowding and seasonality, which lead to a loss of competitiveness;
- we believe in the practical importance of an Agenda for a sustainable and competitive European tourism that is clear-sighted and has ambitious objectives;
- the European tourism model is an internal necessity and could serve as a global point of reference if it is based not on rules but on values of quality, sustainability, accessibility, etc., which are freely taken on board by tourist destinations and all stakeholders;
- the European tourism model is based on and enriched by the variety of destinations, by the different approaches to tourism, and by the diverse forms of tourism;

- this European tourism model that we are advocating is an effective instrument for promoting peace and understanding between peoples.

4. Specific comments

4.1 The Commission communication gives a clear explanation of the proposal regarding the need for balance between sustainability and competitiveness and of how to achieve this in practice. Incorporating all this into a rather short communication certainly involved considerable work to summarise the material and required analysis of many documents, opinions and debates. It should be emphasised that the ultimate aim of clearly informing society about the Commission's basic views on the future of the sector and about the measures to be carried out in this complex industry has been achieved.

4.2 The arguments presented in the communication in support of the Agenda seem appropriate, in that they assess both the economic impact of tourism and its ability to create jobs for young people and also the necessary balance between sustainability and competitiveness which, in the long term, are of mutual benefit to one another. Impact assessments of matters such as the carbon footprint of different activities and regions or restrictions on carrying and reception capacity are key aspects of striking and maintaining a balance between these variables. Universal acceptance that there are limits to the scale and pace of tourism is essential to achieving balance between sustainability and competitiveness.

4.3 Perhaps it would have been useful for the communication also to analyse the new Lisbon Treaty in greater detail, trying to see how it ties in with the Agenda and what its significance for implementing the new European tourism policy is. It should not be forgotten that the Member States and the regions have repeatedly indicated that they wish to maintain their responsibility for tourism, but still allow the European Union to play a catalytic and coordinating role in certain areas of joint interest so as to improve the competitiveness of Europe's tourism sector. One example is the setting-up and management of an internet portal to promote Europe as a tourism destination, which has already become a valuable tool that can showcase all EU countries together as forming a diverse and special tourist destination.

4.4 The challenges and aims mentioned in the communication are certainly the most important ones that will be faced by tourism in the coming decades. Certainly the key challenges of sustainability and improving competitiveness are broad enough to serve as the basis for addressing other major challenges, such as enhancing quality, reducing seasonality or improving the skills of people working in the tourism industry. These challenges are also set out in the Agenda.

4.5 The communication repeatedly calls for collaboration, because, in line with the new tourism policy, strengthening collaboration is proposed as its linchpin and hallmark. It is particularly important to emphasise the role of the trades unions and employers' organisations, which must be included in cooperation arrangements, and asked to take part in all debates and forums, and in the implementation of general measures to improve the tourism sector. By the same token, it would be useful to promote permanent networks of tourist destinations and cities, motivated by the joint aim of improving

competitiveness and sustainability. The Committee welcomes the promotion of the 'European Destinations of Excellence' and urges that this idea should include proper management of social and labour relations and participation of trades unions and employers' organisations at the selected destination, as a means of making tourist destinations more sustainable and competitive.

Within their remit, consumers' organisations have an extremely important role to play.

4.6 The Commission undertakes to implement this new policy on the basis of cooperation, specific new specific support measures and coordination between actors. The Agenda clearly wishes to see all stakeholders in the sector taking on greater responsibility. Into the Committee's view, the Enterprise DG has a key role to play in this task of coordinating all European policies that directly or indirectly affect tourism and which affect the different types of destination that also have their own specific features.

4.7 The Committee also considers that the Commission should play a more active role in introducing Europe-wide initiatives, including cross-border social tourism in Europe. Here in particular, the EESC has on several occasions proposed — and now proposes once again — boosting the European Tourism Forum and pushing forwards with discussions and, if necessary, a study on setting up a **European Tourism Board** and a **European Tourism Agency**, which would provide information and action on policies and measures adopted in the field of European tourism. It is also proposed that the Commission promote research into setting up technology platforms in the tourism sector, in order to improve the ways in which tourism is marketed, especially given the opportunities to boost internal tourism in Europe and potential sources of new tourists, such as China, Russia, India, etc.

4.8 The Committee considers that the communication does not pay adequate attention to the role of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in the new scenario for tourism, both from the perspective of consumers and of businesses and stakeholders in the sector. Research and development work in the tourism industry to improve the use of such technologies must be a priority in the next few years. This work will undoubtedly lead to improved management of destinations, businesses and tourists, gradually achieving the sought-after balance.

4.9 The evident willingness to adopt concrete measures and in particular to improve the use of the available European financial instruments is important, but there is a need for a programme to be proposed for the precise purpose of implementing the major European tourism objectives, which the

communication accurately identifies. It must be ensured that all the funds directly or indirectly allocated to tourism are used effectively and efficiently to achieve the objectives.

4.10 This communication should be viewed in the context of the major contributions made by the report by the Tourism Sustainability Group — a document that has provided significant ideas for the Agenda, in particular with regard to assigning roles to all of the sector's stakeholders. The efforts made by renowned experts over several months have clearly been very productive and provide complementary and practical approaches to a number of questions relating to sustainability and competitiveness.

4.11 The communication does not clearly indicate the role it assigns to tourism statistics. There is a need for clear collaboration on tourism statistics in order to monitor the Agenda's implementation and in particular for greater attention to be paid to the variables of sustainability, competitiveness and employment.

4.12 The communication clearly states the need to mainstream tourism policies for sustainability and competitiveness into all Commission and EU policies in order to ensure that the aims set out in the Agenda are met.

4.13 As already observed in the EESC opinion entitled the Katowice Declaration, and in the opinion on 'Tourism and culture: two forces for growth', in the opinion on 'The renewed tourism policy' and other EESC documents, communication campaigns are also called for to inform and motivate all European citizens, in particular young people.

4.14 The Committee considers it to be crucial that training, both formal and 'on-the-job', meets the needs of businesses and makes people more employable. European-level certification and recognition of knowledge and skills should be an instrument that helps to generate more jobs and better working conditions in the tourism industry.

4.15 In order to make tourism more competitive and sustainable, account should be taken of destinations' specific features. The EESC recommends that, when drawing up tourism-related policies and proposals, attention be paid to the specific features of those Member States that are heavily dependent on tourism and that appropriate account be taken of the needs of the different regions. At the same time it should be noted that tourism to remote destinations may have a particularly strong impact on climate change through the impacts and emissions from long distance travel. Greater emphasis may need to be placed in future on the advantages of seeking destinations nearer to one's starting point, which can be reached with less carbon emissions.

Brussels, 10 July 2008.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Dimitris DIMITRIADIS

APPENDIX

to the Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee

The following text from point 4.15 of the Section Opinion received at least 25 % of the votes cast but was adopted in a modified form by the plenary:

'4.15 In order to make tourism more competitive and sustainable, account should be taken of destinations' specific features. The EESC recommends that, when drawing up tourism-related policies and proposals, attention be paid to the specific features of those Member States that are heavily dependent on tourism and that appropriate account be taken of the needs of the different regions.'

Outcome of the vote:

In favour of adding a new sentence: 48 Against: 43 Abstentions: 16
