

Tourism policy: towards a stronger partnership for Europe, Lisbon strategy

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The European Parliament adopted a resolution based on the own-initiative report drafted by Paolo COSTA (ALDE, IT) on the Communication from the Commission entitled "A renewed EU Tourism Policy: Towards a stronger partnership for European Tourism". The report was adopted by 536 votes in favour to 58 against with 22 abstentions.

Tourism and EU Visa policy: the report stressed the importance to Europe of tourism, and highlighted the need to simplify visa application procedures on a reciprocal basis and to reduce the costs of tourist visas for entry into any Member State. Those Member States that are party to the Schengen agreement were called upon to establish common consular desks for the grant of visas to non-EU applicants, to ensure that these desks have the same working methods and apply the same visa criteria. They should also improve the reception given to visa applicants, for example, through the management of appointments, the way in which interviews are carried out and the time limit for processing applications. This would lead to significant budgetary savings for the Member States. Parliament felt that there should be a review, in the Community Code on Visas, of the number of documents that are requested from visa applicants. It strongly recommended that there should be a presumption in all EU visa policies in favour of issuing multiple-entry visas.

The Schengen Member States were called upon to simplify Schengen visa application procedures for tourists who had already been issued with visas for non-Schengen EU countries or had already arrived in these countries. The non-Schengen EU countries should do the same for holders of Schengen visas.

MEPs recognised, however, that the harmonisation of visa application procedures and the general facilitation of access to Europe for tourists from third countries had to be compatible with the security rules required in order to combat illegal immigration, terrorism, and organised crime.

Statistics: the report recalled that there was an absolute need for adequate information on tourism so that key decisions could be taken, in order to ensure that Europe remained the first destination in international terms and became competitive once again. Parliament requested a review of Council Directive 95/57/EC on the collection of statistical information in the field of tourism so as to ensure better harmonisation of data collection by Member States. The Commission was called upon to: i) seek possibilities for implementing in the Member States Tourism Satellite Accounts (TSAs) since such measurements allowed tourism to be accurately compared with other economic sectors and can contribute to a better understanding of the true size and value of the tourism industry; ii) examine the need to collect statistical information and quality data in order to allow for an assessment of the impact of tourism on the economy, the environment and the quality of life of the inhabitants of popular tourist destinations; iii) publish a report on the various national schemes in place for the protection of special natural and historic sites by means of specific town planning and building regulations and, where appropriate, to encourage best practice in these areas through the publication of guidelines; iv) draw up a harmonised scoreboard describing the condition of natural and historic sites, and in particular the impact of tourists on these sites, with a view to regulating the number of visits and ensuring that they are properly conserved and passed on to future generations.

Harmonisation of quality standards for tourist accommodation in Europe: Parliament noted the multiplicity of classification schemes in the Member States. This has a negative impact on the industry's reliability and on transparency. Consumers regarded the system of classification as an important instrument for choosing accommodation. Parliament therefore considered it important that accurate information on the meaning of the classification in the different countries be easily available. It was possible to establish a common ground and common criteria for customers in order that they might be able to make a choice when they travel abroad. The European hospitality industry was asked, inter alia, to pursue its efforts to facilitate the understanding of the meaning of 'stars' in the different Member States. Whilst a common classification system at EU level would be very difficult to achieve given the variety of hotel types and tourist accommodation, and in view of the very different structures of current classification plans, MEPs considered nevertheless, that a set of guidelines based on common and uniform criteria for the entire EU could take into account the interests of the consumer, while respecting the environment and local characteristics. The Commission was requested to establish a methodology for creating such minimum standards on safety and quality of accommodation services. Such a methodology could include the introduction of an EC mark for accommodation that would encompass pan-European common criteria providing consumers with an assurance as to the minimum level of quality to be expected whatever Member State was visited.

Quality management schemes: the report called on the European hospitality industry to pursue its work in relation to the setting up of a European 'umbrella' for quality management schemes. It welcomed the fact that environmental protection labels were on the increase, but considered that the multiplication of labels at local level could cause confusion for tourists, prompting the need for a consolidation of current labels for better international recognition. MEPs called on the Commission, in cooperation with HOTREC as the European catering trade association, to promote labelling processes regarding tourist accommodation undertaken in Member States and to promote quality models that had proved effective elsewhere (for example the Qualmark in New Zealand. The Commission and Member States were called upon to: i) contribute to the enhancement of a sustainable labelling process based on environmental and social criteria by showcasing best practice, transfer of best practice and encouraging initiatives by industry leaders; ii) promote the use of eco-labels for tourist facilities, sites and services.

Consumer protection: Parliament pointed out that increasing numbers of tourists were booking their travel directly using electronic means and avoiding intermediaries- tour operators and travel agents- who were still subject to legal regimes (Council Directive 90/314/EEC). This anomaly needed to be rectified by incorporating into Directive 90/314/EEC all websites that offered more than one service for sale, such as those offered by low-fare airlines and other actors in this market. The fast development of the use of IT technologies for tourist services required a personal data protection framework for electronic bookings, which might be based on a prior analysis of this market by the Commission. Parliament recommended the certification of sites that provided information and offer tourist services (reservation and payment) of an electronic nature. It regretted the absence of a specific legal instrument covering the safety of services, and called on the Commission and on the Member States to evaluate the possibility of tackling this issue. The Commission was asked to conduct a European promotional campaign on road safety. It should also simplify procedures for hazard analysis critical control points (HACCP) and take account of the needs of small businesses.

Health tourism: MEPs stressed the importance of using all available Community programmes, including the Second Programme of Community

Action in the Field of Health, in order to promote health-related tourism. Businesses in the insurance sector must be given support in finding solutions for trans-boundary cooperation in order to finance health-related tourism. In view of the decline of health tourism, Parliament felt that a specific Community directive was needed to define the recognition of hydrothermal resorts and, more generally, the role of health tourism and thermal cures in connection with tourist facilities in the various Member States, by also making available sufficient financial resources to enable a strategically important sector of the Member States' economy to embark on a suitable development process, so as to increase new direct and indirect employment.

Accessible tourism: the report welcomed initiatives to coordinate at European level the information on accessible tourism that would allow tourists with reduced mobility to find information about the accessibility of tourist destinations. Parliament called for an "Access for all " EC label that would guarantee core accessibility facilities for tourists with reduced mobility and would cover offers such as accommodation, restaurants, leisure and natural sites, auditoriums, monuments, museums, etc. The accessibility of tourist destinations was also an issue involving transport services. It called on the Commission to take due account of the accessibility handicap affecting regions with specific natural or geographical characteristics, such as the outermost regions, island and mountain regions, and the sparsely populated northernmost regions.

Socially, economically and environmentally sustainable tourism: the new tourism policy must make European tourism sustainable in economic, social, territorial, environmental, and cultural terms. Parliament stressed that sustainably developed tourism must offer local economies (especially in disadvantaged regions) a long-term source of revenue, must help to promote stable employment with entitlements and must support other economic activities (both upstream and downstream), yet at the same time it must safeguard and enhance the cultural, historical, landscape and environmental heritage. Threats to the environment, especially carbon dioxide emissions, required the tourism industry to be involved in the education of tourists regarding environmental issues.

The Commission and the Member States are called upon to ensure the provision of information to passengers, and to ensure that easily accessible arbitration mechanisms were provided for by the Member States in situations where a defaulting operator fails to pay damages. The Commission was asked to reflect on an approach through which the EU could offer protection to passengers that have been left behind by a defaulting charter operator, intermediaries or scheduled carriers as a result of bankruptcy or intentional abuse. An EU-wide blacklist of such operators might be established following consultations with transport and/or tourism operators and consumer protection organisations.

Promotion of European tourist destinations: Parliament welcomed the fact that the European Tourist Destinations Portal had been set up with the aid of Commission funding. It called on the Commission to continue to help promote Europe as a tourist destination, for instance by introducing a "Europe" label and organising channels for gathering information on European tourist destinations.

The Commission was also called upon to:

- improve cross-border infrastructures, including recreational (inland) waterways;
- promote more vigorously Europe's transport and industrial heritage;
- promote European destinations in those countries whose peak seasons coincide with the European low seasons and to look into the possibility of endorsing agreements, such as Memorandums of Understanding, with these third countries in order to develop tourist fluxes with an optimised seasonal spread;
- highlight the cultural dimension of European tourism by promoting European UNESCO world heritage sites as testimonies of European culture;
- promote the cross-border memorial cycle route along the former Iron Curtain as an example of "gentle mobility" in tourism and as a symbol for the reunification of Europe.

Tourism development: all players must coordinate the policies with a direct or indirect impact on tourism, cooperate more closely among themselves, and make better use of the European financial instruments available in the period from 2007 to 2013 with a view to developing European tourism. SME's should have greater involvement in tourism-related entrepreneurship and possibilities for simplifying procedures to obtain financial support should be found.

Miscellaneous: the report highlighted the need to implement a European tourist programme for retired people out of season, which would improve the quality of life of senior citizens in the EU, create employment and generate greater demand and growth in the European economy. It believes that this could be called the Ulysses Programme.