

Tourism and sustainability in transition: from “measures” to a “common European policy”¹

Pr. Sofia Avgerinou- Kolonias

Professor of Spatial Planning at the National Technical University of Athens

Anastasia Toufengopoulou

*Engineer of Spatial and Urban Planning and Regional Development, Phd candidate,
National Technical University of Athens*

ABSTRACT

This paper is aimed at exploring the capacities and restrictions arising through the synthetic analysis and assessment of the European policy on tourism, putting emphasis on its sustainable approach. First, a presentation of the political framework established by the Union for tourism from 1995 and the adoption of the "Green Paper" till the first official report on the European tourism following the entry in effect of the Lisbon Treaty titled "Europe, the world's No 1 tourist destination - a new political framework for tourism in Europe" is made. Then, through a synthetic analysis, the evolution of challenges faced by European tourism, the path towards the closest definition of the notion of "sustainable tourism", as well as the evolution of the European policy objectives, are explored. New notions that have been gradually integrated into the European Union (EU) policy on tourism and foster it towards the direction not only of superficial acceptance of sustainable development but also of its substantial and realistic implementation emerge: carrying capacity, locality, ethics, territorial cohesion.

Taking into account the new reality, which consists in: (a) the fact that the Lisbon Treaty now enables the Union "to carry out actions to support, coordinate or supplement the actions of the Member States" in the field of tourism; and (b) the sore crisis afflicting Greece and Europe, which undeniably renders the link of our national policy to the European one unbreakable, it is considered to be useful to take advantage of this "cornucopia" of EU guidelines, measures, regulations, opinions, communications etc. concerning tourist development. The objective is, on one part, to assess EU's role to-date in the sector of tourism, EU's contribution towards promoting its sustainability and the cooperation of the Member States and, on the other part, to highlight policy prospects for the future of tourism in Europe.

In this context, the methodological approach applied consists in the following steps: i) Secondary research of legislative texts, official EU policy documents of guiding and not binding character, operational plans, such as action plans, etc. ii) Synthetic analysis and assessment of the European policy on tourism through the proposals made by the Commission and the policy inputs on spatial planning in Europe.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Treaty on European Union and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union are the two Treaties that establish the Union. Specifically, the Treaty on European Union signed on 7 February 1992 in Maastricht acknowledges for the first time that, in order to carry out the mission assigned to it, the action taken by the European Union will include, according to the terms and the time plan laid down in the Treaty (1992) "measures in the field of tourism" (Article 3t). Please also note that for other policy sectors, such as for example the environment and culture, the Treaty lays down specific objectives and implementing measures.

The second fundamental Treaty of EU, the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union or – as widely known- the Lisbon Treaty organizes the functioning of the Union and determines the fields, the delimitation and the terms of exercising its competences. In accordance with the Treaty (2007), the European Union has auxiliary competence in the field of tourism, namely “the Union shall have competence to carry out actions to support, coordinate or supplement the actions of the Member States”. However, given that tourism is directly and indirectly related to other fields in which the Union has shared competence, i.e. the legislative competence in the said field is shared between Member States and EU (for example, in the fields of the environment, transports and territorial cohesion) or even exclusive competence in matters falling under a greater field (such as the rules on competition), one may understand that tourism is also indirectly governed by European rules, not only by guidelines.

The role of the European Commission in creating a policy on tourism at EU level is critical. This is true due to its role of high responsibility in developing common European policies. The European Commission (usually referred to as the Commission) is the driving force of the European architecture. It takes initiative in the Community decision-making process. The role of the Commission is political to the extent that it selects and prepares the ground on which the European integration is built and technocratic, since its proposals are based on technical and/or scientific assessments (Mousis, 2003). Therefore, given that the Commission has the competence to take first action to develop a common policy, having undertaken to protect through its reports the common interests of each individual Member State, on one part, and that the field of tourism has not been developed upon a distinct legal basis and does not belong to the Union's sectoral policies (such as the policy on transports, the agricultural policy, etc.), on the other part, it is deemed correct, from a methodological aspect, to approach EU's policy through the communications adopted by the Commission in the field of tourism.

Moreover, it is uncontested that the contribution of the other institutional bodies through their decisions and opinions on the communications of the Commission - i.e. of the Council (decision), the European Parliament (decision or opinion), the European Economic and Social Committee (opinion) and the Committee of the Regions (opinion) – is of decisive importance for the creation of a common tourist policy at EU level. For that reason, it has been considered to be expedient to take into account such contribution in the synthetic analysis and assessment of the European policy.

2. FROM THE “GREEN PAPER” TO “EUROPE, THE WORLD’S NO 1 TOURIST DESTINATION”

In April 1995, the Commission presented the “Green Paper on the role of the Union in the field of tourism” and thereby launched wide consultation relating to the role of the EU in that critical field for its development. Following the Green Paper, which gave the signal for a process of extensive consultation and concerns about reinforcing the role of the Union in that, generally acknowledged, important economic activity, the Commission published its communication titled “Working together for the future of European tourism”, which has been the milestone of the said process.

In 2003, in the European Commission’s Communication “Basic orientations for the sustainability of European tourism”, the focus of the EU policy relating to the future of European tourism coincides with its sustainable development. Even though since the mid-90s’ sustainable tourist development is

a priority for the institutional bodies of the EU, the said communication is nevertheless the one providing the basic orientations towards implementing a wide process of Agenda 21, on sustainable tourism. Indeed, the Committee of the Regions underlines in its opinion that it welcomes the Communication of the Commission, given that it constitutes the first noteworthy global position of the EU against the challenges posed by tourism sustainability. More specifically, it regards that “the main value of the Communication resides in the fact that it outlines actions that need to be taken, in particular by regions and destinations, if sustainable tourism is to move from theory to practice” (Committee of the Regions, 2004).

Continuing the process for integrating sustainability into the tourism activities of the Union, the Commission proposes in 2006 “A renewed EU Tourism Policy: Towards a stronger partnership for European Tourism” attempting to integrate the objectives set under the Lisbon Treaty into the tourism strategy it determines. Moreover, emphasis is put on the manner in which the various parties involved can participate in the actions taken by the EU.

Following the works of the Tourism Sustainability Group (TSG) and the public consultation conducted afterwards, the “Agenda for a sustainable and competitive European tourism” was adopted in 2007 – it is the European Agenda 21. The Agenda, according to the Commission (2007), “represents a further contribution to the implementation of the renewed Lisbon strategy for growth and jobs and of the renewed sustainable development strategy”.

Lastly, the European Commission's Communication "Europe, the world's No 1 tourist destination - a new political framework for tourism in Europe" is the first official policy text following the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty, according to which tourism has become a special responsibility of the EU. Therefore, based on this new responsibility for elaborating a European strategy on tourism, which will respect the principle of subsidiarity, the Commission presented the new policy that sets 21 specific actions for the revival of tourism sector in Europe.

3. THE EVOLUTION OF CHALLENGES FOR THE EUROPEAN TOURISM

From 1995 and the "Green Paper" to 2011 and the latest policy texts of the EU on tourism, challenges have been a main section of their content. Challenges reflect the reality which the policy refers to and are either positive (prospects) or negative (threats). They usually refer to the changes which the tourist demand and tourist supply of Europe must adapt to. Finally, the challenges presented in the Communications of the Commissions have been often combined with the requirements for sustainability. The aggregate table below presents their evolution through time.

Table 1: The evolution of challenges for the European tourism through the Communications of the European Commission

	<i>Green Paper (1995)</i>	<i>Working together for the future of the European tourism (2001)</i>	<i>Basic orientations for the sustainability of the European tourism (2003)</i>	<i>A renewed EU tourism policy (2006)</i>	<i>Agenda for a sustainable and competitive European tourism (2007)</i>	<i>Europe, the world's No 1 tourist destination (2010)</i>
<i>Changes in the tourist demand</i>						
economic developments	X	X	X	X	X	X
changes in the demographic structure	X	X	X	X	X	X
social changes	X	X	X		X	X
technological progress	X	X	X		X	X
development of transports	X	X	X	X	X	X
changes in tourist preferences/ demand for new forms of tourism	X	X	X	X	X	X
contingent/ uncontrollable events		X				X
<i>Adaptation of tourist supply</i>						
market globalization	X	X	X	X		X
competitiveness of destinations	X		X	X		X
<i>Sustainability</i>						
balanced approach relating to the three pillars of sustainability (economy, society, environment)	X	X	X	X	X	X
integration of sustainability into businesses			X		X	X
sustainability awareness by tourists			X		X	X
tackling seasonal allocation	X	X	X	X	X	X
sustainable development of destinations		X	X	X	X	X
tackling issues related to climate change			X		X	X
tackling issues related to lack of water					X	X

Source: data processed by the authors

Certain remarks-clarifications need to be made relating to Table 1.

1. The impact of economic developments on tourist demand is a continuous challenge examined by the EU. This emanates from the uncontested contribution of tourism in the GDP of the Union

and in the creation of jobs, as well as from the highly increasing growth rates it presents. However, the rapid development of the sector has been intercepted since 2008 due to the global economic and financial crisis, proving both its vulnerable character and its resilience. “Although they have continued to travel, Europeans have adapted their behaviour to circumstances, in particular by preferring less distant destinations and reducing the length of stay or their spending.” (European Commission, 2010).

2. The change in the structure of population in Europe is a factor that has been observed to affect tourist demand through time. According to estimates, elderly people and pensioners are expected to account for 20% of the population in 2020.
3. Social changes, such as the challenge to provide everyone without distinction the capacity to enjoy tourist experience. This challenge relates to the greater access to tourism of young people and pensioners (which has been achieved to a large extent) and of disabled people and people with reduced mobility (they have been recently calculated to be 127 millions).
4. Tourists’ increasing demand for individualization of the tourist products has directly entailed increase in the demand for certain new forms of tourism. The forms of tourism that, according to the Communications of the Commission, were expected to present the highest increase in demand were, in 1995, rural and cultural tourism, in 2001, cultural tourism and tourism related to the natural heritage, in 2006, tourism for health reasons and tourism related to cultural and natural heritage, while, in 2007, cruise tourism was reported to be rapidly developing. Lastly, in the recent policy text, the Commission's intention to differentiate, boost and promote the different tourist products and forms of tourism is obvious: “cultural heritage, contemporary culture, protected natural sites, health and wellbeing (including spa tourism), educational, wine and food, historical, sport or religious tourism, agri-tourism, rural tourism, or tourism capitalizing on the maritime and sub-aquatic cultural heritage, industrial heritage or the economic fabric of a region" (European Commission, 2010).
5. In 2001, the terrorist attack on the American soil, its direct consequences, such as the fear of air travels and, mostly, the explosion of the volcano in Iceland and the closing of the European airspace in spring 2010 due to the volcanic ash, have highlighted the need for special planning relating to crisis management at EU level.
6. Finally, relating to the progress of EU efforts to address the problem of strong seasonality, it is noted that seasonality is an issue referred to as early as in the Greek Paper on tourism. At first, seasonality was connected to concerns regarding its impact on employment but, afterwards, it acquires a more complete notional content, such as its effect on the carrying capacity of tourist destinations, the use of infrastructures, etc. Remarks relating to the evolution of challenges as regards sustainability are described in detail below in the paper.

4. NEW TERMS FOSTER THE EUROPEAN POLICY ON SUSTAINABLE TOURISM: CARRYING CAPACITY, LOCALITY, ETHICS

The most known and widely used definition of sustainable development is the one provided by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) included in the Brundtland report “Our common future”, published in 1987. According to that definition “sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987). Butler (1999) regards that if there is one factor able to change the nature of tourism more than anyone else, this is the introduction of the notion “sustainable development”. The designation of the notion of “sustainable tourism” has gradually evolved into a positive approach to tourism development that incorporates social and environmental limitations and has been addressed, from an alternative aspect, as a prospect (Kilipiris, 2009). The evolution of the elements attributing to tourism the designation sustainable presents an interesting course through the official EU texts.

Apart from supplementing the policy to address certain timeless challenges (e.g. the seasonality problem, as described above), the following typological developments reflect the progress made in

the sustainable approach to tourism: from *tourist satisfaction* we have turned to *tourist awareness*, from *choosing* between quantity (mainly mass tourism) and yield (mainly expected profit per tourist) we have turned to the *need* for sustainability in tourism. The aforementioned framework is reinforced by certain “new” notions that have been gradually integrated into the EU policy on tourism and foster it towards the direction not only of superficial acceptance of sustainable development but also of its substantial and realistic implementation.

In particular, the Communication “Working together for the future of European tourism” lays down the notion of “*carrying capacity of natural and cultural resources*”. The carrying capacity highlights the need to set boundaries and, for that reason, it has been regarded as the most useful notion for sustainable tourism (Svoronou and Symvoulidou, 2009). Specifically, the Communication states: “Tourism is an important aspect of the quality of life of EU citizens, which could be further improved by promoting sustainable, high-quality, competitive tourism in Europe, while respecting the carrying capacity of its natural and cultural areas, especially Natura 2000 sites” (European Commission, 2001). The aforementioned statement is endorsed by the European Parliament resolution on the Commission’s Communication that calls, as regards the future, for “sustainable tourism to be developed, which must be of high quality, competitive, and open to all, but never overstrain the reception capacities of natural and cultural sites” (European Parliament, 2002).

The texts promoting the implementation of a European Agenda 21 on tourism and, mainly, the Communication “Basic orientations for the sustainability of European tourism” reinforce the notion of “*locality in managing tourist development*”. Indeed, the Commission states that “in the same way that tourism is a global phenomenon that is shaped locally, the sustainability problems linked to it range from global ones that need to be solved globally, to local ones that require action on the ground. However, tourism is a sphere of primarily local and regional responsibility. Tourism-related measures largely need to be devised and implemented locally, in order to address the specific needs and limitations that exist” (European Commission, 2003). The participation of a large number of local bodies, groups of interests or professional associations is another feature of these procedures. This trend drastically intensifies in the following years, while it is also reinforced on an institutional basis (Kokkosis and Tsartas, 2001).

Lastly, a highly interesting introduction to the new EU policy on tourism “Europe, the world’s No 1 tourist destination – a new political framework for tourism in Europe” is the notion of “*Ethics*”. The Commission now presents the need “to reconcile economic growth and sustainable development, including an ethical dimension” (European Commission, 2010). Ethics in tourism is a field that needs to be explored, while research efforts have been limited to date. Acknowledging the significance of the matter, the World Tourism Organization adopted in 2001 the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism, which is a scheme of directions and principles that must govern the tourism sector all over the world. According to Fennel (2001), despite the apparent acceptance of the usefulness of codes by the tourism industry, there are many actors not adopting it. “The presence or absence of acceptable ethical behaviour in tourism settings is, therefore, very much a function of the way in which tourists, operators and local people realize tourism and act both between them and towards natural resources. It is clear that a balance must be struck between the various stakeholders ensuring good intentions” (Fennel, 2001).

5. TOWARDS A COMPETITIVE, SUSTAINABLE, CONTEMPORARY AND SOCIALLY-RESPONSIBLE EUROPEAN TOURISM

The “Green Paper” asserted that a European tourism policy that would indivisibly address the economic potential of the sector, the tourist satisfaction and the preservation of natural wealth and cultural heritage was necessary. Afterwards, the strategy implemented regarded the development of a sustainable, quality tourism, putting emphasis on ways to make European tourist businesses competitive (exploitation of available information, acquisition and development of know-how, facilitation of businesses’ adaptation to market developments etc.). The said Communication was also the milestone of the “Tourism and Employment” process, the conclusions of which consist in

the imperative need for close cooperation between the Commission and the Member States to maximize the contribution of tourism in the development and employment in the EU. One of the actions proposed by the Commission regarded the promotion of the principles of sustainable development of tourist activities in Europe by elaborating and implementing an “Agenda 21”.

The assessment by the European Commission in 2003 of the progress made in the field of sustainable tourism was not encouraging. Even though it stressed out that there had been a large amount of initiatives taken at all levels, from international to local ones, it, nevertheless, underlined that these have not managed to bring the positive results pursued. The “Basic orientations for the sustainability of European tourism”, which is the first noteworthy global position of the European Union against the challenges of tourism sustainability, determined the objectives of European tourism through its sustainable approach. These are: i) sustainable development and growth, ii) a balanced approach to the three pillars of sustainability, iii) sustainable consumption patterns, iv) sustainable production patterns: sustainable value chain and sustainable destination development.

In 2006, the Commission proposed to create a new European policy on tourism with a view to improve the competitiveness of the said sector and to create jobs, attempting to integrate in the strategy that it elaborated for tourism the objectives set under the Lisbon Treaty. The main objective of the renewal European policy on tourism is to improve the competitiveness of the European tourist industry and to create more and better jobs through the sustainable development of tourism in Europe and worldwide. The Commission regarded that the most expedient means to implement that policy were the coordination inside the Commission and inside the national authorities, the cooperation between the various bodies involved and the adoption of special support measures. The main areas on which the said policy focuses are as follows: i) better regulation, ii) policy coordination, iii) improved use of available European financial instruments.

Competitiveness and sustainability are two concurrent requirements that constitute the main objective of the European tourism policy, as presented in 2007 in the “Agenda for a sustainable and competitive European tourism”, integrating in the designation of competitiveness the notion of sustainability and acknowledging that, in the long term, competitiveness depends upon sustainability. Moreover, the quality of tourist experience has been added to the policy objectives.

After the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty, the objectives set by the European Union for the sector of tourism, which all Member States support, are the tourism sector to be competitive, sustainable, contemporary and socially responsible. To achieve these objectives, the actions for tourism focus on four axes:

1. *Stimulating competitiveness of the European tourism sector.*

Some of the actions planned are: Creation of a European heritage label, alongside actions such as European Heritage Days or the European Union Prize for Cultural Heritage. Encouraging the integration into tourism strategies of “natural” heritage. Providing a voluntary tourism exchange mechanism between Member States.

2. *Promoting the development of sustainable, responsible and high-quality tourism.*

Some of the actions planned are: Developing, on the basis of NECSTouR or EDEN, a system of indicators for the sustainable management of destinations. Organising awareness-raising campaigns for European tourists. Developing a European “Qualité Tourisme” brand. Facilitating identification by the European tourism industry of risks linked to climate change. Proposing a charter for sustainable and responsible tourism and establishing a European prize for tourism businesses and destinations respecting the values set out in the charter.

3. *Consolidating the image and profile of Europe as a collection of sustainable and high-quality tourist destinations*

Some of the actions planned are: Creation of a true “Europe brand” in cooperation with the Member States. Promoting the visiteurope.com website in order to increase the attractiveness of Europe as a collection of sustainable and high-quality tourist destinations. Encouraging joint promotional actions at major international events or large-scale tourism fairs and exhibitions. Strengthening European Union participation in international bodies, particularly within the context of the World Tourism Organisation, the OECD, T20 and Euro-Med.

4. *Maximising the potential of EU financial policies and instruments for developing tourism.*

Some of the actions planned are: For the current programming period, the Commission will continue to promote and mobilize Community support instruments and programmes in favour of tourism. These instruments include the various European structural funds (ERDF, ESF), the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), the European Fisheries Fund (EFF) and the framework programme for research and development, which will continue to finance the setting up of specific projects. Finally, the Competitiveness and Innovation Framework Programme is of particular importance to tourism in that, since 2008, it has supported the creation of European networks for competitive and sustainable tourism.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The new European Union policy attempts to promote a dynamic strategy for boosting competitiveness, sustainability (alongside with the integration of the care for responsibility) and promoting European tourism. The current challenges that need to be tackled by European tourism, firstly, the financial crisis and, secondly, the increasing emergence of new competitive destinations, render the need of policy being promptly transformed into actions imperative. In case of crisis or serious recession, which may occur either due to extrinsic factors (such as international conjuncture) or by intrinsic causes (e.g. the quality of the services offered, the quality of the environment, etc.), the areas where the economic base and labour market have been based on the impersonal and mass tourist traffic are the one to be mainly threatened (Klambatsea, 2007).

The Commission's response to the aforementioned threats correctly relates, among others, to the differentiation of the tourist products by taking advantage of the European cultural and natural heritage in its entirety. Moreover, promoting the exchange of best practices between European tourist destinations and promoting a voluntary tourism exchange mechanism between Member States are actions producing results towards that direction. However, in order to achieve the objective of developing forms of tourism such as tourism relating to cultural heritage, tourism in protected natural areas, health and wellbeing tourism, etc., the priorities must follow specific orientations, adapted to the economic, social and spatial particularities of each region, so that the spatial and time framework within which tourism can sustainably develop is clearly defined. The European Economic and Social Committee stresses out in its relevant opinion that "there is no 'one size fits all' in tourism and recognises that different destinations have difference needs and attract difference niche markets. Hence the tourism policy framework needs to take account of differences such as peripherality, mainland situation, coastal situation, rural situation, insularity, poor soil, etc." (European Economic and Social Committee, 2011). Moreover, relevant studies suggest that special forms of tourism, such as food tourism and barrier free tourism, religious tourism, etc. need to be further developed in the context of a European policy that differentiates supply and focuses on new markets.

Another observation is related to the proposal of the Commission to create a system of indicators for the sustainable management of destinations. Given the lack of reliable and widely acceptable sustainability indicators, statistical data and analyses, mainly as regards the special forms of tourism, the actions planned fill to a satisfactory extent the shortages that have been repeatedly underlined by all bodies and researchers in the field of tourism.

Moreover, the Commission stresses out in its Communication that the tourism sector presents a significant potential for development of business activity and that the large majority of tourism undertakings are small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Considering the fact that SMEs fail to access appropriate funding for them to adapt to the constantly changing and evolving tourist industry, to import innovation and to develop networking etc., it is necessary to promptly resolve these structural problems that are critical for the competitiveness and sustainability of the sector. Indeed, in its resolution, the European Parliament, asks "that a specific tourism programme, targeting in particular micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises, be established in the 2014-2020 financial perspectives, encouraging partnerships between firms and public-private partnerships on pan-

European tourism projects, and at the same time encourages SMEs to invest in that sector" (European Parliament, 2011).

Finally, an additional point of exceptional significance is the relation of tourism with space. Space -as territory- is primarily the natural recipient of tourist activity. Nowadays, space is also recognized as constituting a material mechanism – factor that shapes tourist market (Avgerinou-Kolonia 2011). The Green Paper underlines that “tourism affects the development of the whole of European territory, and at the same time depends on this development” (European Commission, 1995). The significance of the territorial dimension –as land use- is already noted in the Communication “Basic orientations for tourism sustainability” which refers to the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) and stresses out that “the planning of land use on an integrated basis, and effective spatial planning, is key to moving towards sustainable tourism” (European Commission, 2001). The “Agenda for a sustainable and competitive European tourism” also underlines that “sustainable destination management is critical for tourism development, especially through effective spatial and land use planning and development control and through investment decisions on infrastructure and services” (European Commission, 2007).

However, the role of territorial dimension has been reinforced by the Lisbon Treaty. In the Lisbon Treaty, territorial cohesion has been recognized as a statutory objective of the Union and as the third constituent of political cohesion, alongside economic and social cohesion. Following its ratification by the Member States and its entry in effect on 1-12-2009, territorial cohesion is now a shared competence of the Union and the Member States. Therefore, even though its importance is institutionally and practically primary for the development of tourist activity in the European area, the synergies of European policy on tourism with the spatial planning policy in Europe are limited.

The understanding and promotion of the notion of territorial cohesion is not obvious in the new policy on European tourism. According to Giannakourou (2009), “the citation of the positions of the main Community bodies on territorial cohesion demonstrates the different aspects from which it is approached and the multiple expectations from it. Issues such as restricting spatial discrepancies and promoting multi-central and sustainable development for the entire European area, highlighting and exploiting the territorial capital of each region, etc. seem to be at the core of the Community bodies' positions and constitute a common element of the various approaches”.

Specifically, the new Treaty aims in particular at “reducing disparities between the levels of development of the various regions and the backwardness of the least favoured regions”. Following that phrase, a paragraph is added containing the regions that the Union regarded as less favoured: “rural areas, areas affected by industrial transition, and regions which suffer from severe and permanent natural or demographic handicaps such as the northernmost regions with very low population density and island, cross-border and mountain regions”. Therefore, it is necessary to also take account of the particularities of such areas when formulating a common European policy on tourism, so that it can adequately respond to new challenges. Under these conditions, the new European policy on tourism may decisively contribute to the achievement of its general objective that is not only the economic and social cohesion in the Union but also its territorial cohesion.

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