After Covid-19 pandemic, the recovery of tourism sector builds on sustainability

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Tourism has been one of the sectors worst affected by the Covid-19 pandemic: hotels, restaurants, airlines and travel agencies had to stop their activity almost completely during a long period and only now touristic activity is slowly recovering back to pre-2020 levels. However, the pandemic has also accelerated the transition to a more sustainable models of tourism. This was the topic of a conference organised by the CoR's NAT Commission in Santiago de Compostela on 3 June. The host city is known for the Camino de Santiago (The Way of St James), which provides a perfect example of sustainable, low-impact tourism combining cultural heritage and bringing together people from across Europe.

The President of the Government of Galicia, Alfonso Rueda Valenzuela, noted that 100 000 pilgrims have already arrived in Santiago de Compostela this year, which means that the city is on the way to beat the record from 2019. "People want to travel again, discover new places and cultural heritage, but the pandemic has changed models of tourism towards destinations that are nearer and less massified", he said.

While touristic activity has returned to pre-pandemic levels in many regions of Europe during spring 2022, Manuel Cardenete Flores (ES/Renew Europe), Regional Minister for Education and Sport in Andalusia, warned that the war in Ukraine and the energy crisis are posing new challenges to the sector. He underlined the importance of tourism to the economic growth – for example, in Andalusia it represents more than 13 percent of the GDP – and called for the European Union to consider tourism as one of its key policy areas.

This call was shared by the MEP Cláudia Monteiro de Aguiar (PT/EPP) who recalled that the European Parliament has urged the European Commission to present a new strategy on sustainable tourism in Europe and to establish an EU Agency for Tourism. She

insisted that the green and digital transition in the tourism sector should be supported through the National Recovery Plans and eventually by setting up a separate budget line.

At the same time, cities and regions across Europe are responding to the growing demand for more sustainable ways of travel: for example, the Veneto Region in Italy has recently inaugurated several new walking and cycling routes across the territory. The President of Veneto Region Roberto Ciambetti (IT/ECR) also referred to a study showing that 54% of tourists arriving in his region would accept to pay an extra price for a more ecologic-friendly must be the rule, not exception", concluded the NAT Commission Chair Ulrika Landergren (SV/Renew Europe). " The EU must develop a strategy that takes into account the tourism's ecologic and social impact", she added, regretting that unsustainable practices still exist: golf courses are watered in areas suffering from drought and some cruise ships continue dumping wastewater into oceans.

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