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**Tourism as a Key Tool for Sustainable Development – an Analysis
from the Perspective of the European Context**

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Abstract: Worldwide promoting sustainable development became the biggest challenge in recent years, because it emphasizes the qualitative side of a society's growth model. Tourism is a significant tool for development, prosperity, well-being and for promoting sustainable development in the European Union. Using a qualitative analysis, the aim of this article is to examine the importance of tourism in the sustainable development process, from the viewpoint of the European context. The two are strongly connected by the numerous means in which tourism can contribute to the development of a tourist destination. This study leads to better comprehension of the potential contribution which sustainable practices of tourism can have to the sustainable evolution of the European Union.

Keywords: sustainable development; tourism; European Union

JEL Classification: O1; O52; Q01; Q5

1. Sustainable Development – the Biggest Challenge in Recent Years

Currently, humanity is characterized by multiple conflicting elements: development and spectacular results in some areas (amazing technological and medical progress, high-speed spread of information, etc.) and simultaneously serious crisis (poverty, hunger, crime, environmental crisis, etc.) which are amplifying and question the sustainability of these achievements.

Europe is going through a period of transformation. The global crisis suppressed years of economic and social progress and highlighted the structural weaknesses in Europe's economy. The European Union must now handle its own future and what must be considered is related to the need to sustain life in conditions that favor this aspect long term.

Sustainable development has become an extremely important topic both for scholars and for the economic and political environment. Concerns about this theme are not recent, but unfortunately the current trends pleaded, sometime excessive, for the description and analysis of only one side or another of the phenomenon. These trends are harmful because only reporting to the whole is relevant, the future development of society needing a stability point that considers on the same level of importance the three major dimensions of human development: environmental, social and economic.

The notion of sustainable development refers to a process that involves changes, progress and development and aims to achieve and support improvement in quality of life for present and future generations. Consequently sustainable development is less a pursuit for a stable equilibrium but rather a dynamic concept that recognizes that change is a certain fact in human societies.

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Moreover, because sustainable development links three interrelated elements (the ecological, the socio-cultural and economic), there are three essential principles: futurity, equity and holism (Redcliffe and Woodgate, 1997).

Sustainable development is a great challenge for our societies and a primordial and fundamental objective of the European Union. It demands nations to make use of their natural resources rationally, while pointing toward their economic development and at the same time taking into account the quality of the natural environment as a determinant of their societies welfare; it is increasingly recognized as an alternative pathway that can ensure low-carbon and climate-resilient development, substantially improve resource efficiency, healthy and more resilient ecosystems, social inclusion and more economic opportunities, social justice in particular for the poor who depend largely on the natural environment for their livelihoods, healthiness and well-being. Sustainability considers that economic evolution must be completely integrated in the natural environment. Economic growth had been proven to be not sustainable without environmental and social input.

The growing need for sustainability was also a consequence of the increasing concerns about the spectacular development of tourism in recent decades. Tourism has evolved from an activity with limited importance to one of the largest industries in the world. The industry has a immense capacity for generating growth in destination areas. On the other hand, its expansive impacts have driven to a range of evident and potential problems and of environmental, social, cultural, economic, and political concerns in destinations and systems, generating a need for alternative and more environment and host friendly procedures in development, planning, and policies. Thus this need had imposed for tourism to be in line with the notion of sustainable development and gave rise to the concept of sustainable tourism.

Tourism sustainable development should link the present needs of tourists and regions that receive tourists, leaving free way to further development of tourism along with the conservation of cultural and natural heritage for future generations.

2. Tourism – a Catalyst for Growth and Sustainable Development in the E.U.

Tourism is a specific and complex socio-economic phenomenon of modern civilization, firmly anchored in society's life and influenced by its evolution, with a high national and international dynamics. Tourism is one of the most active industries, with a significant contribution to the economic growth, especially regarding the capitalization of resources, the creation, increase and use of national income, employment, investment incentives, fighting against poverty, while also being a component of foreign relations. For example, tourism generated 5% of the world GDP and about 8% of total employment in 2012. Tourism has a particularly importance when taking into account job opportunities for young people, since they represent twice as much as the labor force than in the rest of the economy. According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) international tourism ranks fourth (after fuels, chemicals and automotive products), accounting for 30% of the world's exports of commercial services or 6% of total exports.

Tourism plays a substantial role in stimulating investments in new infrastructure and competition between local companies and companies in other tourist countries. It can determine positive exploitation of economies of scale in national organizations and it is an influential agent of diffusion of technical knowledge, spurring of research and development and accumulation of human capital.

Furthermore it is one of five top export earners in over 150 nations, whereas in 60 nations it is the number one export. It is also the core source of foreign exchange for a third of the developing countries and a half of least developed countries. Tourism is an important factor in economic recovery, being a sector which rapidly turns back to the growing trend under economic crisis contexts.

Tourism is a multifaceted and cross-sectoral activity, entailing a wide spectrum of sectors, stakeholders and geographical areas. It has been found that tourism development helps to boost other economic sectors which are not related to this field, contribution called the multiplication effect of

tourism. Tourism activity creates demand for a wide range of goods and services purchased by tourists and subsequent by travel companies, including goods and services produced by other sectors (trade, construction, transport, food, clothing and footwear industry, small and craft industries).

For the European Union as a whole and particularly for its economy, tourism is one of the most important industries. Surveying the existing field literature, prior studies have shown that tourism has a positive effect on economic growth in the EU countries (Albalade & Bel, 2010; Holzner, 2011), in Eastern Europe (Hall, 1998), in Austria (Falk, 2010), in Greece (Dritsakis, 2004a,b), in Italy (Bernini, 2009), in Spain (Balaguer & Cantavella-Jordá, 2002), in the United Kingdom (Blackstock, White, McCrum, Scott & Hunter, 2008), etc. Tourism has also a significant contribution to the integration process as well as to the development of peripheral or less-developed regions (Pascariu & Frunzã, 2012).

The linkages between tourism and the other economic activities are complex, taking different shapes, manifesting directly, indirectly or induced, periodically or permanent, on the horizontal or vertical design.

Moreover, tourism is more than an economic branch, contributing to the fulfillment of a wide range of the Union key strategic objectives: economic growth, social and regional cohesion, preservation of natural and cultural heritage, EU citizenship, peaceful relationships, sustainable development, etc.

Although still witnessing the economic downturn worldwide, the number of tourist globally increased, with one billion tourist arrivals in a single year – in 2012, showing now a growth rate of 4% per annum (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2012), highlighting again the fact that tourism in one of the largest and fastest-growing economic sectors in the world.

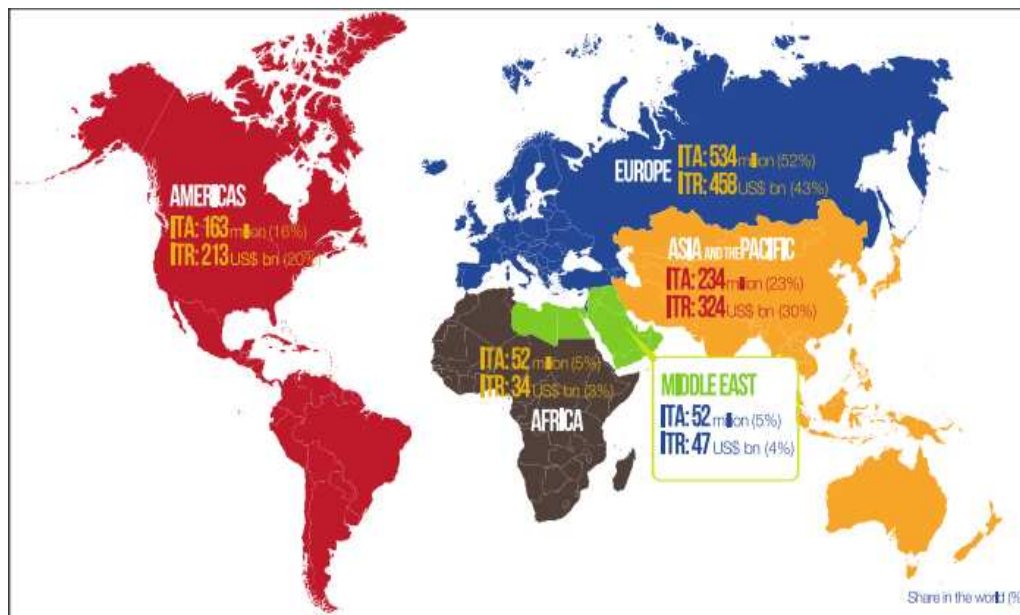


Figure 1. International Tourism Arrivals and Receipts in 2012

Europe remains the most visited and popular destination at the global level – accounting 52% of the international tourism arrivals worldwide, with five member states (France, Italy, Spain, Germany, United Kingdom) among the world’s top ten destinations for holidaymakers.

It becomes obvious that the increase and expansion of the European tourism market, as well as the increase of the number of tourists and tourist destinations, will generate greater effects on the economy, on the cultural identity, as well as on the physical surrounding and natural environment than before. So the accent should be focused on trying to minimize the negative effects and expand the positive effects of tourism. Applying the principles of sustainable development became a priority

especially as tourism and sustainable development are connected by the numerous means in which tourism can contribute to the development of a tourist destination.

However, the road to achieving tourism sustainable development is more complex than at first glance.

In the European Union, complementary to the economic deficits, tourism is facing, from the point of view of the strategic objectives of sustainable development, the difficult harmonization of its three dimensions, particularly in developing regions (Pascariu & Frunză, 2012).

From *the economic point of view*, tourism sustains economic growth and has a significant multiplication effect, in the developed economies/areas rather than in the developing regions where the dependence on the foreign capital is high, thus with risks regarding the sustainability and the perspectives of improving for this regions.

According to *the social-cultural point of view*, tourism contributes to the increase and use of income, employment and improvement of the quality of life and of the comfort level. It increases the culture level, bringing together populations with different values, habits and lifestyles, acquiring new information and knowledge otherwise unavailable, modernizing and revitalizing especially the poor regions. On the other hand, this exchange can affect the traditional social structures and practices leading to degradation because of inferiority complexes, moral and cultural perverting, in particular woman and vulnerable indigenous people, as well as rejection of the foreign tourists by the domestic residents. Moreover, it can lead to frictions, threaten or loss of valuable attractiveness elements on the long term.

From *the environmental point of view*, we can state that the tourism – natural environment relationship is characterized by complementarity. Firstly, tourism activities are often affected by the quality of environmental resources (Tribe, 2011). In the tourism industry, the environment is not only an input factor (e.g., water and energy), but also a major component of its output, like national parks and agritourism (Razumova, Lozano & Rey-Maqueira, 2009). A clean and healthy environment, with a properly conserved diversity of landscapes, flora and fauna is a favorable support for tourist development, the main element of attractiveness and promoter of comparative advantages, being a priority in the criteria of selecting destinations. Secondly, the tourist activity grants the superior valorization of natural resources, particularly through the international flows and can have a fundamental role in the awareness of society about the environment protection; besides, by the positive impact on the prosperity of the local economy, it can sustain the process of sustainable development. On the other hand, humankind is at a critical stage in its relationship with the natural environment, a relationship in which tourism has increasing significance, since by its specificity the tourism industry is linked to the environment more than other industries. Therefore, the most pressing negative influence of tourism is the one it exerts on the natural environment. It is energy and water consuming, produces a comparative high quantity of waste and affects cultural heritage by attracting large crowds of people to these sites. Also the impact on biodiversity has already been tremendous. There are numerous examples where large-scale tourism has had harmful effects on biodiversity, including coral reefs, coastal wetland, rainforests, arid and semi-arid ecosystems and mountainous areas. Tourism exerts pressures on the environment, leading to the alteration or even considerable modification of ecosystems (Pascariu, 2006).

The natural environment is a capital asset and such as reproducible capital assets (roads, buildings, equipment) it deteriorates if it is misused or overused. But unlike reproducible capital assets: (1) depreciation of natural capital is often irreversible (or at the best it takes long time to recover), (2) only in a very limited sense a depleted or depreciated ecosystem can be replaced by a new one, and (3) natural capital assets can collapse unexpectedly, without previous warning.

Ecological degradation triggers socio-economic down-turn, consequently the tourism-environment relationship is of particular matter, environmental protection and conservation representing a essential condition for the progress and sustainable development of tourism.

In the last decades, the interdependencies between tourism and sustainable development have intensified, therefore the tourism industry is called to eliminate or compensate for the deficits / limits of the effects of tourism in the receiving areas from the point of view of the sustainable development goals and principles.

As a consequence, it is crucial to ensure the European tourism sustainability, being understood as a significant element of added value not only for the tourist industry, but also for the integration process as a whole.

3. Implementing a Roadmap for Tourism Sustainable Development

Tourism, seen as a complex social and economic phenomenon, has reached unprecedented levels of development and prosperity worldwide.

In the past few years, the travel and tourism industry faced a chain of unpredictable incidents. The political uncertainty, terrorism, the variation and variability of consumer habits and demands, the economic turbulences and so on, generated numerous pressures on the sector. Observable is the shift in thinking about sustainable development and as well as its impact on tourism and the reciprocal linkages between them.

Tourism is one of the most relevant industries of the Union and has with a significant contribution to employment, economic growth, development, socio-economic integration of rural, underdeveloped and peripheral regions, international trade flows and foreign direct investments, and is included in a numerous series of the European policies (cohesion, agricultural, transport, environment etc.) hence acknowledging the great potential of tourism for the Union's sustainable development, the potentiating of this contribution still being conditioned by sustainable practices of the tourist industry.

As the role of tourism in structural economic progress and sustainable development is not a new subject on the European and international agenda, how to make tourism more sustainable and contribute to nations sustainable development goals is still a challenge that necessitates great attention. Sustainable practices of tourism can contribute to the sustainable evolution of the European Union. The major challenges are represented by the current consumption designs (the dominance of the quantity side, the high concentration in time and space) and by the production designs as well determining mass tourism, destructive on the receiving economic, social and natural environment. Thus, it is more than important to have a coherent and long-term vision for the Union future development. The decisions about tourism development should be a balance among the national and the local needs, the private sector and the state, the local communities, the communities of citizens, between the tourists and the mass media etc. Political decisions in particular ought to take into consideration the direct returns and also the long-term benefits, which involve a clear and well defined vision.

The increasing attention being paid globally and in particular in the European Union, to sustainability made it more and more a guiding principle and a concrete approach for the European tourism industry, because tourism is a people oriented industry which depends largely on the natural and social potential, two essential pillars of sustainable development.

Tourism and sustainable development are strongly linked by numerous ways in which tourism can contribute to the development of a tourist destination, having a considerable influence on the economy, on the quality of life and on the environment. Applying the principles of sustainable development has become a priority for the tourism industry and is important to eliminate or compensate for the deficits / limits of the impact of tourism in the receiving areas from the point of view of the sustainable development goals and principles. Responsible tourist behavior, social responsibility of the tourism industry and good governance must be the main concerns in guaranteeing the premises of sustainable development in the European tourism industry and should be specific each member state.

4. Concluding Remarks

The paper set out to cast light on the relationship between tourism and sustainable development and leads to better understanding of the contribution that sustainable practices of tourism can have on the positive evolution of the European Union. Both are complex and dynamic socio-economical phenomena, being deep interconnected.

Sustainable development is an extremely important objective on the European Union agenda, aiming to achieve and support improvement in the quality of life and welfare for present and future generations and tourism is an essential tool for promoting and sustaining this goal, having a significant impact on destinations, economically, socially and environmentally. However sustainability in any economic sector is not an easy task to achieve. The decisions and actions towards tourism sustainable development should be balanced between all stakeholders: the state and private sector, the local communities, the communities of citizens, mass media etc. Political decisions should take into account the direct positive and especially negative effects, as well as the long-term benefits, which require a clear and well defined strategy.

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