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Tourism policy in the European Union: progress, challenges and prospects

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the evolution of EU tourism policy, from its early economic integration in the 1980s to current frameworks prioritising sustainability, resilience, and digital transition. Initially, tourism policy was driven by economic growth and regional development, with limited institutional recognition. The Treaty of Lisbon (2007) marked a turning point, granting the EU explicit competency in tourism policy, yet progress remained constrained by fragmented governance and the absence of a dedicated budget line. Recent initiatives, such as the *Transition Pathway for Tourism* and the *European Agenda for Tourism 2030*, promote sustainable, digital, and inclusive tourism. However, challenges persist, including weak enforcement mechanisms, the voluntary nature of stakeholder commitments, and insufficient policies addressing cultural heritage protection, tourism sites management, socio-cultural impacts and climate risks. Moving forward, stronger coordination among Member States, targeted funding, and enhanced policy enforcement are essential to achieve a truly cohesive and resilient EU tourism policy framework.

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Introduction

Tourism policy has been extensively examined in academic literature, focusing on its power dynamics and inherent complexities (Airey, 2015; Bramwell & Meyer, 2007; Dredge & Jamal, 2015; Farsari et al., 2011). Public policy encompasses the set of principles and strategic actions adopted by governments or institutions to address societal challenges, shaped by broader political and institutional contexts (Dionysopoulou, 2012). Within tourism, policy plays a critical role in shaping development pathways, balancing economic, environmental, and social priorities.

While much of the existing research has examined tourism policy at the national or destination level (Brandano & Crociata, 2023; Costa et al., 2014; Santos Lacueva et al., 2022), the integration of tourism policy within the European Union (EU) framework is a more recent phenomenon. The EU has at its disposal a diverse set of legislative tools, ranging from binding regulations and directives to non-binding communications and opinions (European Commission, 1995); which employs to influence Member State actions. Estol and Font (2016) have examined the historical evolution of EU tourism

policy, while other authors have focused on related dimensions such as institutionalisation, governance structures, regionalisation and cohesion (Anastasiadou, 2011; Brandano & Crociata, 2023; Costa et al., 2014; Estol et al., 2018). Additionally, recent EU studies and reports have reviewed tourism policy developments and the deeper integration of EU tourism policy (Palma Andrés et al., 2019; Weston et al., 2019). However, these contributions largely precede several major policy developments.

In recent years, significant contextual shifts have reshaped the European tourism policy landscape. These include the COVID-19 pandemic, the launch of the European Green Deal, and the adoption of global sustainability frameworks such as Agenda 2030. Furthermore, the appointment in September 2024 of the first EU Commissioner with a direct mandate for both Sustainable Transport and Tourism, and the forthcoming EU Sustainable Tourism Strategy expected in 2026, mark a potential turning point in the EU policy agenda. These developments raise important questions about the direction and coherence of EU tourism policy going forward.

This paper addresses a critical gap in the academic literature by providing a longitudinal review of EU tourism policy evolution. It traces policy development from the early initiatives of the 1980s and 1990s, through its formal recognition under the Treaty of Lisbon, to the most recent strategies aligned with sustainability, digitalisation, resilience, and funding. The objective is to examine this progression in depth, highlighting key milestones, achievements and existing limitations. By doing so, this paper sheds light on how EU tourism policy has adapted to evolving priorities, identifies gaps that remain, and explores prospects for a more integrated and resilient policy framework.

Literature review

Conceptual foundations of tourism policy

Tourism policy is increasingly understood as a complex and contested domain, shaped by multiple layers of governance, competing interests, and shifting priorities. Rather than presenting policy as a neutral or technical exercise, Dredge and Jamal (2015) highlight its political and discursive nature, where power dynamics and institutional structures determine which voices and agendas dominate. This framing reveals how mainstream narratives often marginalise alternative perspectives and reinforces the need for more inclusive and reflexive policymaking. The field has also evolved with Airey (2015) noting a shift from fragmented, reactive approaches towards more structured and analytical understandings. A key contribution from his work is the distinction between policy outputs and policy outcomes, emphasising the importance of assessing not just official plans but their tangible effects. Farsari et al. (2011) strengthen this systems-based view by focusing on the complex interactions, fragmented institutions, and unpredictable dynamics that shape tourism policymaking in multi-actor environments. Dioko (2024) expands on this complexity by proposing a facet-based framework that captures the cross-sectoral, multi-level, and reactive nature of tourism governance, which is often constrained by institutional limitations. Torkington et al. (2020) further show how sustainability goals in policy texts are frequently overshadowed by persistent economic growth narratives. Together, these foundational works offer valuable tools for understanding how EU tourism policy is constructed, justified, and implemented.

Institutional evolution of EU tourism policy

The development of EU tourism policy has historically been characterised by fragmentation, indirect influence, and a dependence on soft governance mechanisms. Rather than forming part of a unified policy framework, tourism has typically been addressed through broader EU domains such as transport, cohesion, environment, and consumer protection (Dionysopoulou, 2012). This has limited its visibility and coherence, despite the sector's substantial economic contribution. The EU's approach to promoting sustainability in tourism has similarly relied on voluntary cooperation, open coordination, and project-based funding instead of binding regulation, a model that allows experimentation but often results in uneven implementation and limited accountability (Anastasiadou, 2011). A major institutional milestone occurred with the Lisbon Treaty, which formally recognised tourism as an area of EU supporting competence. This was followed by the adoption of the 2010 Communication 'Europe, the world's No 1 tourist destination' intended to consolidate a strategic vision for the sector (Panyik & Anastasiadou, 2013). However, challenges around inter-institutional coordination and weak enforcement mechanisms persist. Manente et al. (2013) distinguish between direct and indirect EU tourism policies and point out that overlapping responsibilities across Commission services can hinder policy coherence and strategic impact.

Among the most comprehensive efforts to trace the evolution of EU tourism policy are those by Estol and Font (2016), who provide a detailed analysis of the sector's gradual transition from marginal, fragmented interventions to a more coordinated, though still predominantly soft, policy space. Their work, along with Estol et al. (2018), highlights the proliferation of non-binding instruments such as strategic communications, coordination platforms, and funding programmes. Costa et al. (2014) further contribute to this body of research by proposing a comparative governance model across Member States and emphasising the importance of aligning tourism with broader EU goals.

Current debates in EU tourism policy highlight a growing emphasis on climate action, sustainability, and the green and digital transitions. However, despite rhetorical commitments to these goals, implementation remains fragmented and inconsistent. For instance, Conefrey et al. (2024) point to a clear disconnect between high-level decarbonisation targets and the limited tools available to monitor or enforce enterprise-level change. Similarly, Torkington et al. (2020) warn that discursive strategies in policy documents often mask the limited operationalisation of sustainability goals. Addressing these contradictions will require the development of more robust governance mechanisms, better alignment between tourism and wider EU priorities such as climate and cohesion policy, and a stronger focus on implementation. While the post-Lisbon Treaty period has been well analysed in earlier studies, there is a notable lack of recent research addressing how tourism policy is evolving in light of the EU Green Deal, digitalisation, and the post-COVID recovery, as well as in EU funding. This study addresses this gap by critically assessing how EU tourism policy is responding to today's challenges and emerging policy agendas.

Materials and methods

At the European Union level, various legal instruments are available to facilitate the functioning of its institutions. The *Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union* (TFEU)

(European Union, 2017) identifies *Regulations* as the most authoritative, as they are directly binding and fully applicable across all Member States. *Directives* are also binding but establish objectives that Member States must achieve, allowing national governments to determine the specific legislative measures for implementation. *Decisions* are legally binding but apply only to the entities or individuals to whom they are addressed. Furthermore, *Recommendations* and *Opinions* serve as advisory instruments without binding legal force. EU tourism policy has primarily been shaped through *Communications* issued by the European Commission. These documents outline policy directions, inform on planned actions, and serve as key instruments for public engagement. Although *Communications* are not explicitly recognised as legal instruments under the TFEU and do not carry binding authority, they function as an important mechanism for transmitting policy intentions to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, and the Committee of the Regions. In addition, *Council Resolutions*, though non-binding, express political positions on EU-related issues and are adopted following Council meetings to outline future priorities within a given policy area (Council of the European Union, 2024). Similarly, the European Parliament issues *Resolutions* to articulate its stance on EU policies, political affairs, and global events (European Parliament, 2024a). These resolutions also play a role in monitoring and evaluating the actions of other EU institutions, including the European Council, thereby influencing the broader EU policy landscape.

To examine the evolution of EU tourism policy, a comprehensive review of multiple policy instruments was conducted, including *Communications*, *Council Resolutions*, *Council Decisions*, *Treaties*, *European Parliament Resolutions*, *Commission Reports*, and *Council Conclusions*. These documents were primarily accessed through the Publications Office of the European Union and the *Official Journal of the European Union*, ensuring the inclusion of official and up-to-date policy materials. In total, 33 EU tourism policy documents were analysed (see Table 1), with particular attention to sections outlining priority policy areas and available EU funding mechanisms. The review aimed to identify key policy advancements, shifts in strategic focus, and the broader institutional framework governing EU tourism policy. This analysis builds upon the work of Estol and Font (2016), extending the discussion by incorporating recent developments in sustainability, digital transition and resilience strategies.

A qualitative content analysis approach (Krippendorff, 2019) was employed to extract recurring themes, assess policy coherence, and identify persistent policy gaps. Following Krippendorff's methodology, policy documents were examined as communicative artefacts that reflect institutional priorities and intention. Key themes were identified and categorised based on both existing academic literature and patterns observed across EU-level tourism policy documents. These categories included: (1) institutional recognition of tourism at EU level, (2) strategic policy priorities (e.g. sustainability, competitiveness, resilience, digitalisation), and (3) funding tools and financial frameworks. The focus on these particular aspects of policy development reflects their centrality to the effectiveness and visibility of EU tourism policy over time. Funding, in particular, was highlighted due to its recurrent treatment in policy communications and its importance in enabling implementation, especially in the absence of a dedicated tourism budget line. Analysing how funding opportunities are framed within each policy instrument also sheds light on the EU's capacity to support tourism stakeholders and align policy ambitions with operational mechanisms.

Table 1. Chronology of main EU tourism policy instruments.

Year	Title	Main points
<i>Early EU tourism policy actions (80s–90s)</i>		
1982	Communication 'Initial guidelines on a Community policy on tourism – COM(82) 385 final'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Since the 80s, first communications and plans to assist tourism • European Tourism Year (1990) for a borderless region, tourism for unity • Tourism as a 'Community measure', rather than specific policy, subsidiarity principle
1984	Council Resolution of 10 April on a Community policy on tourism (84/C 115/01)	
1986	Communication 'Community action in the field of tourism – COM(86) 32 final'	
1988	Council Decision of 21 December 1988 on an action programme for European Tourism Year (1990)	
1991	Communication 'Community Action Plan to Assist Tourism – COM(91) 97 final'	
1992	Treaty on European Union – Treaty of Maastricht, 7 February 1992	
1992	Council Decision of 13 July 1992 on a Community action plan to assist tourism (92/421/EEC)	
1995	Communication 'Green Paper on the role of the Union in the field of tourism – COM(95) 97'	
1996	Proposal for a Council Decision on a First Multiannual Programme to Assist European Tourism 'Philoxenia' (1997–2000) – COM(96) 168 final	
1996	Report on the evaluation of the Community Action Plan to assist tourism 1993–1995, Council Decision 92/421/EEC – COM(96) 166 final	
1997	Treaty of Amsterdam	
1999	Communication 'Enhancing Tourism's Potential for Employment – COM(1999) 205 final'	
<i>EU tourism policy developments in the beginning of the twenty-first century</i>		
2001	Communication 'Working together for the future of European Tourism – COM(2001) 665 final'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communications for stronger partnerships • Agenda for sustainable and competitive EU tourism • Treaty of Lisbon officially recognised tourism and EU role in promoting competitiveness
2001	Report from the Commission on the Community measures affecting Tourism (1997–1999)	
2006	Communication 'A renewed EU Tourism Policy: Towards a stronger partnership for European Tourism – COM(2006) 134 final'	
2007	Communication 'Agenda for a sustainable and competitive European tourism – COM(2007) 621 final'	
2007	Treaty of Lisbon signed on 13 December 2007	
2007	European Parliament Resolution of 29 November 2007 on a renewed EU Tourism Policy: Towards a stronger partnership for European Tourism (2006/2129(INI)) (P6_TA(2007)0575)	
2008	European Parliament Resolution of 16 December 2008 on the regional development aspects of the impact of tourism on coastal regions (2008/2132(INI)) (P6_TA(2008)0597)	
2010	Communication 'Europe, the world's No 1 tourist destination – a new political framework for tourism in Europe – COM(2010) 352 final'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Framework for world's n° 1 tourist destination • Strategy for growth and jobs in coastal and maritime tourism • Agenda for Culture highlighting economic link between culture and tourism
2011	European Parliament Resolution of 27 September 2011 on Europe, the world's No 1 tourist destination – a new political framework for tourism in Europe (2010/2206(INI)) (P7_TA(2011)0407)	
2013	European Parliament Resolution of 2 July 2013 on Blue Growth: Enhancing sustainable growth in the EU's marine, maritime transport and tourism sectors (2012/2297(INI)) (P7_TA(2013)0300)	
2014	Communication 'European strategy for more growth and jobs in coastal and maritime tourism – COM(2014) 86 final'	

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Year	Title	Main points
2015	European Parliament Resolution of 29 October 2015 on new challenges and concepts for the promotion of tourism in Europe (2014/2241(INI)) (P8_TA(2015)0391)	
2018	Communication 'A New European Agenda for Culture – COM(2018) 267 final'	
<i>Towards a European Agenda for Tourism 2030</i>		
2019	Council of the European Union conclusions on 'The Competitiveness of the tourism sector as a driver for sustainable growth, jobs and social cohesion in the EU for the next decade' of 27 May 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alignment with UN SDGs, EU Green Deal • Transport and tourism in 2020 and beyond (pandemic) • Transition Pathway for Tourism and EU Agenda for Tourism 2030, with governance, green and digital transition, resilience and skills
2019	Communication 'European Green Deal – COM(2019) 640 final'	
2020	Communication 'Tourism and transport in 2020 and beyond – COM(2020) 550 final'	
2020	European Parliament Resolution of 19 June 2020 on transport and tourism in 2020 and beyond (2020/2649(RSP)) (P9_TA(2020)0169)	
2021	European Parliament Resolution of 25 March 2021 on establishing an EU strategy for sustainable tourism (2020/2038(INI)) (P9_TA(2021)0109)	
2021	Council of the European Union conclusions on 'Tourism in Europe for the next decade: sustainable, resilient, digital, global and social' of 27 May 2021	
2022	Transition Pathway for Tourism	
2022	Council of the European Union conclusions on 'European Agenda for Tourism 2030' of 1 December 2022	

Source: Own elaboration with data from various EU policy instruments.

The study adopts a chronological perspective, mapping policy developments from early tourism-related initiatives in the 1980s to the latest strategic frameworks under the *European Agenda for Tourism 2030* and the *Transition Pathway for Tourism*, and its alignment with broader EU strategies and global development goals. This method facilitates the evaluation of long-term trends and the identification of enduring challenges in EU tourism policy formulation and implementation.

Results

Early EU tourism policy actions (80s–90s)

In its early stages, EU regional policy was largely controlled by its Member States, with minimal European or regional input. However, as funding and the significance of regional policy grew, the European Commission pushed for a more unified Community approach, leading to competition between the Commission, Member States, and regional entities for influence over its direction (Hooghe & Keating, 1994). In the realm of tourism, Robinson (1993) criticised the delayed policy development, noting that it took over 25 years after the 1957 Treaty of Rome established the European Economic Community for tourism policies to emerge, despite tourism's considerable economic, social, and cultural importance. This delay was attributed to tourism's complex, multifaceted nature, intersecting with sectors such as transport, regional policy, mobility, and environmental concerns. Similarly, Lickorish (1991) argued that tourism had been

relegated to a secondary status in the 1970s, insisting that its intrinsic significance should not be reduced to a supplementary role supporting other policy areas. He urged policy-makers to recognise tourism's potential contributions to the Single Market and called for a coordinated public-private approach to achieve EU objectives. The 1982 Communication titled *Initial guidelines on a Community policy on tourism – COM(82) 385 final* was the first comprehensive attempt to evaluate tourism's significance within the Community, situating it within a framework that connects with other policy areas (Robinson, 1993).

The Council Resolution of 10 April 1984, on a *Community policy on tourism (84/C 115/01)*, further underscored tourism's role in strengthening European relations and fostering European integration (Council of the European Union, 1984). This resolution outlined tourism's importance to the Community and introduced measures to facilitate free movement and protect tourists, including simplified customs and border checks, enhanced social security for tourists, and improved working conditions for tourism professionals. It also integrated tourism and transport and emphasised preserving European heritage for tourism, recognising its economic value when promoted responsibly, and the necessity of environmental protection in tourism development.

The Commission's 1986 Communication *Community action in the field of tourism – COM(86) 32 final* highlighted tourism's significance for the economy, employment, and the integration of an increasingly diverse Community (European Commission, 1986). The initiative aimed to support, improve, and develop tourism within the Community, with a focus on information, coordination and tourist safety. It underscored the need for robust data collection and analysis to optimise tourism management across regions. This communication proposed three resolutions for the Council's adoption: (1) promoting seasonal and geographical distribution of tourism, (2) standardising information on hotel accommodations, and (3) establishing consultation and coordination mechanisms in tourism.

With the enlargement of the European Community, tourism's role in facilitating free movement within a borderless area gained priority, and its strategic importance was recognised for advancing the Internal Market (Estol & Font, 2016). In its 1988 resolution on tourism facilitation, promotion and financing, the European Parliament proposed that 1990 be declared European Tourism Year. Subsequently, a Council Decision in December 1988 launched a programme with objectives to: (1) prepare for a borderless region, leveraging tourism to foster a 'people's Europe', and (2) emphasise tourism's economic and social significance for regional policy and job creation (Council of the European Union, 1989). Actions focused on promoting cultural awareness among Member States, especially for youth, optimising the geographical and temporal spread of tourism, and easing travel from external countries. Financial support was allocated for projects promoting off-season travel, youth travel, and tourism-themed campaigns with budgets up to ECU 1.5 million (Ibid.). Although European Tourism Year had limited direct impact on the public, the Commission deemed it a success for promoting collaboration across European, national, and local institutions, improving mutual understanding of tourism's dimensions (Robinson, 1993).

Building on these initiatives, the 1991 Communication *Community Action Plan to Assist Tourism – COM(91) 97 final* reflected on lessons from European Tourism Year, aligning with ongoing policies such as rural tourism promotion and cultural tourism

through heritage preservation (European Commission, 1991). Following the Treaty on European Union – Treaty of Maastricht, 7 February 1992 which in its Article 3 identified tourism as a necessary policy area, the Council Decision 92/421/EEC of July 1992 launched a three-year ambitious Action Plan to Assist Tourism, with ECU 18 million allocated for eleven action areas, including rural tourism, social tourism, youth tourism, cultural tourism, transnational measures and the promotion of tourism in third countries (Council of the European Union, 1992)

In 1995, the *Green Paper on the role of the Union in the field of tourism – COM(95) 97* was published, based on broad consultations with tourism stakeholders across public and private sectors at various levels. It highlighted the Community's actions in tourism, assessing the added value of a tourism policy at the EU level and identifying areas for future development. While acknowledging Member States' efforts, it noted that fragmented actions hindered balanced, sustainable tourism growth. The Green Paper valued the Community Action Plan to Assist Tourism as a pilot for Member State cooperation, despite recognising limitations in its scope and duration. To address these issues, the Green Paper recommended strengthening existing measures and increasing funding. Although the 1996 Intergovernmental Conference provided an opportunity to formalise tourism policy, it did not result in formal recognition. Instead, tourism remained a Community measure under the Treaty of Amsterdam (1997), adhering to the principle of subsidiarity (Estol & Font, 2016). This principle dictates that EU intervention occurs only when necessary, meaning tourism policy primarily complements Member State actions rather than replacing them. However, this treaty introduced 'sustainable development' as an EU-wide objective, recognising tourism's potential to support economic and social progress through employment growth.

In 1996, a proposal for a Council Decision was developed regarding the *First Multi-annual Programme to Assist European Tourism 'Philoxenia'* (1997–2000), which aimed to enhance tourism's quality, sustainability, and competitiveness in response to rising global competition, particularly from South and East Asia and the Americas (European Commission, 1996). The Philoxenia programme focused on several key areas, including improved data collection and analysis to build a robust European statistical system for tourism; enhancing legislative and financial conditions by fostering stakeholder cooperation; and conducting systematic assessments of Community measures impacting tourism. Philoxenia emphasised sustainable tourism, proposing eco-friendly management systems in accommodations and creating a European Tourism and Environment Award. The Working Group in Tourism of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) supported the proposal but recommended further engagement with the private sector, noting that the tourism sector would bear many responsibilities (EFTA, 1996). Despite assessments by the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee, and the Committee of the Regions, the Council ultimately did not approve the revised Philoxenia programme. The fragmented nature of the tourism industry, coupled with the absence of a centralised authority within the EU, created significant obstacles to implementing cohesive sustainability policies across Member States (Ruzza, 2000).

By the decade's end, the Commission's 1999 Communication *Enhancing Tourism's Potential for Employment – COM(1999) 205 final* underscored tourism's role in job creation and advocated integrating sustainable tourism strategies into broader economic

frameworks. It highlighted the European Social Fund's potential for supporting workforce skills development, thereby enhancing employability (European Commission, 1999).

EU tourism policy developments in the beginning of the twenty-first century

As the twenty-first century commenced, the European Commission adopted the Communication *Working together for the future of European Tourism – COM(2001) 665 final* on 13 November 2001, soon after the 9/11 attacks in the United States, which had profound impacts on air travel, including heightened passenger apprehension and stringent security measures. This document analysed market trends in Europe, noting a rising demand for active leisure among a healthier population with increased life expectancy and acknowledging the needs of travellers with disabilities, alongside demographic and transportation shifts (European Commission, 2001). A primary objective of this Communication was to facilitate stakeholder access to EU instruments, which could benefit the tourism industry. It recommended regular updates of online resources detailing EU support programmes for tourism, particularly highlighting the Structural Funds and the Research & Development framework programme. In anticipation of the 2002 International Year of Ecotourism and the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, the Commission proposed the development of a European Agenda 21 for tourism to advance a sustainable tourism model.

In 2006, the Commission released the Communication *A renewed EU Tourism Policy: Towards a stronger partnership for European Tourism – COM(2006) 134 final*, aimed at enhancing the tourism industry's competitiveness through improved employment and sustainable growth. It outlined three policy areas: (1) integrating tourism measures, including regulatory improvement and coordinated policies; (2) promoting sustainable tourism, with an emphasis on a European Agenda 21 for tourism; and (3) increasing visibility and understanding of European tourism, particularly through destination promotion and stakeholder engagement (European Commission, 2006). Successful implementation of these initiatives raised awareness in both public and private sectors regarding the potential inclusion of tourism policy in future EU Treaty reforms (Estol & Font, 2016).

The subsequent Communication *Agenda for a sustainable and competitive European tourism – COM(2007) 621 final* underscored the importance of balancing a competitive tourism economy with the protection of environmental, societal, and cultural resources, in alignment with the EU's Sustainable Development Strategy (European Commission, 2007). Notably, this communication was among the first to highlight climate change as a critical concern for the tourism industry, calling for collective efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and address other pressing environmental challenges, such as water scarcity. For achieving sustainable, competitive tourism, the Agenda proposed nine principles, including long-term planning, inclusive stakeholder involvement, balanced growth, risk management and continuous monitoring. Although voluntary, this Agenda clarified roles across different sectors to ensure its implementation, including the European Commission's role in mobilising stakeholders, promoting exemplary destinations, sharing knowledge on EU financial tools, and embedding sustainability and competitiveness within policy frameworks. Responding to this, the European Parliament adopted the *Resolution of 29 November 2007 [P6_TA(2007)0575]*, urging better coordination in tourism policy and maximising EU funds for 2007–2013 to enhance

competitiveness, business growth, employment, mobility and vocational training, especially in underdeveloped regions (European Parliament, 2007). The resolution stressed that EU tourism funding should prioritise high-quality standards, particularly in promoting tourism in accession countries.

The Treaty of Lisbon signed on 13 December 2007 and effective from 2009, marked a significant milestone by formally recognising EU tourism policy under Article 195. This article outlined that the Union would support the efforts of Member States in tourism, by encouraging greater competitiveness within the sector overall. This development institutionalised tourism within EU policymaking, empowering the Union to promote initiatives that strengthen its competitive edge.

One year later, the *European Parliament's Resolution of 16 December 2008 [P6_TA(2008)0587]* addressed the regional development aspects of coastal tourism, advocating for an integrated approach that aligned with EU cohesion, maritime, and environmental policies, especially in vulnerable regions (European Parliament, 2008). This resolution called for streamlined EU funding access, simplified processes, and strengthened public-private partnerships, particularly for sustainable economic and environmental practices in coastal regions. It highlighted areas needing improvement, such as tracking EU expenditures, consistent funding assessments, and a comprehensive database for sustainable coastal tourism, vital for informed decision-making and sector-wide knowledge sharing.

The Communication *Europe, the world's No 1 tourist destination – a new political framework for tourism in Europe – COM(2010) 352 final* emerged amidst the aftermath of the 2008 global economic crisis and a volcanic eruption in Iceland, which underscored the sector's vulnerability to external disruptions. It proposed a coordinated European response, leveraging the EU's newly established tourism competency under the Lisbon Treaty, and prioritised actions around four objectives: (1) enhancing sector competitiveness, (2) fostering sustainable tourism, (3) consolidating Europe's image as a high-quality destination, and (4) maximising EU financial instruments (European Commission, 2010). Key funding sources included the European Structural Funds (European Regional Development Fund – ERDF, and European Social Fund – ESF), the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), the European Fisheries Fund (EFF) and the research and development framework programme. The Competitiveness and Innovation Framework Programme (CIP) was also highlighted for its role in supporting networks for competitive and sustainable tourism since 2008.

In response, the *European Parliament's Resolution of 27 September 2011 [P7_TA(2011)0407]* encouraged the Commission to introduce 'interregionality' and 'complementarity' in tourism planning, fostering collaborative regional efforts to create a cohesive and unified tourism experience Europe (European Parliament, 2011). It also advocated a dedicated tourism programme in the 2014–2020 financial framework, though the Council ultimately approved only a thematic line for tourism under the Programme for the Competitiveness of Enterprises and Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (COSME), supporting cross-border and transnational tourism initiatives, such as theme-based tourist products and 'European Routes'.

The *European Parliament's Resolution of 2 July 2013 [P7_TA(2013)0300] on Blue Growth: Enhancing sustainable growth in the EU's marine, maritime transport, and tourism sectors* highlighted the significant role of coastal regions as premier tourist

destinations in Europe (European Parliament, 2013). The resolution emphasised the need for thoughtful spatial planning to avoid overdevelopment, protect environmental and cultural heritage, including underwater and maritime heritage; and uphold sustainable tourism infrastructure. It called for targeted funding to support blue economy projects, such as coastal, island and marine tourism strategies, particularly in addressing coastal erosion, preserving biodiversity, and improving water quality, and recommended similar initiatives for islands and other vulnerable areas.

Following this resolution, the 2014 Communication on a *European strategy for more growth and jobs in coastal and maritime tourism* – COM(2014) 86 final recognised this sector's strategic role within the blue economy, given that one-third of tourism businesses in Europe are located in coastal areas (European Commission, 2014). The strategy identified key challenges and proposed actions to address them, with a focus on enhancing competitiveness, fostering skills and innovation, and ensuring sustainability. It encouraged Member States to create national or regional strategies and leverage EU resources in an efficient and effective way, including European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF), alongside financial instruments related to research and innovation (Horizon 2020), SME competitiveness (COSME), education (Erasmus+), culture (Creative Europe), environmental protection and climate change adaptation (LIFE+).

Finally, in 2015, the *European Parliament Resolution of 29 October [P8_TA(2015)0391]* addressed rising competition, evolving distribution channels, quality standards, skills development and seasonality in tourism. It urged the Commission to assess the effectiveness of funds like COSME and CIP and recommended a dedicated tourism budget in the next multiannual financial framework, emphasising that clearer funding communication would help Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) access resources (European Parliament, 2015). In addition, in 2018, the Communication COM(2018) 267 final – *New European Agenda for Culture* underscored the economic link between culture and tourism, leading to a COSME call for projects focused on promoting cultural tourism during the European Year of Culture (European Commission, 2018). While the benefits of investing in culture for cities were emphasised, particularly in terms of job creation and attracting investment, with the European Capitals of Culture initiative highlighted as a tool for supporting community regeneration, similar attention was given to rural areas where heritage enhancement was linked to growth and sustainability. However, the communication fell short in addressing critical issues, such as the need to protect cultural heritage at popular tourist sites facing increasing visitor pressure, as well as the importance of effectively managing fragile resources to ensure their preservation for future generations.

Towards a European Agenda for Tourism 2030

Aligned with the United Nations' Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the *European Green Deal* – COM(2019) 640 final outlined the goal of climate neutrality for Europe by 2050 (European Commission, 2019). Within the tourism sector, the EU has encouraged SMEs to adopt greener practices, circular economy approaches, and decarbonisation initiatives, though reaching net-zero emissions remains an arduous challenge. Despite the introduction of climate action plans and roadmaps, such as the *Glasgow Declaration on Climate Action in Tourism* in 2021, which included methodologies for measuring greenhouse gas emissions (World Tourism

Organisation, 2023), actual progress on decarbonisation has been limited. The continued growth of tourism, coupled with insufficient efforts to curb emissions from large tourism enterprises – many of which account for significant emissions – has hampered effective progress toward net-zero targets (Gössling et al., 2024).

These challenges were already apparent during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, though economic sustainability took priority at that time. The pandemic's impact was immediate, with widespread business closures, border restrictions, and strict lockdowns. The European Commission responded with the *Communication Tourism and transport in 2020 and beyond – COM(2020) 550 final*, calling for a coordinated response to facilitate a safe and secure summer tourism season (European Commission, 2020a). This document provided recommendations for safely resuming business operations and gradually lifting travel restrictions. The European Parliament supported this effort with its *Resolution of 19 June 2020 [P9_TA(2020)0169]*, which focused on measures for tourism and transport recovery (European Parliament, 2020a).

In response to the economic strain on tourism SMEs, the EU adjusted its financial mechanisms and introduced new programmes and recovery funds (Camous & Claeys, 2020). The *Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative*, funded by restructuring the structural funds, allowed Member States to offer financial relief to tourism businesses severely impacted by the downturn (European Commission, 2020a). Alongside this, plans were underway to support the green and digital transformation of the tourism sector. An online consultation conducted during the pandemic's initial months laid the groundwork for the European Tourism Convention on 12 October 2020, which focused on three key areas: resilience, sustainability and green transition, and digital transformation through data and innovation (European Commission, 2020b). This convention aimed to establish a comprehensive European policy framework for tourism, grounded in these common priorities. The outcomes included agreed action points among stakeholders to guide cooperation towards the European Agenda for Tourism by 2030. The consultation employed an appreciative inquiry approach, highlighting strengths and positive aspects in assessing sustainability issues to establish legitimacy for the EU 2050 tourism policies among participating stakeholders (Guix & Font, 2022).

During the Convention, the European Parliament's Tourism Task Force called for an EU Tourism Strategy focused on sustainable tourism, emphasising the need for a detailed action plan to support the green and digital transition. The Task Force advocated for dedicated funds to facilitate sector recovery and promote long-term resilience and sustainability, recognising tourism's substantial contribution to Member States' GDP (European Parliament, 2020b). The *European Parliament's Resolution of 25 March 2021 [P9_TA(2021)0109]* on a sustainable EU tourism strategy (European Parliament, 2021) and the Council's conclusions of 27 May 2021, *Tourism in Europe for the next decade: sustainable, resilient, digital, global and social* (Council of the European Union, 2021), both urged Member States to draft a European Agenda for Tourism 2030. However, the European Parliament expressed disappointment with the lack of prioritisation for sustainable tourism in the 2021–2027 Multiannual Financial Framework. It urged the European Commission to enhance the dissemination of information on all available funding opportunities, including those provided under the Next Generation EU, to support stakeholders in building resilience and advancing the green and digital transitions. They also suggested establishing a European Agency for Tourism to support sectoral initiatives.

On 4 February 2022, the European Commission published the *Transition Pathway for Tourism*, which outlined 27 priority areas to make tourism more sustainable, digitally advanced, and resilient. This initiative represented the first sector-specific pathway for the dual green and digital transitions, in line with the 2020 EU Industrial Strategy (European Commission, 2022). The topics in the pathway covered seven essential domains: (1) sustainable competitiveness, (2) regulatory frameworks and governance, (3) research and innovation, and technological solutions, (4) infrastructure, (5) skill development, (6) social dimensions, and (7) investments and funding. Notably, the Transition Pathway emphasised the need for improved access to EU funding for tourism actors, proposing an enhanced *Guide on EU funding for tourism* with recent project information and future funding calls, a one-stop platform linking SMEs to European, national, and regional funding sources, and better communication of SME support through COSME/SMP programmes across Member States. The EU Tourism Platform was developed in 2024 and collects a range of resources, policy documents, funding calls, transition pledges and best practices (European Union, 2024b).

Finally, on 1 December 2022, the Council of the European Union adopted the *European Agenda for Tourism 2030*, drawing on the *Transition Pathway for Tourism* (Council of the European Union, 2022). This Agenda included a multi-annual work plan with targeted actions for Member States, the European Commission, and other tourism stakeholders, structured around five priority areas: (1) establishing a supportive policy framework and governance, (2) advancing the green transition, (3) fostering digital transition, (4) enhancing resilience and inclusion, and (5) promoting skills and resources for transition. Figure 1 shows the interlinkages between the EU Agenda for Tourism 2030 and the Transition Pathway for Tourism.

EU Agenda for Tourism 2030	Transition Pathway for Tourism	
Enabling policy framework and governance	Topic 1: Short-term rentals Topic 2: Multimodal travelling Topic 3: Tourism statistics and indicators	Topic 4: Tourism strategies Topic 5: Collaborative and smart destination governance
Green transition	Topic 6: Sustainable mobility Topic 7: Circularity of tourism services Topic 8: Greening of tourism companies	Topic 12: R&I and pilots for circular and climate-friendly tourism Topic 13: Product environmental footprint methodology for tourism
Digital transition	Topic 9: Innovative & data-driven services Topic 10: Availability of online information Topic 14: Common EU data space for tourism destinations	Topic 15: R&I for digital services Topic 16: Digitalisation of tourism SMEs and
Resilience and inclusion	Topic 17: Seamless cross-border travel Topic 18: Coordinated information on travel restrictions Topic 24: Fair and equal tourism jobs	Topic 25: Access for all for tourism Topic 26: Diversification of tourism services and well-being of communities
Skills and support for transition	Topic 11: Information platform for SMEs Topic 19: Awareness of new skills needs Topic 20: Awareness of changes in tourism demand and need for twin transition Topic 21: Developing tourism education	Topic 22: Pact for skills in tourism Topic 23: One-stop-shop for learning, best practices and networking Topic 27: Visibility of funding opportunities for tourism

Figure 1. Interlinkages between EU Agenda for Tourism 2030 and Transition Pathway for Tourism. Source: European Commission (2024b).

Discussion

Towards a cohesive EU tourism policy framework

As illustrated throughout this review, the evolution of EU tourism policy has been a gradual and complex process, shaped by shifting priorities from a focus on economic integration in the 1980s to the inclusion of sustainability and resilience in recent years. This trajectory has experienced slow but steady growth, driven by the principles of sustainability and the Single Market. However, tourism's inherently multi-faceted nature, spanning numerous industries and governance levels, has added complexity. Furthermore, limited leadership from individual Member States has placed considerable responsibility on the European Commission to drive a cohesive policy framework forward (Estol & Font, 2016).

In the 1980s, the first EU Communications laid the foundation by enhancing tourism's contribution to the Single Market and promoting freedom of movement within an emerging borderless Europe. The significance of tourism as a unifying economic force within the Community became clearer, leading to more structured initiatives aimed at supporting regional development and cross-sector connectivity. During the 1990s, despite diverse tourism policies among European Community member states, common objectives emerged, such as attracting high-spending international tourists, enhancing product quality, and reducing seasonality to stabilise tourist flows year-round (Akehurst et al., 1993). This period saw significant initiatives aimed at integrating tourism within the EU framework, with *European Tourism Year* in 1990 being a pivotal effort to promote unity, regional development, and the social role of tourism within a newly borderless Europe. Further strides were made to integrate tourism into the EU framework, but it still lacked adequate recognition under the Treaty of Amsterdam (Estol & Font, 2016). This period also introduced the first multi-sectoral action plans targeting rural, social and cultural tourism, demonstrating the sector's potential for cross-sectoral collaboration, yet failed to secure sufficient institutional support. The unsuccessful proposal for the first multiannual programme for tourism reflected the still-fragmented nature of EU tourism governance, underscoring the challenges of fostering robust partnerships and cohesive policies across Member States.

The 2000s marked a critical shift, culminating in the formal recognition of tourism in the Treaty of Lisbon in 2007, which granted the EU explicit competency in tourism policy. This institutionalisation allowed the EU to engage more directly in enhancing sectoral competitiveness, although the lack of a dedicated budget line limited the scope of these efforts. The 2010s saw the emergence of frameworks addressing new challenges in a rapidly globalising tourism sector. The *Communication on Europe as the World's No. 1 Tourist Destination* in 2010 aimed to solidify Europe's reputation as a high-quality tourism destination while maximising access to EU financial instruments. However, despite calls for a dedicated tourism budget in the 2014–2020 Multiannual Financial Framework, only a thematic line within the COSME programme was achieved. The focus also expanded towards coastal and maritime tourism, aligning with the EU's *Blue Growth Strategy* to promote employment in these areas, but this remained constrained by limited financial resources and fragmented support among Member States.

With the adoption of the *European Green Deal* in 2019, the EU committed to climate neutrality by 2050, further broadening tourism policy to prioritise sustainability and

decarbonisation. Nevertheless, the gap between policy ambition and tangible outcomes remains evident, as the EU lacks robust enforcement mechanisms to ensure tourism enterprises meet sustainability targets. This will become further evident in the application of the measures of the upcoming *EU Directive 2024/825 as regards empowering consumers for the green transition through better protection against unfair practices and through better information* also known as the Green Claims Directive, which shall be applied from September 2026 (European Union, 2024a), for which much efforts will be needed to bridge the knowledge gap and develop the needed green skills within the sector (Conefrey et al., 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the tourism sector's vulnerability and accelerated the EU's focus on economic resilience, green transition and digital innovation. In response, the European Commission introduced initiatives such as the *Transition Pathway for Tourism* in 2021, aimed at guiding tourism's green and digital transition, and the *European Agenda for Tourism 2030*, which outlines a multi-annual work plan for achieving a sustainable, resilient sector. However, success depends heavily on coordinated implementation at the Member State level, where fragmented efforts have often hindered cohesive action, especially when EU and national policies are disconnected from local needs (Dionysopoulou, 2012; Wanner et al., 2020).

Despite advancements in EU tourism policy, several areas remain underdeveloped, particularly in cultural and urban tourism. As European cities rank among the world's top tourist destinations, policy action should prioritise social sustainability. This includes tackling overtourism, safeguarding and preserving cultural heritage, enhancing visitor experience, improving working conditions in the sector, and advancing genuinely sustainable tourism models; areas often overlooked in national policy discourses that, as Torkington et al. (2020) argue, continue to prioritise growth-oriented narratives. While some countries have integrated tourism and cultural and creative industries as part of their resilience and recovery strategies following the COVID-19 pandemic, investment in truly transformative measures remains limited (Betzler et al., 2024). Additionally, rural and nature-based tourism, including tourism in protected areas, has yet to be fully incorporated into a comprehensive EU tourism policy. Although recent initiatives have acknowledged the importance of resilience in the tourism sector, stronger commitments are required to transition from broad recommendations to enforceable policies. A study published by the European Commission (2024a) provided strategic guidelines for enhancing crisis management capacity and governance in tourism, particularly in response to ongoing threats such as extreme climate events and lessons learned from the COVID-19 crisis. The study underscored the need for stronger coordination mechanisms to improve preparedness and long-term resilience. However, without binding measures, these recommendations risk remaining aspirational rather than leading to concrete policy actions.

As part of its efforts to engage stakeholders, the European Commission launched an initiative in February 2022 encouraging public and private actors to pledge commitments towards measurable targets aligned with the 27 themes of the *Transition Pathway for Tourism*. To support transparency and peer learning, a digital platform was introduced in 2024 to track implementation progress. The first stocktaking report (European Commission, 2024b) assessed actions taken up to 2023 and established a baseline with indicators and 2025 targets. Building on this, the 2025 *Stocktaking Report* evaluates additional progress made throughout 2024 and offers more detailed insights into implementation gaps and stakeholder participation (European Commission, 2025).

Notably, the 2025 report reflects stronger engagement by Member States and civil society, partly influenced by the advisory work of the Together for EU Tourism (T4T) expert group. Nevertheless, the findings confirm previous concerns: policy and governance continue to show the most progress, while digitalisation, resilience, skills development, and inclusion remain underdeveloped. The report also highlights a geographic and structural imbalance, with most advancements concentrated among larger, well-connected stakeholders. Although many pledges relate to the green transition of tourism SMEs, aligned with the EU Green Deal, the lack of an external verification system still raises concerns about the credibility and measurable outcomes of these commitments. Without accountability measures, some commitments risk remaining aspirational rather than delivering concrete impacts. Addressing this gap is essential for improving accountability and the effectiveness of tourism policy interventions (Airey, 2015; Dioko, 2024).

Despite notable progress, EU tourism policy remains constrained by structural and financial limitations. Unlike other economic sectors, tourism lacks a dedicated budget line within the 2021–2027 Multiannual Financial Framework, limiting the EU's ability to establish robust, sector-specific initiatives. Furthermore, while the policy's interdisciplinary nature generates spill-over effects from other sectors, this complicates efforts to assess policy effectiveness and coordinate actions across diverse governance levels (Halkier, 2010). Cohesion policies, like the Structural Funds, have indirectly supported tourism by funding regional and rural development projects, particularly in underdeveloped areas, but a more integrated, proactive approach is necessary for addressing future challenges effectively.

The first-ever explicit inclusion of tourism in the portfolio of an EU Commissioner, alongside sustainable transport in September 2024, marks a significant milestone in EU tourism policy (European Parliament, 2024b). As of 1 February 2025, the tourism portfolio has transitioned from the *Directorate-General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs* (DG GROW) to the *Directorate-General for Mobility and Transport* (DG MOVE), placing transport and tourism under the same institutional framework. This shift reflects the increasing recognition of tourism's strategic role within the EU policy landscape. While well-defined policy actions have been introduced for achieving a *Single Market in Transport*, including improved connectivity, infrastructure development, passenger and worker rights protection, and regulatory enhancements, particularly in relation to climate targets and safety; the tourism-related agenda is still in the early stages of development and integration within the new organisational structure.

A targeted consultation is currently underway until August 2025 to engage stakeholders in shaping a new Sustainable Tourism Strategy, to be presented to the Council by the end of the year. As outlined in the 2025 Stocktaking Report (European Commission, 2025), the strategy is intended to build on the *Transition Pathway for Tourism* and the *European Agenda for Tourism 2030*, while addressing emerging issues such as climate change and unbalanced visitor flows. Although this signals growing political commitment, key questions remain regarding how these efforts will translate into cohesive policy measures and institutional coordination across Member States. The report acknowledges the need to align the forthcoming EU strategy with national strategies for the Multiannual Financial Framework 2028–2034, using the current stocktaking

process and guidance as a foundation for joint action. However, the extent to which this collaborative momentum will lead to enforceable outcomes is yet to be seen. The coming months and years will be crucial in assessing whether these commitments result in a more structured, integrated, and effective EU tourism governance framework.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this paper has demonstrated that while EU tourism policy has evolved significantly, progressing from a peripheral measure to a more structured framework with sustainability and competitiveness at its core, achieving cohesive and resilient tourism policy remains a challenge. As tourism largely falls under Member State competence and the EU's role is supportive, policy actions often remain non-binding and primarily take the form of recommendations rather than enforceable measures. Additionally, the competitive nature of the sector, where Member States aim to attract not only international visitors but also tourists from within the EU, makes it difficult to align national priorities under a unified strategy.

Over the decades, policy efforts have primarily focused on tourism's economic dimensions, recognising its role as a key driver of growth and development in both urban and rural areas. However, relatively little emphasis has been placed on EU policies specifically addressing tourism planning and management of cultural and natural heritage sites, despite their prominence as defining elements of the European tourism attractiveness. Many of the continent's most visited attractions are publicly managed by Member States, necessitating coordinated and well-aligned policies to ensure their effective and sustainable management. Yet, persistent issues of overcrowding at major heritage sites, coupled with mounting social tensions between residents and the tourism sector, indicate that existing EU tourism policies have been insufficient in addressing these pressing challenges.

In terms of environmental policy, stronger efforts are required not only in policymaking but also in enforcement. In alignment with the *European Green Deal* and the *Glasgow Declaration on Climate Action in Tourism*, tourism policy must be strengthened to mitigate the escalating impacts of climate change. Extreme weather events, such as floods, heatwaves, wildfires and snowmelt, are already significantly affecting tourism destinations within the EU and beyond. Without proactive measures to address these growing threats, the resilience of the tourism sector remains uncertain.

A key challenge in the implementation of the *Transition Pathway for Tourism* lies in its voluntary nature, making it difficult to assess its true impact on the sector. While stakeholder pledges have increased since the initiative's launch, it remains unclear what proportion of the tourism market these commitments represent, particularly within the private sector. This raises concerns that only a small, highly engaged segment of the EU tourism sector is participating in such initiatives, leaving a significant portion of the sector unaccounted for in sustainability efforts. Greater dissemination of policies and outreach to all stakeholders, including those at local levels who may be less connected to leading industry players, is essential for scaling up impact and fostering a more inclusive approach.

Moving forward, achieving the EU's long-term tourism objectives require targeted resources, stronger cooperation among Member States, and a holistic approach that

encompasses heritage resource management, as well as social and environmental sustainability, rather than focusing solely on economic aspects. Additionally, more robust enforcement mechanisms and adequate funding are essential to ensuring effective implementation. In an era of rapid change and growing sustainability challenges, EU tourism policy must continue to evolve, maintaining the sector's role as a key economic driver while aligning with broader environmental and social goals. This paper has aimed to contribute to the kind of 'research activism and praxis' advocated by Dredge and Jamal (2015, p. 295), by critically tracing the evolution of EU tourism policy and identifying key areas where further progress is required. It has moved beyond descriptive analysis to engage directly with ongoing policy discussions, aiming to inform decision-making processes at a crucial time. This contribution is especially timely given the European Commission's ongoing targeted consultation and the planned development of a new EU sustainable tourism strategy by 2026. By highlighting both achievements and persistent gaps in the EU's tourism policy framework, the paper has demonstrated the need for more coherent, inclusive, and forward-looking policymaking at this pivotal moment. Looking ahead, further research should assess the outcomes of the Transition Pathway for Tourism and analyse how its lessons are integrated into the next generation of EU tourism policy.

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