

OVERTOURISM AND BEYOND: TOURISM AND SUSTAINABILITY IN CITIES AND TERRITORIES

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Abstract

Tourism has undoubtedly contributed significantly to the development of many territories over the last century. In recent decades, world tourism has grown at an accelerating rate, which has had considerable impacts on the economy, society and the environment of the expanding tourist areas of cities and territories.

The increase in tourist flows (more pronounced during the last two years, that followed the covid period), created pressures that exceed any "capacity limits" of the destination areas. This has been explained in terms of city «overtourism» - characteristically intense in Venice but also in several urban zones / mainly historical (including Athens) and coastal or islandic territories of Europe.

More severe tensions due to overtourism in territories -expressed through the impressive rise of the Airbnb sector- concern housing; in particular, increase in rents for natives. Other important tensions include infrastructure (transportation, parking, health facilities) and changes in land use - at the expense of green spaces and areas with traditional building ensembles. These particularly strong pressures in many territories caused strong protests from the residents, who asked for the drastic reduction of the factors that lead to overtourism in order to protect the environment and their quality of life.

All this requires a new approach for tourism and territories, aligned with the respective UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Relevant policies should include objectives and measures to address the housing problem, protect and promote cultural heritage and regulate infrastructures and land uses.

However, this is not enough. It is necessary to integrate strategic priorities for the actual new model of territorial division of tourism into overall strategic territorial planning at all spatial levels, promoting economic, social and environmental sustainability.

The paper outlines proposals for a new, holistic, sustainability-oriented tourism model as well as more specific proposals for the tourist zones of Athens.

Key words: *Overtourism, sustainable development, cities, territories, Athens, European Union*

1. INTRODUCTION: ACTUAL TOURISM AS A GROWING CHALLENGE FOR CITIES AND TERRITORIES

Tourism changes worldwide and hypertourism

In recent decades, global tourism has expanded at an unprecedented rate, reshaping local economies, societies, and environments. These impacts were more significant for the most: (a) in the **very touristic zones of cities** and even more pronounced in the historic zones of several cities (b) in some **highly touristic coastal zones**.

In last years, the increase in tourist flows has been clearly more pronounced, especially during the last two years, since tourist movements that had been suspended during the period of restrictions due to covid-19 were added. The **tourism intensity** -measured by nights spent in tourist accommodation establishments per inhabitant-, reached the level of 2019 in 2024, both in European Union and in Greece - **Figure 1**. See, among others, in (Eurostat 2024).

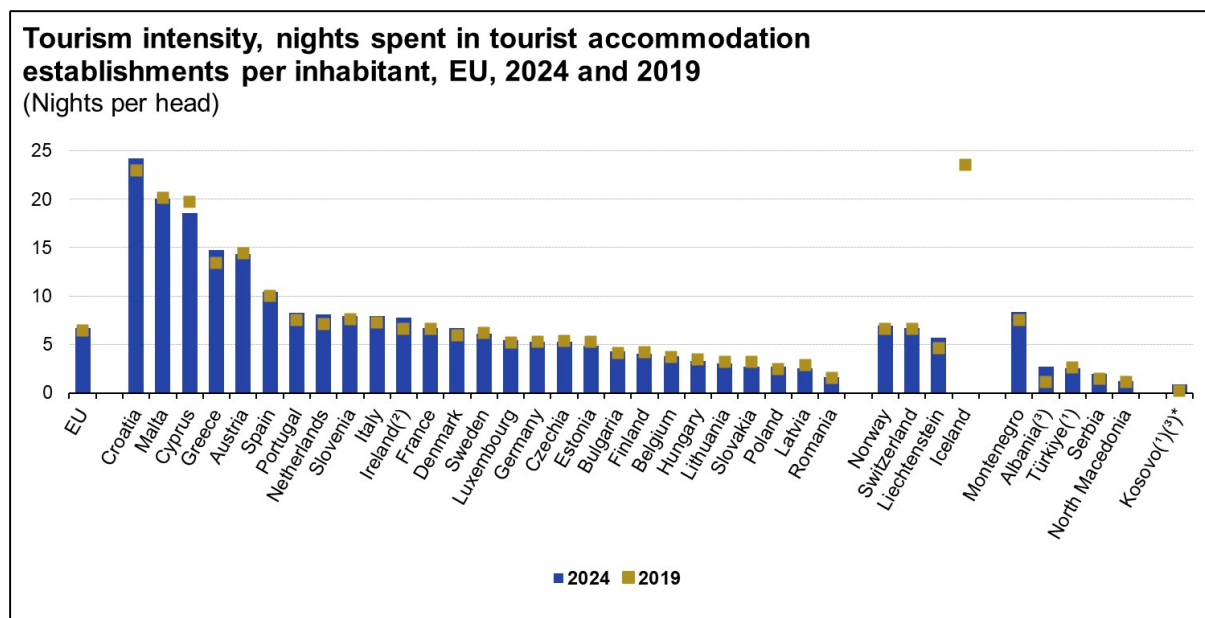


Figure 1: Tourism intensity: nights spent in tourist accommodation establishments per inhabitant, EU, 2024 and 2019. Source: (Eurostat 2024)

The intense pressures contributed to overcoming any “**capacity limits**” of the destinations. This has been explained in terms of «**overtourism**» -overtourism or hypertourism in English, surtourisme in French. See, indicatively, the following publication on overtourism: (Pechlaner – Innerhofer – Philipp (Eds.) 2024), (Iázquez-Salom - Cladera - Sard 2023), (Nádasi - Kovács -Szöllős-Tóth 2024), (Mihalič 2024).

The first international “**Overtourism Index**”, which analyses 70 of the world’s most popular holiday destinations, seeks to assess their level of exposure to visitors” (Money-tourism 2024). The index was created by management consultancy Roland Berger, based on the travel platform Evaneos. See also: (Fes 2024) and (Roland Berger and Evaneos 2024).

To measure the degree of exposure to overtourism, each destination is scored from 1 to 5 based on four **objective criteria: the number of international tourists per inhabitant, the number of international tourists per square kilometre, seasonality and the maturity of the host country in terms of sustainability**. This last criterion of evaluation considers factors such as “the social impact of the tourist activity, the state of the host infrastructure or the development of transport” (Money-tourism 2024).

We mention here that in a recent publication - see (Angelidis 2025)-, we examined the characteristics of overtourism and its impact on the historic area of Athens. In the present publication, we start with a brief investigation of overtourism, but the main body of the discussion is the overall territorial change of tourism, the consequent negative effects from the point of view of sustainability and the discussion and evaluation of the proposals to address the problem in terms of economic, social and environmental sustainability.

Overtourism is characteristically intense in **Venice**. In 2021, the Italian coastal region of Venice had the highest number of overnight stays in tourist accommodation (27.1 million). See in more extent in (Angelidis 2025).

In particular, the use of the term “overtourism” raises the questions of:

(a) whether there are “upper limits” to the development of tourism in a given area or
(b) whether there is some form of «**capacity**» or «**carrying capacity**» to the development of tourism in the area - in general and in particular in developed tourist areas (urban, coastal etc.) that interest us here (see, indicatively, for tourism carrying capacity in (Coccosis 2022)).

In our opinion, despite that several analyses of “overtourism”, as exceeding the “tourist capacity” of destinations, have been made a few decades ago, we should now have a largely new discussion.

Anti-hypertourism protests



A wave of *anti-tourism protests* has hit Europe as residents in popular destinations push back against the overwhelming influx of visitors, with *demonstrations flaring, among other, in the Netherlands, Greece, Italy, Portugal, and notably Spain*.

Only last year, **citizens in Barcelona made global headline news when they started soaking unsuspecting visitors with water guns while chanting “tourists go home.”** This growing rebellion against overtourism is taking root in other communities around the world,

Similar issues plague other popular destinations like Lisbon, Athens, Las Palmas, and Ibiza. These territories, while benefiting from tourism revenue, are increasingly concerned about losing their working-class residents, local grocery stores, and cultural identity.

2. METHODOLOGICAL CHOICES: A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO THE ACTUAL TOURISM CHANGES AND POLICY DILEMMAS

At that time -as we will explain in more detail below-, the relevant analyses were not narrowly focused on tourist demand as an explanatory factor of «overtourism», as is largely the case today. On the contrary, the explanation of "overtourism" seemed to be related to multi-sectoral, multi-level, **holistic analyses of the impact of tourism development on host zones** (in coastal areas, in urban zones, in entire cities and regions, in entire countries) - see in detail, among others, in Angelidis 1994, Angelidis 2000, Angelidis - Economou 2008.

While in the past a type of «hypertourism» appeared mainly in coastal and island zones, for a few years now, **we also have «hypertourism» in some touristic zones (mostly historical) of cities or even entire cities. In some coastal zones or entire islands**, we have now more “hypertourism” -see **Photo 1** for the case of Santorini (ekathimerini 2021).

Our **basic hypothesis**, however, is that to be able to analyze today this *new model of tourism, related to hypertourism* (meaning tourism that excessively pressures specific areas), with the sustainable development of territories, it is necessary to examine *holistically* the sustainability of this development.

We clarify, in addition, that overtourism is not only associated with an "excessive" number of tourists in relation to the population (per inhabitant, etc.) and the society of the host areas as well as their natural resources, infrastructure and cultural heritage, but *also brings*

about a set of negative consequences on the local and regional economy, society and environment.

At a first level, this intensification of tourism uses, **increasing the pressures on the natural and cultural resources of several areas, leads to the degradation of their quality, which, however, constitutes the main basis for the development of tourism activity.**

We clarify that the above is not related to views that support, usually generally, vaguely and "voluntary", the restriction of tourism activities.

Therefore, both for the maintenance of satisfactory environmental quality in «congested» areas of Greek territories and for their further tourist development, the implementation of appropriate forms of their planning is required - in particular, effective ways of implementing specific territorial policies.



Photo 1: Overtourism in Santorini 2021. Photo: e-kathimerini

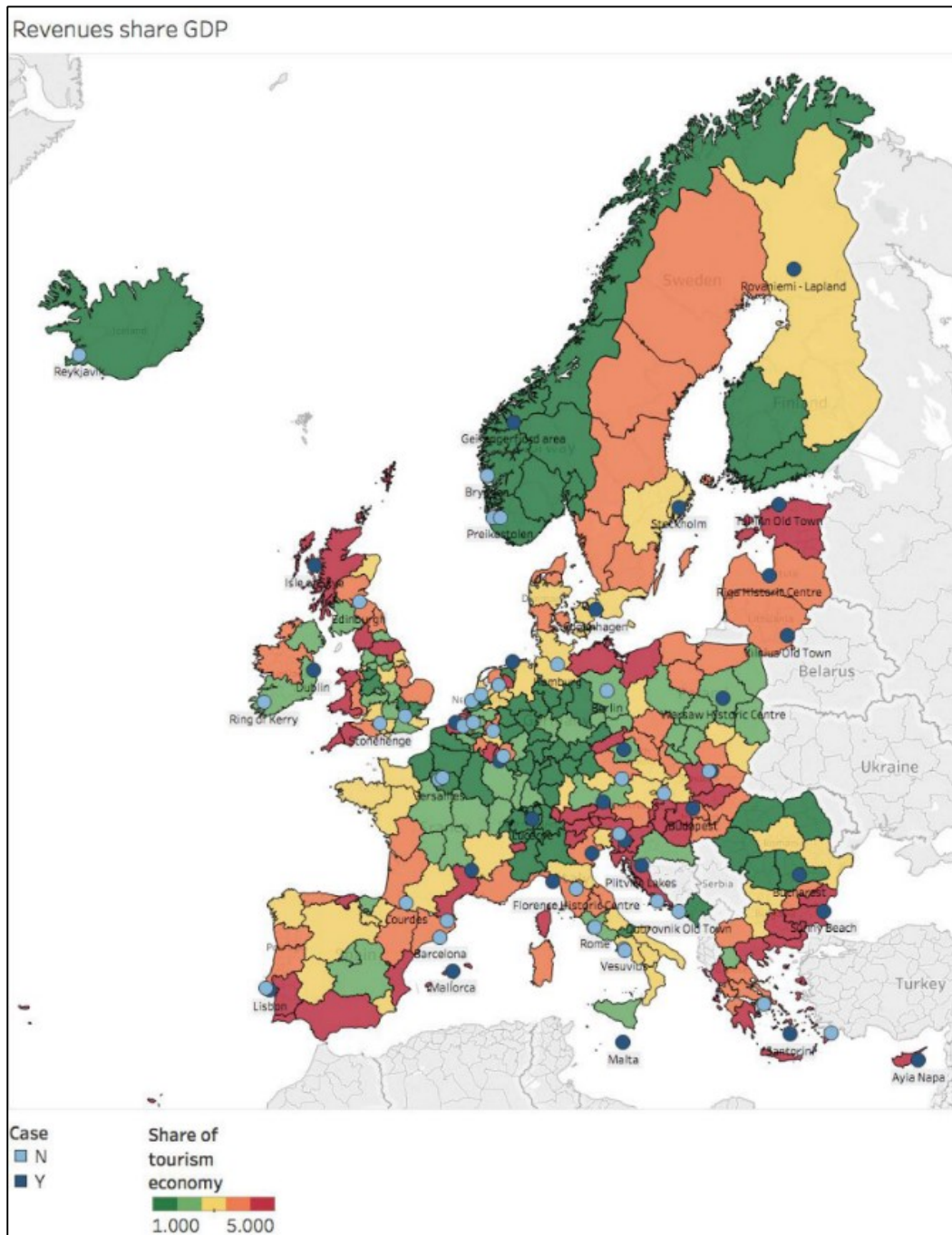
In line with the above, we have prioritized the determination of the *drivers of change* the territorial tourist model and the corresponding weaknesses, so that we can then propose a "reverse model" of really sustainable tourism development of territories.

3. HYPERTOURISM AND TOURISM TERRITORIAL DIVISION IN EU, GREECE AND ATHENS

In European Union

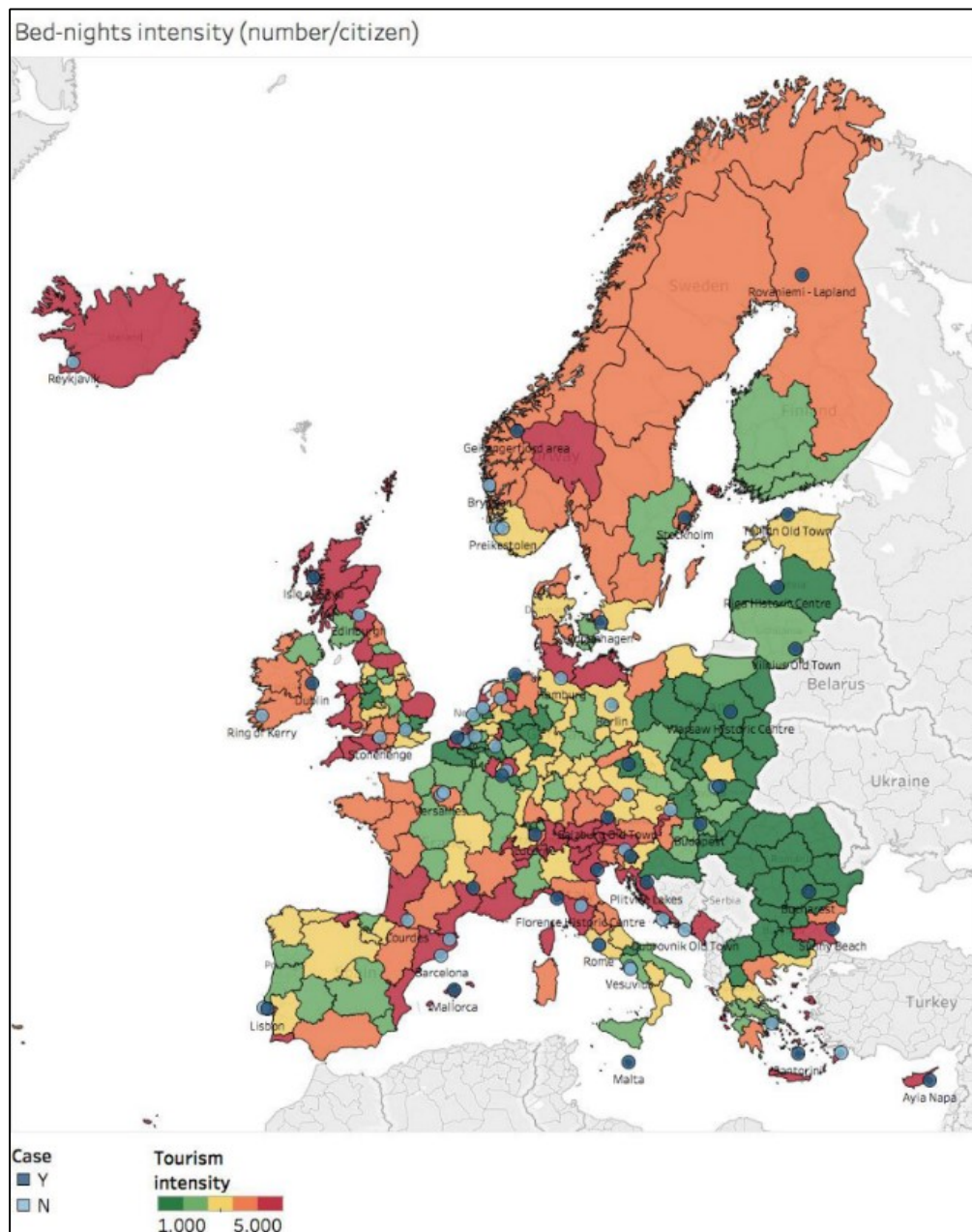
In general, overall tourism development and the more specific model of «hypertourism» constitute a major challenge for several countries of the EU -including Greece- for many reasons, the first of which is that *these countries derive a very large part of their GDP from tourism activities* -see (Peeters et al 2018) (European Parliament), especially the **Map 1 – Revenues share GDP (share of tourism economy).**

As it turns out, the countries of the Southern part of the European Union, as well as several countries of the Eastern part, have a high rate of participation of tourism in the total GDP of their economy. Most regions of Greece show increased values of this index.



Map 1: Revenues share GDP (share of tourism economy). Source of the Map: Peeters et al 2018

A significant spatial differentiation in terms of the intensity of tourism (beds – overnight stays per inhabitant) and region arises in EU but also inside Greece - see **Map 2**.



Map 2: Intensity of tourism by region (beds - overnight stays per inhabitant)

Source of the Map: Peeters et al 2018

In Greece

In general, overall tourism development and even more «hypertourism» constitute a major challenge for Greece – for many reasons, the first of which is that the country derives a very large part of its GDP -25 to 30 percent- from tourism activities (with this number increasing to 90 percent on the island of Santorini) (Norman 2024). Specifically, regarding GDP, as an important indicator of the economic aspect of tourism development: according to a study by the National Bank of Greece (NBG), Greek tourism was projected to have revenues of 22 billion euros in 2024 -see in (TornosNews.gr 2024). See for the Greek tourist development and policy, among others, in (Tsartas – Sarantakou 2022), (Sarantakou 2025) (Economou – Mitoula 2017), Lagarias – Stratigea - Theodora, Y. (2023).

The increased GDP is associated with an increased number of arrivals and overnight stays in the country. The number of visitors to Greece has increased particularly sharply: by

120% between 2019 and 2023. In 2023, approximately 33 million tourists came to Greece, while it was expected to reach 35 million in 2024 (record of arrivals).

The ratio of the number of tourists to the natives / residents of the country -as an indicator of the deterioration of the population's life conditions and the «excessive» change of the socio-historical physiognomy of the territory- reached 3 to 1 in Greece (3 tourists per inhabitant).

Greece is among the four countries most affected by overtourism. The remaining three are Cyprus, Mauritius and Croatia.

Furthermore, destinations that experience particularly high flows during the summer in a large part of their territory include Spain, Italy, Portugal and France.

It is of great importance that it has been documented that Greece has a very high value of the (above-mentioned) overtourism index compared to other countries. Consequently, an appropriate strategy should be formulated in Greece and measures should be taken to limit overtourism.

We point out here that in Greece there is an overconcentration of tourism in a few areas: Attica, Crete, Dodecanese, Corfu, Cyclades, etc. (Angelidis 2000). See **Map 3** for the number of overnight stays per thousand inhabitants in the regional units of Greece in 2020 (author of the map: M. Angelidis).

In more detail, the spatial concentration corresponding to the value of the above index is much higher *in certain small zones*, such as in particular in certain coastal areas but also in areas of historical centers. Conversely, however, the value of the index is currently well below the “capacity limit” in many “inland” areas (far from the coasts and historical cities), often very attractive for tourism development.

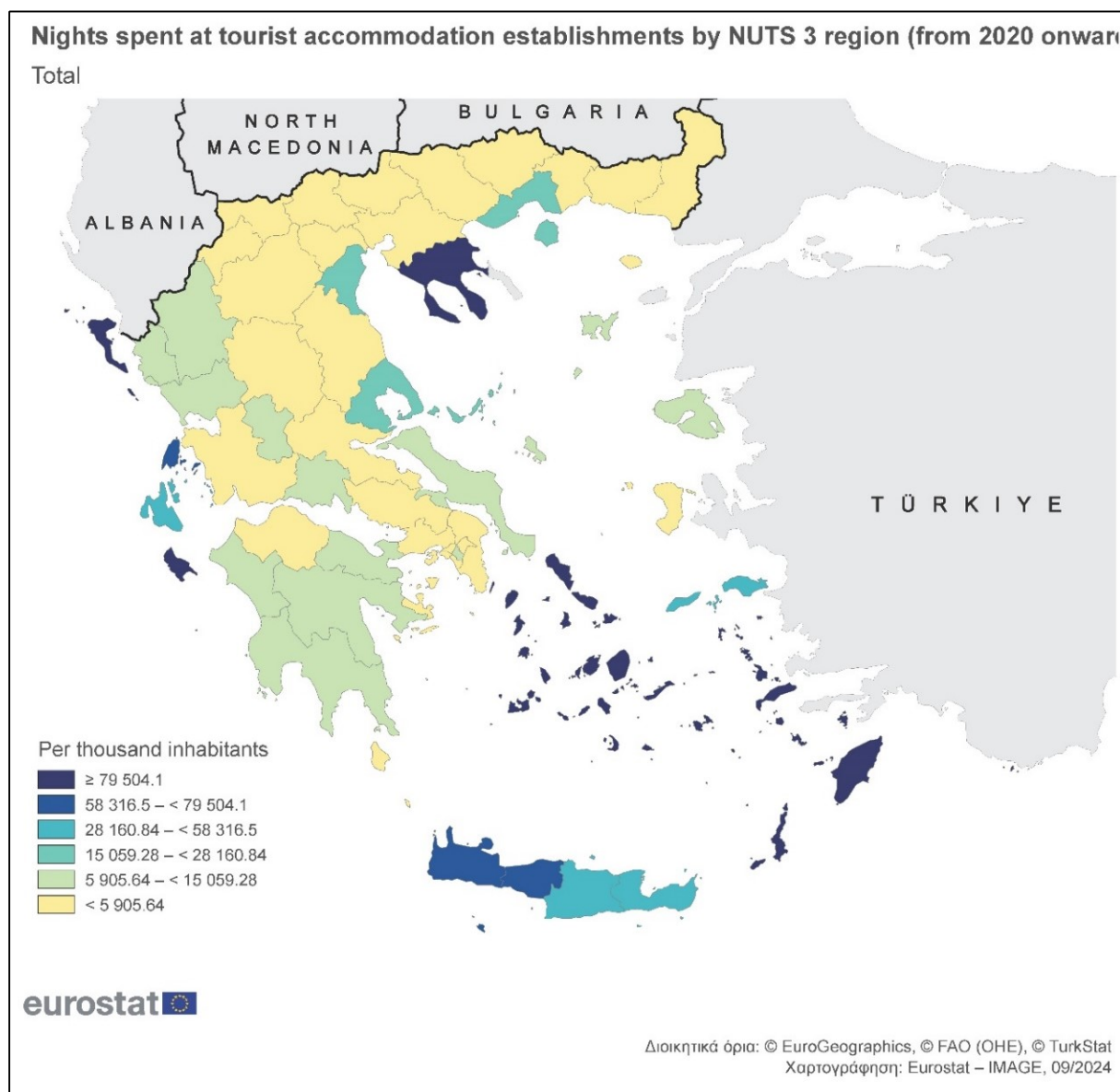
In the tourist areas of many *Greek historical centers*, similar to what happened in the world (see above), the phenomena of “overtourism” that had appeared in a comparatively slighter form before the covid period, intensified very significantly in 2023 and 2024, largely due to the pressure relief for tourist travel after the end of the covid restrictions period.

More specific pressures and tensions due to overtourism in 2024 in general in Greece and in particular in territories concern:

- *Infrastructure (transportation, parking, health services ...)*,
- *Housing* - in particular: increase in rents for natives due to excessive expansion of the Airbnb sector (See, among others, in: Balabanidis D., Papatzani E., Pepas D. 2021)
- *Several more specific environmental and quality of life issues. The latter includes to a certain extent the change in land use* - at the expense of green and natural spaces as well as areas with traditional buildings.

For several decades in Greece, the greatest pressure has been exerted on the thin, but of great environmental importance, zone between the land area and the sea, which constitutes the extreme part of the wider coastal zones towards the sea.

In recent years, the very intense expansion of Airbnb accommodation in urban areas, especially in historical zones of the cities, has created *a great deal of pressure on the environment of historical zones* - beyond its contribution to the extreme increase in rents in these areas.



Map 3: Overnight stays per thousand inhabitants in the regional units of Greece in 2020.
Data source: Eurostat Processing: Minas Angelidis, using appropriate Eurostat tools

In Athens

Tourism developed comparatively earlier (as early as the 1950s) in Athens than in other regions of Greece due to the existence of globally significant historical zones in the Capital.

Subsequently, the “front” of intense tourist development shifted towards the coastal zones and the islands of Greece, while in the last decade (and a little before) the arrival of tourists to Athens increased significantly. Despite any (relatively limited) decentralization of tourist development at the levels of the Attica Basin and the Attica Region, the main part of the tourist demand is directed to some, well-known to foreigners but relatively small areas of ancient cultural heritage as well as heritage of more recent times - indicatively: Plaka, Monastiraki, Thisio, Keramikos. These zones were expanded with the implementation of some infrastructures - e.g. the “archaeological walk of Athens”, but not on a large scale, nor is it easy to quickly expand on a large scale.

Therefore, *the impressive increase in the number of tourists -with the “adding” of many Airbnb accommodations-* led to “overtourism” in several places. Of course, as is the case in

historical cities abroad, at emblematic spots such as the Acropolis, the numbers of visitors “reached the ceiling”, as we will see later.

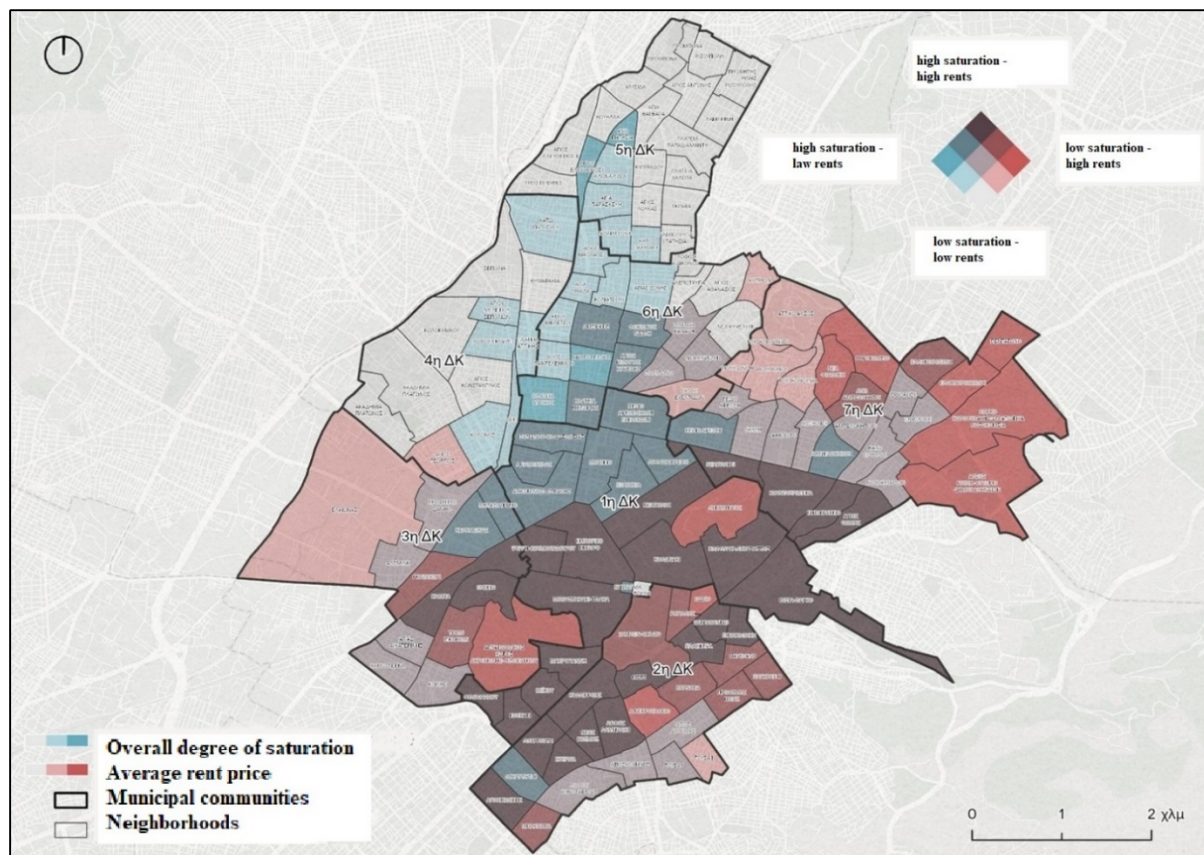
We refer here to a relevant article in the magazine “reporter” in 2024 (Norman 2024): “The authorities in Athens have already expressed concerns about this ... exponential increase in tourist numbers, as the crowds have become uncontrollable. In order to stop the attack and bring some control to Athens, last year the maximum number of tourists who could visit the Acropolis was set at 20,000 per day.”

Athens Mayor Haris Doukas told Fortune magazine a few months ago (on 2024): “...The challenge of too many visitors and the impact it has on local communities and the city itself means that **tourism in its current form is not sustainable.**” “Every visitor brings €0.40 to the city, and we haven’t seen that money yet,” the mayor told Euronews. “We need to find a way to make tourism sustainable.”

The municipality of Athens then commissioned the preparation of the study «**Athens Tourism Carrying Capacity Study**” (Develop Athens S.A., University of Piraeus, and Gimisis + Associates 2024) which has been completed.

The study shows that Athens, although “not characterized as a city with overtourism” op. cit.), but has a "tourist fragility" and a sensitivity to the pressure of its infrastructure from rising tourism in recent years.

The study identifies spatial over-concentrations in specific saturated neighbourhoods of the city centre (shopping centre, Monastiraki-Plaka, Psyrri-Koumoundourou, Makrigianni - more or less the ones we mentioned above), which observes significant pressures by permanent residents and visitors/tourists, as well as energy and waste (which culminate in saturated areas). - see **Map 4**.



Map 4: Area of the Municipality of Athens: Correlation of the degree of saturation of short-term lease with long-term lease

Source of the Map: Develop Athens etc., Athens Tourism Carrying Capacity Study, 2024

However, tourism trends - pressures in the more peripheral areas appear (medium and low saturation - Durgouti, Fokionos Negri, Kato Patisia, Agios Nikolaos, Ampelokipoi), with corresponding significant impacts on the standard of living and the market.

According to the study: "The increase in rents is the most significant negative impact although residents acknowledge that it is not just tourism" (op.cit.).

4. TOURISM AND TERRITORIES IN THE UN (AND EU) SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGS)

Let's move on to a **second approach** to the relationship between tourism and sustainable development of territories: how this relationship is analyzed and evaluated within the framework of the sustainable development strategy in general and the UN's set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in particular (see for the sustainable development of territories, among others, in: (Angelidis M., Drakouli E., Tsigkas E. 2024)).

We need to emphasize from the beginning that while the UN SDGs are very useful both for assessing the "degree" of sustainable development of tourist territories and for formulating intervention policies in the direction of sustainable development, *they are often characterized by fragmentation and lack of interconnection with strategic priorities of sustainable development.*

In other words, the "literal" use of the SDGs, as well as corresponding indicators, may, for example, **present** an area with low-level tourism growth and employment and dependent on other areas as an area that grows quickly and satisfactorily.

Regarding the **UN SDGs**, we will start with the SDGs that are most closely linked to tourism and territories and then delve deeper into Goal 8.9 - Promote healthy and sustainable tourism and 12.B - Tools for monitoring the impact of sustainable development on sustainable tourism.

SDGs related to tourism

Tourism-related goals have been included in the SDGs:

- *Goal 8 - sustainable and inclusive economic growth*
- *Goal 12 - sustainable consumption and production (SCP) and*
- *Goal 14 - sustainable use of oceans and marine resources, respectively.*

We considered it appropriate to deal more here with the proposals for tourism in Goals 8 and 12 (without underestimating those related to Goal 14) (UN / Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2024).

It is useful to mention here that the *World Tourism Organization (WHO)* defines sustainable tourism as "***tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities***" (UN / Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2024).

We point out that this definition is to a significant extent *global (holistic)* because it refers to *the economic, social and environmental impacts of tourism all together.*

Finally, the set of SDGs for tourism are strongly related to SDG 11 - sustainable cities and communities (see discussion of this SDG, among others, in: Stefanou I. - Mitoula R. 2024).

Goal 8.9 - Promote beneficial and sustainable tourism

The UN "2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development" *includes target 8.9: Promote Beneficial and Sustainable Tourism. Specifically, SDG 8.9 aims to "by 2030, design and implement policies to promote sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and*

products". It is noted that ICCROM has developed a series of indicators that are linked to the achievement of target 8.9 - see ICCROM 2019.

SDG 12.b on tools for monitoring the impact of sustainable development on sustainable tourism

The importance of sustainable tourism is also highlighted in SDG 12.b, which aims to develop and use tools to monitor the impact of sustainable development on sustainable tourism, which *creates jobs and promotes local culture and products*. It is interesting that an appropriate (according to those responsible for the SDGs) evaluation *indicator 12.b.1* has already been created by the UN experts: "Implementation of standardized accounting tools to monitor the economic and environmental aspects of tourism sustainability".

The SDGs of EU policies and the UN SDGs - Comparison and notes on SDG implementation

As stated in the relevant documents, the SDGs of EU policies and the UN SDGs on tourism, and territories are almost identical. The EU has adopted the UN SDGs in their entirety. It has only specialized certain sub-chapters of the Goals.

With this in mind, reports are also being made on the implementation of the SDGs in Member States - including Greece.

But beyond the gaps and ambiguities contained in the SDGs and indicators assessing their implementation, the fact that **their implementation is not mandatory** significantly limits their contribution to a sustainable development path for territories - which are of particular interest to us here.

5. EU POLICIES FOR TOURISM, SUSTAINABILITY AND TERRITORIES

European Union' strategic framework and policies for tourism

The EU bodies have formulated strategies and implemented actions and interventions for both tourism and territories - which are of most interest to us here. All these strategies and actions converge, as we will see, in promoting the most important global strategies of the Union: "Green", "Digital", etc.

Of course, these EU policies influence those implemented in the tourist areas of a country, as, for example, Greece: those situated in urban areas / mainly historical areas as well as the coastal and islandic areas etc. (see, among others, Angelidis 2004).

It is not possible to expand here more to the *territorial impact* of strategies and policy guidelines for tourism in Greece. We refer, inter alia, to: (Lampropoulos V., Panagiotopoulou M, Stratigea A. 2021). However, here it is possible and useful to discuss the EU strategies and policy guidelines for territorial tourism and sustainability themselves.

The EU institutions have been developing strategic frameworks for tourism for several years. More recently, the European Council (in 2022) adopted the "European Agenda for Tourism 2030" (Council of the European Union 2022) - which, according to the Commission, includes "the commitment of EU countries to make tourism *greener, more digital and resilient*".

As stated in the Council of the European Union 2022, the agenda includes a programme of actions to be taken by EU countries, the Commission and the tourism ecosystem. "... The agenda covers five priority areas: *the green transition, the digital transition, resilience and inclusion, skills and support, and the enabling policy framework and governance*".

It is obvious, as a declaration of intentions in principle, that the agenda is called upon to contribute to the implementation of the major current EU policies: "Green Deal", "Digital

Europe”, etc. “Within the framework of each priority, various actions are defined, such as *the differentiation of tourist services between seasons and locations* (in italic by us), *the reduction of the environmental footprint and the support of accessibility in tourism...*”. (Council of the EU 2022 – see also in European Commission 2022).

On 28 May 2025, the EC / DG for Mobility and Transport has published the report: “Progress towards a green and digital tourism” (Green report on European tourism) (EC / DG for Mobility and Transport 2025). “The report shows concrete results in all action areas, supported by the engagement of tourism players across all EU Member States and beyond...” (European Commission 2022)

Tourism, sustainability and territories in EU Territorial Agendas

Spatial aspects of tourism and sustainability are presented in the following agendas for territorial (spatial and urban) EU issues: *Urban Agenda for the EU* (EC / European Commission 2017), *Territorial Agenda 2030 / TA30* (Ministers for Spatial Planning – EU 2020) and *New Leipzig Charter / NLC* (Ministers on Urban Matters – EU 2020).

Sustainable tourism in the TA2030 and the NLC is not only encouraged but explicitly framed as part of integrated, place-based development. In **TA2030**, it warns that “urbanisation and mass tourism threaten cultural assets and landscapes and may fragment natural habitats ...” (Ministers for Spatial Planning – EU 2020). Similarly, TA2030 calls for “cooperation ... between places, levels of governments, policy sectors and societal groups” to address such challenges (Pertoldi et al 2022). The Agenda defines two overarching objectives - a *Just Europe* and a *Green Europe* - which strongly support sustainable tourism as a means to territorial cohesion (Ministers for Spatial Planning – EU 2020)

In the **NLC**, cities are described as “historically grown centres of outstanding cultural value ... shaping Europe’s urban heritage” - meaning that tourism should help preserve cultural identity, not erase it (Ministers on Urban Matters – EU 2020). The Charter also emphasises that “culture is at the core of any sustainable urban development, including the preservation ... of the built and other cultural heritage.” (ibid). Furthermore, high-quality public spaces allow people to “interact, exchange and integrate into society,” thus making tourism part of a socially inclusive city life (ibid).

Together, these texts suggest that sustainable tourism must be **environmentally responsible, culturally respectful, and socially inclusive**, embedded in multi-level governance and strategic spatial planning.

See some notes on the specific role of culture / heritage in tourism - territories in ANNEX

6. SPECIFIC POLICIES OF EU AND MEMBER STATES TO FACE OVERTOURISM

European Union and Member States have formulated policies and taken actions to deal with overtourism in the conditions that have developed in recent years In the relevant report of the European Commission: (Research for TRAN Committee - Overtourism: impact and possible policy responses ...- see detailed references) (Peeters et al. 2018) *both some key findings on the effects of overtourism and proposals for dealing with it by Member States*.

The following are almost identical to our own findings in the context of this paper as well as to our main proposals for tackling over-tourism in EU and Member States

- The effects of overtourism are potentially severe and **both natural and cultural heritage sites are at risk of losing their appeal as desirable tourism destinations due to overtourism.**

- **The character of overtourism impacts – environmental, economic and social - depends on the type of destination.** The most vulnerable destinations are not necessarily cities, but rather coastal, islands and rural heritage sites.
- *Most destinations are managed based on a growth-paradigm, mainly valuing growth of visitors' numbers, without considering carrying capacity and other policy goals* (Peeters et al. 2018)
- We have pointed out that both in the EU as a whole and in most Member States and in Greece, emphasis is placed, especially in recent years, on the expansion of the number of tourists in the "revenues" from tourism, etc., and not on the -absolutely necessary (see also in the following) holistic treatment of the phenomenon.
- «The most frequent measures taken by destination management organisations and local governments to soften the negative effects of overtourism are related to **spreading visitors in time and space**» (Peeters et al. 2018).

7. SPECIFIC ACTIONS OF EU COUNTRIES AND TERRITORIES TO FACE OVERTOURISM

Serious overtourism problems have appeared in some amazing destinations around the world, especially in EU countries and territories which are influenced by EU policies for tourism and sustainability in territories etc.

Support by EU for the actions of cities and coastal areas to deal with overtourism

The EU is investing via **Cohesion Policy** to promote sustainable tourism in tourism-intensive areas: 17 Interreg (Mediterranean) programmes target greener, inclusive tourism.

The **Urban Agenda for the EU** includes a *Sustainable Tourism Partnership* (since 2022) focused on governance, climate adaptation, and preserving local culture

The EU's first-ever **Tourism Strategy**, being developed, aims to balance economic growth, environmental preservation and community well-being.

The **EU Tourism Dashboard** provides destination-specific data (e.g. density, seasonality) to help local policymakers detect and manage overtourism (DG for Mobility and Transport 2025)

The **Community-Led Local Development (CLLD)** approach supports locally driven projects in coastal or urban areas, involving local stakeholders in planning responses.

Within CLLD, **FLAGs** (Fisheries Local Action Groups) have supported innovation and economic diversification in coastal areas.

The **“NA-Tour4CChange” project**, under Interreg, pilot's climate-adaptive governance models in tourism-heavy coastal regions.

The EU supports **crisis management and governance** in tourism via funded projects to improve resilience (e.g. for destination management)

Macro-regional strategies, like the **Adriatic-Ionian Strategy (EUSAIR)**, include coastal tourism actions in their revised action plans.

Through **ERDF (European Regional Development Fund)**, the EU allocates billions to sustainable tourism infrastructure, especially in urban and coastal areas.

The specific nature of actions (in EU and other countries)

In the following, we will also refer to policies and interventions that have been implemented in non-EU countries, but we will insist on what has been implemented in EU countries.

Following the often-strong protests about over-tourism, which we examined in subsection 1.2, many national, regional and local governments, councils and officials **are starting to act**.

In Barcelona and Venice, **restrictions for cruises** already have been placed – “resulting in the withdrawal of major cruise line Norwegian - other destinations at risk include Norway, France, and Greece, where cruise lines such as Royal Caribbean and Celestyal generate significant revenue”.

Similarly, in 2023, New York City made it illegal to rent out an apartment in the short term unless the tenant is registered with the city, and Berlin banned short-term rentals altogether.

The methods they’re taking are varied - levying tourist taxes, restricting access by location and time, refocusing on sustainability and imposing far stricter regulations on tourist behavior. The impact they will have, only time will show. But if they don’t work, ever more extreme measures are expected.

Spain’s recent crackdown on Airbnb and vacation rentals is expected to help - by prioritizing responsible travel. Plan smartly, pick sustainable transport methods, book with companies and guides that promote environmental and cultural preservation. Less crowded, more memorable places.

Measures

Countries which have sustainability regulations and environmental restrictions

Italy, Ecuador, Japan, Thailand

Countries which restrict tourist access to overtourism areas

Greece (Athens, Mykonos, Santorini), Peru (Machu Picchu), Spain (Ibiza, Menorca, Barcelona), Netherlands (Amsterdam), South Korea (Seoul), Austria (Hallstatt), Italy (Trentino Alto Adige), French Polynesia

Which cities have a tourist tax?

Barcelona, Venice, Santorini, Mykonos, Kyoto, Bhutan, Galapagos Islands, Bali, Seville, Edinburgh

Cities and countries which have tourist behavior regulations

Amsterdam (Netherlands), Sardinia, Portofino, Rome (Italy), Dubrovnik (Croatia), Prague (Czechia)

Cities which have bans and regulations on holiday rentals

Cornwall, Yorkshire Dales (England), Malaga (Spain), Florence (Italy), Marseille (France), Penang (Malaysia).

A case study: Barcelona

“Barcelona is the fourth most-visited European city, the first destination of Mediterranean cruise ships and the seventh largest European airport. While there were 3,7 million bookings in 1990, in 2016, Barcelona had more than 31 million bookings. *Barcelona’s tourism industry leads to very serious impacts and conflicts for the local society and the environment – social movements raise critique.*” (Stay Grounded Network)

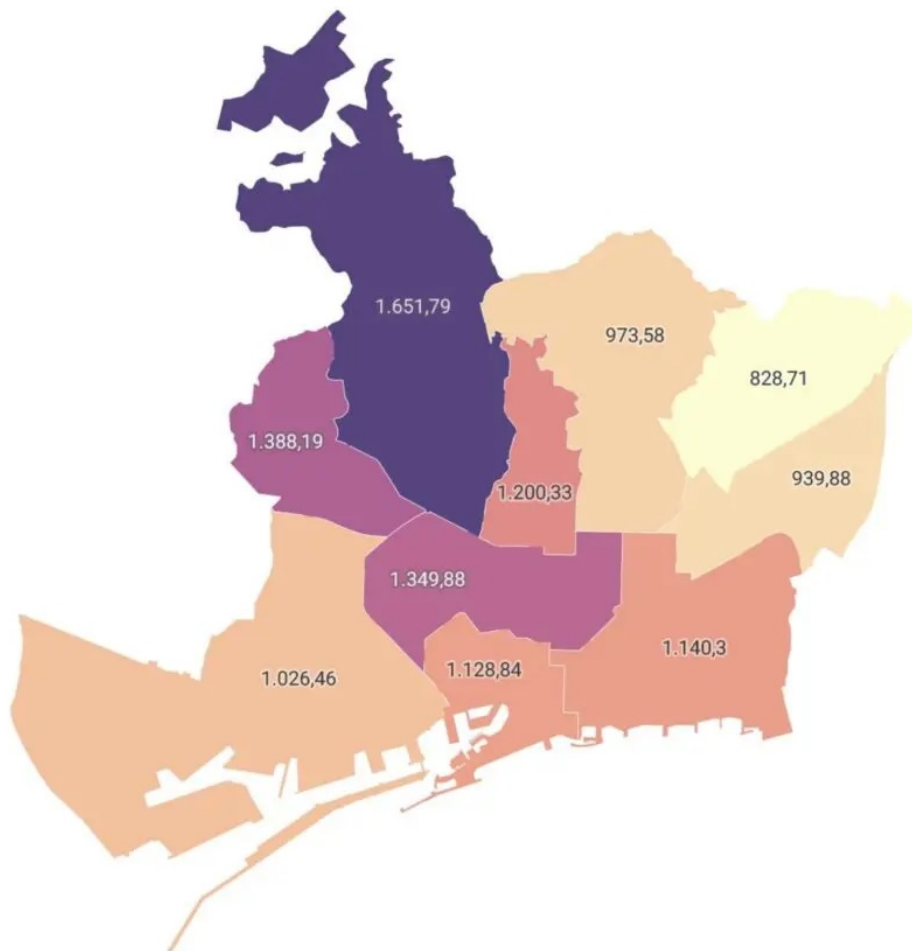
A very important ascertainment: “*the price of rentals in Barcelona reached a new record!*” (EO Mobility Consultancy (Barcelona) 2024) – see **Map 5**.

Measures which have been taken by different levels authorities²:

- *Regulating Short-Term Rentals – Enforcing stricter rules on platforms like Airbnb to prevent housing shortages and rising rents.*
- *Limiting Air Traffic – Reducing flights to curb emissions and over-tourism.*
- *Strengthening Workers’ Rights – Ensuring fair wages and better conditions for tourism industry employees.*
- *Promoting Sustainable Tourism – Encouraging local, low-impact tourism models.*

² (compiled from: Stay Grounded Network 2024)

average rental price



Map 5: Price of rent in Barcelona in Euros per month in 2024

Source of the map: EO Mobility Consultancy (Barcelona) 2024

8. A NEW TOURISM TERRITORIAL MODEL NEEDING HOLISTIC APPROACH

A new model of tourism territorial division - Need for holistic approach and territorial "decentralization"

The most important finding of our work, on which this paper is based, is that the overall development and territorial division of tourism has changed in recent years so significantly that we can talk to a large extent to a **new model, developmental and territorial**, of tourism. In this context, we found that policies and interventions to deal with overtourism, when they remain spatially and sectorally limited, are less effective than necessary. Only holistic approaches – multisectoral, multi-level -can be very effective. Illustrative example: Let's assume that we take the usual measures nowadays to restrict Airbnb and that the pressures on rents for residents are reduced. However, if there is no "**decentralization**" of demand from

tourists for this area - both spatially and temporally (extension of the tourist season throughout the year), the pressures on rent, infrastructure, land use, etc. will continue to grow (in the hypothesis that world tourism demand will continue to grow highly in next years).

In more general: from more balanced (holistic, sustainable) paradigms to growth paradigms and again to balanced paradigms

In several countries where decentralization of tourism demand had advanced in a frame of balanced tourism development, before roughly 2010, shifting part of the tourist demand from congested to less developed tourist areas have been relatively easier.

Looking at **Greece as an example** of the territorial decentralization of tourism:

For several years a strategy has been formulated to relieve the saturated tourist areas (urban, coastal etc.) and strengthen the "inland" areas (including mountainous areas, etc.). The results of this policy were limited - below the targets, however slowed down to some extent the pressure on congested destinations.

After roughly 2010, the views that supported the **growth paradigm** (an increase in tourist demand everywhere, a reduction in state regulation) were significantly strengthened (generally speaking), everywhere (including the EU and the Member States). The relevant policies have failed to reduce spatial and temporal bottlenecks. That is why, in a way, the "return" (in today's terms, obviously) of the more balanced policies – which necessarily require some appreciable degree of state regulation. Of course, a more extensive discussion of this issue is needed – but it is not possible to do so in the context of this work.

9. CONCLUSIONS

General

- Global tourism has intensified dramatically, **producing “overtourism” pressures, especially (but not only) in historic urban areas and sensitive coastal zones and island territories.** Post-Covid rebound further amplified visitor flows, exceeding the carrying capacity of many destinations.
- Excessive tourist concentration / congestion degrades natural and cultural assets, undermining the very foundations of tourism development in the congested areas.
- Residents across Europe increasingly **protest** against hypertourism’ impacts on housing, public space, and cultural identity.
- Fragmentary measures such as, for example: sole restrictions of Airbnb, although they can be useful, don't really address the problem.
- The UN SDGs (especially 8, 11, 12, 14) offer a useful but fragmented framework; tools like SDG 8.9 and 12.b support monitoring but need better integration with territorial priorities.
- Overtourism cannot be explained solely by demand; it requires **holistic, multi-sectoral analysis integrating economic, social, environmental and cultural dimensions.**
- Sustainable **planning is essential** to balance tourism growth with environmental quality, livability, social equity / inclusiveness and preservation of cultural identity.

Greece and Athens

They are examined here as an example.

Greece is among the countries most affected by overtourism, with extreme concentration in specific islands and historic city districts. But the fact that tourism corresponds to a large proportion of its economy restricts measures to stop over-tourism.

Athens, including many individual historical zones, shows intense overtourism, which has accelerated the use of houses as Airbnb accommodation. This had strong negative consequences for increasing rental prices for natives, the serious additional burden on the city's infrastructure and the relative limitation of the use of free spaces by residents. The measures taken did not substantially contribute to the overturning of overtourism in the historic area of the city.

Policies of European Union and member states to face overtourism

EU strategies (Green, Digital, Tourism Agenda 2030) call for greener, more resilient, **seasonally-and-spatially diversified tourism**.

European cities increasingly adopt measures such as tourist taxes, rental restrictions, access limits, and cruise controls. Examples from Barcelona (which we examined in more detail), Venice, Amsterdam and others show that unregulated tourism erodes affordability and urban cohesion.

The entire EU / EU countries and local authorities' action to contain overtourism is well under the demands, mainly because it remains fragmentary - that is, not holistic. In particular, the individual actions that have a social and environmental orientation are insufficient.

Summarizing

A new tourism model must **move beyond growth-paradigms** and place territorial sustainability, community well-being as well as nature and cultural heritage protection at its core.

Spreading tourism across space (towards often inland areas or even mountainous areas) and time (extension of the tourist season) is a key mitigation strategy.

10. PROPOSAL FOR A REALLY SUSTAINABLE TOURISM MODEL

In order to contain "overtourism" in urban (mainly historical) and non-urban (mainly coastal) areas, a comprehensive (multi-sectoral, multi-level) readjustment of tourism development is required, first of all, with economic, social, environmental and cultural priorities that are related to the UN (and EU) SDGs but also linked to the specific characteristics of sustainable development of each country and territory. In other words, strategies, policies / plans and actions - towards sustainable tourism' territorial development in countries and individual territories should be formulated.

In more detail, we propose:

Strategic, holistic governance

- Adopt a **holistic tourism governance model** linking economic, social, environmental and cultural impacts. Replace the current **growth-driven paradigm** with a sustainability-centred approach integrating carrying capacity assessments.
- Create **multi-level territorial tourism observatories** (local–regional–national) to monitor congestion, housing, infrastructure pressures and environmental degradation.
- Institutionalize **mandatory SDG-based monitoring** (SDGs 8.9, 11, 12.b, 14) adapted to local territorial realities.
- Introduce (or upgrade any existing) **integrated territorial planning tools** that explicitly limit tourism density in saturated urban and coastal areas.

Territorial and temporal decongestion

- Implement **territorial decentralization of tourism**, developing inland, mountainous and less-known regions through targeted incentives and infrastructure.

- Promote **seasonal redistribution**, extending tourism beyond peak months via cultural, educational and nature-based programs.
- Set **visitor caps** at sensitive heritage sites (e.g., Acropolis, Venice model) using digital reservation systems. Regulate cruise flows and disembarkation schedules in saturated ports. Design **tourism mobility plans** prioritizing public transport, pedestrian zones and reduced car dependency.

Housing, local economy and social protection

- Impose **strict regulation on short-term rentals** (caps / ceilings, licenses, taxation, exclusion zones in historic centres). Establish **affordability protections for residents**, including rent controls and incentives for long-term leases.
- Redirect part of tourism revenue to **local community funds** supporting public spaces, social services and cultural programs. Encourage **local supply chains** and traditional businesses through procurement rules, branding and subsidies. Require **corporate social responsibility standards** from tourism operators regarding labour rights and environmental performance.

Cultural & Environmental Safeguards

- Strengthen **legal protection of cultural heritage zones** and enforce strict environmental limits in coastal areas. Develop **carrying-capacity-based cultural tourism plans**, balancing visitor access with conservation. Promote **low-impact tourism forms**, including eco-tourism, cultural interpretation routes and community-based tourism.
- Invest in **waste, water and energy management systems** that can withstand peak tourism loads. Implement **visitor behaviour codes** with clear penalties (as in Amsterdam, Rome, Dubrovnik).

EU funding

- Align national tourism strategies with the **EU Tourism Agenda 2030**, the European Green Deal and Digital Europe – **considering the national realities and needs**.
- Utilize **ERDF, Cohesion Fund and Creative Europe** resources for sustainable tourism, and infrastructure upgrading. Require all EU-funded tourism projects to include **climate resilience and community benefit criteria**.
- Create an **EU-wide framework for overtourism risk assessment**, harmonizing indicators and data systems. Promote **cross-border cooperation** for sustainable tourism corridors and decongestion strategies.

Similar proposals need to be implemented in the total of **Greece** as well as in the total of Athens with emphasis in the more specific zones that face greater pressure from overtourism.

Specifically, for overtourism zones of **Athens**:

(a) The protection of the individual historical areas, such as Plaka, Monastiraki and Keramikos, must be a priority in the tourism structural and city plan.

(b) Critical infrastructures of the city need to be improved. This includes both transport and public services, such as health services and waste management. These infrastructures must be sufficient for visitors and permanent residents, so as to maintain a balance between tourism and the local community.

(c) The implementation of appropriate regulations for Airbnb accommodation is urgently needed: reduction of the total permitted capacity and adjustment of the conditions of their establishment and operation in order to limit or eliminate their negative impacts on the housing sector (rents, etc.) of the city's residents.

Overall priority: Overcoming overtourism needs a **new holistic tourism strategy**:

Reorientation of the territorial plans of tourism with appropriate “decentralization” at all levels and strengthening the goals and measures for economically, socially and environmentally sustainable tourism.

ANNEX

Some notes on the specific role of culture / heritage in tourism – territories

We refer here in summary to the *specific role of the culture / heritage in tourism - territories, due to the great importance of this role*. See for a much more extensive analysis in (Angelidis 2025).

Strategic framework for EU cultural policy

For cultural policy, the EU has also formulated appropriate strategic frameworks over time. Following the 2007 European Agenda for Culture, the European Commission adopted the **new European Agenda for Culture in 2018** (European Commission 2018), in order to consider recent developments in the cultural sector. The new agenda and accompanying documents constitute the framework for cooperation in the cultural sector at EU level. They focus on the positive contribution of culture to Europe’s society, economy and international relations. Member States define the main themes and working methods for political cooperation in the field of culture through work programmes for culture, which are adopted by the Council of the European Union.

Regarding **cultural heritage** in particular, the European Commission proposed the *first European Framework of Action for Cultural Heritage* in December 2018. The *EU policy for cultural heritage* is continuously adapted, to this day, with relevant documents, actions, etc. See, among others, in (EU Partnership on Culture / Cultural Heritage 2024), (EC / European Commission 2020), (EC / European Commission (2024)).

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