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

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The Committee on Transport and Tourism adopted the own-initiative report drawn up by Paolo **COSTA** (ALDE, IT) on a renewed EU tourism policy: towards a stronger partnership for European Tourism.

Tourism and EU Visa policy: the report stresses the importance to Europe of tourism, including tourism from third countries. It highlights in particular 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. Member States, that are party to the Schengen agreement, are 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 and to improve the reception given to visa applicants through, for example, the management of appointments, the way in which interviews are carried out and the time limit for processing applications, since this would lead to significant budgetary savings for the Member States.

The committee stresses the need to review, in the Community Code on Visas, the number and type of documents that are requested from visa applicants. It strongly recommends that there should be a presumption in all EU visa policies in favour of issuing multiple-entry visas.

It points out that longer-term visas of at least one year's validity are needed by tour operators and transport companies so that they can hire the right personnel to meet the needs of their clients. It insists on the need to maintain and enhance the delivery of visas for groups. The Schengen Member States are called upon to simplify Schengen visa application procedures for tourists who have already been issued with visas for non-Schengen EU countries or have already arrived in these countries. The report calls on the non-Schengen EU countries to do the same for holders of Schengen visas.

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

Statistics: the report recalls that there is an absolute need for adequate, trustworthy, homogeneous and up-to-date information on tourism so that key strategic and management decisions can be taken in the public and private sector, and a need to develop adequate accompanying measures and orientations at EU level, in order to ensure that Europe remains the first destination in international terms and becomes competitive once again.

The committee requests 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, in relation to both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the supply of data. The Commission is called upon to: i) seek possibilities for implementing in the Member States Tourism Satellite Accounts (TSAs) since such measurements allow 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: the report notes that it is important that accurate information on the meaning of the classification in the different countries be easily available to consumers and that it take their needs into close consideration. A common ground and common criteria for customers should be established in order that they be able to make a choice, on the basis of clear and verifiable classification criteria, when they decide to travel abroad. The European hospitality industry is asked to pursue its efforts to facilitate the understanding of the meaning of "stars" in the different Member States.

Given that a common classification system at EU level would be very difficult to achieve given the variety of hotel types and tourist accommodation due to local requirements, cultures and sensitivities, and in view of the very different structures of current classification plans, MEPs consider 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, in cooperation with European hotel and catering organisations, such as HOTREC (Hotels, Restaurants and Cafes in Europe), and with the European consumer protection organisations, is requested to establish a methodology for creating such minimum standards on safety and quality of accommodation services. The report stresses that 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 EU country is visited.

Quality management schemes: the report calls on the European hospitality industry to pursue its work in relation to the setting up of a European "umbrella" for quality management schemes and to inform regularly the Community institutions of progress made. It welcomes the fact that environmental protection labels are on the increase, but considers that the multiplication of labels at local level can cause confusion for tourists and affect transparency, prompting the need for better information for tourists and a consolidation of current labels for better international recognition. MEPs call on the Commission, in cooperation with HOTREC as the European catering trade association, to promote labelling processes regarding tourist accommodation undertaken in the different Member States and to promote quality models that have proved effective elsewhere (for example the Qualmark in New Zealand) in order to improve visibility. The Commission and the Member States are 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: the committee is aware of the fact that more and more tourists are booking their travel (transport, accommodation, etc.) directly using electronic means and avoiding intermediates- tour operators and travel agents who are still subject to legal regimes (Council Directive 90/314/EEC). It stresses that this anomaly needs to be rectified by incorporating into Directive 90/314/EEC all websites that offer more than one service for sale, such as those offered by low-fare airlines and other actors in this market. MEPs consider that this fast development of the use of IT technologies for tourist services requires a consumers and personal data protection framework for electronic bookings, which might be based on a prior analysis of this market by the Commission. They recommend, in the interests of consumer protection, the **certification of sites** that provide information and offer tourist services (reservation and payment) of an electronic nature. The committee welcomes the legislative measure on the protection of consumers in respect of certain aspects of timeshare, long-term holiday products, resale and exchange. On the other hand, it regrets the absence of a specific legal instrument covering the safety of services, which is crucial in the tourism sector and calls on the Commission and on the Member States to evaluate the possibility of tackling this issue in order to address the concerns expressed by several

Members of Parliament. The Commission is called on to conduct a European promotional campaign on road safety. It should also simplify procedures for hazard analysis critical control points (HACCP) and to take account of the needs of small businesses, with particular regard to micro-businesses.

Health tourism: MEPs stress 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. They consider that there is a need for the adoption of a specific Community directive to define the recognition and use of hydrothermal resorts and, more generally, the role of health tourism and thermal cures in connection with tourist facilities in the various Member States – apart from the health, social security and insurance aspects – 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 significantly increase new direct and indirect employment.

Accessible tourism: the report welcomes initiatives to coordinate at European level the information on accessible tourism that would allow tourists with reduced mobility and their families to find information about the accessibility of tourist destinations. MEPs also call on the Commission and the Member States to initialise 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 committee notes that the accessibility of tourist destinations is a matter that also has to do with the transport services provided or available. It calls, therefore, on the Commission, for the purposes of the new European tourism policy and of developing European transport policy, 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 committee points to the need for the new tourism policy to make European tourism sustainable in economic, social, territorial, environmental, and cultural terms. It emphasises that threats to the environment, especially carbon dioxide emissions, require the tourism industry to be involved in the education of tourists regarding environmental issues when drawing up environmental policy. The Commission and the Member States are called upon to ensure the provision of **information to passengers**, and, in particular, the proper implementation of those passenger rights, and particularly of air passenger rights, and to ensure that easily accessible arbitration mechanisms are provided for by the Member States in situations where a defaulting operator fails to pay damages. The Commission is also called upon to reflect on an approach through which the EU could offer protection to passengers that have been left behind by a defaulting charter operator, intermediates or scheduled carriers as a result of bankruptcy or intentional abuse. The report suggests that an EU-wide blacklist of such operators be established, on the basis of criteria clearly defined by the Commission, following consultations with transport and/or tourism operators and consumer protection organisations.

Promotion of European tourist destinations: the committee welcomes the fact that the European Tourist Destinations Portal has been set up with the aid of Commission funding and calls on the Commission to continue to help promote Europe as a tourist destination or a collection of attractive tourist destinations, for instance by introducing and publicising a 'Europe' label and organising arrangements and channels for gathering information on European tourist destinations and subsequently circulating it to those working in the tourism industry outside Europe.

The Commission is 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: the report urges the Commission, the Member States, the regions, local authorities, and the tourism industry to 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, focusing on the competitiveness of the tourism industry and tourist destinations, the development of tourism enterprises, services, and facilities, job creation, mobility, and vocational training in the tourism sector, and economic diversification and the development of Europe's regions, in particular the less-favoured regions.

Miscellaneous: the report highlights the scale of forthcoming change in the demographic structure of the EU and 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.