

OPINIONS

COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

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Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions — Age-friendly tourism

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POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

1. underlines the need to identify the different groups within the community of elderly, defining their market preferences and needs in order to develop business plans adjusted to ensuring the best possible development of age-friendly tourism in the EU, aimed at both group and individual tourism offers; stresses also the need to identify the different barriers that older tourists may face (such as language, accessibility of information, organisational challenges, age discrimination, availability of healthcare and emergency, travel insurance, etc.) as well as suggesting ways and means to overcome these barriers;
2. notes that it will be important in future to work on the basis of a single age range or definition when discussing senior tourism, so that monitoring and comparable studies can be carried out with the aim of **maximising** the potential of this growing market segment;
3. emphasises that it is vital to have a large initial market, with **broadband** (roll-out) throughout Europe, in order to give relevant regions every opportunity to develop and **secure** a strategically sustainable competitive (tourism) advantage. Small and medium-sized tourism companies in particular could **benefit** from this;
4. calls on the Commission to make senior tourism central to the **Digital Agenda for Europe**, as a mechanism for bridging the digital divide;
5. believes that a policy to promote **age-friendly tourism requires an integrated approach**. In particular, local and regional authorities should adopt a **cross-sectoral approach** that involves different organisations operating in areas such as healthcare, accessibility and transport;
6. recognises the importance of setting up a **European database** containing facts and figures on this affluent population group consisting generally of independent-minded older people. Within this standardised framework, analyses and indicators can be developed to effectively explain the implications of this growing number of older people for the services provided by tourism operators in terms of: tourist destinations, transportation, attractions, accommodation, retail facilities, and sources of information and media that give tourists ideas and knowledge which are important in helping them enhance their personal experience of tourism. Given the growth in senior tourism, such a database will become increasingly important;

7. refers to the objectives of the EU's 2010 tourism policy⁽¹⁾, namely to promote 'sustainable, responsible and high-quality tourism', as well as the associated growth in jobs and social development in the EU;

8. calls on the European Commission to earmark a greater share of the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) for tourism development after evaluating the needs of local and regional authorities. The Commission could also mobilise financial support by continuing the Calypso programme, paying particular attention to tourism companies in the COSME programme and introducing Erasmus+ funding for older people. Given the employment potential of this sector, the promotion of tourism — also in relation to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) — should be made a pillar of the multiannual framework post-2021;

9. underlines that accessibility is fundamental to ensuring the smooth running of any tourism activity, especially for older people, as their access to tourist destinations and places of interest (hotels, spas, etc.) by means of sustainable, comfortable, affordable transport adapted to the needs of different age segments of tourists is a pre-condition for their travelling at all. It would therefore be advisable to involve the providers of transportation such as airlines, passenger shipping and bus companies, train operators and cruise lines to establish cooperation between them to ensure intermodality between the different modes of transport so that the elderly can easily and comfortably reach their tourism destinations, including remote regions;

10. in this context seconds the proposal of the European Parliament Intergroup on European Tourism Development to declare 2018 a **European Year of Tourism**, noting that there should be a greater focus on facilities for older people and the promotion of tourism during the low and mid seasons;

11. points out that the tourism sector is very important for Europe's regions because of the income and jobs it generates: for certain regions tourism is even indispensable for promoting and sustaining competitive advantage. Tourism has significant growth potential and is directly and indirectly connected with many economic sectors and aspects of society and culture. It is often a driving factor in developing and expanding competitiveness on a comprehensive, strategic and sustainable basis. Local and regional authorities play a crucial role here, and it is therefore of the utmost importance to capitalise on their knowledge and experience by encouraging local and regional cooperation at European level;

12. notes that older people make a significant contribution to Europe's tourism industry and represent enormous market potential. Moreover, in Europe the over-65 age group already has spending power of more than EUR 3 trillion and the number of people with age-related impairments is expected to grow from 68 million in 2005 to 84 million in 2020. There are currently over 128 million EU citizens aged between 55 and 80, accounting for around 25 % of the total population. However, 41 % of Europeans across the 28 Member States have never travelled outside their national borders, while seven out of ten older people only take holidays in their own country;

13. concludes that this demographic trend has considerable implications for the demand for tourism services and by extension for the labour market. The tourism industry has already proven to be far more resilient to external shocks/crises than anticipated. Expenditure on leisure and tourism remains high in today's economy. Tourism is a very labour-intensive activity, making an important contribution to employment and social development, and it deserves to receive more attention in the next multiannual framework;

14. notes that the tourism sector is facing many challenges, including: (a) demographic shifts, (b) digital technologies and (c) diversification of tourist amenities. Global competition is upending conventional marketing strategies in favour of strategies that make service provision more accessible and flexible for tourists;

15. believes that quality, sustainability, continuing innovation and a well-trained workforce are key to the development of age-friendly tourism;

⁽¹⁾ <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52010DC0352>

16. therefore recommends that the national and regional significance of the demographic challenge be determined under the regional Operational Programmes (OPs), which concern among other things the competitiveness of SMEs, employment and the jobs market, and social integration. This is important in addressing seasonal unemployment and generating leverage with jobs in the tourism sector;

17. notes that to extend the local and regional tourist season, within and in addition to specific age-groups, policymakers should be looking also at specific groups motivated by their common interests such as cultural heritage, history, education, religion, sports and recreation;

18. notes that, health tourism represents a growing element of the EU's tourism sector and its two dimensions (medical healthcare and wellness tourism) should be supported. It is essential, especially from a regional perspective, to promote competitiveness and turn European destinations into destinations of health excellence with high added value offers. Health tourism is becoming the market segment with the highest growth within the tourism industry, especially among the elderly for whom seeking healthcare is one of the main motivations for travelling;

19. believes that improving digital technologies to ensure faster access to ICT serves a number of objectives, including the promotion of age-friendly tourism, and can be linked to priorities that are important for the EU. Facilitating access to technological infrastructure will help significantly to develop silver spending power, bearing in mind that the over-50s are now the age group with the greatest spending power (potential of the silver economy);

20. notes the importance of food tourism for the creation of sustainable jobs, regional growth and cohesion as over a third of tourist spending is devoted to food;

21. recommends that local and regional authorities focus on these measures in the OPs by: getting involved, encouraging public-private partnerships (PPS), building networks, and promoting and developing age-friendly tourism. Communication activities to raise awareness of the market potential of age-friendly tourism should therefore also be a key priority for local and regional authorities;

22. notes that there is no uniform market for senior tourism; rather, older people are a heterogeneous group of individuals with different needs, incentives and expectations. Social isolation is a risk for older people, and tourism helps them to create new social contacts. Research shows that older people who engage in tourist activities not only have better health and are therefore less dependent on care services, also actively chose their destinations to benefit from quality health and welfare services;

23. recommends maintaining the link with the European Innovation Partnership (EIP) on Active and Healthy Ageing in relation to promoting mobility, safety, accessibility in public places, healthcare and social services;

24. would remind the EU institutions and the Member States that local and regional authorities play an important role in coordinating sectoral policies such as transport, care, urban planning and rural development. These sectors in turn have a direct and indirect impact on local tourism, where services are provided by small and medium-sized family businesses;

25. agrees that local authorities need to seize the opportunities offered by tourism for developing 'smart' cities and that the skills of individual SMEs should be harnessed and support given to them. Such support could involve awareness-raising activities, which might include capacity-building to provide information on financing options, coordination of partnerships on EU projects through, for instance, twinning programmes, or the establishment of joint ventures based on local and regional best practice in relation to easier access to information, transport infrastructure and products adapted to all age-group needs;

26. calls on policymakers to create the necessary conditions for the tourism sector to:

— develop affordable and varied tourism services,

- identify good practice among senior citizen organisations and extend this practice by, for example, setting up exchange programmes for older people,
- develop affordable tourism products for older people,
- help small and medium-sized enterprises in the tourism sector to cooperate in packaging and marketing tourism services in their region,
- encourage efforts to make cross-border travel easier for older people,
- to respect the principle of subsidiarity in line with article 195 TFEU which stipulates that the EU has only a supporting competence in matters of tourism;

27. notes that reservation systems, social media and electronic marketplaces are just a few of the common tourism applications available on the internet. Local authorities may also opt to employ modern communication technology, including search engines which provide transparent information so that older people understand what quality to expect for what price. However, not all older people are familiar with online booking systems and product review websites. The digital divide means that they may rely more on traditional reservation methods and personal interaction, inter alia, with travel agents. To enable older generations to take advantage of digital opportunities, local and regional authorities could, for example, provide classes geared towards older people;

28. believes that social contacts can help older people to stay healthy, independent and active at work or in their community. This can be achieved by supporting social networks and involving stakeholders (e.g. research centres and institutes, private IT companies, civil society and local communities) in designing and developing technological interfaces and a universal blueprint for age-friendly communities;

29. is aware that the impact of digital interaction between stakeholders has evolved considerably and underlines the importance of having a European database. In order to make the most of existing resources, a database on senior tourism could be provided by the Virtual Tourism Observatory, although it would presumably still have to be decided who would develop the model and who would gather the data for the indicators;

30. notes that the soaring cost of healthcare has strengthened interest in the issue of ageing and the creation of **cross-sectoral partnerships**. eHealth initiatives could thus have a very favourable impact on the development of age-friendly tourism. Older travellers often cite health as the second reason not to take a trip. If older people were given access (online) to high-quality healthcare away from home, this might allay or dispel their fears, and perhaps make them more adventurous in their free time. Travel to gentler climes and exposure to new experiences could also get them out of their routine and be beneficial to their health;

31. stresses the importance of a cross-border healthcare directive and calls on regional and national authorities to improve access to information about health services abroad for senior citizens, enabling them to make informed choices about cure and care procedures and to travel within the EU without health-related worries;

32. recommends improving mobility, launching safety initiatives and improving accessibility in public places for all age groups. It is important to forge strong links between senior tourism and the European Innovation Partnership on Active and Healthy Ageing;

33. supports the idea of launching a European Covenant of Mayors on Demographic Change and calls for tourism to be recognised as an important policy area that can help to boost innovation, healthy and active living, and intergenerational solidarity.

Brussels, 10 February 2016.

The President
of the European Committee of the Regions
Markku MARKKULA
