New prospects and new challenges for sustainable European tourism

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The European Parliament adopted Luis QUIERO's (EPP-ED, PT) own-initiative report on new prospects and new challenges for sustainable European tourism by 471 votes in favour to 54 against and 58 abstentions. The report presents various initiatives, which were considered viable and useful to the central goal of sustainability in tourism EU-wide. (Please see the summary of 14/06/2005.)

Parliament pointed out that Europe is the world's leading tourist destination. Tourist and travel services contribute directly - at a rate of at least 4% - to the EU's GDP and account directly for more than seven million jobs. Furthermore, more than two million businesses, a large majority of which are small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), are directly involved in providing tourist services. Whilst tourism does not at present constitute a Community policy, it is nevertheless affected by many policies which do come under the Community's remit and that means that it should be given greater consideration at EU level.

Competitiveness and quality of services: Parliament **c**onsidered it vitally important to complete the internal market in tourist services and to achieve genuine equality of treatment between tourist operators. It proposed a Community-wide classification of tourist services, with the cooperation of the industry, to be used in particular for the classification of hotel facilities. Measures should also be taken to identify and to harmonise professional profiles in the tourist industry in order to avoid unnecessary duplication and guarantee a more transparent service that does not confuse users. Parliament called on the Council to restart work on the proposed revision of the Council Directive amending Directive 77/388/EEC as regards the special scheme for travel agents (COM(2003)0078). It reiterated its support for the objectives of simplifying this special VAT scheme and maintaining the competitive position of operators established in the EU vis-à-vis operators from third countries. The Council is asked to conclude the decision-making process on the proposal for amending Directive 77/388/EEC (COM(2003)0397), so as to enable all Member States to apply in a structured way reduced VAT rates for restaurants, as already exist for other tourism-related activities, such as holiday accommodation, plots on campsites, hotels and amusement parks.

Parliament went on to state that consumer rights in the tourism sector should be defined and better protected and that this should include identifying new forms of protection such as conciliation services for tourists. It called on the Commission to consider the drafting of a "tourism package" comprising both a review of the existing directives on consumers" rights with regard to tourism and new measures making it possible to improve consumer protection and quality standards in tourist services (particularly in the hotel and touring sectors) while taking account of new trends on the supply side (electronic sales).

Safety and security of tourism: Amongst other recommendations, Parliament tookthe view that the Commission should coordinate the establishment of a network for good practice exchange between high risk sports and leisure organisations and the provision of information on risk prevention and management, in particular for young people. It called on the Commission to investigate the desirability of requiring the maximum possible transparency and professionalism from companies managing this type of high risk leisure activity, asking that they take out compulsory care insurance.

New sustainable tourism activities: The report highlights of the dangers of mass tourism, senior citizens' tourism, and also stressed the need for all parties in the sector to take steps to capture new demand outside the high season, to spread visits over the year and to make better use of hotel and accommodation facilities. Parliament pointed to the positive repercussions of conference and business tourism, medical

and thermal tourism, commemorative tourism, cultural tourism in every shape and form, gastronomic, naturalist, sports-based, spiritual, historical and language-related tourism, religious tourism, social tourism and so on.

It also considered that the tourism industry occupies a key place in the economic development of countries in the Mediterranean basin and is a vector for rapprochement in the cultural dialogue. Consideration should be given to the possibility of setting up a training exchange programme for people working in tourism in the Mediterranean regions, within the framework of the Barcelona process.

Knowledge and promotion of European tourism: Parliament called on the Commission and the Member States to assess the possibility of a scheme, along the lines of the European Capital of Culture initiative, to designate outstanding European tourist destinations, to allow one or more regions or micro-regions to be selected yearly on the basis of quality indicators linked to the preservation and upgrading of cultural and natural heritage and the development of sustainable tourist services. Accordingly, Parliament called on the Commission and the Member States to study the desirability of proposing an EU tourism mark or destination, characterised by tremendous diversity and high social quality and sustainability, and to promote it both within and outside the EU through a suitable communication campaign. Preserving the cultural heritage (in particular that which is designated world heritage by UNESCO) is of major importance to the sustainable development of tourism in the EU. Parliament asked the Commission and the Member States to create the "Iron Curtain Trail", an initiative analogous to the "Boston Freedom Trail" in remembrance of the American Independence War or to the "Berliner Mauerweg" in remembrance of the construction and fall of the Berlin Wall, in order to promote European identity.

Tourism and transport: Transport is essential to tourism, especially in the case of island regions and the most remote regions in general, both as a contribution to the quality of the tourist services chain and in terms of the accessibility of destinations. Parliament emphasised the need to promote combined train and bicycle travel and considers the 'Eurovelo' network to be a good basis for this. It also requested that railway enterprises allow bicycles on trains, including long distance and cross-border trains, as is already the case with the French TGV.

It welcomed the Commission's initiative to establish state-aid guidelines for regional airports and low-cost companies, so as to improve legal certainty and ensure fair competition in favour of tourist accessibility and regional development. Nevertheless, steps should be taken to ensure that the development of low-cost airlines is supervised, so as to avoid a proliferation of air links to specific regions or neighbouring regions, and on the contrary develop to the full the interconnection of air transport and collective land transport. Parliament also hoped for a specific Commission initiative laying down safety standards and monitoring procedures applicable to small carriers, minor airlines and secondary airports. In any case, the activities of the European Aviation Safety Agency must be stepped up and coordination with the Member States' authorities must be improved.

Structural intervention co-funded by the Community: When adopting the new structural policy instruments for 2007-2013, it should be ensured that the strategic guidelines provide for an integrated approach to tourism, allowing the EAFRD and the ERDF actions to be coordinated in a spirit similar to that of the LEADER programme and the Interreg and Urban programmes. This approach should allow the implementation of a genuine regional strategy for sustainable tourism. Parliament called on the Member States to establish objectives within their national strategic frameworks and operating programmes which will enable the regions to set up and fund coherent projects for developing sustainable tourism, tailor-made to local conditions and possibilities, including partnerships between different areas and institutions so as to build up appropriate local tourist systems.

Tourism and coordinating Community legislation: Parliament asked that any draft secondary legislation which has an impact on the tourist sector be identified at the outset of the implementation of the Commission's work programme, and be subject to an impact assessment, with the involvement of

bodies representing industry, employees and consumers. It also called on the Commission to consider setting up a network of tourism correspondents/ coordinators in all Commission Directorates whose remit affects tourism activities.

In the debate, however, Commissioner Günther VERHEUGEN told Members that the Commission would not take on board many of their proposals. Consequently, it remains to be seen if proposals such as the introduction of an EU-wide hotel classification system or a European campaign to encourage the development of senior citizens' tourism within the Community will be realized.