Explorative Proposal
for an UAEU Thematic Partnership under the Ljubljana Agreement

Sustainable Tourism

Challenge:

Cities are faced with an unprecedented situation. Shook to the core by the pandemic and its lockdows, deserted by tourists for months and only partially recovering losses this summer, they are in the critical position to review their approach to tourism and address its key failings.

For several years, many leading EU tourism destinations have suffered from the so-called over-tourism. Receiving 20-30 tourists per inhabitant per year left many municipal councils with little to none tools to oversee and regulate the rapidly developing sector. While some key platforms registered triple figure growth, local coffers remain empty and the locals were left to deal with increased noise, pollution, crowds and changing fabric of their cities.

This lack of control has led the way to many unintended consequences. This includes mono-functional areas of the city and the rise of a low quality tourism industry, undermining the resilience of the sector and bringing adverse consequences to the quality of life in cities. At the same time small and medium-sized cities can also identify tourism as potential economic opportunity on the condition that they could provide for proper infrastructures and that it would not prevent the sustainable development of their territory.

From the urban-perspective, in some cases the lack of control on tourism has undermined the liveability and social fabric of city centres due to on a high concentration on certain economic activities and retail such as souvenir shops, restaurants and fast foods, etc., an increasing pressure on the housing market to accommodate tourists, and a cultural and entertainment sector mostly focused on tourist interests vis a vis local ones, among others. The over reliance on tourism in certain city areas has generated an important economic recession during the pandemic, confirming the risks associated with a mono-sectorial economic model.

Yet, the pandemic has also revealed a new interest for a more local tourism and smaller and medium-sized cities but also regions are exploring how to answer this new demand while preserving their natural and cultural heritage as well as keeping their urban centres alive throughout the whole year.

City administrations have been looking for ways to regulate the sector to find a balance between citizens' needs and touristic ambitions, but they cannot do it alone. Working in a multi-level set-up is necessary to find the appropriate support and coordination, as well as developing tools, funding schemes and regulation that can help them take back control of the sector and lead it to a sustainable path.

Opportunity:

The unprecedented amount of resources made available in the EU recovery has the potential to transform the tourism sector in cities and make it more sustainable and resilient against future shocks. Resources and investments are only part of the solution, and there is an opportunity to

couple them with enabling conditions that will put municipal, regional and national administrations as well as the European institutions in a better position to align their different policies and legislative initiatives.

The potential provided by the digital revolution is still today largely untapped. Cities have been looking at data and metrics as tools to track tourism trends and flows as well as to tackle social and environmental shortcomings of the industry. However, major barriers remain, such as the lack of access to many datasets still kept privately and an administration not yet ready to interpret and use them. Developing digital skills is not only an important opportunity, but also a competitive factor for the sector as a whole, which can greatly benefit from digitalisation. Next to digitalisation, the EU Recovery offers an important opportunity to invest in a more sustainable mobility for the touristic sector.

Taking back control of the sector means also co-creating comprehensive and long-term strategies for the sector in dialogue with stakeholders and citizens, identifying priorities and goals to make the best of innovation. Many cities are already experimenting and working on transforming their tourism industry, for instance by assessing how they can bring in circular economy principles in the tourism sector, or by looking at how they can revive their crafts local production, or by exploring how they can boost innovation in SMEs. This is particularly important in the context of creating urban-rural linkages in the tourism sector.

Another area of interest can include the use of resources and look into the land use (e.g. public beaches), water pollution, use and treatment (e.g. grey water transformation) and air quality (e.g. in large cruise ports), addressing underlying challenges and jointly developing innovative solutions to reduce the impact of tourism activities on natural environment.

Mission of the proposed Thematic Partnership:

This Thematic Partnership will bring together the experts working on tourism-policies from local, regional, national and European level, with a view to initiate a mapping and scoping exercise from the perspective of accelerating sustainable tourism in European cities. The Thematic Partnership will, from this exercise, jointly decide on the areas of collaboration and develop (and implement) an action plan on Better EU regulation, Better use of EU funding and Better exchange of Knowledge.

Fields of action may include:

- The promotion of tourism in cities as sustainable and resilient activity (particularly by tapping on the potential of digitalisation and improved access to and sharing of date, to better deliver policy responses, while addressing related challenges (e.g. platform economy) and contributing to climate neutrality objectives.
- The promotion of positive interaction between tourism and culture and local way of life.
- Find synergies between tourism and sustainable land use, preservation of urban and natural ecosystems.

Contributing to Green, Productive and Just cities and building on good urban governance:

Such mission would contribute to a more productive city in the long-term. Sustainable tourism is in fact one EU main industrial ecosystems and increasingly prominent in cities, and as such a key contributor to GDP and employment in cities. Its value chain links with transport, accommodation, experience and intermediation, among others. Bringing innovation in the sector towards high-quality

services and products is fundamental and will make the sector more sustainable and performing in the future.

At the same time, transforming the sector can contribute to reduce its carbon footprint, which today is estimated to be responsible for 8% of CO_2 emissions[1], and other emissions. In doing so, it can make cities greener and more liveable, supporting climate adaptation and mitigation efforts, as well as supporting switches to soft mobility, multimodal and sustainable collective transport system, buildings energy efficiency.

Finally, a transformed sector would contribute to a just city as it would be better equipped to provide quality work, and for instance not rely as much on underpaid short-term employees. It would equally better address issues related to housing shortages, city centres diversity, etc.

Aligning with and supporting EU priorities:

At the European level, tourism policies are being developed by the European Commission (in particular by DG GROW) and also at the EU Council tourism is a recurrent policy domain, for instance as part of the priorities of the revolving EU Presidencies. Under the former Portuguese Presidency, the Council adopted conclusions in which it called on member states and the Commission to come forward by the end of 2021 with a co-designed European Agenda for Tourism 2030/2050 and to jointly design an EU Tourism Dashboard, as an EU flagship tool for the tourism ecosystem (currently under development by DG GROW and the JRC).

In a recent resolution, the European Parliament called for an EU Strategy for Sustainable Tourism. Among other proposals, it called for the renewal of the European Charter for Sustainable and Responsible Tourism.

Most member states are actively developing and implementing national policies on tourism. Tourism is a key component of Next Generation EU and as such prominently tackled in the National Recovery and Resilience Plans put forward by member states. In this context, an EU-wide approach is particularly important to monitor and address high competition from regions and cities to attract tourism.

The CoR, in its 2020 opinion on Sustainable Tourism called for measures to assist cities and regions in their transition towards digital, smart and greener tourism. In this context with the UNWTO Porto Declaration of June 2021, Mayors committed to building bridges between cities and the most vulnerable rural areas, to boost the most efficient use of resources and reduce gas emissions, without letting go of sustainability based on a sustainable transport that improves mobility, connectivity and social equity.

Tourism is one of the ecosystems of the EU Industrial Strategy, and as such it is already addressed and tackled in many Commission initiatives of relevance for cities, including the Intelligent cities Challenge, Living in the EU, European Green Capital, etc. At the same time, it is one of the key sectors which is addressed by the Long Term for Rural Vision 2040 and in this context an important opportunity to strengthen urban rural partnerships. Next to the Recovery and Resilience facility, other EU resources are of particular relevance, including Horizon Europe (e.g. Mission on Climate Neutral and Smart Cities), European Regional Development Fund and ESIF territorial cooperation.

Both the European Strategy for data (incl. Digital Services Act; Digital Single Market, etc.) and the European Skills Agenda (incl. Pact for Skills in tourism; upskilling strategy) are relevant and important enablers for sustainable tourism. For instance, with the forthcoming implementation of the digital

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[1] See' The carbon footprint of global tourism' by Lenzen et al. – Nature (2018)

services act there is a window of opportunity for cities and STRP to exchange data and maximise the value offered by digital platforms.

Sustainable Tourism is strongly aligned and contributes to the objectives of the European Green Deal, particularly in areas such as transportation, building renovation, circular economy, etc. Finally, it is strongly aligned with the EU social agenda, and in particular to the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPRS).

The Partnership and Pilot Action of Territorial Agenda 2030 could jointly work on the theme so as to bring together territorial and urban challenges.

Building on previous Thematic Partnerships:

This Thematic Partnership will build on the work of previous partnerships such as the **Digital transition** partnership (e.g., action Access and reuse of private sector data of general interest by the public authorities; Strengthen the ability for cities to act within the digital transition), the **Housing** partnership (e.g. action Recommendations on improvement of EU urban housing market data); **Jobs and skills in the local economy.** (e.g. action on Regional Innovation Strategy (RIS3) 2.0), **Urban mobility, Culture and Cultural Heritage** (e.g. action on Data Collection and Smart Use Applied to the Management of Tourist Flows; Regulating Phenomena of Sharing Economy; Guiding Principles for Resilience and Integrated Approaches in Risk and Heritage Management in European Cities).