

PhD Thesis

PROTOCOL FOR THE EVALUATION OF
EU-FUNDED TOURISM PROJECTS:
APPLICATION TO TOURISM SUSTAINABILITY PLANS IN
DESTINATIONS IN THE FRAMEWORK OF NEXT
GENERATION EU



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DE VALÈNCIA

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València, June 2026



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Abstract

Tourism is a major economic sector for the European Union (EU) and has received increasing policy attention over recent decades through the development of EU tourism policies and the allocation of financial instruments aimed at supporting the competitiveness and sustainability of Europe as the world's leading tourism destination. Despite this growing focus, important gaps remain in understanding how EU-funded tourism projects contribute to policy objectives and sustainable development outcomes. This thesis critically examines the evolution of EU tourism policy and funding mechanisms, with particular attention to the financing and evaluation of tourism projects, in order to identify existing limitations and propose improvements to future evaluation frameworks. Using a Design Science Research approach, the study develops an evaluation protocol intended to improve the assessment and maximise the impact of EU-funded tourism projects across their entire project cycle. The research is presented as a collection of articles, comprising four journal articles and one book chapter.

The findings show that although tourism plays a significant socio-economic role across Europe and numerous initiatives have been implemented through different EU programmes, the overall scale and distribution of EU funding allocated to tourism projects remain difficult to determine due to fragmented datasets and dispersed funding instruments. Moreover, evaluation practices for EU-funded tourism projects are limited and rarely cover the entire project cycle. As a result, evidence on project outcomes, long-term impacts, and sustainability remains scarce. The lack of consistent evaluation frameworks, combined with limited dissemination of evaluation results and weak data transparency, constrains opportunities for learning, accountability, and evidence-based policymaking.

The case study of the Tourism Destination Sustainability Plans (PSTD) in Spain illustrates how these structural limitations manifest within a real EU-funded programme. The analysis shows that the design and implementation of these plans were strongly influenced by the exceptional context of the EU Recovery and Resilience Facility, particularly the urgency associated with fund absorption and the compressed timelines for implementation.

In response to these challenges, the thesis proposes an evaluation protocol integrating eight iterative steps designed to strengthen learning-oriented evaluation and improve governance and project performance across all phases of the project cycle (ex-ante, mid-term, final, and ex-post). With the forthcoming EU Sustainable Tourism Strategy and the preparation of the next Multiannual Financial Framework 2028–2034, the findings and tools developed in this research provide timely insights to support more strategic, transparent, and impactful tourism initiatives, helping the EU move from fragmented project-based interventions towards more coherent and long-term pathways for sustainable tourism development.

Resum

El turisme és un sector econòmic de gran importància per a la Unió Europea (UE) i ha rebut una atenció creixent en les polítiques públiques durant les darreres dècades mitjançant el desenvolupament de polítiques turístiques i l'assignació d'instruments financers destinats a donar suport a la competitivitat i sostenibilitat d'Europa com a principal destinació turística mundial. Malgrat aquest creixent enfocament, persisteixen importants llacunes en la comprensió de com els projectes turístics finançats per la UE contribueixen als objectius de les polítiques i als resultats en matèria de desenvolupament sostenible. Aquesta tesi examina críticament l'evolució de la política turística de la UE i dels seus mecanismes de finançament, prestant especial atenció al finançament i a l'avaluació de projectes turístics, amb la finalitat d'identificar limitacions existents i proposar millores per a futurs marcs d'avaluació. Mitjançant un enfocament basat en *Design Science Research*, l'estudi desenvolupa un protocol d'avaluació destinat a millorar l'avaluació i a maximitzar l'impacte dels projectes turístics finançats per la UE al llarg de tot el seu cicle de vida. Els resultats de la investigació es presenten en forma d'una col·lecció d'articles, composta per quatre articles científics i un capítol de llibre.

Els resultats mostren que, tot i que el turisme exerceix un paper socioeconòmic significatiu a Europa i s'han implementat nombroses iniciatives a través de diferents programes europeus, la magnitud total i la distribució del finançament de la UE destinat a projectes turístics continuen sent difícils de determinar a causa de la fragmentació dels conjunts de dades i de la dispersió dels instruments de finançament. A més a més, les pràctiques d'avaluació dels projectes turístics finançats per la UE són limitades i rarament abasteixen tot el cicle del projecte. Com a resultat, l'evidència sobre els resultats dels projectes, els seus impactes a llarg termini i la seua sostenibilitat continua sent escassa. La manca de marcs d'avaluació coherents, juntament amb la limitada difusió dels resultats de les avaluacions i la baixa transparència de les dades, limita les oportunitats d'aprenentatge, rendició de comptes i formulació de polítiques basades en evidències.

L'estudi de cas dels Plans de Sostenibilitat Turística en Destinació (PSTD) a Espanya il·lustra com aquestes limitacions estructurals es manifesten en un programa real finançat per la UE. L'anàlisi mostra que el disseny i la implementació d'aquests plans van estar fortament influïts pel context excepcional del Mecanisme de Recuperació i Resiliència de la UE, en particular per la urgència associada a l'absorció dels fons i pels terminis reduïts d'execució.

Com a resposta a aquests reptes, la tesi proposa un protocol d'avaluació que integra huit passos iteratius dissenyats per a reforçar una avaluació orientada a l'aprenentatge i millorar la governança i el rendiment dels projectes al llarg de totes les fases del seu cicle de vida (ex ante, intermèdia, final i ex post). En el context de la futura Estratègia de Turisme Sostenible de la UE i de la preparació del pròxim Marc Financer Plurianual 2028–2034, els resultats i les eines desenvolupades en aquesta investigació aporten orientacions oportunes per donar suport a iniciatives turístiques més estratègiques, transparents i amb major impacte, ajudant la UE a passar d'intervencions fragmentades basades en projectes cap a trajectòries més coherents i de llarg termini per al desenvolupament sostenible del turisme.

Resumen

El turismo es un sector económico de gran importancia para la Unión Europea (UE) y ha recibido una atención creciente en las políticas públicas durante las últimas décadas mediante el desarrollo de políticas turísticas y la asignación de instrumentos financieros destinados a apoyar la competitividad y sostenibilidad de Europa como principal destino turístico mundial. A pesar de este creciente enfoque, persisten importantes lagunas en la comprensión de cómo los proyectos turísticos financiados por la UE contribuyen a los objetivos de las políticas y a los resultados en materia de desarrollo sostenible. Esta tesis examina críticamente la evolución de la política turística de la UE y de sus mecanismos de financiación, prestando especial atención a la financiación y evaluación de proyectos turísticos, con el fin de identificar limitaciones existentes y proponer mejoras para futuros marcos de evaluación. Mediante un enfoque basado en Design Science Research, el estudio desarrolla un protocolo de evaluación destinado a mejorar la evaluación y maximizar el impacto de los proyectos turísticos financiados por la UE a lo largo de todo su ciclo de vida. Los resultados de la investigación se presentan en forma de una colección de artículos, compuesta por cuatro artículos científicos y un capítulo de libro.

Los resultados muestran que, aunque el turismo desempeña un papel socioeconómico significativo en Europa y se han implementado numerosas iniciativas a través de distintos programas europeos, la magnitud total y la distribución de la financiación de la UE destinada a proyectos turísticos siguen siendo difíciles de determinar debido a la fragmentación de los conjuntos de datos y a la dispersión de los instrumentos de financiación. Además, las prácticas de evaluación de los proyectos turísticos financiados por la UE son limitadas y rara vez abarcan todo el ciclo del proyecto. Como resultado, la evidencia sobre los resultados de los proyectos, sus impactos a largo plazo y su sostenibilidad sigue siendo escasa. La falta de marcos de evaluación coherentes, junto con la limitada difusión de los resultados de las evaluaciones y la poca transparencia de los datos, limita las oportunidades de aprendizaje, rendición de cuentas y formulación de políticas basadas en evidencia.

El estudio de caso de los Planes de Sostenibilidad Turística en Destino (PSTD) en España ilustra cómo estas limitaciones estructurales se manifiestan en un programa real financiado por la UE. El análisis muestra que el diseño y la implementación de estos planes estuvieron fuertemente influenciados por el contexto excepcional del Mecanismo de Recuperación y Resiliencia de la UE, en particular por la urgencia asociada a la absorción de fondos y por los plazos reducidos de ejecución.

En respuesta a estos desafíos, la tesis propone un protocolo de evaluación que integra ocho pasos iterativos diseñados para fortalecer una evaluación orientada al aprendizaje y mejorar la gobernanza y el desempeño de los proyectos a lo largo de todas las fases de su ciclo de vida (ex ante, intermedia, final y ex post). En el contexto de la futura Estrategia de Turismo Sostenible de la UE y de la preparación del próximo Marco Financiero Plurianual 2028–2034, los hallazgos y herramientas desarrollados en esta investigación aportan orientaciones oportunas para apoyar iniciativas turísticas más estratégicas, transparentes e impactantes, ayudando a la UE a pasar de intervenciones fragmentadas basadas en proyectos hacia trayectorias más coherentes y de largo plazo para el desarrollo sostenible del turismo.

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List of acronyms

CBC	Cross-Border Cooperation
CF	Cohesion Fund
CINEA	European Climate, Infrastructure and Environment Executive Agency
CIP	Competitiveness and Innovation Framework Programme
CORDIS	Community Research and Development Information Service
COSME	Programme for the Competitiveness of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises
CV	Comunitat Valenciana
DG GROW	Directorate-General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs
DG MOVE	EU Directorate-General for Mobility and Transport
DMO	Destination Management Organisation
DSR	Design Science Research
EAFRD	European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development
EASME	Executive Agency for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises
ECA	European Court of Auditors
ECU	European Currency Unit
EFTA	European Free Trade Association
EISMEA	European Innovation Council and SMEs Executive Agency
EMFF	European Maritime and Fisheries Fund
ENPI	European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
ESF	European Social Fund
ESIF	European Structural and Investment Funds
EU	European Union
FP7	Seventh Framework Programme for research and technological development
H2020	EU's research and innovation funding programme from 2014-2020
INTERREG	European Territorial Cooperation
INTOSAI	International Organisation of Supreme Audit Institutions
IPA	Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance
LIFE	EU programme for environment and climate action
MMF	Multiannual Financial Framework
MSME	Micro, Small and Medium-sized enterprises
NECSTouR	Network of European Regions for Competitive and Sustainable Tourism

OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
P–A	Principal–Agent (Theory)
PSTD	Tourism Destination Sustainability Plans
RE	Realist Evaluation
RRF	Recovery and Resilience Facility
SA	Stakeholder Analysis
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SME	Small and Medium-sized Enterprises
SMP	Single Market Programme
TFEU	Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
T4T	Together for EU Tourism (Expert Group)
ToC	Theory of Change
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
WTTC	World Travel & Tourism Council

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Context and background

Tourism is one of the world's most significant economic sectors, and within the European Union (EU) it holds particular prominence, as Europe remains the world's leading tourist destination, receiving over half of all international visitors. In 2024, the region recorded 747 million international arrivals, surpassing pre-pandemic levels by 1%, despite persistent economic challenges such as inflation and ongoing territorial and political conflicts (UN Tourism, 2025). Economically, tourism contributed 9.6% to the EU's GDP in 2019 and generated employment for over 38.5 million people (WTTC, 2024).

Despite the slow and fragmented evolution of EU tourism policy (Estol & Font, 2016), the EU has consistently sought to maintain its global leadership in tourism, from the first strategic communications issued in the 1980s and 1990s, to the explicit recognition of tourism in the *Treaty of Lisbon* in 2007, and the subsequent *Communication on Europe, the world's No. 1 tourist destination* in 2010 (Panyik & Anastasiadou, 2013). Over time, EU policy discourse has increasingly emphasised the need to enhance competitiveness and to promote Europe as a sustainable destination grounded in social, cultural, and environmental responsibility (European Commission, 2023a). In line with this ambition, the European Commission adopted the *European Agenda for Tourism 2030* and launched the *Tourism Transition Pathway* in 2022. These initiatives define the measures required to accelerate the green and digital transitions of the tourism ecosystem, thereby strengthening its long-term resilience (European Commission, 2022).

Funding constitutes a cornerstone of EU policy implementation. Through its various programmes, the EU supports Member States in advancing strategic objectives such as social cohesion, territorial cooperation, economic and regional development, and private sector competitiveness, particularly for micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs). Tourism, being a cross-cutting sector, benefits from this funding through multiple domains, including transport, infrastructure, environment, culture, skills development, and employment.

Key EU programmes supporting tourism projects include:

- The European Regional Development Fund (ERDF);
- The Cohesion Fund (CF);
- The European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD);
- The European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF);
- The Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme;
- The Programme for the Competitiveness of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) (COSME);
- The Erasmus+ programme for education, training, youth and sport;
- The Creative Europe programme for culture and audiovisual sectors; and
- The LIFE Programme for environment and climate action.

Through these instruments, the EU expects destinations and private actors to adopt more sustainable tourism practices, foster innovation, and enhance competitiveness. To facilitate access to funding, a variety of guides have been developed since the 1990s to help destinations and stakeholders navigate available opportunities, such as *Tourism in the European Union and the Structural Funds* (European Commission, 1996), the *Tourism Guide 2014–2020* (European Commission, 2016), the online guide for 2021–2027 (European Commission, 2023b), and the *Community Capitalisation on Sustainable Tourism* guide published under the Interreg Mediterranean Programme (NECSTouR, 2022).

Despite these resources, accessing EU funding remains a challenge. The EU is the largest funder of cross-border tourism cooperation projects, both within its borders and in neighbouring or candidate countries, as part of its broader cohesion and integration objectives (Makkonen et al., 2018). However, certain regions and organisations have greater experience and stronger technical and financial capacities to apply for and manage funds, resulting in territorial imbalances in funding absorption (Bachtler & Ferry, 2015). These patterns also reinforce the risk of projectification, whereby experienced partners and regions become embedded in recurring project cycles that shape and dominate local action. This may lead to a proliferation of short-term initiatives with limited integration across sectors, rather than more holistic and long-term approaches to tourism development (Sjöblom & Godenhjelm, 2009).

The limitations in accessing and managing EU funds became particularly evident when the COVID-19 pandemic severely affected the tourism sector. In response, the European Commission deployed exceptional funding mechanisms, most notably the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) under *Next Generation EU*. This instrument, approved by the European Council in July 2020, was designed to address the pandemic's economic and social repercussions, mobilising over €750 billion across Member States. Spain, for instance, was allocated more than €140 billion in public investment through its *Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Plan* (Ministerio de Hacienda y Función Pública, 2022). Among the plan's ten strategic policies, Policy V “Modernisation and digitalisation of the industrial fabric and SMEs, recovery of tourism and boosting Spain as an entrepreneurial nation” includes the *Plan for the Modernisation and Competitiveness of the Tourism Sector*, endowed with €3.4 billion (Gobierno de España, 2021). Within this framework, the *Tourism Destination Sustainability Plans* (PSTD) were launched, allocating over €1.858 billion between 2021 and 2023 (€660 million in 2021, €720 million in 2022, and €478 million in 2023). These plans target a wide range of destinations, from rural and natural areas to urban, coastal, and highly internationalised locations, with actions aimed at improving competitiveness and quality while prioritising environmental sustainability and digital transformation (Ministerio de Industria, Comercio y Turismo, 2023).

An issue of particular importance for EU funds is evaluation, which is fundamental for ensuring that public resources are used efficiently and effectively, an issue of particular importance for EU funds; and for enabling knowledge sharing and dissemination, especially within cooperation projects (European Commission, 2013). Within the EU, the institutionalisation of evaluation has historically been linked to the implementation of the Structural Funds, establishing clear goals and responsibilities across programming stages, with notable impacts observed in Southern Europe and in Member States that joined the EU after 2004 (European Commission, 2013).

The evaluation of EU-funded projects, particularly within the tourism sector, has become increasingly critical due to the complexity and significant socio-economic implications of these interventions. Cohesion Policy, one of the EU's primary instruments for addressing regional disparities and fostering development, faces persistent challenges that hinder comprehensive and meaningful evaluation. These include the multi-dimensional nature of interventions, inconsistent evaluation methodologies, regional disparities in evaluation capacity and quality, and an overreliance on quantitative or overly simplistic approaches (Byrne, 2013; Koudoumakis et al., 2022). Such limitations constrain the ability to measure policy impacts effectively and to generate robust evidence for policy learning and improvement.

1.2 Research rationale

In September 2024, the European Union appointed a Commissioner for Sustainable Transport and Tourism, a newly created portfolio that signals a renewed political commitment to the tourism sector; and began developing a new EU Sustainable Tourism Strategy to be launched in 2026. As this new strategy will define the future direction of EU tourism policy and its alignment with broader EU priorities, including the European Green Deal and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, it is essential to undertake a critical assessment of what has been achieved so far and where persistent gaps remain. A key point of departure for this reflection is the analysis by Estol & Font (2016), who argued that EU tourism policy had evolved slowly, in a fragmented manner, and without clear institutional leadership. Their work identified structural limitations that constrained policy coherence and hindered the development of a strong, proactive tourism governance framework. Nearly a decade later, and after significant contextual changes at EU and international levels, including a global pandemic, it is timely to revisit these limitations to determine whether they have been addressed or whether they continue to shape the EU tourism policy landscape.

A second rationale for this thesis lies in the central role of funding in shaping the implementation of EU tourism priorities. While numerous EU programmes refer to tourism's contribution to cohesion, sustainability, and regional development, the actual volume of EU funding allocated to tourism projects remains unknown. The only systematic assessment available conducted by Butowski (2010) focused on earlier periods of Cohesion Policy (1994–1999 and 2000–2006) and concluded that tourism was comparatively underfunded relative to sectors such as transport and infrastructure. Since then, no study has quantified the extent of tourism funding across the full range of EU instruments that support tourism projects, despite the sector's cross-cutting relevance and its inclusion in programmes related to research, environment, rural development, maritime affairs, culture, education, and SMEs. This gap is particularly relevant as the EU prepares the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MMF) (2028–2034), when decisions on future allocations will require an accurate understanding of spatial imbalances, absorption capacity, and the institutional factors that influence access to funding.

Beyond funding allocation, the systematic evaluation of EU-funded tourism projects remains limited. Although evaluation requirements for EU funds have been strengthened over the last decade and guidance exists for the European Regional Development Fund and the Cohesion Fund calling for evidence-based and outcome-oriented approaches (European Commission,

2012), evaluation practices remain uneven across countries, programmes, and projects. International organisations, including the World Bank, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), emphasise the importance of results-based monitoring systems that combine qualitative and quantitative methods and involve stakeholders throughout the process (Kusek & Rist, 2004; OECD, 2012; UNDP, 2002). However, these principles are only partially integrated into EU-funded tourism projects. An audit by the European Court of Auditors (2021) found significant shortcomings in the planning, needs assessment, and project selection processes for tourism projects financed through the ERDF, concluding that these weaknesses limited the effectiveness of interventions and undermined their long-term impact.

Evaluation should take place across several stages: *ex-ante* (during design and formulation to ensure relevance and feasibility), *mid-term* (to introduce corrective measures), *final* (to verify completion and results), and *ex-post* (to assess long-term sustainability and impact). Yet in practice, evaluation efforts tend to concentrate at the *ex-ante* stage while subsequent phases are inconsistently applied or omitted entirely. Some EU programmes attempt to incorporate impact considerations into their award criteria. For example, the COSME-2022-TOURSME call defined impact as the “ambition and expected long-term effect of results on SMEs”, including how outcomes contribute to the green and digital transitions, how dissemination strategies ensure longevity, and how results are sustained beyond EU funding (European Innovation Council and SMEs Executive Agency - EISMEA, 2022, p. 25). At national level, Spain’s *Strategy for Sustainable Tourism in Destinations* (Ministerio de Industria, Comercio y Turismo, 2021) established clear evaluation criteria for the Tourism Destination Sustainability Plans, including:

1. The destination’s tourism profile or vocation;
2. Coherence and alignment with regional and national strategies;
3. Quality of diagnosis and intervention objectives;
4. Feasibility and precision of proposed actions; and
5. Accuracy of the implementation timeline and milestones.

However, as many PSTDs are still being implemented and will continue until 2026, there remains limited transparency about how evaluation processes are being conducted or how outcomes will be assessed.

The limited availability of evaluation results, combined with significant variation in monitoring practices across Member States, restricts the ability of destinations and administrations to learn from past projects, replicate successful approaches, and avoid repeated weaknesses in project design and implementation. This is all the more pressing in a context where territorial inequalities in technical capacity may exacerbate disadvantages in project absorption, reinforcing broader concerns regarding spatial justice and institutional capacity within the tourism sector.

Taken together, these gaps underscore the urgency of generating robust, empirical evidence. As the EU prepares a new tourism strategy and the next Multiannual Financial Framework, this thesis provides timely insights to support improved governance structures, more equitable funding distribution, and stronger evaluation frameworks across the tourism project cycle.

1.3 Structure of the thesis

This thesis is presented as a collection of articles, compiled in Chapter 4 and organised into five subsections, each addressing one or more of the research objectives outlined in Chapter 2. Following this introductory **Chapter 1**, which presents the background and rationale of the study, **Chapter 2** defines the general and specific objectives guiding the research. **Chapter 3** then outlines the methodological framework, which is grounded in the principles of Design Science Research.

Chapter 4 constitutes the core of the thesis and includes the five research articles developed during the doctoral process. Each article addresses a specific dimension of the research problem, collectively contributing to the broader objectives of the thesis. The articles are presented as separate subsections to highlight their individual contributions while maintaining coherence within the overall research framework.

Chapter 5 provides the general discussion of results, integrating insights from the articles and offering a comprehensive interpretation of the findings. This chapter synthesises the evidence generated across the studies and discusses its implications for EU tourism policy, funding mechanisms, and evaluation practices.

Chapter 6 presents the main conclusions of the thesis and outlines avenues for future research. It reflects on how the findings contribute to current debates on tourism governance in the European Union and how they may inform the forthcoming EU Sustainable Tourism Strategy, as well as the development of stronger evaluation frameworks for EU-funded tourism interventions.

Finally, **Annex 1** presents the complete evaluation protocol proposed in this research. The protocol is intended as a practical tool to strengthen evaluation, learning, and accountability throughout the project cycle and to support its application in EU-funded tourism projects, including the Tourism Destinations Sustainability Plans. **Annex 2** contains the interview guides used with the three main stakeholder groups involved in the empirical research.

CHAPTER 2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

2.1 General objective

Building on the above gaps, this thesis adopts a multi-level approach combining policy analysis, funding mapping, and evaluation framework assessment. This thesis aims to critically examine the evolution of European Union tourism policy and funding mechanisms, with particular attention to the financing and evaluation of tourism projects, in order to propose improvements to future evaluation frameworks.

2.2 Specific objectives

Accordingly, the research pursues the following specific objectives:

1. To critically examine the evolution of EU tourism policy, identifying key milestones, achievements, and persistent limitations from the 1980s to the present.
2. To analyse EU funding allocated to tourism projects during the two most recent full programming periods (2007–2013 and 2014–2020), identifying trends and spatial distribution patterns.
3. To assess the evaluation frameworks applied to tourism projects under EU funding programmes, identifying key weaknesses.
4. To assess the *Tourism Destination Sustainability Plans* under the *Next Generation EU* framework in relation to their contribution to the sustainable transition.
5. To identify systemic factors that constrain project impact across all evaluation phases (*ex-ante*, *mid-term*, *final*, and *ex-post*).
6. To propose a comprehensive evaluation protocol aimed at strengthening learning and accountability throughout the project cycle, with specific applicability to the *Tourism Destination Sustainability Plans*.

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Methodological approach

The methodological approach adopted in this thesis is grounded in Design Science Research (DSR), which follows a predominantly deductive reasoning process, moving from general problem framing to the development and validation of a specific solution. Building on Vaishnavi & Kuechler (2015) conceptualisation and the practice-oriented perspective of Holmström et al. (2009), DSR can be understood as a research paradigm focused on the creation and evaluation of artefacts, such as models, frameworks, protocols, or methods; that address complex real-world problems. Rather than solely describing or analysing phenomena, DSR emphasises purposeful design, iterative refinement, and knowledge generation through the very act of constructing and testing artefacts.

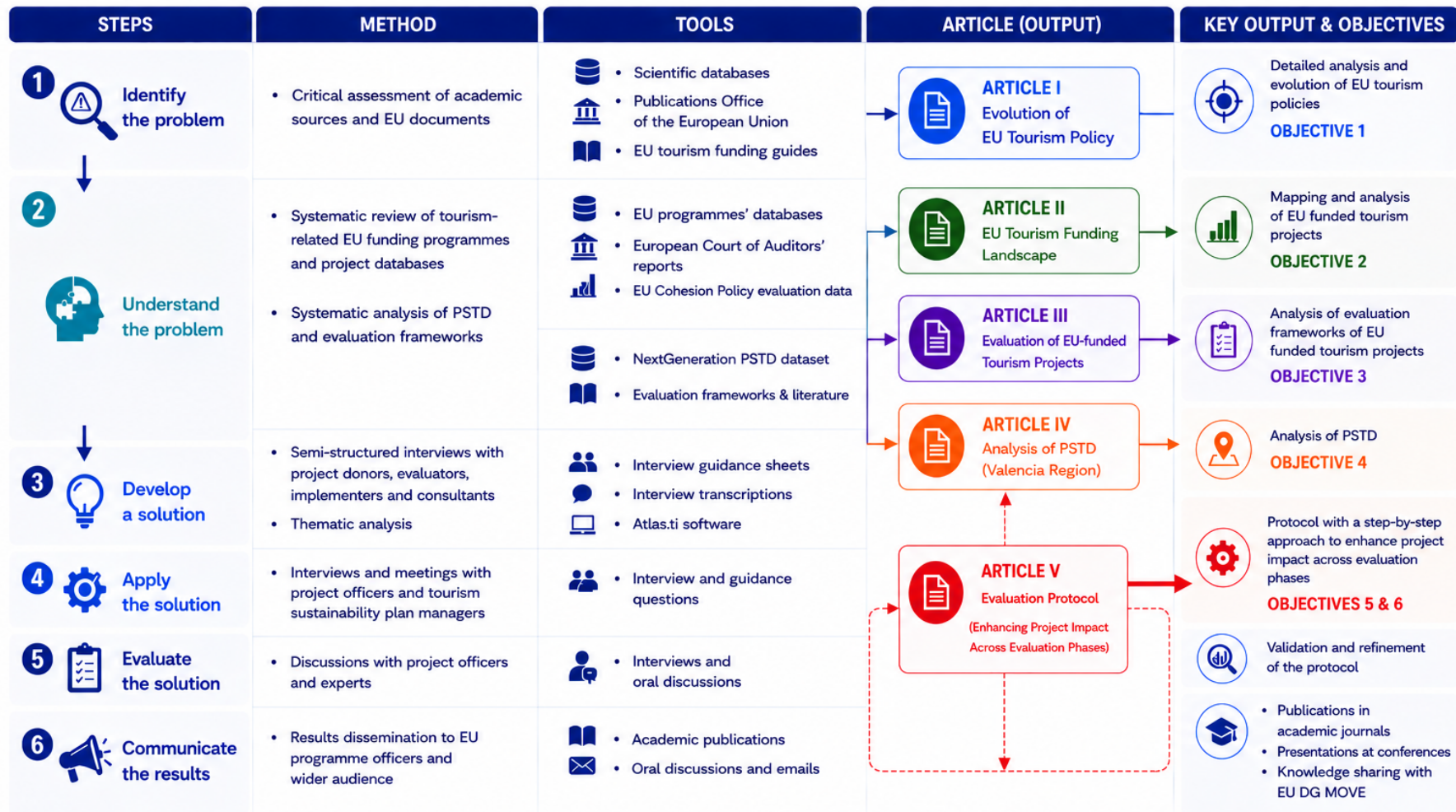
Vaishnavi & Kuechler (2015) describe DSR as a structured process comprising problem identification, understanding the problem, artefact design and development, evaluation, and communication. Each iterative cycle produces insights that refine both the artefact and the underlying theoretical foundations. Holmström et al. (2009) further highlight DSR's capacity to bridge theory and practice: researchers intervene directly in real contexts to develop new tools, procedures, or systems, which are then empirically assessed and theoretically interpreted. This dual orientation ensures that research outputs are both practically relevant and theoretically meaningful. In the tourism field, DSR has increasingly been employed to develop new artefacts and technology-based solutions that enhance the tourism experience or improve operational processes (Fesenmaier & Xiang, 2017).

This approach is particularly suited to the aims of this thesis, which seeks to develop a validated evaluation protocol capable of improving the assessment and maximising the impact of EU-funded tourism projects across their entire project cycle. In line with DSR, the methodology follows six steps (Figure 1):

1. Identify the problem,
2. Understand the problem,
3. Develop a solution,
4. Apply the solution,
5. Evaluate the solution, and
6. Communicate the results.

The final step 'Communication' has been added to ensure wide dissemination, exploitation, and practical uptake of the proposed protocol, reflecting DSR's emphasis on relevance and knowledge transfer.

Figure 1. Design Science Research Methodology



Source: Own elaboration

3.1.1 Identify the problem

Problem identification was achieved through a comprehensive literature review and a systematic analysis of EU tourism policy documents and programmes. The process began with the review of international, European, national, and academic sources accessed through databases such as Google Scholar, ProQuest, Scopus, Dialnet, Riunet, SAGE Journals, Taylor & Francis Online, and ScienceDirect. Reviewed materials included peer-reviewed articles, doctoral theses, EU regulations and Commission Reports.

Keywords guiding the search included: *EU tourism policy, EU tourism funding, European tourism, EU financial instruments, sustainable tourism, projectification, regionalisation, spatial justice, project evaluation, impact, theory of change, principal-agent theory, Next Generation EU tourism, and Tourism Sustainability Plans in Destinations (PSTD)*. As most EU documents are published in English, keywords were defined primarily in English, with Spanish keywords added for the PSTD-specific documentation.

EU tourism policy instruments were also systematically reviewed, covering the full spectrum of Communications, Council Conclusions, Resolutions, Treaties, and Commission working documents. Further methodological detail on the policy review is provided in Article I.

In parallel, data on EU funding opportunities for tourism was compiled. Given tourism's cross-cutting nature, no single EU programme covers the sector. Therefore, financial information was gathered through:

- analysis of financial instrument sections within EU policy documents;
- consultation of funding guides for the tourism sector; and
- review of programme websites and thematic EU portals.

Key resources included the European Commission's tourism funding guide for 2014–2020 (European Commission, 2016) and the online guide for 2021–2027 (European Commission, 2023b).

3.1.2 Understand the problem

To deepen understanding of the limited knowledge surrounding the impact of EU-funded tourism projects, a systematic review and critical assessment of tourism-related actions financed during the 2007–2013 and 2014–2020 programming periods was undertaken.

Programme-level information was collected through EU programme websites, complemented by project-level data from EU portals, evaluation repositories, data hubs, and programme documentation. Projects were categorised into four broad thematic areas:

1. Structural and Investment,
2. Research, Innovation and Competitiveness,
3. Education, Training and Youth,
4. Culture and Environment.

Detailed methodological choices and dataset descriptions are provided in Article II.

A second element of this step consisted of analysing the evaluation landscape surrounding EU-funded projects. This included:

- international handbooks (UNDP, OECD, World Bank),
- European Commission guidance for ERDF and the Cohesion Fund,
- academic literature on evaluation methods and criteria,
- reports of the European Court of Auditors (ECA), and
- evaluation summaries from the EU Cohesion Policy platform.

This review helped identify methodological gaps, inconsistencies, and limitations that hinder the evaluation of tourism-related interventions. Further detail is provided in Article III.

For the PSTD case study, this phase also included a systematic analysis of *Tourism Sustainability Plans in Destinations* funded through Next Generation EU in Spain. This involved reviewing national-level funding allocation, annual distribution by region, and a detailed analysis of the actions funded in the Comunitat Valenciana. The methodological details appear in Article IV.

3.1.3 Develop a solution

To design a solution capable of addressing the gaps identified, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders involved in the design, evaluation, and implementation of EU-funded tourism projects. Interviewees included:

- donors from EU programmes and multilateral organisations,
- evaluators and audit professionals,
- project implementers from local and regional authorities,
- academics and researchers,
- networks and sectoral organisations, and
- consultants and advisory entities.

In total, 31 participants from 27 organisations were interviewed through online sessions.

Interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis in Atlas.ti following a hybrid inductive–deductive approach, enabling the identification of patterns, interdependencies, and factors influencing tourism project impact. Themes were then mapped onto the four phases of the evaluation cycle (*ex-ante*, *mid-term*, *final*, *ex-post*) to inform the construction of the evaluation protocol. Further methodological detail is provided in Article V.

With the inputs from the interviews, as well as the critical knowledge and expertise developed throughout the thesis, a preliminary version of the protocol, structured as a set of guiding questions for each evaluation phase was developed.

3.1.4 Apply the solution

The protocol was then shared with experts for validation. Discussions were held with programme managers, beneficiaries, and consultants involved in PSTD implementation and other EU-funded tourism initiatives. Their feedback was incorporated to refine the protocol through iterative improvement cycles. The final version is presented in Annex I.

3.1.5 Evaluate the solution and communicate the results

From the outset, this research aimed to generate a practical solution that could be widely disseminated and applied. For this purpose, results were shared and discussed continuously with stakeholders involved in EU tourism project management. Dissemination activities included:

- Presentation at the International Geographical Congress in Dublin (August 2024)
- Presentation at the Pre-meeting of the Tourism Commission of the International Geographical Union in Galway (August 2024)
- Presentation to Members of the Tourism Expert Group of the European Commission (September 2024)
- Seminar with PhD students and researchers at Technological University Dublin (September 2024)
- Discussion at the WESTMED Sustainable Tourism Technical Expert Group, Sun & Blue Congress in Almeria (November 2024)
- Discussion at the Interreg Next MED Info Day in València (February 2025)
- Discussion at the Summer Course ‘Gobernando el Turismo: Hacia la Estrategia España Turismo 2030’ with managers of the Secretaría de Estado de Turismo (SETUR) in Madrid (July 2025)
- Presentation at the XXVIII Congreso Internacional de Turismo Universidad-Empresa: ‘Gestión inteligente de los destinos turísticos’ in Castelló (October 2025)
- Email exchanges and knowledge sharing with EU Directorate-General for Mobility and Transport (DG MOVE) Tourism Policy Officers
- Seminar with researchers at the Universidade de Brasília – Centro de Excelência em Turismo (CET/UnB) in Brazil (January 2026)
- Guest lecture for municipal tourism managers in the Specialisation Course in Local Tourism Management at the Universidade de Brasília (Brazil), addressing European Union funding mechanisms and proposal preparation for successful tourism projects (January 2026)
- Publication of results in widely recognised tourism journals and books, including:
 - *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* – SJR 2024 Category: 2.733 Q1
 - *Annals of Tourism Research Empirical Insights* – SJR 2024 Category: 0.918 Q1
 - *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events* – SJR 2024 Category: 0.559 Q2
 - *Tourism: An International Interdisciplinary Journal* – SJR 2024 Category: 0.305 Q3
 - Editorial Tirant Lo Blanch

CHAPTER 4. RESULTS

The results of thesis are presented as a collection of articles (sub-sections 1–5), each addressing one or more of the research objectives outlined above. Therefore, the thesis results are structured as follows:

Section 1 presents the article ‘**Tourism policy in the European Union: progress, challenges and prospects**’ published in the *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events*. It traces the development of the policy framework from the initial communications and initiatives of the European Commission in the 1980s through to the recognition of tourism as an EU supporting competence in the Treaty of Lisbon (2007), and further to subsequent policy efforts up to the present day. The article identifies key milestones, achievements, and turning points, while critically assessing persistent limitations that remain relevant for the forthcoming EU Sustainable Tourism Strategy.

Section 2 presents the article ‘**Spatial distribution and challenges in European Union funding: a perspective from tourism projects**’ published in the journal *Annals of Tourism Research Empirical Insights*. It analyses the allocation of EU funding to tourism projects during the two most recent complete programming periods (2007–2013 and 2014–2020). Drawing on a broad range of EU funding instruments, including Structural and Investment Funds; Research, Innovation and Competitiveness programmes; Education, Training and Youth; and Culture and Environment programmes; the chapter offers the first comprehensive mapping and analysis of EU-funded tourism projects. It identifies major trends, explores spatial distribution patterns, and discusses the institutional and territorial inequalities affecting funding uptake.

Section 3 presents the article ‘**Analysis of the evaluation framework of European Union-funded tourism projects**’ published in the *Tourism: An International Interdisciplinary Journal*. It explores the evaluation of tourism projects funded under EU programmes. It reviews EU and international evaluation frameworks, analyses evaluation reports related to tourism interventions within the EU Cohesion Policy, and assesses methodological limitations that hinder robust impact assessment. The chapter highlights the fragmentation of evaluation practices and the limited availability of publicly shared results, underscoring the need for stronger mechanisms to support learning and accountability.

Section 4 presents the article ‘**EU-funded tourism projects for a green transition: The case of Tourism Sustainability Plans in Destinations (PSTD) in Spain**’ published in the book *XXVIII Congreso Internacional de Turismo Universidad-Empresa. Gestión inteligente de los destinos turísticos* by Editorial Tirant Lo Blanch. The chapter focuses on the Tourism Destinations Sustainability Plans funded under the Next Generation EU framework in Spain. It examines funding allocations, their distribution by year and region, and provides a detailed analysis of the types of actions financed in Comunitat Valenciana. The chapter assesses the extent to which these actions contribute to the sustainable transition and identifies emerging challenges related to governance, implementation, and evaluation.

Section 5 presents the article ‘**Rethinking evaluation in European Union-funded tourism projects: towards a practical protocol for maximising impact**’ published in the *Journal of*

Sustainable Tourism. It integrates the findings from semi-structured interviews with donors, evaluators, implementers, consultants, and other stakeholders to identify the systemic factors that influence project impact. By examining practices, constraints, and opportunities across all evaluation phases (*ex-ante*, *mid-term*, *final*, and *ex-post*), the chapter proposes a step-by-step approach to enhance project impact throughout the project cycle. This forms the empirical basis for the evaluation protocol developed in the thesis.

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

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Tourism Policy in the European Union: Progress, Challenges and Prospects

Abstract

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

Keywords: Tourism policy, European Union, Policy research, Evolutive analysis, Sustainable tourism

Introduction

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

While much of the existing research has examined tourism policy at the national or destination level (Brandano & Crociata, 2023; Costa et al., 2014; Santos Lacueva et al., 2022), the integration of tourism policy within the European Union (EU) framework is a more recent phenomenon. The EU has at its disposal a diverse set of legislative tools, ranging from binding regulations and directives to non-binding communications and opinions (European Commission, 1995); which employs to influence Member State actions. Estol & Font (2016) have examined the historical evolution of EU tourism policy, while other authors have focused on related dimensions such as institutionalisation, governance structures, regionalisation and cohesion (Anastasiadou, 2011; Brandano & Crociata, 2023; Costa et al., 2014; Estol et al., 2018). Additionally, recent EU studies and reports have reviewed tourism policy developments and the deeper integration of EU tourism policy (Palma Andrés et al., 2019; Weston et al., 2019). However, these contributions largely precede several major policy developments.

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

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

Literature review

Conceptual foundations of tourism policy

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

Institutional evolution of EU tourism policy

The development of EU tourism policy has historically been characterised by fragmentation, indirect influence, and a dependence on soft governance mechanisms. Rather than forming part of a unified policy framework, tourism has typically been addressed through broader EU domains

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

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

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

Materials and methods

At the European Union level, various legal instruments are available to facilitate the functioning of its institutions. The *Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union* (TFEU) (European Union, 2017) identifies *Regulations* as the most authoritative, as they are directly binding and fully applicable across all Member States. *Directives* are also binding but establish objectives that Member States must achieve, allowing national governments to determine the specific legislative

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

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

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

The study adopts a chronological perspective, mapping policy developments from early tourism-related initiatives in the 1980s to the latest strategic frameworks under the *European Agenda for Tourism 2030* and the *Transition Pathway for Tourism*, and its alignment with broader EU

strategies and global development goals. This method facilitates the evaluation of long-term trends and the identification of enduring challenges in EU tourism policy formulation and implementation.

Table 1. Chronology of main EU tourism policy instruments

Year	Title	Main points
Early EU tourism policy actions (80s – 90s)		
1982	Communication ‘Initial guidelines on a Community policy on tourism – COM(82) 385 final’	• Since the 80s, first communications and plans to assist tourism • European Tourism Year (1990) for a borderless region, tourism for unity • Tourism as a ‘Community measure’, rather than specific policy, subsidiarity principle
1984	Council Resolution of 10 April on a Community policy on tourism (84/C 115/01)	
1986	Communication ‘Community action in the field of tourism – COM(86) 32 final’	
1988	Council Decision of 21 December 1988 on an action programme for European Tourism Year (1990)	
1991	Communication ‘Community Action Plan to Assist Tourism – COM(91) 97 final’	
1992	Treaty on European Union – Treaty of Maastricht, 7 February 1992	
1992	Council Decision of 13 July 1992 on a Community action plan to assist tourism (92/421/EEC)	
1995	Communication ‘Green Paper on the role of the Union in the field of tourism – COM(95) 97’	
1996	Proposal for a Council Decision on a First Multiannual Programme to Assist European Tourism “Philoxenia” (1997-2000) – COM(96) 168 final	
1996	Report on the evaluation of the Community Action Plan to assist tourism 1993 – 1995, Council Decision 92/421/EEC – COM(96) 166 final	
1997	Treaty of Amsterdam	
1999	Communication ‘Enhancing Tourism’s Potential for Employment – COM(1999) 205 final’	
EU tourism policy developments in the beginning of the 21st century		
2001	Communication ‘Working together for the future of European Tourism – COM(2001) 665 final’	• Communications for stronger partnerships • Agenda for sustainable and competitive EU tourism • Treaty of Lisbon officially recognised tourism and EU role in promoting competitiveness
2001	Report from the Commission on the Community measures affecting Tourism (1997-99)	
2006	Communication ‘A renewed EU Tourism Policy: Towards a stronger partnership for European Tourism – COM(2006) 134 final’	
2007	Communication ‘Agenda for a sustainable and competitive European tourism – COM(2007) 621 final’	
2007	Treaty of Lisbon signed on 13 December 2007	
2007	European Parliament Resolution of 29 November 2007 on a renewed EU Tourism Policy: Towards a stronger partnership for European Tourism (2006/2129(INI)) (P6_TA(2007)0575)	
2008	European Parliament Resolution of 16 December 2008 on the regional development	

	aspects of the impact of tourism on coastal regions (2008/2132(INI)) (P6_TA(2008)0597)	
2010	Communication ‘Europe, the world’s No 1 tourist destination – a new political framework for tourism in Europe – COM(2010) 352 final’	• Framework for world’s n° 1 tourist destination • Strategy for growth and jobs in coastal and maritime tourism • Agenda for Culture highlighting economic link between culture and tourism
2011	European Parliament Resolution of 27 September 2011 on Europe, the world’s No 1 tourist destination — a new political framework for tourism in Europe (2010/2206(INI)) (P7_TA(2011)0407)	
2013	European Parliament Resolution of 2 July 2013 on Blue Growth: Enhancing sustainable growth in the EU’s marine, maritime transport and tourism sectors (2012/2297(INI)) (P7_TA(2013)0300)	
2014	Communication ‘European strategy for more growth and jobs in coastal and maritime tourism – COM(2014) 86 final’	
2015	European Parliament Resolution of 29 October 2015 on new challenges and concepts for the promotion of tourism in Europe (2014/2241(INI)) (P8_TA(2015)0391)	
2018	Communication ‘A New European Agenda for Culture – COM(2018) 267 final’	
<i>Towards a European Agenda for Tourism 2030</i>		
2019	Council of the European Union conclusions on ‘The Competitiveness of the tourism sector as a driver for sustainable growth, jobs and social cohesion in the EU for the next decade’ of 27 May 2019	• Alignment with UN SDGs, EU Green Deal • Transport and tourism in 2020 and beyond (pandemic) • Transition Pathway for Tourism and EU Agenda for Tourism 2030, with governance, green and digital transition, resilience and skills
2019	Communication ‘European Green Deal – COM(2019) 640 final’	
2020	Communication ‘Tourism and transport in 2020 and beyond – COM(2020) 550 final’	
2020	European Parliament Resolution of 19 June 2020 on transport and tourism in 2020 and beyond (2020/2649(RSP)) (P9_TA(2020)0169)	
2021	European Parliament Resolution of 25 March 2021 on establishing an EU strategy for sustainable tourism (2020/2038(INI)) (P9_TA(2021)0109)	
2021	Council of the European Union conclusions on ‘Tourism in Europe for the next decade: sustainable, resilient, digital, global and social’ of 27 May 2021	
2022	Transition Pathway for Tourism	
2022	Council of the European Union conclusions on ‘European Agenda for Tourism 2030’ of 1 st December 2022	

Source: Own elaboration with data from various EU policy instruments

Results

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

In its early stages, EU regional policy was largely controlled by its Member States, with minimal European or regional input. However, as funding and the significance of regional policy grew, the European Commission pushed for a more unified Community approach, leading to competition between the Commission, Member States, and regional entities for influence over its direction (Hooghe & Keating, 1994). In the realm of tourism, Robinson (1993) criticised the delayed policy development, noting that it took over 25 years after the 1957 Treaty of Rome established the European Economic Community for tourism policies to emerge, despite tourism's considerable economic, social, and cultural importance. This delay was attributed to tourism's complex, multifaceted nature, intersecting with sectors such as transport, regional policy, mobility, and environmental concerns. Similarly, Lickorish (1991) argued that tourism had been relegated to a secondary status in the 1970s, insisting that its intrinsic significance should not be reduced to a supplementary role supporting other policy areas. He urged policymakers to recognise tourism's potential contributions to the Single Market and called for a coordinated public-private approach to achieve EU objectives. The 1982 Communication titled *Initial guidelines on a Community policy on tourism – COM(82) 385 final* was the first comprehensive attempt to evaluate tourism's significance within the Community, situating it within a framework that connects with other policy areas (Robinson, 1993).

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

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

With the enlargement of the European Community, tourism's role in facilitating free movement within a borderless area gained priority, and its strategic importance was recognised for advancing the Internal Market (Estol & Font, 2016). In its 1988 resolution on tourism facilitation, promotion and financing, the European Parliament proposed that 1990 be declared European Tourism Year. Subsequently, a Council Decision in December 1988 launched a programme with

objectives to: 1) prepare for a borderless region, leveraging tourism to foster a “people's Europe”, and 2) emphasise tourism's economic and social significance for regional policy and job creation (Council of the European Union, 1989). Actions focused on promoting cultural awareness among Member States, especially for youth, optimising the geographical and temporal spread of tourism, and easing travel from external countries. Financial support was allocated for projects promoting off-season travel, youth travel, and tourism-themed campaigns with budgets up to ECU 1.5 million (Ibid.). Although European Tourism Year had limited direct impact on the public, the Commission deemed it a success for promoting collaboration across European, national, and local institutions, improving mutual understanding of tourism's dimensions (Robinson, 1993).

Building on these initiatives, the 1991 Communication *Community Action Plan to Assist Tourism – COM(91) 97 final* reflected on lessons from European Tourism Year, aligning with ongoing policies such as rural tourism promotion and cultural tourism through heritage preservation (European Commission, 1991). Following the Treaty on European Union - Treaty of Maastricht, 7 February 1992 which in its Article 3 identified tourism as a necessary policy area, the Council Decision 92/421/EEC of July 1992 launched a three-year ambitious Action Plan to Assist Tourism, with ECU 18 million allocated for eleven action areas, including rural tourism, social tourism, youth tourism, cultural tourism, transnational measures and the promotion of tourism in third countries (Council of the European Union, 1992).

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

In 1996, a proposal for a Council Decision was developed regarding the *First Multiannual Programme to Assist European Tourism "Philoxenia"* (1997–2000), which aimed to enhance tourism's quality, sustainability, and competitiveness in response to rising global competition, particularly from South and East Asia and the Americas (European Commission, 1996b). The Philoxenia programme focused on several key areas, including improved data collection and analysis to build a robust European statistical system for tourism; enhancing legislative and financial conditions by fostering stakeholder cooperation; and conducting systematic assessments of Community measures impacting tourism. Philoxenia emphasised sustainable

tourism, proposing eco-friendly management systems in accommodations and creating a European Tourism and Environment Award. The Working Group in Tourism of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) supported the proposal but recommended further engagement with the private sector, noting that the tourism sector would bear many responsibilities (EFTA, 1996). Despite assessments by the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee, and the Committee of the Regions, the Council ultimately did not approve the revised Philoxenia programme. The fragmented nature of the tourism industry, coupled with the absence of a centralised authority within the EU, created significant obstacles to implementing cohesive sustainability policies across Member States (Ruzza, 2000).

By the decade's end, the Commission's 1999 Communication *Enhancing Tourism's Potential for Employment – COM(1999) 205 final* underscored tourism's role in job creation and advocated integrating sustainable tourism strategies into broader economic frameworks. It highlighted the European Social Fund's potential for supporting workforce skills development, thereby enhancing employability (European Commission, 1999).

EU tourism policy developments in the beginning of the 21st century

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

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

The subsequent Communication *Agenda for a sustainable and competitive European tourism – COM(2007) 621 final* underscored the importance of balancing a competitive tourism economy

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

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

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

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

Innovation Framework Programme (CIP) was also highlighted for its role in supporting networks for competitive and sustainable tourism since 2008.

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

The *European Parliament's Resolution of 2 July 2013 [P7_TA(2013)0300] on Blue Growth: Enhancing sustainable growth in the EU's marine, maritime transport, and tourism sectors* highlighted the significant role of coastal regions as premier tourist destinations in Europe (European Parliament, 2013). The resolution emphasised the need for thoughtful spatial planning to avoid overdevelopment, protect environmental and cultural heritage, including underwater and maritime heritage; and uphold sustainable tourism infrastructure. It called for targeted funding to support blue economy projects, such as coastal, island and marine tourism strategies, particularly in addressing coastal erosion, preserving biodiversity, and improving water quality, and recommended similar initiatives for islands and other vulnerable areas.

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

Finally, in 2015, the *European Parliament Resolution of 29 October [P8_TA(2015)0391]* addressed rising competition, evolving distribution channels, quality standards, skills development and seasonality in tourism. It urged the Commission to assess the effectiveness of funds like COSME and CIP and recommended a dedicated tourism budget in the next multiannual financial framework, emphasising that clearer funding communication would help Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) access resources (European Parliament, 2015). In addition, in 2018, the Communication *COM(2018) 267 final - New European Agenda for Culture* underscored the economic link between culture and tourism, leading to a COSME call for projects focused on promoting cultural tourism during the European Year of Culture (European Commission, 2018). While the benefits of investing in culture for cities were emphasised, particularly in terms of job creation and attracting investment, with the European Capitals of Culture initiative highlighted as a tool for supporting community regeneration, similar attention was given to rural areas where

heritage enhancement was linked to growth and sustainability. However, the communication fell short in addressing critical issues, such as the need to protect cultural heritage at popular tourist sites facing increasing visitor pressure, as well as the importance of effectively managing fragile resources to ensure their preservation for future generations.

Towards a European Agenda for Tourism 2030

Aligned with the United Nations' Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the *European Green Deal – COM(2019) 640 final* outlined the goal of climate neutrality for Europe by 2050 (European Commission, 2019). Within the tourism sector, the EU has encouraged SMEs to adopt greener practices, circular economy approaches, and decarbonisation initiatives, though reaching net-zero emissions remains an arduous challenge. Despite the introduction of climate action plans and roadmaps, such as the *Glasgow Declaration on Climate Action in Tourism* in 2021, which included methodologies for measuring greenhouse gas emissions (World Tourism Organisation, 2023), actual progress on decarbonisation has been limited. The continued growth of tourism, coupled with insufficient efforts to curb emissions from large tourism enterprises –many of which account for significant emissions– has hampered effective progress toward net-zero targets (Gössling et al., 2024).

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

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

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

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

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

Figure 2. Interlinkages between EU Agenda for Tourism 2030 and Transition Pathway for Tourism

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

Source: European Commission (2024f)

Discussion

Towards a cohesive EU tourism policy framework

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

In the 1980s, the first EU Communications laid the foundation by enhancing tourism's contribution to the Single Market and promoting freedom of movement within an emerging borderless Europe. The significance of tourism as a unifying economic force within the Community became clearer, leading to more structured initiatives aimed at supporting regional development and cross-sector connectivity. During the 1990s, despite diverse tourism policies among European Community member states, common objectives emerged, such as attracting high-spending international tourists, enhancing product quality, and reducing seasonality to stabilise tourist flows year-round (Akehurst et al., 1993). This period saw significant initiatives aimed at integrating tourism within the EU framework, with *European Tourism Year* in 1990 being a pivotal effort to promote unity, regional development, and the social role of tourism within a newly borderless Europe. Further strides were made to integrate tourism into the EU framework,

but it still lacked adequate recognition under the Treaty of Amsterdam (Estol & Font, 2016). This period also introduced the first multi-sectoral action plans targeting rural, social and cultural tourism, demonstrating the sector's potential for cross-sectoral collaboration, yet failed to secure sufficient institutional support. The unsuccessful proposal for the first multiannual programme for tourism reflected the still-fragmented nature of EU tourism governance, underscoring the challenges of fostering robust partnerships and cohesive policies across Member States.

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

With the adoption of the *European Green Deal* in 2019, the EU committed to climate neutrality by 2050, further broadening tourism policy to prioritise sustainability and decarbonisation. Nevertheless, the gap between policy ambition and tangible outcomes remains evident, as the EU lacks robust enforcement mechanisms to ensure tourism enterprises meet sustainability targets. This will become further evident in the application of the measures of the upcoming *EU Directive 2024/825 as regards empowering consumers for the green transition through better protection against unfair practices and through better information* also known as the Green Claims Directive, which shall be applied from September 2026 (European Union, 2024a), for which much efforts will be needed to bridge the knowledge gap and develop the needed green skills within the sector (Conefrey et al., 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the tourism sector's vulnerability and accelerated the EU's focus on economic resilience, green transition and digital innovation. In response, the European Commission introduced initiatives such as the *Transition Pathway for Tourism* in 2021, aimed at guiding tourism's green and digital transition, and the *European Agenda for Tourism 2030*, which outlines a multi-annual work plan for achieving a sustainable, resilient sector. However, success depends heavily on coordinated implementation at the Member State level, where fragmented efforts have often hindered cohesive action, especially when EU and national policies are disconnected from local needs (Dionysopoulou, 2012; Wanner et al., 2020).

Despite advancements in EU tourism policy, several areas remain underdeveloped, particularly in cultural and urban tourism. As European cities rank among the world's top tourist destinations, policy action should prioritise social sustainability. This includes tackling overtourism, safeguarding and preserving cultural heritage, enhancing visitor experience, improving working conditions in the sector, and advancing genuinely sustainable tourism models; areas often overlooked in national policy discourses that, as Torkington et al. (2020) argue, continue to

prioritise growth-oriented narratives. While some countries have integrated tourism and cultural and creative industries as part of their resilience and recovery strategies following the COVID-19 pandemic, investment in truly transformative measures remains limited (Betzler et al., 2024). Additionally, rural and nature-based tourism, including tourism in protected areas, has yet to be fully incorporated into a comprehensive EU tourism policy. Although recent initiatives have acknowledged the importance of resilience in the tourism sector, stronger commitments are required to transition from broad recommendations to enforceable policies. A study published by the European Commission (2024b) provided strategic guidelines for enhancing crisis management capacity and governance in tourism, particularly in response to ongoing threats such as extreme climate events and lessons learned from the COVID-19 crisis. The study underscored the need for stronger coordination mechanisms to improve preparedness and long-term resilience. However, without binding measures, these recommendations risk remaining aspirational rather than leading to concrete policy actions.

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

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

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

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

A targeted consultation is currently underway until August 2025 to engage stakeholders in shaping a new Sustainable Tourism Strategy, to be presented to the Council by the end of the year. As outlined in the 2025 Stocktaking Report (European Commission, 2025a), the strategy is intended to build on the *Transition Pathway for Tourism* and the *European Agenda for Tourism 2030*, while addressing emerging issues such as climate change and unbalanced visitor flows. Although this signals growing political commitment, key questions remain regarding how these efforts will translate into cohesive policy measures and institutional coordination across Member States. The report acknowledges the need to align the forthcoming EU strategy with national strategies for the Multiannual Financial Framework 2028–2034, using the current stocktaking process and guidance as a foundation for joint action. However, the extent to which this collaborative momentum will lead to enforceable outcomes is yet to be seen. The coming months and years will be crucial in assessing whether these commitments result in a more structured, integrated, and effective EU tourism governance framework.

Conclusions

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

Over the decades, policy efforts have primarily focused on tourism's economic dimensions, recognising its role as a key driver of growth and development in both urban and rural areas. However, relatively little emphasis has been placed on EU policies specifically addressing tourism planning and management of cultural and natural heritage sites, despite their prominence as defining elements of the European tourism attractiveness. Many of the continent's most visited attractions are publicly managed by Member States, necessitating coordinated and well-aligned policies to ensure their effective and sustainable management. Yet,

persistent issues of overcrowding at major heritage sites, coupled with mounting social tensions between residents and the tourism sector, indicate that existing EU tourism policies have been insufficient in addressing these pressing challenges.

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

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

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

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Article II – Spatial distribution and challenges in European Union funding: a perspective from tourism projects

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Spatial distribution and challenges in European Union funding: a perspective from tourism projects

Abstract

Tourism is a key economic sector, yet its prominence within European Union funding remains limited. This paper presents the first multi-programme estimate of tourism-related EU funding between 2007 and 2020, covering eleven major programmes. An estimated €5.45 billion—2.23% of total EU funding—was allocated, primarily through regional and structural funds. Support from other instruments was marginal, despite tourism's multisectoral relevance. The findings reveal spatial disparities linked to institutional capacity and governance structures, reflecting broader challenges associated with project-based funding. This study contributes to ongoing policy debates around the future Multiannual Financial Framework (2028–2034) and the EU Sustainable Tourism Strategy, calling for more coherent and inclusive support for tourism across Member States.

Keywords: Tourism, European Union, tourism policy, EU funding, territorial distribution

Introduction

Tourism is a globally significant economic sector, with Europe leading as the world's top destination, welcoming over half of international visitors, totalling 747 million arrivals—1% above pre-pandemic levels in 2024 (UN Tourism, 2025). In 2019, tourism contributed 9.6% to European GDP and provided employment for over 38.5 million people (WTTC, 2024). European Union (EU) policies aim to maintain this leading position while promoting Europe as a sustainable destination, with a strong focus on social and environmental considerations (European Commission, 2023a; Torres et al., 2025). In line with these goals, the European Commission adopted the European Agenda for Tourism 2030 and launched the Tourism Transition Pathway, outlining funding sources to support destinations and the tourism sector in accelerating towards a more resilient and sustainable tourism ecosystem (European Commission, 2022). This financial support enables the development of sustainable tourism practices, fosters innovation and strengthens collaboration between Member States. The EU is the highest funder of cross-border tourism cooperation projects, not just within EU border, but also as a means to strengthen cooperation with neighbouring countries and those wishing accession to the EU (Makkonen et al., 2018).

In the tourism sector, EU funding is distributed through multiple programmes, reflecting the broader trend of project-based governance (Godenhjelm et al., 2015; Setoodegan et al., 2022). Much of research conducted in EU funded tourism projects has been centred around regional and cross-border projects to analyse cooperation, regionalisation, governance, regional identity, visitor attractions and destination development issues, amongst others (Bohn et al., 2023; Ioannides et al., 2006; Mayer et al., 2019; Montano et al., 2024; Nash et al., 2006; Prokkola, 2011; Prokkola et al., 2015; Setoodegan et al., 2022; Shepherd & Ioannides, 2020; Stoffelen, 2018; Stoffelen & Vanneste, 2017). However, despite its recognised importance, tourism remains

largely absent from strategic EU budgetary frameworks, often embedded within broader policy domains such as regional development, culture, research, or environment. This limited recognition has contributed to persistent gaps in knowledge regarding the actual volume and distribution of EU support for tourism-related activities.

Previous studies on the spatial distribution of EU funding and its impact on territorial development have largely focused on specific country regions when assessing the tourism sector, such as in Hungary (Badar et al., 2023; Czuczor et al., 2023) and Poland (Puciato & Oleśniewicz, 2023). Other research has examined broader funding programmes, such as research and development funding, but without direct relevance to tourism (Piro et al., 2024; Rubiera Morollón & Fernández García, 2023). The only prior study that analysed tourism at the EU-wide level was Butowski (2010), which assessed the role and financial support for tourism within the EU's Cohesion Policy, focusing on Structural Funds for the 1994–1999 and 2000–2006 programming periods. Since then, the range of EU funding mechanisms has diversified significantly.

The objective of this paper is to comprehensively analyse EU funding allocated to tourism-related projects during the last two most recent complete programming periods, 2007–2013 and 2014–2020, identifying trends and spatial distribution patterns. This analysis adopts a broad EU-wide perspective, encompassing multiple funding mechanisms beyond European Structural and Investment Funds, examining other EU programmes and providing a more holistic view of the sector. This study is innovative, as it represents the first critical analysis of this topic, addressing a significant gap in the existing literature. This study offers not only a descriptive account but also a diagnostic tool that can inform policy reform and funding strategy. Its findings are particularly relevant for EU policymakers currently engaged in consultations for the new EU Sustainable Tourism Strategy, and for negotiators shaping the forthcoming Multiannual Financial Framework (2028–2034). Moreover, the analysis serves national and regional tourism authorities, policy makers, and funding applicants seeking to better understand past allocation patterns, identify barriers to access, and advocate for more targeted and transparent support. By exposing country disparities and programme-level imbalances, the study provides an empirical foundation for advancing more equitable, cohesive, and evidence-based approaches to EU tourism funding.

Considering this, the theoretical framework begins by examining the role of tourism within the EU, particularly in relation to spatial justice, institutional and absorptive capacity, and projectification and EU governance. The methodology section details the approach and sources used to collect and analyse data on EU funding allocated to tourism. The results are then presented, broken down by thematic areas and programmes in four main areas: 1) Structural and investment; 2) Research, innovation and competitiveness; 3) Education, training and youth; and 4) Culture and Environment. The discussion places particular emphasis on the scale and distribution of funding across various programmes and Member States, providing insights into resource allocation within the EU and raising concerns about potential power imbalances.

Theoretical framework

This study is situated at the intersection of EU cohesion policy, regional development, and tourism governance. To interpret the distribution of EU funding for tourism-related projects, the analysis draws on three interlinked conceptual lenses: spatial justice, institutional and absorptive capacity, and projectification within multi-level governance. Together, these offer a framework for understanding how disparities in tourism funding emerge across Member States, and how they reflect broader structural and governance dynamics within the EU.

Spatial justice

Spatial justice provides a normative and analytical foundation for evaluating how public resources are geographically distributed, calling for the fair territorial distribution of resources and opportunities (Soja, 2010). EU cohesion policy is explicitly designed to reduce disparities between regions and foster balanced development. However, funding allocations do not always reflect these aims, raising questions about whether existing mechanisms deliver spatially just outcomes or reinforce pre-existing inequalities (Fritsch et al., 2024; Madanipour et al., 2022).

Scott (2023) describes spatial justice as a core objective of EU territorial policy, while also recognising that broader demographic and institutional shifts challenge its implementation. He advocates for better alignment between policy instruments and place-based needs. Similarly, Fritsch et al. (2024) frame spatial justice as both a policy imperative and a condition of legitimacy, emphasising that uniform solutions are insufficient. They argue for context-sensitive approaches that acknowledge governance asymmetries and the need for enabling conditions and local empowerment. Madanipour et al. (2022) advance a multidimensional model, encompassing spatiality, integration, and inclusion; that challenges the rigid distinction between distributive and procedural justice. Their analysis underscores how spatial justice in the EU remains more rhetorical than operational, with structural imbalances continuing to shape access to cohesion resources.

This literature provides critical insights for analysing the geography of tourism funding, particularly in cross-border and peripheral regions where EU support is positioned as both a development tool and an instrument of integration. Tourism has played a role in fostering cross-border regionalisation (Prokkola, 2011; Timothy, 2006), enabled through initiatives such as INTERREG, which have supported the development of shared infrastructures, cooperative frameworks, and joint destination branding (Prokkola, 2011). Yet, despite its potential to contribute to territorial cohesion beyond national borders, such as in the case of Cultural Routes (Camatti et al., 2022), tourism remains underfunded relative to other sectors, such as transportation and environmental infrastructure (Butowski, 2010).

Institutional and absorptive capacity

The second analytical lens is institutional and absorptive capacity, defined as the ability of public and private actors to access, manage, and deliver EU-funded projects (Bachtler & Ferry, 2015). Tourism, being a multisectoral and often fragmented domain, may lack the consolidated administrative structures needed to effectively engage with complex EU funding procedures. This

fragmentation makes it difficult for tourism actors to navigate the procedural and competitive requirements of EU funding, which often include strict eligibility criteria, technical documentation, and co-financing obligations that many lack the capacity to meet. As a result, access to EU funds depends heavily on local institutional readiness, technical expertise, and co-financing ability.

According to Bachtler & Ferry (2015), cohesion policy conditionalities are only effective when they are credible, proportionate, and adapted to national administrative contexts. They emphasise that both structural mismatches, such as misalignments between EU funding design and domestic governance systems; and administrative capacity gaps, including limited expertise, staffing, or procedural knowledge, contribute to lower absorption rates, particularly in less experienced or under-resourced regions. In cross-border cooperation, for example, research has shown that funding often circulates among the same networked actors and more capable institutions, while small businesses and community-based actors struggle to engage due to administrative complexity, low awareness, and weak institutional support (Bohn et al., 2023; Ioannides et al., 2006; Stoffelen & Vanneste, 2017).

Disparities persist in how resources are accessed and absorbed across regions (Piro et al., 2024; Sánchez Trujillo et al., 2024). These asymmetries not only impact funding uptake, but also affect the nature and quality of project outcomes. Regions with higher capacity tend to dominate coordination roles and shape funding priorities, while others are left with symbolic or fragmented participation (Ioannides et al., 2006). This dynamic reinforces systemic inequalities rather than correcting them.

Projectification and EU governance

The third conceptual lens is projectification, this is the increasing use of short-term, competitive, and externally funded projects as the dominant governance model in EU policymaking (Hodgson et al., 2019; Sjöblom & Godenhjelm, 2009). As Büttner (2019) highlights, this co-financing model has fostered a professionalised ‘project world’ reliant on managerial standards, specialised consultants, and standardised procedures. This has created both opportunities and structural barriers, especially for sectors like tourism, where capacity and project readiness vary widely across Member States, reinforcing administrative hierarchies and limiting the role of non-professional actors. Sjöblom & Godenhjelm (2009) similarly warn that project proliferation creates fragmented decision-making structures and undermines institutional continuity, particularly in policy fields that require cross-sectoral alignment and long-term investment. In the tourism sector, this trend is particularly evident; without a dedicated EU funding line, tourism projects must compete within broader frameworks (e.g. European Regional Development Fund, Competitiveness of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises – COSME – or Erasmus+), aligning their objectives with general programme priorities rather than sector-specific needs.

Hodgson et al. (2019) argue that projectification represents not just a technical innovation, but a political shift in public governance; one that favours short-termism, audit culture, and managerial logics over democratic accountability and long-term planning. This is echoed by Ponzo & Milazzo (2025), who describe ‘project-driven governance’ as a system where policy interventions are shaped primarily by funding availability rather than long-term strategic goals. Their findings,

drawn from the field of migrant integration, are highly applicable to tourism, where externally defined funding cycles often determine the scope, partnerships, and sustainability of initiatives.

These critiques are especially relevant in the context of EU Territorial Cooperation programmes, where short project durations, rigid thematic priorities, and difficulties in securing follow-up funding often hinder sustained development pathways (Godenhjelm et al., 2015; Makkonen et al., 2018; Mayer et al., 2019; Shepherd & Ioannides, 2020; Stoffelen & Vanneste, 2017). While cross-border tourism projects have contributed to infrastructural improvements and the creation of cohesive regional identities (Prokkola, 2011), their strategic potential is often undermined by administrative complexity, limited integration with broader planning processes, and the weak engagement of non-governmental actors (Bohn et al., 2023; Ioannides et al., 2006; Stoffelen & Vanneste, 2017). This insufficient involvement of civil society and local stakeholders has been criticised for producing initiatives that are more symbolic than substantive, lacking depth, continuity, and the foundations necessary for long-term impact (Prokkola, 2011).

EU funding logic and sectoral context

The evolution of EU project-based funding is inseparable from its cohesion policy architecture. Originating in the 1980s in regional development project pilots, this approach laid the groundwork for the establishment of the EU's cohesion policy and the introduction of Multiannual Financial Frameworks (MFFs), with approximately half of the EU budget now distributed through project instruments such as the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), Cohesion Fund (CF), European Social Fund (ESF), European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF) (Büttner, 2019). As Büttner explains, these funds are channelled via Operational Programmes negotiated with Member States, based on EU-wide strategic objectives, and typically require national or regional co-financing. This co-funding model creates both opportunities and constraints: while it promotes joint ownership, it also favours territories with the fiscal and institutional capacity to meet EU requirements, further entrenching disparities in access and influence.

In tourism, this logic has had mixed outcomes. While the sector contributes significantly to local economies and cross-border regionalisation (Camatti et al., 2022; Timothy & Saarinen, 2013), its visibility within EU programmes remains low, and access to funding remains dependent on administrative competence, prior experience, and the ability to align project objectives with broader programme goals. As recent research has shown, this creates structural barriers that disproportionately benefit regions with strong institutional ecosystems, leaving others, particularly in the periphery, at a disadvantage (Sánchez Trujillo et al., 2024; Varela-Vázquez et al., 2019).

While previous studies have explored the role of tourism in regional development and the strategic relevance of EU Territorial Cooperation (Faby, 2006; Makkonen et al., 2018; Prokkola et al., 2015), there remains a lack of systematic analysis of how EU funding for tourism-related projects has been distributed across programmes, countries, and time. This paper addresses that gap by providing the first comprehensive, multi-programme mapping of EU tourism funding between 2007 and 2020. By applying the conceptual lenses of spatial justice, institutional capacity, and projectification, the study moves beyond descriptive mapping to critically examine

the underlying dynamics of funding distribution and their implications for territorial cohesion, policy design, and governance equity in the tourism sector.

Method

This study adopts a qualitative and exploratory research approach, based on systematic document and database analysis. Its primary aim is to map and interpret the distribution of EU funding for tourism-related projects across multiple programmes, rather than to produce generalisable statistical models. While some quantitative data, such as project counts and estimated funding shares; are used to support the analysis, the focus remains on identifying patterns, inconsistencies, and governance dynamics within the EU funding landscape. Due to the lack of standardised and fully comparable data across programmes, a qualitative and exploratory lens is more appropriate. This approach allows for an interpretive examination of how tourism-related funding is structured, which actors benefit, and how institutional, territorial, and policy factors influence outcomes.

Given the diversity of EU funding programmes applicable to tourism, the initial phase of the research involved a systematic review of tourism-related projects funded by the European Union during the last two full programming periods (2007-2013 and 2014-2020). In order to identify which EU programmes supported tourism-related actions, various guides and sources were consulted, particularly the European Commission's publication for the 2014-2020 period (European Commission, 2016a) and the online platform or guide for the 2021-2027 period (European Commission, 2023b). The latter source was used to provide a comprehensive overview of the current funding landscape, despite some current programmes not being available in previous periods. In total, eleven programmes were analysed by reviewing their respective EU programme websites, which provided details on objectives, target groups, and budget allocations. Subsequently, further project-specific information for each programme was gathered from various EU websites, datasets, data hubs and programme documentation.

The information was categorised into four main thematic areas, each representing an aspect under which EU programmes allocate funds for tourism-related projects. These are: 1. Structural and investment; 2. Research, innovation and competitiveness; 3. Education, training and youth; and 4. Environment and culture (Table 2). Sources included ERDF/CF/ESF raw data, Rural development EAFRD payments, ESIF Finance implementation details, EMFF and COSME datahubs, Keep.eu platform for cross-border, transnational and interregional cooperation programmes, CORDIS, Erasmus+ projects, Creative Europe projects, and the LIFE public database from CINEA. All platforms and data used are publicly accessible, ensuring transparency and replicability of the data collection process. Hyperlinks to each database are included in the Endnotes. Initial data collection was conducted between April and July 2024, with verification and updates carried out in January–February 2025 to estimate tourism-related allocations as a share of overall programme budgets.

Table 2. Categorisation of EU funding programmes by thematic area

Thematic area	EU programmes
1. Structural and investment	European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), Cohesion Fund (CF), European Social Fund (ESF), European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF)
2. Research, innovation and competitiveness	FP7/Horizon, Competitiveness of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (COSME)
3. Education, training and youth	Erasmus+
4. Culture and Environment	Creative Europe and LIFE Programme

Source: Own elaboration

Due to inconsistencies across the datasets and the inability to make exact data comparisons, the data selection process was adjusted accordingly to ensure the most accurate and comprehensive analysis. For instance, in some datasets from the 2007-2013 period, project titles were not always available. In the EAFRD dataset, the code ‘tourism activities’ was chosen from the ‘measure name’ variable. For data from the Keep.eu website, which is the largest database of cross-border, transnational and interregional cooperation programmes, projects were initially identified through keyword searches using the terms ‘tourism’ and ‘tourist’ across project titles. In the EMFF datahub, although there was a filter for the relevant topic ‘Tourism & nautical routes’, it did not return a complete list of tourism-related projects. As a result, a manual search using the terms ‘tourism’ and ‘tourist’ was conducted to complement the data. A similar approach was applied to the COSME datahub. Downloadable zip files from CORDIS for the FP7 and H2020 programmes were retrieved, and the same keywords were used to search project titles. For Erasmus+, Creative Europe and the LIFE Programme, online databases were accessed using the same keyword search in project titles. In the case of Creative Europe and LIFE Programme, all search results were included, even if the terms did not appear in the project title, as their relevance was confirmed in the project descriptions. In all cases, only publicly available data from official EU websites was examined. Consequently, information found on individual EU Member States’ websites was neither searched nor included in the analysis. As a result, most of the findings discussed pertain to cooperation projects implemented across multiple countries, with the exception of the EAFRD actions from the 2007-2013 period, which cover single-country initiatives but are included in the EU dataset. This approach aligns with the methodologies used by Butowski (2010), who analysed EU Structural Funds for the 1994–1999 and 2000–2006 programming periods, and Bellini et al. (2017), who examined tourism’s contribution to regional development strategies through an exploratory analysis of Smart Specialisation Strategy documents using EU databases.

This approach successfully identified the majority of projects explicitly labelled as tourism-focused. However, it is acknowledged that this method may have excluded projects framed under adjacent terms such as ‘heritage’, ‘culture’, ‘leisure’, ‘travel’, ‘attraction’, ‘destination’, ‘outdoor recreation’, or ‘hospitality’, which could have provided a more comprehensive picture of the funding landscape. Nevertheless, the selected search strategy yielded a substantial dataset of over 4,800 tourism-related projects and offered a high degree of accuracy in identifying relevant initiatives. A full manual screening of all projects across databases was not feasible due to

significant limitations in data comparability and structure. For example, the EAFRD dataset did not provide individual project-level data but only grouped expenditures under broad measures such as ‘tourism activities’. In other cases, such as the Keep.eu database, the volume of entries was too extensive to allow for manual screening, with more than 11,700 projects listed for the 2014–2020 period alone.

Several limitations arise due to inconsistencies in the available datasets. For example, the Keep.eu website acknowledges that its data is not consistently complete or up-to-date across all programmes due to differences between them. Furthermore, during the 2007-2013 period, publicly available data is incomplete for certain programmes. Additionally, some websites for inactive programmes are either no longer updated or contain broken links, making comprehensive data collection challenging. Efforts to clarify and resolve inconsistencies through email inquiries to the EU have gone unanswered.

The data was examined to estimate the number of EU grants awarded for tourism-related projects under each programme. Where possible, it was further disaggregated by the country of project partners and by year. The analysis was conducted at the country level, as available data did not consistently support a breakdown by region. While some funds, particularly under Cohesion Policy, are allocated to specific sub-national areas based on eligibility criteria, the retrieved datasets did not allow for systematic analysis at that territorial scale. Only EU contributions or grants were considered, although some datasets included the total project amount and specified the percentage of EU funding. This allowed for a more detailed analysis of the distribution of EU funding across different programmes, countries and time periods, enabling the identification of trends and variations in tourism-related project funding.

Despite efforts to cross-check datasets and minimise duplication, variations in data quality, format, and completeness across programmes limit the precision of the results. Therefore, the figures presented should be interpreted as indicative rather than exact. Nonetheless, they offer a robust and systematic approximation of EU funding directed toward tourism-related actions between 2007 and 2020, allowing for a comparative assessment of which programmes contributed most, and which countries captured the largest shares of funding.

Results

This section first provides an overview of the objectives and key features of the various EU funding programmes that support tourism-related actions. It then presents the main findings from the data collection, illustrating the contribution of EU funds by programme, year and the countries of the project partners. To support clarity and comparability, the figures included in this section display the number of tourism-related projects, partner participation, and estimated funding volumes, based on the available data. While figure captions indicate the primary focus of each chart, detailed interpretation and discussion are provided in the accompanying narrative.

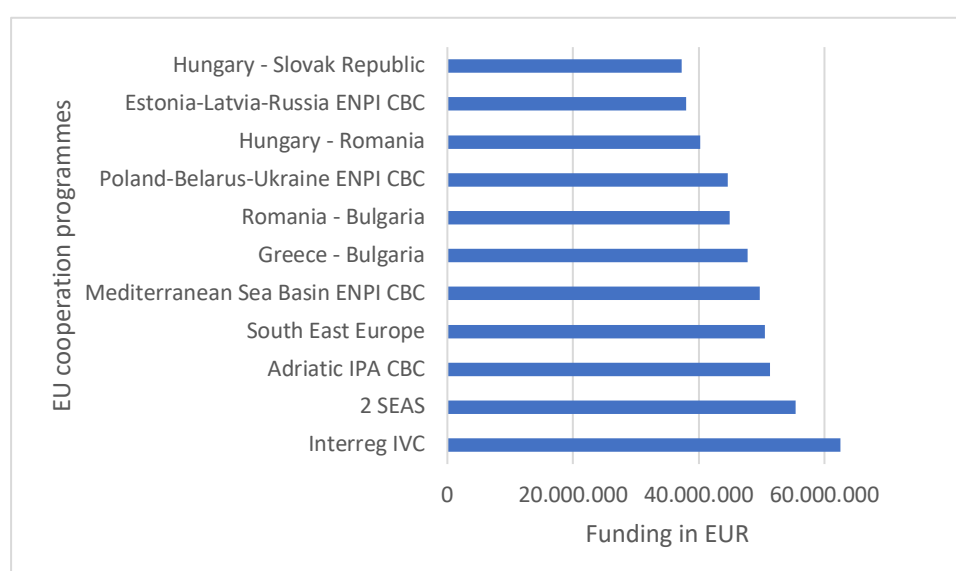
Structural and investment (ESIF)

Since their inception, the Structural Funds have played a pivotal role in promoting the development of tourism, with a primary focus on achieving the Community's objectives of

economic and social cohesion. These funds have been particularly directed toward providing support to underdeveloped regions, areas experiencing industrial decline, and those engaged in rural development (European Commission, 1995). Such regions are prioritised for European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) allocation, including the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the European Social Fund (ESF), the Cohesion Fund (CF), the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and the European Fisheries Fund, later called European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF).

ERDF has long been a key financial instrument supporting the economic development of European regions, particularly through tourism (Council of the European Union, 1984). INTERREG (European Territorial Cooperation), supported by ERDF, is the EU's leading programme for fostering cross-border cooperation at both regional and national levels, aimed at benefiting all EU citizens. First introduced in 1990, INTERREG operates across several strands: cross-border (Interreg A), transnational (Interreg B), interregional (Interreg C), and cooperation with the outermost regions (Interreg D) (European Commission, n.d.). Figure 3 highlights the top regional and structural EU tourism funding programmes during the 2007-2013 period, where a total of €1.29 billion was allocated to 1,441 projects, predominantly in Eastern Europe and Mediterranean EU countries. These programmes, which include several Cross-Border Cooperation (CBC) initiatives funded by the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) and the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA), targeted transnational cooperation in regions such as the Adriatic, South-East Europe, and the Mediterranean Sea Basin. These play a vital role in fostering tourism-related projects that strengthen economic ties and promote sustainable tourism development across borders, particularly in regions that benefit from structural and cohesion funding.

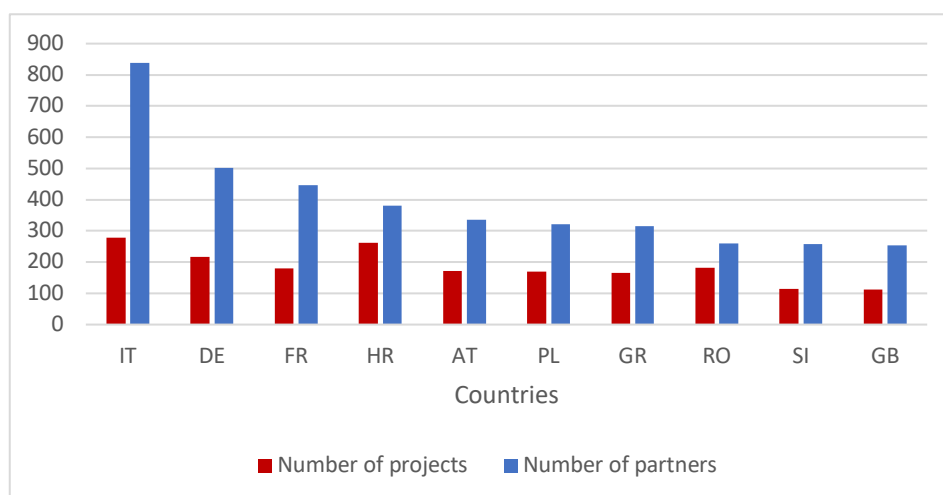
Figure 3. Regional / structural EU tourism funding (Top programmes) (2007-2013)



Source: own elaboration with data from Keep.eu

Figure 4 examines the number of regional/structural projects and partners by country during the same period. Italy leads in terms of both project numbers and partner involvement, participating in over 300 projects and engaging more than 800 partners. Other significant contributors include Germany and France. This imbalance highlights the leadership role that countries like Italy play in cross-border cooperation and the management of tourism-related structural projects.

Figure 4. Regional / structural funds – tourism projects and partners (Top countries) (2007-2013)

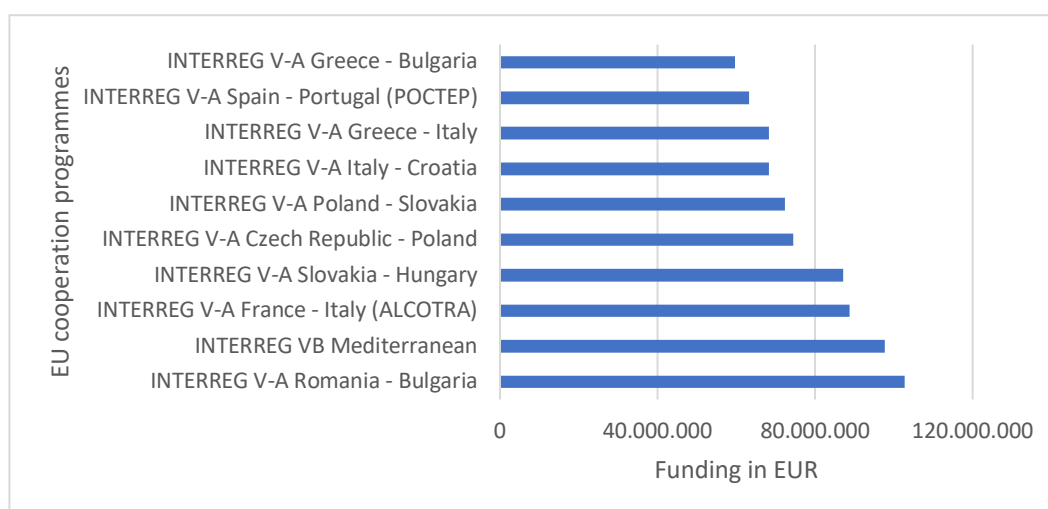


Source: own elaboration with data from Keep.eu.

ISO2 Country codes for all figures: AT (Austria), BE (Belgium), BG (Bulgaria), CY (Cyprus), CZ (Czech Republic), DE (Germany), ES (Spain), GR (Greece), FR (France), GB (United Kingdom), HR (Croatia), HU (Hungary), IT (Italy), LT (Lithuania), NL (Netherlands), NO (Norway), PL (Poland), PT (Portugal), RO (Romania), SE (Sweden), SI (Slovenia), SK (Slovakia), TR (Turkey)

Figure 5 illustrates the top regional and structural EU tourism funding programmes for the 2014-2020 period, with a total of €2.49 billion allocated to 2,281 unique projects. The increase in project numbers and funding in comparison to the previous period reflects the growing prioritisation of tourism as a driver for regional cohesion and economic growth.

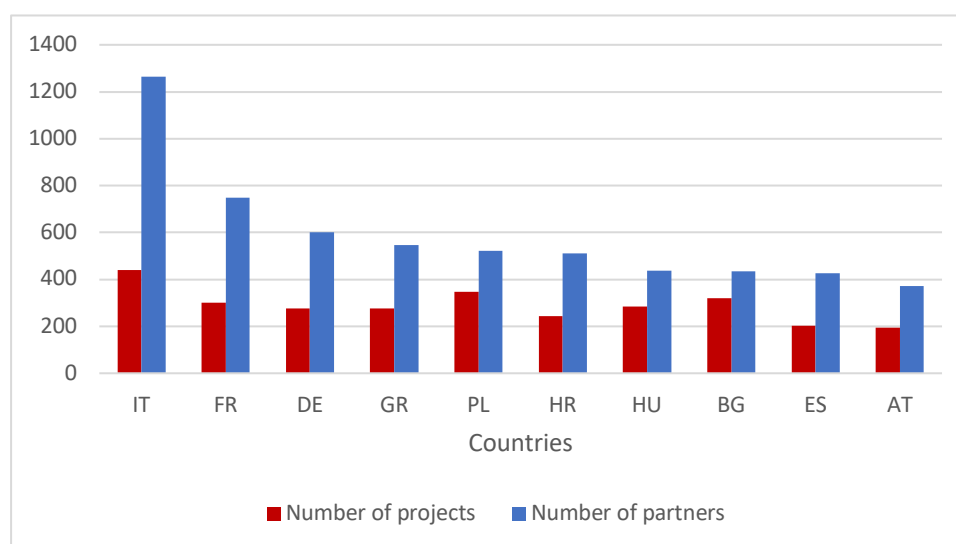
Figure 5. Regional / structural EU funding (Tourism Top programmes) (2014-2020)



Source: own elaboration with data from Keep.eu

Regarding the distribution of regional and structural funds for tourism projects and partners by country during the 2014-2020 period (Fig. 6), Italy once again leads in both the number of projects and partners, with over 400 projects and more than 1,200 partners involved. France and Germany follow, also showing high levels of partner involvement, though with fewer projects compared to Italy.

Figure 6. Regional / structural funds – tourism projects and partners (Top countries) (2014-2020)

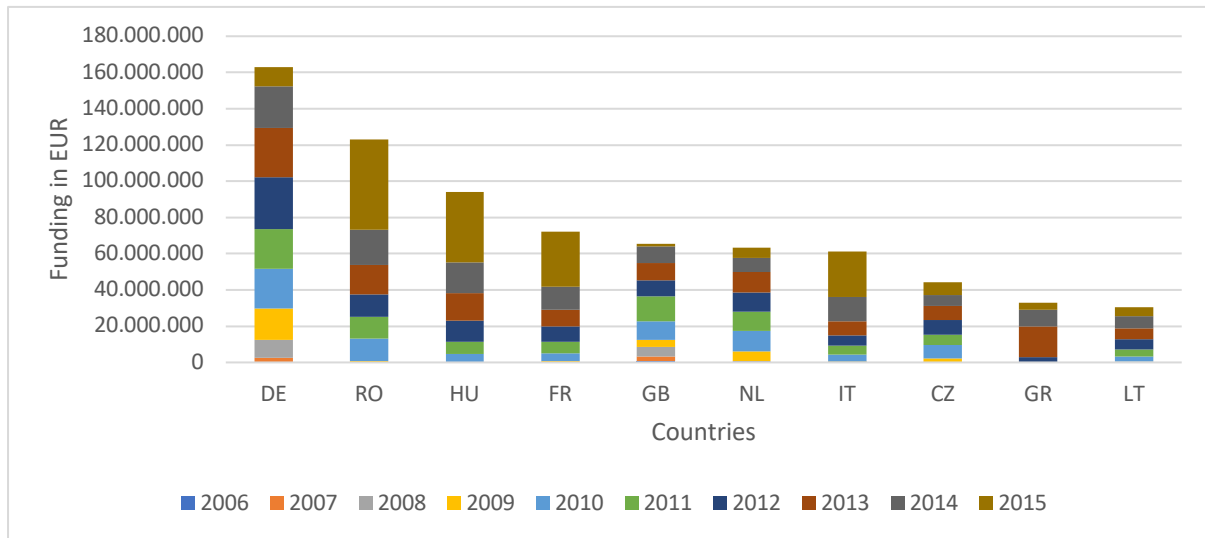


Source: own elaboration with data from Keep.eu

The EU's rural development policy, through the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, supports rural tourism by fostering business creation, promoting agri-tourism, and enhancing the cultural and natural heritage of rural and mountainous regions. Initiated with projects in the 1970s and 1980s, EAFRD funds were directed towards developing activities that complemented agricultural and farming efforts. These funds were primarily aimed at developing skills, particularly through tourism training courses, to facilitate the diversification of rural areas into tourism-related activities. Moreover, the funds encouraged the promotion of rural and farm tourism, alongside craft trade activities, with a focus on improving or adapting facilities to better accommodate and attract tourists.

Figure 7 illustrates the analysis of EAFRD tourism funding from 2006 to 2015, amounting to €887.9 million, and reveals significant variation in how countries allocated funds, despite the absence of data on the total number of projects per country. Germany received the most funding overall, followed by Romania and Hungary, though initially receiving no funding, saw rapid increases and secured funding in later years. Data for the 2014-2020 period is not available.

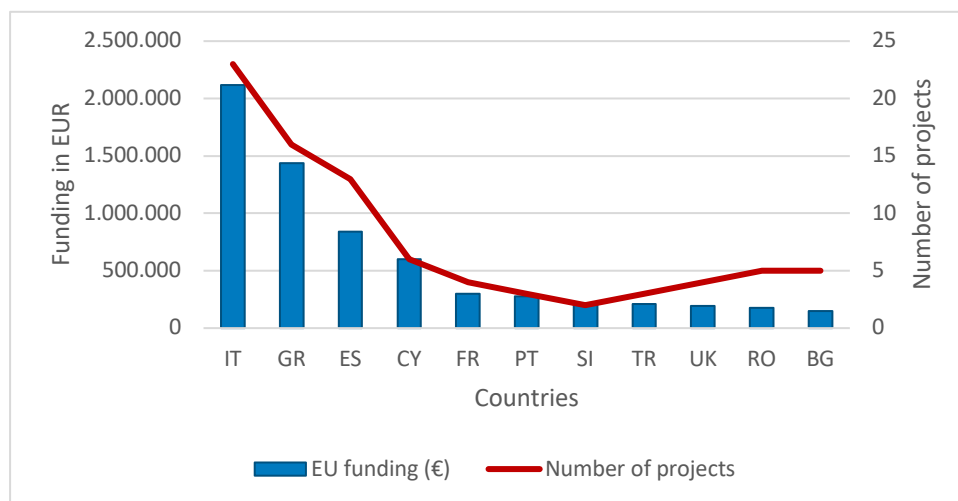
Figure 7. EAFRD tourism funding by country (Top 10 countries) (2006-2015)



Source: own elaboration with data from EAFRD

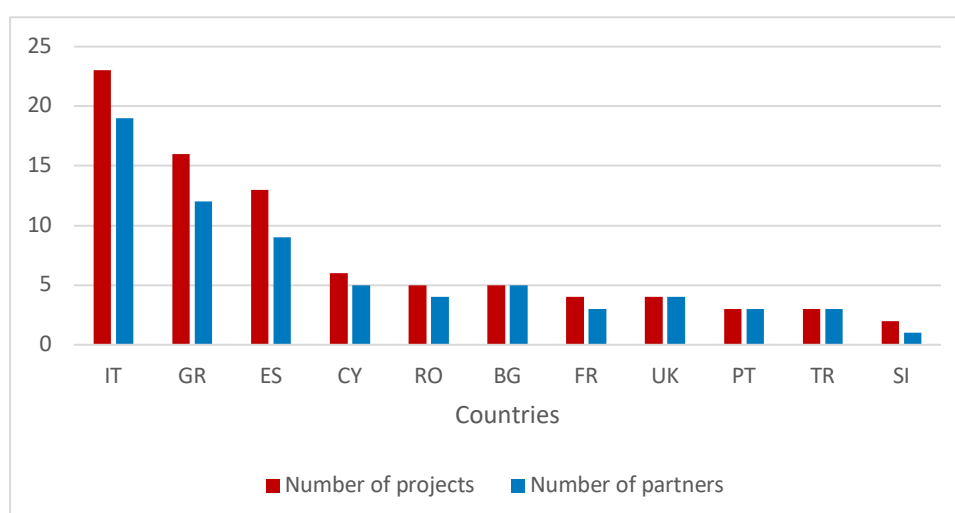
The European Fisheries Fund, active from 2007 to 2013, focused on promoting sustainable development in fisheries regions by supporting diversification into activities such as eco-tourism and alternative employment to mitigate the socio-economic impacts of fisheries decline (European Commission, 2006). It evolved into the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund for the 2014-2020 period, aiming to promote sustainable fishing, assist coastal communities in diversifying their economies, create jobs and improve the quality of life in coastal areas. Of the total budget of €6.4 billion, 89% was directly distributed to Member States for national programmes (European Commission, 2015), and the remaining is allocated to other projects managed by the European Commission through the Executive Agency for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (EASME). As shown in Figure 8, approximately €7.1 million was allocated to 18 tourism-related projects across 21 countries, with Italy, Greece, and Spain receiving the largest shares of funding (Fig. 9), due to their higher number of participants and projects.

Figure 8. EMFF tourism funding by country and number of projects (Top countries) (2014-2020)



Source: own elaboration with data from EMFF Datahub

Figure 9. EMFF tourism projects and partners by country



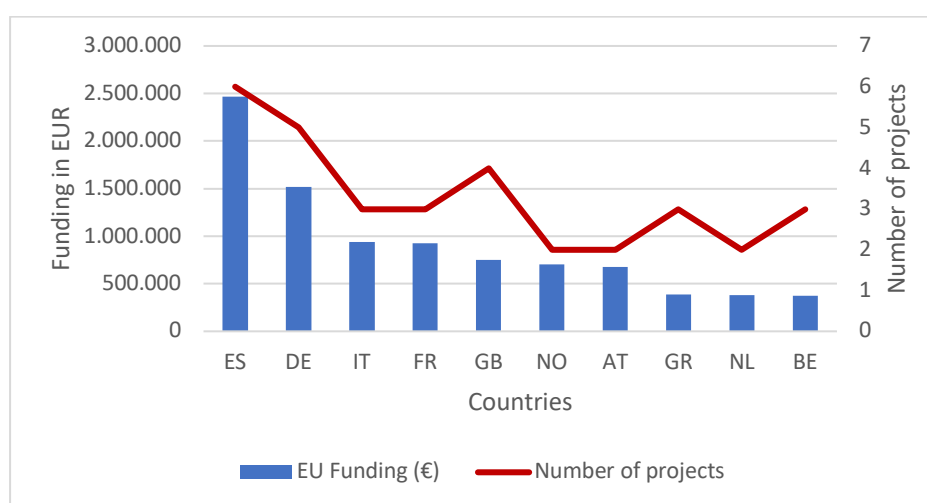
Source: own elaboration with data from EMFF Datahub

Research, innovation and competitiveness

Research and innovation in the EU are funded through various framework programmes. During the 2007-2013 period, the 7th Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development (FP7) was in place. It was followed by the Horizon 2020 Programme in 2014-2020.

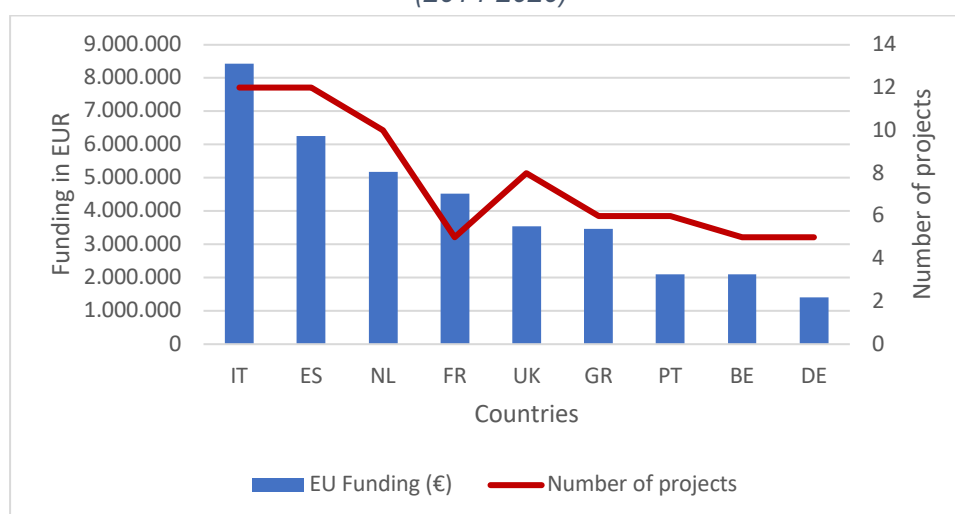
An analysis of tourism-related projects under FP7 and Horizon 2020 reveals differences in scope, funding and focus. FP7 funded 13 tourism-related projects, focusing primarily on sustainability, heritage and the socio-economic impacts of tourism. The EU allocated a total of €11.85 million to FP7 tourism projects, with Spain being the top recipient, followed by Germany (Fig. 10). In contrast, Horizon 2020 funded 25 tourism-related projects, with a broader scope covering rural development, youth employment, smart tourism, and the impact of media on local communities. The total funding for these projects was significantly higher, at €46.82 million, with Italy and Spain receiving the largest shares (Fig. 11).

Figure 10. FP7 tourism funding by country and number of projects (Top countries) (2007-2013)



Source: own elaboration with data from CORDIS

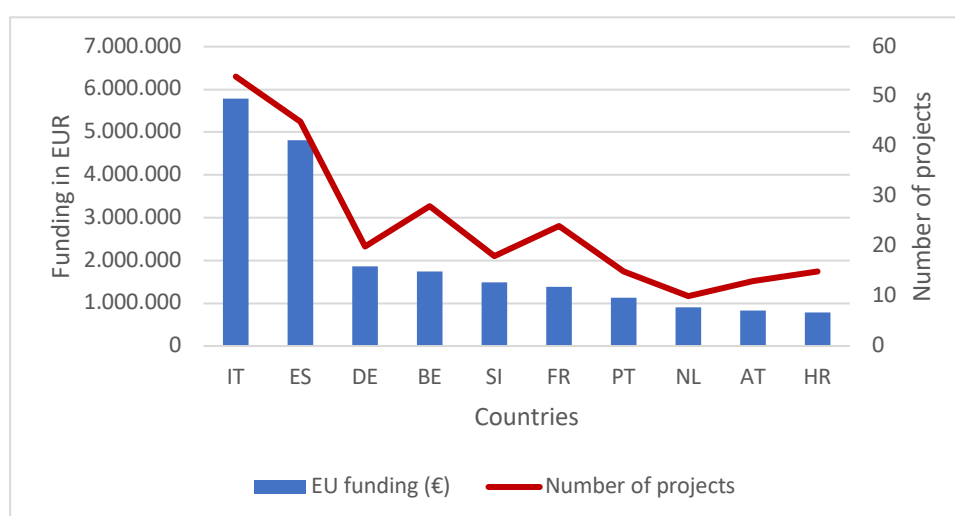
Figure 11. Horizon 2020 tourism funding by country and number of projects (Top countries) (2014-2020)



Source: own elaboration with data from CORDIS

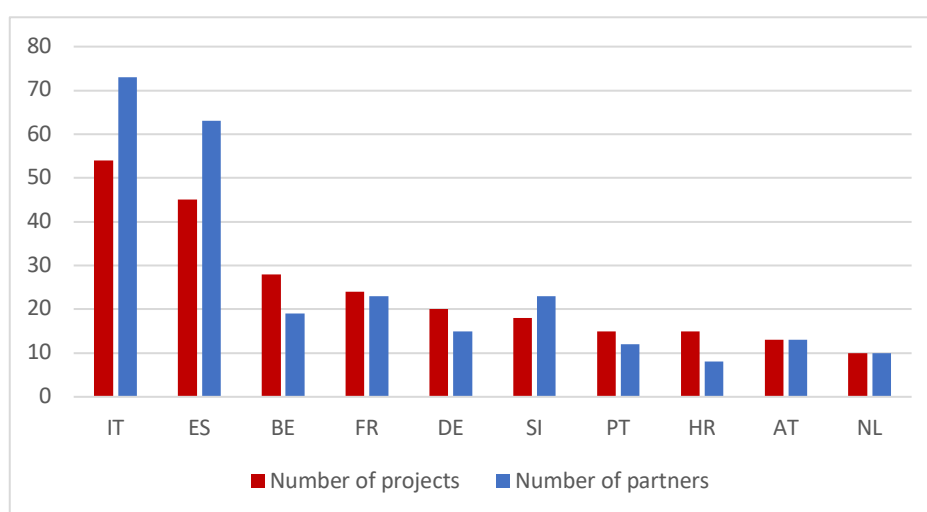
The instruments of the Competitiveness and Innovation Framework Programme during the 2007-2013 period (European Commission, 2014b), evolved into the Programme for the Competitiveness of Enterprises and Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (COSME) for 2014-2020 (Lajarthe, 2012). COSME is the only EU initiative specifically focused on tourism, aiming to enhance the sector's competitiveness and promote sustainable management. It supports SMEs by improving access to markets and financing, helping them remain sustainable and competitive. The programme also aids public authorities in improving the business environment and fostering entrepreneurship, driving economic growth across the EU (Svášek, 2016). Key tourism projects funded under COSME focused on addressing seasonality by supporting low-season tourism flows, diversifying the tourism offer through transnational products, enhancing cultural and natural routes, and increasing accessibility in tourism services. COSME funded 102 tourism projects, allocating approximately €28.63 million to organisations in 39 countries (Fig. 12). Italy led in participation, followed by Spain (Fig. 13).

Figure 12. COSME tourism funding by country and number of projects (Top countries) (2014-2020)



Source: own elaboration with data from EISMEA

Figure 13. COSME tourism projects and partners by country

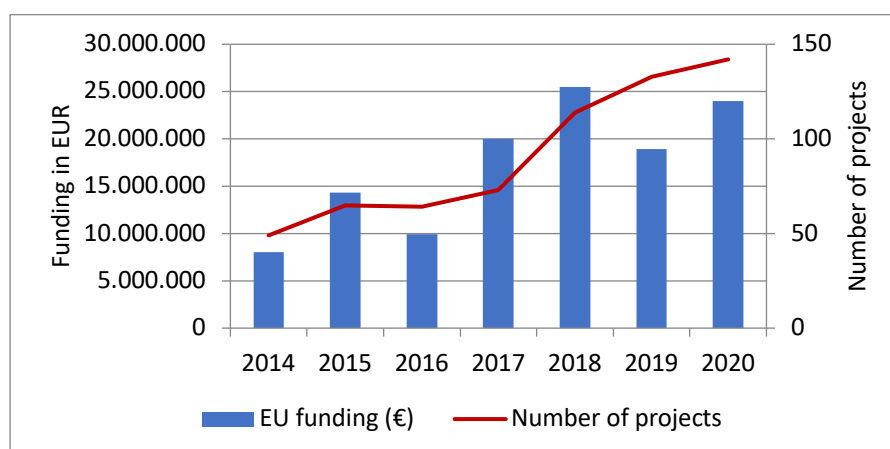


Source: own elaboration with data from EISMEA

Education, training and youth

Erasmus has expanded from its initial focus on higher education to now include all areas of education, training, youth and sport. In 2014, the EU consolidated these efforts under a single programme, Erasmus+, which focuses on three key areas: student and staff mobility, cooperation through strategic partnerships and capacity building, and support for policy reform (European Commission, 2020b). Figure 14 illustrates annual Erasmus+ tourism funding from 2014 to 2020, with a total of 640 projects receiving approximately €120.85 million in EU funding. A clear trend is the consistent increase in the number of supported projects, rising from around 70 in 2014 to approximately 150 in 2020, as well as in funding amounts, despite fluctuations. This growth reflects the expanding reach of Erasmus tourism initiatives, fostering educational and cultural exchanges across Europe.

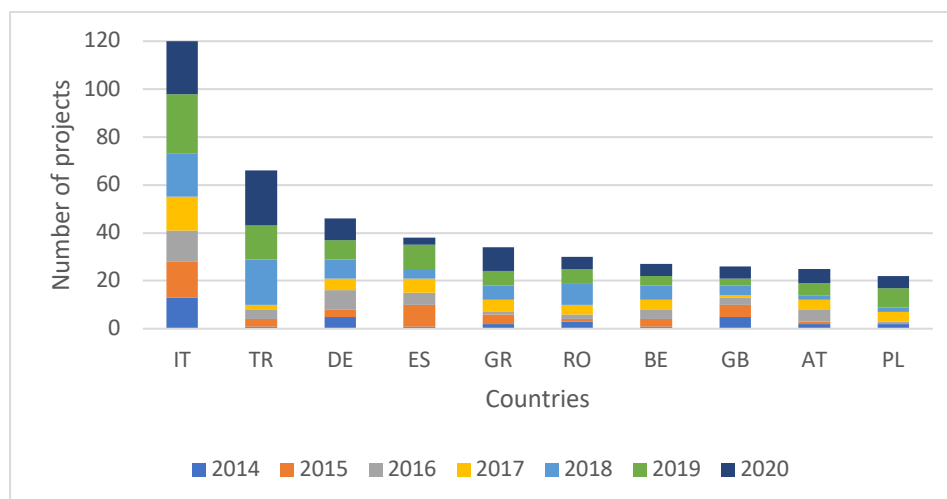
Figure 14. Erasmus+ tourism funding and number of projects (2014-2020)



Source: own elaboration with data from Erasmus+

In terms of project coordination, Italy clearly leads with over 120 projects, followed by Turkey follows with around 90 projects. Although the dataset suggests trends in funding distribution by country, breakdown of figures per country and project are unavailable (Fig. 15).

Figure 15. Number of Erasmus+ tourism projects by coordinating country and year (Top countries)

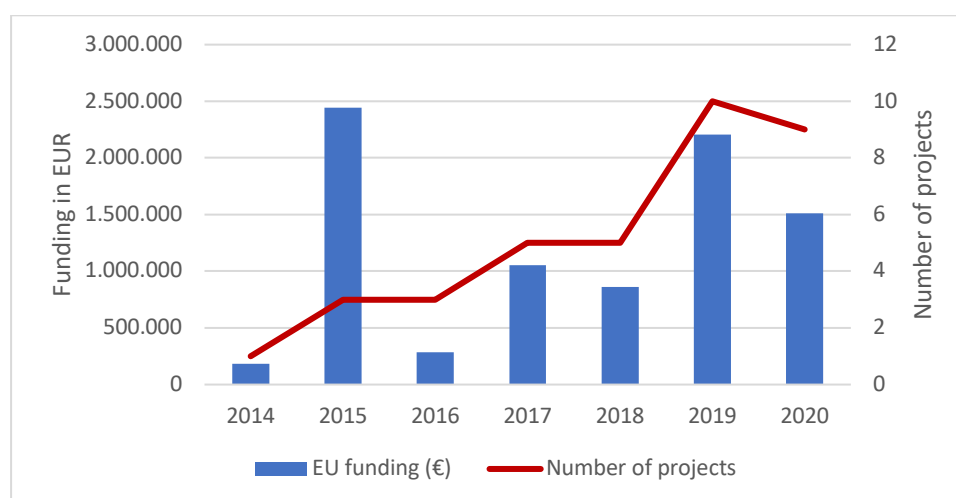


Source: own elaboration with data from Erasmus+

Culture and environment

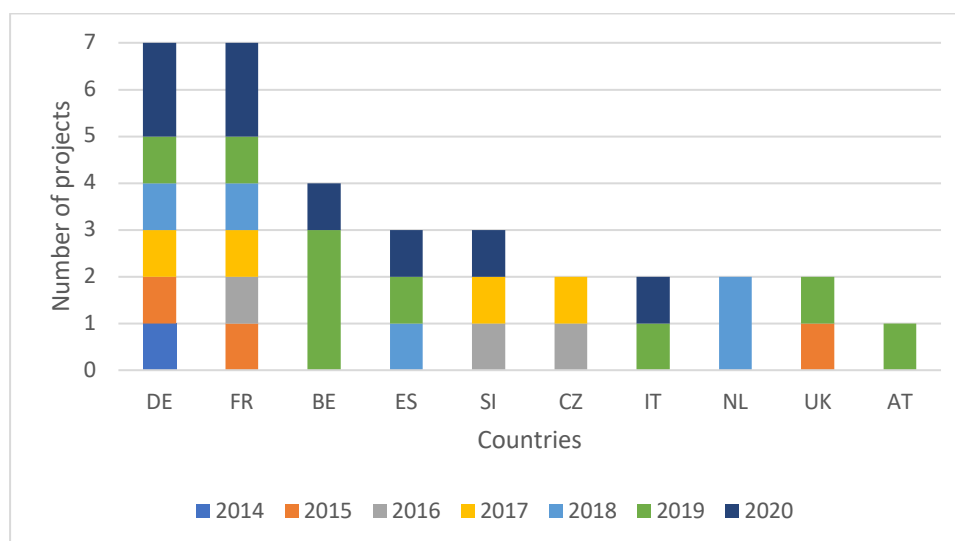
From 2014 to 2020, Creative Europe aimed at fostering cultural diversity, artistic expression, and boosting the economic potential of the creative industries. It supported a range of projects in areas such as architecture, music, literature, performing arts, films, festivals and cultural tourism (European Commission, 2024c). The Creative Europe dataset includes 36 tourism-related projects, with a total grant of approximately €8.55 million from 2014 to 2020 (Fig. 16). Germany and France led project coordination with 7 projects each, while Belgium followed with 4, mostly in the last two years of the programme (Fig. 17). As with Erasmus+, a detailed breakdown of figures by country and project is unavailable.

Figure 16. Creative Europe tourism funding and number of projects (2014-2020)



Source: own elaboration with data from Creative Europe

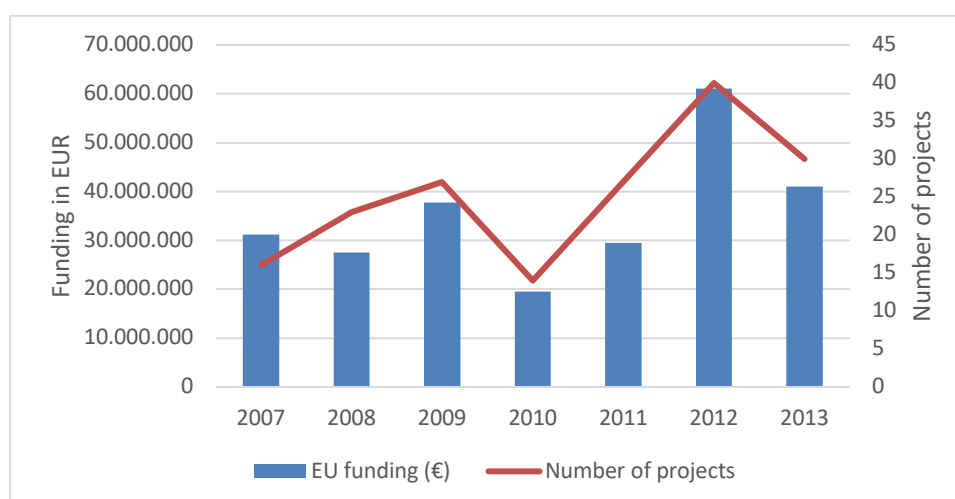
Figure 17. Number of Creative Europe tourism projects by coordinating country and year (Top countries)



Source: own elaboration with data from Creative Europe

The LIFE Programme is the EU's funding instrument for environment and climate action. From 2007 to 2013, LIFE+ consisted of three sub-programmes: Nature and Biodiversity, Environment Policy and Governance, and Information and Communication. In the 2014-2020 period, the programme was streamlined into two sub-programmes: Environment; and Climate Action. LIFE has supported various initiatives that promote sustainable tourism, particularly by safeguarding natural, cultural and traditional assets in regions that are economically dependent on them (European Commission, 2024e). The LIFE dataset from 2007 to 2013 reveals a total of 177 tourism-related projects with an EU contribution of approximately €247.71 million (Fig. 18).

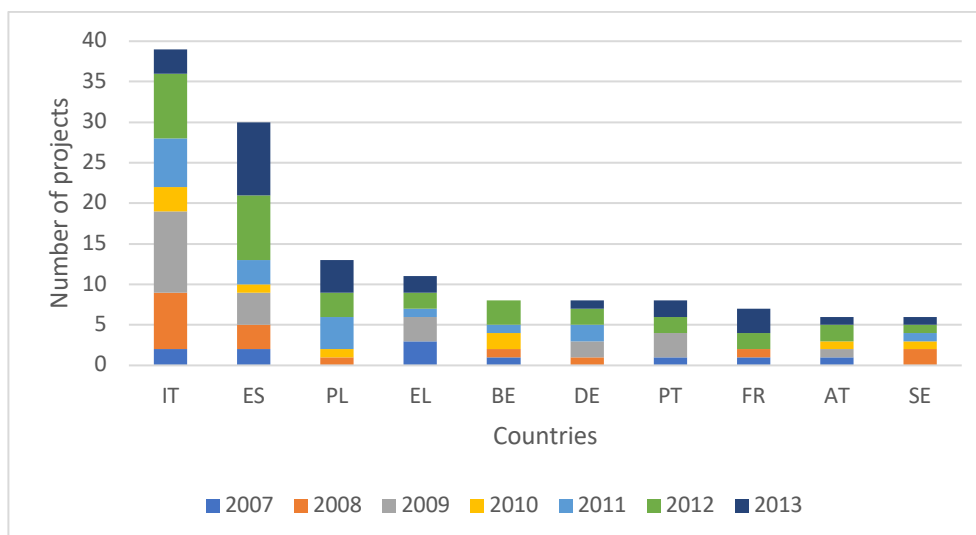
Figure 18. LIFE tourism funding and number of projects (2007-2013)



Source: own elaboration with data from LIFE Programme

Figure 19 depicting the number of LIFE projects by coordinating country from 2007 to 2013 highlights Italy as the leader, followed closely by Spain; and Poland, in third place, shows steady participation in the final three years.

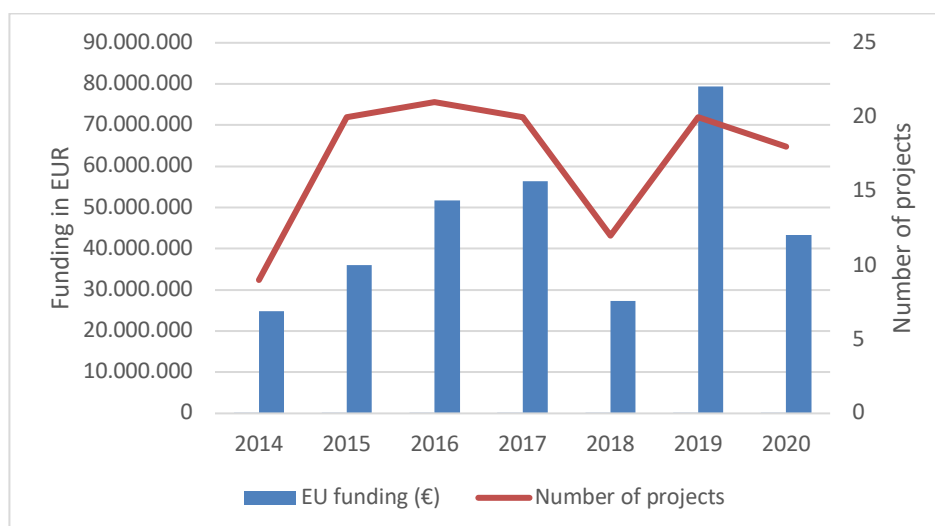
Figure 19. Number of LIFE projects by coordinating country and year (Top countries) (2007-2013)



Source: own elaboration with data from LIFE Programme

The analysis of LIFE programme projects from 2014 to 2020 reveals several key insights. A total of 120 projects were funded during this period, with a cumulative EU contribution of approximately €318.97 million (Fig. 20).

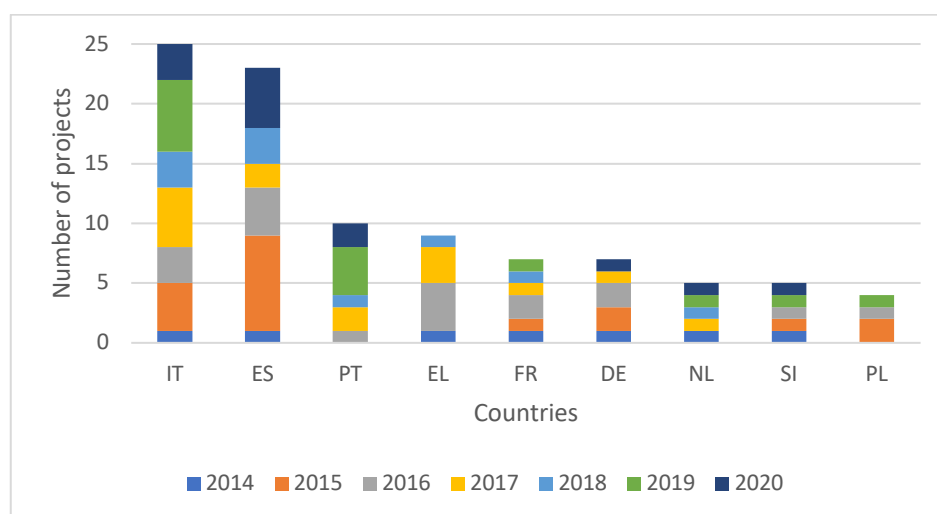
Figure 20. LIFE tourism funding and number of projects (2014-2020)



Source: own elaboration with data from LIFE Programme

Figure 21 shows Italy and Spain as the leading coordinators, with Italy overseeing 25 projects and Spain 22.

Figure 21. Number of LIFE projects by coordinating country and year (Top countries) (2014-2020)



Source: own elaboration with data from LIFE Programme

Funding overview

This study has presented the first comparative, cross-programme mapping of EU funding for tourism-related projects over the 2007-2013 and 2014-2020 programming periods. The findings highlight substantial differences in how various programmes support the tourism sector, revealing both structural imbalances and governance challenges. Across these two periods, a total of €5.45 billion was allocated to 4,852 projects (Table 3).

Table 3. Overview of EU funding tourism programmes by programming periods, number of projects and countries

Funding programme	Tourism funding (EUR billion)	Number of projects	Programme total budget (EUR billion)	% of funding allocated to tourism	Top grant receivers (1st, 2nd and 3rd)			
2007-2013								
Regional structural funds (cooperation)	1.29	1440	8	16.08%	Italy	Germany	France	
EAFRD	0.89	N/A	93.37	0.95%	Germany	Romania	Hungary	
LIFE Programme	0.25	177	1.72	14.40%	Italy	Spain	Poland	
FP7	0.01	13	40.78	0.03%	Spain	Germany	Italy	
Subtotal	2.43	1630	143.87	1.69%				
2014-2020								
Regional structural funds (cooperation)	2.49	2281	10.37	23.97%	Italy	France	Germany	
LIFE Programme	0.32	120	2.64	12.08%	Italy	Spain	Portugal	
Erasmus+	0.12	640	14.7	0.82%	Italy	Turkey	Germany	
Horizon 2020	0.05	25	68.33	0.07%	Italy	Spain	Netherlands	
COSME	0.03	102	3.6	0.80%	Italy	Spain	Germany	
Creative Europe Programme	0.01	36	0.29	2.95%	Germany	France	Belgium	
EMFF	0.01	18	0.66	1.08%	Italy	Greece	Spain	
Subtotal	3.02	3222	100.59	3.00%				
TOTAL EU FUNDING (billion)	€ 5.45	4852	244.46	2.23%	Italy	Spain	Germany	

Source: own elaboration with data from EU programmes

Overall, this funding spans a wide range of programmes. During the 2007-2013 period, €2.43 billion was allocated across 1,630 projects. The largest share was provided by regional and structural funds, which contributed €1.29 billion to projects promoting regional development and cooperation. Additionally, EAFRD allocated €888 million, playing a significant role in supporting rural tourism development. Funding from the LIFE programme and, especially from research and innovation through the FP7 programme, were lower. The 2014-2020 period saw a significant increase in funding, with €3.02 billion allocated to 3,222 projects. Regional and structural funds remained a major source, contributing €2.49 billion and reinforcing their pivotal role in supporting cross-border and regional tourism initiatives. The LIFE programme allocated €319 million to tourism-related projects. Although the budget for research and innovation projects through Horizon 2020 doubled to almost €47 million in this period, it remains insufficient for equipping the sector to address future challenges and prepare for sustainable growth. New programmes during the 2014-2020 period contributed to tourism funding, with Erasmus+ allocating €121 million to educational and youth tourism projects, and COSME providing almost €29 million to

initiatives aimed at enhancing the competitiveness and innovation of SMEs. Creative Europe contributed about €9 million to cultural tourism projects. EMFF allocated only €7 million for sustainable tourism projects in coastal and maritime areas.

Discussion

In this section, we interpret these findings through the lens of spatial justice, institutional capacity, and projectification, as outlined in the theoretical framework and explore their implications for future EU tourism programming and policy reform.

Despite its macroeconomic relevance, tourism receives a small share of EU funding, with an average of 2.23% for both periods. Tourism funding is only substantial within Structural Funds for cooperation, where it accounted for 16% in 2007–2013 and nearly 24% in 2014–2020. However, across other funding streams, tourism remains underfunded, representing only 3% in the Creative Europe Programme, even though culture is a key driver of tourism demand in Europe; and around or below 1% in key programmes such as EAFRD, Erasmus+, COSME, and EMFF, despite its critical role in regional development and economic growth. Although the LIFE programme shows relatively higher allocations, further scrutiny reveals that many projects only superficially reference tourism, with very few explicitly focused on tourism activities in natural environments. This reflects a broader issue of limited thematic alignment, where tourism is acknowledged in funding narratives but rarely prioritised in practice.

Particularly striking is the almost non-existent presence of tourism within research and innovation programmes. Despite the recognised potential of these programmes to support tourism research, such as in ICTs, cultural heritage, and land use; and the European Commission's call for results to be disseminated to policymakers and stakeholders (European Commission, 2006), funding for tourism-related research remains insignificant given the overall budgets. Although percentages for Horizon 2020 shows a higher investment in tourism-related R&D than FP7, it remains a low-funded sector. These findings, while slightly lower, align with the EU Blue Economy Report (European Commission, 2021), which estimated that €53 million were allocated through Horizon 2020 to 33 coastal tourism projects, though the report acknowledges potential overlaps with other funding portfolios.

Regarding EMFF funding, despite the launch of a 2014 EU Communication on a 'European strategy for more growth and jobs in coastal and maritime tourism' (European Commission, 2014a), the funding allocated to blue tourism remains insignificant compared to the overall budget. Tourism is a core pillar of the coastal and maritime economy, accounting for 45% of the gross value added and 64% of jobs in the EU Blue Economy. Yet, it receives disproportionately low funding compared to fisheries, aquaculture, and marine renewable energy (European Commission, 2021). Investments in these sectors are prioritised due to their higher perceived economic returns and strategic role in supporting climate neutrality objectives under the European Green Deal. This funding gap is particularly evident in the Mediterranean, a world-leading tourism destination that significantly contributes to economic growth and employment. While blue tourism has received support from regional and cooperation funds, including Interreg

Mediterranean basin projects, overall funding remains inadequate relative to its economic importance.

While limited funding could be due to lower proposal volumes from the tourism sector, when compared to other sectors, linked to limited awareness, capacity, or eligibility; this does not fully explain the consistent underrepresentation across programmes that are otherwise aligned with tourism goals (e.g., culture, blue economy, SMEs). Moreover, this raises concerns of equitable access, as sectors with weaker governance structures may struggle to secure an adequate share of public resources, particularly when no thematic budget line exists to ensure visibility and strategic coherence (Fritsch et al., 2024; Scott, 2023).

The distribution of EU tourism-related funding further illustrates these challenges, with significant disparities among Member States that call into question the fairness and territorial balance of existing funding frameworks. Italy, Spain, and Germany consistently rank among the top recipients and project coordinators across most programmes, reflecting strong institutional capacity, technical expertise, and embeddedness in EU funding networks. Notably, France, despite being the world's leading destination in terms of international tourist arrivals, does not feature among the highest recipients, whereas Spain and Italy do. This suggests that factors beyond tourism demand, such as institutional readiness and funding experience, strongly influence outcomes. In contrast, countries such as Ireland, Malta, Estonia, Latvia, Luxembourg, and Denmark are notably underrepresented. While some variation may relate to later accession, market size, or Cohesion Policy targeting, the observed concentration of funding in wealthier and more experienced Member States suggests persistent structural imbalances. These patterns indicate that, despite cohesion policy's aim to reduce territorial disparities, current allocation mechanisms may reproduce rather than reduce inequalities, undermining the EU's commitment to spatial justice (Fritsch et al., 2024; Scott, 2023).

A preliminary review of the EASME and Creative Europe databases which shows budget distribution by project partners, reveals a recurring pattern of specific organisations participating in multiple projects, suggesting the existence of a core group of experienced entities adept at securing EU funding. These findings are consistent with research by Sánchez Trujillo et al. (2024) and Piro et al. (2024), who highlight that prior participation in EU-funded projects and familiarity with application procedures confer cumulative advantages to certain institutions and regions, creating a capacity gap between high-performing and low-performing territories. This gap reflects not only administrative weaknesses, but also a misalignment between programme conditionalities and local realities, a point stressed in Bachtler & Ferry (2015) concept of the 'effectiveness threshold'. Regions with limited financial flexibility or technical staff may struggle to meet the procedural demands of EU calls, despite having high tourism potential or development needs. This reinforces imbalances in funding access and underscores the need for capacity-building measures that extend beyond basic awareness-raising to include sustained investment in administrative systems, skills development, and institutional learning at regional and local levels. Uneven absorption patterns should be seen not merely as technical challenges, but as symptoms of deeper governance deficits that ultimately weaken the EU's spatial cohesion objectives and its ambition for territorially balanced development (Sjöblom & Godenhjelm, 2009).

This observation is in line with the efforts by the European Innovation Council and SMEs Executive Agency - EISMEA (2024) to enhance awareness of funding opportunities within the ecosystem. Through initiatives like the Pilot Project – Building Capacity for Tourism Ecosystem, EISMEA seeks to improve SMEs' knowledge and expertise, enabling them to navigate and apply for EU programmes more effectively. This initiative addresses concerns raised by stakeholders regarding the lack of knowledge, skills and resources within the tourism sector, which hinder access to EU funding through calls or grants. Moreover, these findings align with spatial justice theory and broader concerns regarding regional disparities not just in EU funding absorption but in the ability to access it (Fritsch et al., 2024; Madanipour et al., 2022; Ponzo & Milazzo, 2025). As identified by Piro et al. (2024), there is a pressing need to strengthen the capacity of low-performing regions, preventing the perpetuation of long-term growth inequalities (Varela-Vázquez et al., 2019). However, these must be scaled up and better integrated into mainstream funding logic. Without targeted support for low-capacity regions and actors, in particular MSMEs, the EU risks reinforcing a geography of exclusion.

The structure and delivery of EU tourism-related funding is heavily shaped by the broader trend of projectification in EU governance, an increasing reliance on short-term, competitive project-based mechanisms to implement policy across sectors and territories (Hodgson et al., 2019; Sjöblom & Godenhjelm, 2009). Due to its multisectoral nature, tourism is particularly affected by this logic, as funding is often accessed through scattered, general-purpose programmes, requiring project promoters to frame tourism initiatives in terms aligned with other priorities such as innovation, entrepreneurship, or environmental protection. As a result, tourism actors must strategically reframe their initiatives to fit shifting programme objectives, often at the expense of long-term vision and sectoral coherence. This fragmented positioning reflects a key characteristic of projectification: the dilution of sector-specific goals to broader, time-bound funding agendas. It also weakens tourism's institutional visibility, legitimacy and strategic integration within the EU policy framework. These dynamics contradict the recommendations of the European Economic and Social Committee (2019), which called for the creation of a dedicated budget line for tourism in the 2021–2027 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) to enhance visibility and funding allocation. This aligns with Varela-Vázquez et al. (2019) who advocates for greater integration between research and innovation programmes and ESIF to maximise their impact and effectiveness. The issue is particularly relevant now, as the EU prepares the next MFF which will start in 2028 and conducts consultations aimed at achieving a higher impact of the EU budget (European Commission, 2025b; Torres et al., 2025a).

Another key finding is the challenge of data transparency in publicly funded sectors, including tourism. While transparency is an expected standard, available data remains fragmented and inconsistent across EU platforms and reports, even within same programmes. This issue is particularly evident in the Framework Programmes for Research and Innovation, where the complexity of data structures has been noted as a barrier to combining datasets and enabling comparisons (Varela-Vázquez et al., 2019). The problem is even pronounced for previous programming periods, where information is often scattered or, in some cases, entirely unavailable. Additionally, the reliance on projectification further exacerbates these challenges, as data on individual projects is often limited, despite the growing number of funded initiatives each year (Godenhjelm et al., 2015). To address these shortcomings, it is essential to establish

a more open, transparent, and accessible system for EU-funded projects. Such a system should provide comprehensive and cohesive data, encompassing not only projects implemented by multiple EU partners but also funds directly allocated to Member States for local implementation categorised by sector and project, not only in tourism but across all sectors. Ensuring access to this information would enable stakeholders to better understand the distribution and impact of EU funding and enhance the overall transparency and effectiveness of EU-supported initiatives. Moreover, this would help address current limitations in evaluating intervention effectiveness, a challenge further complicated by tourism's multisectoral nature (O'Sullivan et al., 2003; Tirado Ballesteros & Hernández Hernández, 2017).

To address these challenges, stronger institutional support is needed for long-term tourism strategies. The appointment of a dedicated European Commissioner for Sustainable Transport and Tourism in September 2024, with a focus on investment, decarbonisation and cross-border connectivity, marks a critical shift in the EU policy agenda, a long-sought achievement advocated by the sector. This development could shape future programming periods and give it the needed visibility it deserves, not only in economic terms, but also for its contribution to address social and environmental development goals.

Conclusions

The novelty of this paper lies in its presentation of the first comprehensive attempt to examine and estimate EU funding allocated to tourism-related projects from a multi-programme perspective. The findings of this study hold significant implications for EU tourism policy, particularly in the context of the ongoing stakeholder consultations for the Sustainable Tourism Strategy and the upcoming Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for 2028–2034. The fragmented and often marginal treatment of tourism within EU funding streams not only limits the sector's capacity to contribute to cohesion, innovation, and sustainability goals; it also reveals deeper governance challenges related to visibility, accessibility, and policy coherence.

From a spatial justice perspective, the uneven distribution of funding, both geographically and across programmes, undermines the EU's commitment to balanced territorial development. Regions with strong institutional capacity and prior experience consistently benefit more, while others remain disadvantaged despite high tourism potential. Addressing these disparities through enhanced capacity-building efforts is crucial to achieving balanced regional development and preventing the further exacerbation of funding inequalities across the EU. Greater alignment between programme design and regional realities is essential to enable broader participation and fairer access to EU resources. In this regard, the explicit inclusion of tourism in a Commissioner's portfolio in 2024 with the shift from the Directorate-General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs (DG GROW) to Directorate-General Mobility and Transport (DG MOVE) presents a significant opportunity to elevate the sector's relevance and strengthen its strategic position within EU policies.

A significant finding of this study is the challenge of data transparency, characterised by fragmented and inconsistent information across EU platforms, particularly for earlier programming periods. This limits evaluation and learning, and weakens public accountability,

underscoring the urgent need for a cohesive and accessible system that provides comprehensive data on both multi-partner projects and direct allocations to EU Member States. Encouragingly, the proposal for the MFF 2028–2034 explicitly states that the EU will enhance transparency and oversight of budget beneficiaries, with information on fund recipients to be published in a centralised public database (European Commission, 2025c). For this to support tourism policy effectively, it should include thematic categorisation and show interlinkages between programmes. Despite these limitations, this study has successfully provided a detailed estimation and analysis of EU funding for tourism-related projects over the last two complete programming periods, based on the best available data, given the incomplete data sources.

This mapping and analysis study provides an evidence base to contribute to EU tourism policymaking and programme management, reinforcing the notion that ‘one cannot manage what cannot be measured’, particularly in light of ongoing efforts to update the EU tourism strategy, where funding plays a critical role. Nevertheless, further research should aim to disaggregate data both by country and sub-national regions, and to analyse funding distribution at the level of individual project partners where possible. This would help better understand spatial participation dynamics and support more targeted evaluation of tourism-related interventions. Moving forward, the EU should consider mechanisms to foster policy continuity, such as multi-stage funding schemes, dedicated budget lines for tourism, and integrated monitoring frameworks that enable consistent tracking of tourism-related impacts across sectors.

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¹ Note 1: Links to used EU websites and databases are as follows: ERDF/CF/ESF raw data https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu/2007-2013-Categorisation/2007-2013-Cohesion-categorisation-raw-data-from-cl/qt3c-wiyg/about_data , Rural development EAFRD payments https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu/2007-2013-Finances/2007-2013-EAFRD-expenditure-declaration-by-measure/sffx-zkzc/about_data , ESIF Finance implementation details https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu/2014-2020-Finances/ESIF-2014-2020-Finance-Implementation-Details/99js-gm52/about_data , EMFF datahub <https://emff-datahub.eisma.eu> , COSME datahub <https://cosme-datahub.eisma.eu> , Keep.eu platform for cross-border, transnational and interregional cooperation programmes <https://keep.eu/projects/> , CORDIS FP7 <https://data.europa.eu/data/datasets/cordisfp7projects?locale=en> CORDIS Horizon 2020 <https://data.europa.eu/data/datasets/cordish2020projects?locale=en> , Erasmus+, <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/projects/search/> Creative Europe <https://culture.ec.europa.eu/creative-europe/projects/search/> , and the LIFE public database from CINEA <https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/life/publicWebsite/search/advanced>

Article III – Analysis of the evaluation framework of European Union-funded tourism projects

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Analysis of the evaluation framework of European Union-funded tourism projects

Abstract

This paper examines the evaluation frameworks applied to tourism-related interventions funded by the European Union (EU), focusing on their effectiveness in promoting accountability, learning, and sustainable outcomes. Through content analysis of evaluation reports, audits, and programme assessments from the EU's Cohesion Policy data platform, the study identifies key methodological patterns and recurring challenges. Despite progress in adopting participatory and mixed-method approaches, evaluations remain limited in number and scope, with tourism accounting for less than 1% of all assessments. Persistent challenges include fragmented data, lack of standardised indicators, inconsistent methodologies, and limited capacity to assess regional diversity and long-term impacts. Poor dissemination practices further restrict knowledge transfer and reduce the potential for learning. By highlighting these gaps, the paper contributes to the underexplored field of tourism evaluation in EU policy and advocates for more harmonised and transparent evaluation protocols. Strengthening these foundations is critical to enhance the impact of EU funding and support evidence-based policymaking in the tourism sector.

Keywords: Tourism, Projects' Evaluation, European Union, Cohesion Policy, Sustainability

Introduction

Evaluation plays a critical role in public policy and programme delivery by ensuring the efficient use of resources, demonstrating accountability, enhancing implementation, generating knowledge on effective practices, and building institutional capacity (European Commission, 2013). Within the European Union (EU), evaluation has been institutionalised through Structural Funds, with distinct responsibilities and goals throughout programming stages. It supports evidence-based policymaking through ex-ante, mid-term, and ex-post assessments aligned with the programme cycle, enabling the systematic analysis of outputs, outcomes, and impacts.

The evaluation of tourism-related EU-funded interventions has gained increasing relevance given the sector's complex and cross-cutting nature. Tourism investments often intersect with other policy areas such as infrastructure, skills, rural development, and enterprise support. While this multidimensionality creates opportunities for broader socio-economic benefits, it also complicates the measurement of impacts, particularly when interventions are fragmented or inadequately monitored. Despite the strategic role of Cohesion Policy in supporting tourism across Europe (Camatti et al., 2022), significant challenges persist, including inconsistent evaluation methodologies, limited use of qualitative indicators, and wide disparities in evaluation capacity across Member States (Byrne, 2013; Koudoumakis et al., 2022).

The introduction of mandatory ex-ante evaluations in the 2014–2020 programming period was a notable step toward more outcome-oriented programme design, intended to improve intervention quality and ensure alignment with the Europe 2020 strategy (European

Commission, 2012). However, the decision to remove the requirement for ex-ante evaluations in the 2021–2027 period has been criticised as a regression in terms of ensuring rigorous planning and evidence-based funding decisions (Koudoumakis et al., 2022). Equally critical but even more underdeveloped are ex-post evaluations, which aim to assess actual outcomes, long-term impacts, and sustainability. In tourism, ex-post evaluation practices remain inconsistent and often limited to basic output monitoring, with few efforts to establish causality or evaluate broader systemic effects. While progress has been made in the estimation of value of EU-funded tourism interventions, systematic evaluation remains limited (Torres et al., 2025a). Most existing studies focus on localised experiences (Escarré Urueña et al., 2020; Kechagia & Kyriazi, 2021; Nash et al., 2006; Tirado Ballesteros & Hernández Hernández, 2017) or are embedded within specific research themes, such as skills development (Carlisle et al., 2023). As a result, there is a lack of comprehensive understanding regarding the broader impacts of EU tourism funding and the evaluation methods used. Without robust ex-post assessments, the ability to generate learning and accountability from EU-funded tourism projects is constrained, weakening the feedback loop necessary for adaptive policy and programme design.

This paper addresses these gaps by systematically analysing evaluation reports of tourism-related interventions within the EU Cohesion Policy dataset and by reviewing key EU audit and programme evaluation documents. Through content analysis, it assesses how tourism has been evaluated, identifies methodological limitations, and proposes improvements to enhance evaluation rigour, relevance, and comparability across the EU. In doing so, the paper contributes to strengthening the evaluation of tourism-related actions within EU cohesion policy and supports the development of more coherent, context-sensitive, and forward-looking evaluation practices. This analysis is especially timely in view of the upcoming Multiannual Financial Framework (2028–2034) and the ongoing consultations for the EU’s Sustainable Tourism Strategy, both of which present opportunities to embed stronger evaluation standards across tourism funding instruments.

Literature review

Conceptual foundations and methodological approaches to evaluation

Evaluation plays a central role in ensuring public interventions are effective, efficient, and accountable. Ex-ante evaluations are intended to assess baseline conditions and forecast policy outcomes, yet they remain inconsistently applied. One key limitation is what Manski (2013) refers to as ‘incredible certitude’, the overconfidence of policymakers in assumed knowledge, which discourages learning and reduces the perceived need for evaluation. Structural modelling has been advanced as one tool to counter this limitation. Attanasio and Blair (2018) highlight its capacity to simulate behavioural responses by incorporating assumptions about agents, preferences, and constraints within broader economic contexts. This approach provides policymakers with a transparent and theoretically grounded tool to anticipate impacts and design more effective, context-sensitive interventions before implementation.

Ex-post evaluations, by contrast, measure actual outcomes and enable causal inference. The Neyman-Rubin framework (Sekhon, 2008) provides the basis for comparing observed results

with counterfactual scenarios. Angrist and Pischke (2009) further argue that clear causal identification, not statistical complexity, should be the priority. Storey (2008) "Six Steps to Heaven" underscores that many evaluations fall short of this standard, stopping at monitoring outputs or lacking credible control groups. As such, theory-based approaches and counterfactual methods are increasingly recommended (European Commission, 2014c).

In line with these methodological concerns, the European Commission has issued several guidance documents to promote a more outcome-oriented approach to evaluation. These documents advocate for shifting focus from fund absorption to assessing performance and results (European Commission, 2012, 2014c). Effective evaluations are expected to go beyond counting outputs to determine whether interventions lead to lasting improvements in competitiveness, employment, or social inclusion (European Commission, 2013). However, the European Court of Auditors (2018) noted that output indicators still dominate evaluations and called for greater use of standardised results indicators to enhance impact measurement.

The Commission also differentiates between impact evaluations, which examine the attributable effects of interventions, and implementation evaluations, which assess programme delivery and management. It recommends using theory-based and counterfactual approaches to better understand causality and inform future policymaking (European Commission, 2014c). The European Commission (2024d) Evaluation Handbook further reinforces these principles, encouraging early integration of evaluation into the policy cycle and advocating for the use of intervention logic and theory of change to clarify causal pathways. It promotes mixed-method designs that combine quantitative rigour with qualitative depth and calls for improved transparency in findings dissemination. These recommendations aim to strengthen evaluation utility, comparability, and relevance across complex, multi-sectoral policy fields.

These EU-level efforts are in line with international best practices. Institutions such as the World Bank, UNDP, and OECD have long advocated for integrated evaluation frameworks that combine qualitative and quantitative methods with strong stakeholder participation (Kusek & Rist, 2004; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2012). While early tourism-specific guidance often focused on cost-benefit analysis (World Tourism Organisation, 1980), later publications, such as UNDP's results-based Monitoring and Evaluation handbook (United Nations Development Programme, 2002) and Gertler et al. (2016) impact evaluation guide, have prioritised baseline data, theories of change, and the value of pilot testing. These tools are essential for developing evidence-based and contextually appropriate interventions. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2012) identifies evaluation as critical for advancing evidence-based tourism policy and ensuring transparency, though disparities in evaluation practices continue to limit knowledge transfer and weaken the learning potential of EU tourism funding.

Quantitative and qualitative approaches in evaluation

A growing body of empirical research has applied rigorous quantitative methods to assess public grants, though tourism-specific studies remain limited. Dvouletý et al. (2021) review 30 SME grant evaluations across the EU, highlighting the use of matching and difference-in-differences approaches. Their findings indicate generally positive effects on employment and firm survival,

but more mixed impacts on productivity. The authors call for better reporting, long-term evaluations to capture delayed effects on firm productivity and efficiency. Bernini and Pellegrini (2013) apply similar methods to Italy's tourism sector and show that while grants boost output and employment, they do not significantly improve productivity. They warn that such interventions may not enhance long-term competitiveness unless they are complemented by broader policies focused on innovation, skills, and firm capabilities.

Sector-specific evaluations confirm that outcomes vary by region and programme design. For example, Srhoj et al. (2022) find small tourism grants generate positive results only in high-demand destinations, while Tundis et al. (2017) report that hotel subsidies improve performance in Alpine regions, but effects are geographically uneven, suggesting that subsidies may exacerbate regional disparities rather than promote territorial cohesion. Other ex-post quantitative analyses offer valuable insights into the unintended consequences of tourism growth, such as its association with rising housing prices and population displacement, as illustrated by Mikulić et al. (2024), who examine how tourism expansion may contribute to broader socio-economic and demographic shifts. These findings underscore the importance of tailoring grant schemes to regional contexts and integrating broader policy tools to address systemic issues.

While quantitative methods are indispensable for identifying trends and estimating impacts, recent research has highlighted the role of qualitative and participatory approaches in complementing traditional evaluation frameworks. Montano et al. (2024) argue that traditional evaluation tools often fail to capture intangible, localised, or emergent outcomes, and advocate for the use of the Most Significant Change technique to surface stakeholder narratives and unexpected results in tourism interventions, as well as co-learning through participatory evaluations (Montano et al., 2023). Qualitative methods, such as interviews or focus groups, remain underutilised despite their recognised value in capturing stakeholder perspectives and understanding causal mechanisms (European Commission, 2013). Vanclay (2013) similarly underscores how interviews and ethnography enrich understanding of social change and stakeholder perspectives.

Plzakova (2022) proposes a multi-level evaluation framework that combines quantitative methods with participatory tools like the Method for Impact Assessment of Programmes and Projects (MAPP) approach to assess tourism programmes at the local level. These models help bridge the gap between top-down evaluation systems and bottom-up community realities. The European Commission (2024d) supports this integration, encouraging the use of theory-based, mixed-method approaches that are context-sensitive and stakeholder-informed. Together, these works argue for a more balanced evaluation practice that combines methodological rigour with inclusive and grounded insights.

Persistent challenges in evaluating EU-funded tourism interventions

Despite methodological advances and increasing guidance from the European Commission, several persistent challenges limit the quality and utility of tourism evaluation under EU funding frameworks. A major issue is the fragmented integration of evaluation across the policy cycle, often treated as a one-off administrative requirement rather than a tool for strategic learning

(European Commission, 2013; Volden & Welde, 2022). This is particularly problematic in complex, multi-annual Cohesion Policy programmes, where evaluations should serve as iterative feedback mechanisms.

Tourism's cross-cutting nature, spanning infrastructure, SMEs, cultural heritage, and environment, complicates impact attribution and weakens the visibility of tourism-specific outcomes (European Commission, 2016a). Standardised frameworks remain underdeveloped, and decentralised governance contributes to uneven evaluation capacities across Member States (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2012). Without holistic, locally tailored approaches, projects risk exacerbating disparities rather than decreasing them, in particular when root causes are not addressed (Muñoz-Fernández et al., 2023). Furthermore, most evaluations rely heavily on quantitative metrics such as visitor numbers or job creation, which often neglect qualitative outcomes like institutional learning, social cohesion, or cultural sustainability (O'Sullivan et al., 2003; Tirado Ballesteros & Hernández Hernández, 2017). Baseline studies and mixed-method approaches are also necessary to understand how context influences outcomes (Gonzalez-Urango & García-Melón, 2018; Tirado Ballesteros & Hernández Hernández, 2017; United Nations Development Programme, 2002).

Evaluation quality also varies depending on the implementing institution. While the Commission's internal evaluations follow methodological guidance, van Voorst and Mastenbroek (2019) observed that they often struggle with scope clarity and data substantiation. Evaluations conducted by external actors generally demonstrate higher analytical rigour. Data inconsistencies and lack of comparability across regions also hinder robust assessments, particularly where baseline data are missing or indicators differ across projects. Lastly, limited dissemination and language barriers often restrict access to full evaluation reports, reducing opportunities for learning and replication (Christoforou Livani et al., 2024; European Court of Auditors, 2018).

Case-based evidence and lessons from applied evaluations

Empirical studies on tourism project evaluations have generated valuable insights, particularly when grounded in robust ex-post methodologies. Srakar and Vecco (2017), in their analysis of the European Capital of Culture Maribor 2012, show that ex-ante multiplier estimates overstated employment effects, while ex-post analysis confirmed tourism growth but failed to verify projected job creation. This underlines the importance of combining ex-ante projections with ex-post verification. Fox and Rampton (2015) evaluation of the 2014 European Capitals of Culture cities Riga and Umeå identified increases in cultural participation and visibility but acknowledged that structural transformation and tourism impacts remained difficult to measure and attribute, underlining the importance of integrating legacy planning and robust evaluation mechanisms from the outset to enhance the effectiveness of EU cultural interventions. Similarly, Valente and Uršič (2025) highlight that evaluations of Portugal's Recovery and Resilience Plan tourism investments lack robust impact frameworks and fail to reflect uneven regional capacities.

Other regional evaluations expose systemic gaps. In Greece, Kechagia and Kyriazi (2021) found that tourism-related structural funds stimulated growth but delayed broader economic

restructuring. Studies of LEADER and INTERREG programmes (Shepherd & Ioannides, 2020; Tirado Ballesteros & Hernández Hernández, 2017) point to limitations in stakeholder participation, short project cycles, and weak legacy planning.

These cases highlight the need for evaluations that are context-specific, theory-informed, and attentive to long-term structural outcomes, reinforcing earlier calls for triangulation between ex-ante, ex-post, and participatory methods to inform more adaptive and effective tourism funding policies. While most existing studies focus on individual cases or programmes, this paper addresses a significant gap by analysing a broader dataset from Cohesion Policy evaluations to identify how tourism-related measures have been assessed across EU Member States.

Methodology

Content analysis has been used as the main qualitative research method as it enables the systematic organisation and interpretation of large volumes of secondary data, as followed by Şengel et al. (2023). First of all, the theoretical framework has been developed by examining existing methodological guidelines and tools for evaluating projects and programmes, drawing on both EU and international practices. Therefore, an in-depth review of audits conducted by the European Court of Auditors in 2011, 2021 and 2022 has been carried out in relation to the tourism and rural projects, alongside evaluations of Cohesion Policy Programmes from 2007–2013 in the areas of culture and tourism. This review is complemented by insights from evaluations of Interreg Europe and research programmes. These analyses were seeking to identify recurring challenges, limitations and examples of good practices in evaluation approaches, methods, and techniques.

Secondly, an analysis was conducted on the dataset of Cohesion Policy Programme evaluations completed by EU Member States from 2015 to the present¹. This dataset includes 3,088 evaluations, of which 21 were identified as containing the terms “tourism” or “tourist”. This dataset was selected because it represents the most comprehensive publicly available source of tourism-related evaluations. Other EU funding instruments either do not conduct evaluations specific to tourism or, if they do, such evaluations are not publicly accessible. Regularly updated by the European Commission and last accessed on 3 December 2024, the dataset comprises 49 columns with various codes and data related to evaluation files. For the purposes of this study, the following columns were deemed particularly relevant: (i) Title of the evaluation (in English), (ii) Country code, (iii) Publication date, (iv) Abstract summary, (v) Objectives, (vi) Methods, (vii) Main findings and (viii) Limitations. Keywords within the evaluations were examined to identify common terms and facilitate their categorisation.

The results are presented in two parts. The first part involves an analysis of key findings from EU audits and evaluations focusing on tourism-related actions. The second part examines 21 tourism programme evaluations on the European Commission’s Cohesion data platform. Finally, the results are discussed, providing a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities in evaluating EU-funded tourism initiatives.

¹ Data was retrieved from https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu/2014-2020-Evaluation/Cohesion-policy-programme-evaluations-2015-to-date/iz3t-u7bv/about_data

Results and discussion

EU evaluation of tourism-related actions

The European Union relies on both internal and external evaluation mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of public interventions. The European Court of Auditors (ECA), as the EU's external audit body, conducts performance audits to ensure that funds are used effectively and align with policy goals. These audits follow international evaluation standards such as the European Implementing Guidelines for INTOSAI Auditing Standards (European Court of Auditors, 1998), reflecting the EU's alignment with global best practices (Gertler et al., 2016; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2012).

Despite progress in strengthening the EU's evaluation architecture, tourism remains a cross-cutting area without a dedicated budget line, leading to fragmented assessment and weak integration across policy instruments (Torres et al., 2025b). This fragmentation complicates the application of theory-based approaches and counterfactual analysis, which are essential for robust impact evaluation (European Commission, 2014; Sekhon, 2008).

Evaluations of Research and Innovation and SME-related frameworks, such as Horizon 2020 and COSME, underline persistent implementation gaps. These include insufficient dissemination of results, limited participation from underrepresented groups, and weak capacity among final users (European Commission, 2022, 2024a). In response, recent COSME calls have mandated the creation of Best Practice Compendiums, reflecting an effort to institutionalise learning mechanisms (European Commission, 2023c). These developments echo earlier calls for evaluations that promote learning and continuous improvement rather than fulfilling purely accountability functions (Montano et al., 2023).

Audits by the ECA provide valuable ex-post insights. For example, the 2011 report reviewing ERDF-funded tourism projects (2000–2006) identified positive operational continuity and job creation outcomes, but also highlighted administrative burdens and insufficient cost-effectiveness analysis (European Court of Auditors, 2011). Similarly, the 2021 audit of 32 tourism projects during 2014–2020 revealed recurrent challenges. While many projects successfully enhanced regional tourism infrastructure, the audit identified recurring issues: poor initial planning, cost overruns, delays, and duplication of initiatives. Overreliance on visitor numbers as the sole output indicator hindered a more comprehensive assessment of impacts such as seasonality mitigation or local economic spill-overs. The ECA recommended better project selection criteria, improved coordination, and more holistic monitoring frameworks (European Court of Auditors, 2021). These findings reinforce the argument advanced by Storey (2008) and Plzakova (2022) that evaluations must move beyond output monitoring toward impact-oriented, multi-level frameworks that include social and environmental dimensions.

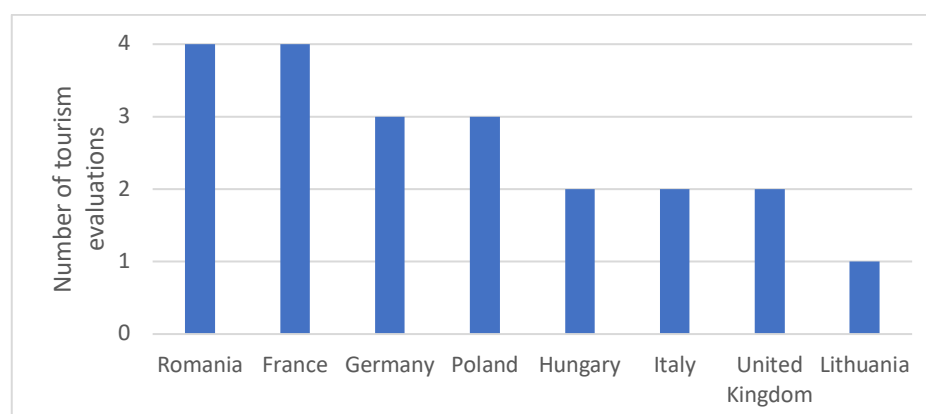
Evaluations of rural development funds between 2007 and 2020 further illustrated inconsistencies in project durability and monitoring (European Court of Auditors, 2022a). The adoption of stricter sustainability criteria in countries like Austria and Italy provides useful institutional models, aligning with international recommendations for context-sensitive and long-term evaluations (Attanasio & Blair, 2018; Dvouletý et al., 2021). Evaluations of INTERREG

and cross-border initiatives also point to difficulties in aggregating results across diverse territories and the limited ability to capture indirect socio-economic effects, challenges that highlight the importance of developing tailored theories of change and standardised evaluation protocols (European Commission, 2016a; Hinojosa et al., 2020; Interreg Europe Joint Secretariat, 2024).

Evaluations of tourism programmes from Cohesion Policy dataset

Of the 3,088 Cohesion Policy Programme evaluations recorded since 2015, only 21 (less than 1%) explicitly mention “tourism” or “tourist”, reflecting its cross-sectoral nature and the persistent invisibility of tourism within broader evaluation systems (European Commission, 2016a). This limited visibility undermines the sector’s strategic positioning and hinders learning across interventions. France and Romania had the most evaluations (four each), followed by Germany and Poland (three each), Hungary, Italy and UK (two each), and Lithuania (one). No other EU Member States were represented (Figure 22).

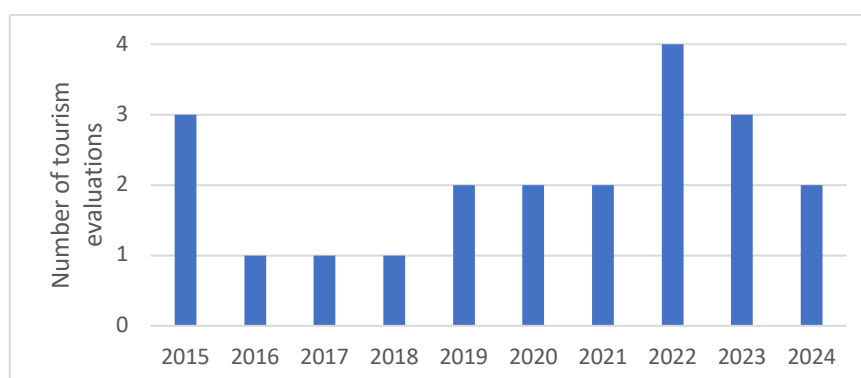
Figure 22. Number and countries of tourism-related Cohesion Policy evaluations



Source: own elaboration with data from EU Cohesion policy platform

The number of tourism-related evaluations has varied over time, with a generally low and uneven frequency. While occasional peaks have occurred, such as in 2022, overall activity remains limited (Fig. 23). This sporadic pattern suggests a lack of systematic evaluation practice in the sector.

Figure 23. Number of tourism-related Cohesion Policy evaluations per year (2015-2024)

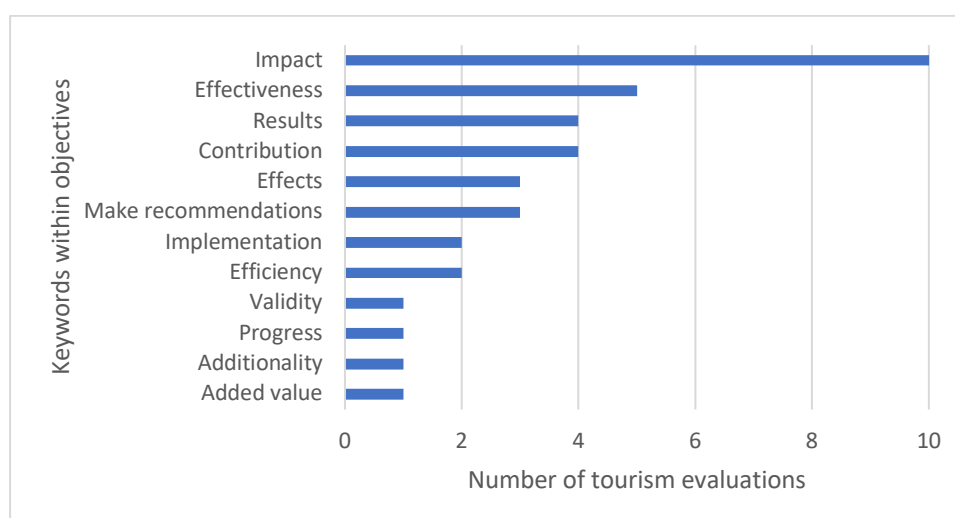


Source: own elaboration with data from EU Cohesion policy platform

Thematic analysis of objectives reveals that TO6 (Preserving and protecting the environment) was cited in 67% of evaluations, aligning with the shift toward sustainability-oriented outcomes. TO3 (Enhancing the competitiveness of SMEs) and TO8 (Employment and labour mobility) followed, each mentioned in 29% of cases, consistent with tourism’s contribution to regional development and job creation. However, other objectives, including TO1 (Research, technological development and innovation) and TO9 (Social inclusion), were largely absent with only one evaluation each, accounting for less than 5% of the projects.

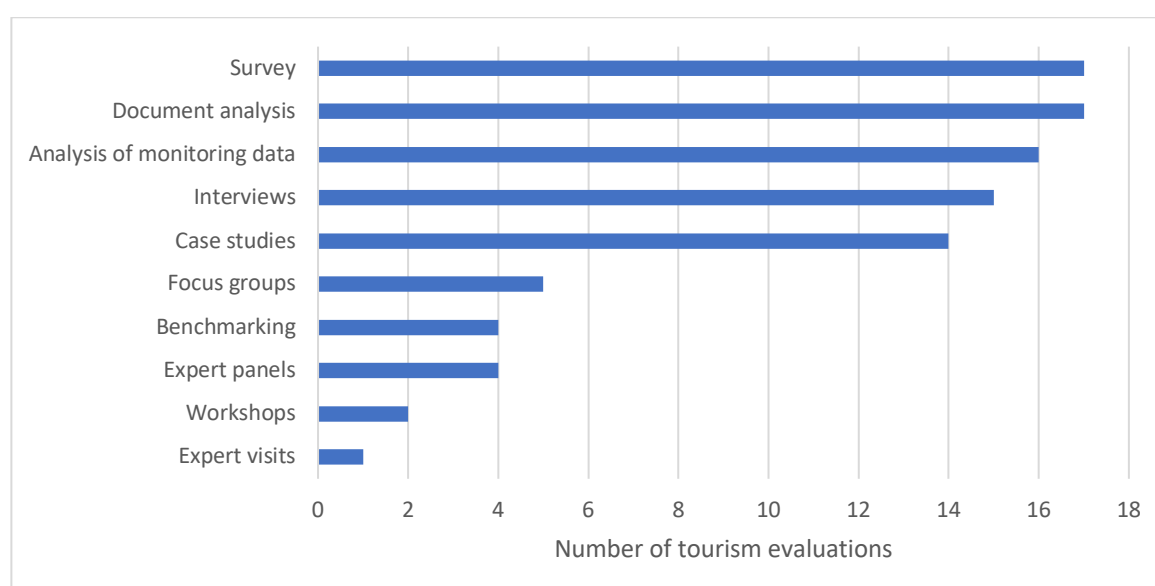
Evaluation objectives frequently referenced “impact”, followed by “effectiveness”, “results”, and “contribution”, each cited in 4–5 evaluations, reflecting a growing emphasis on results-oriented assessments (Figure 24). Yet this rhetorical focus is not always supported by methodological rigour. As shown in Figure 25, most evaluations employed surveys, document analysis, and monitoring data, methods that, while necessary, often remain descriptive. Overall, the data indicates a preference for mixed-method approaches to capture both measurable outcomes and contextual insights. Only one evaluation applied counterfactual techniques (score matching and difference-in-differences), underscoring the underutilisation of rigorous impact evaluation designs as noted by Storey (2008) and Sekhon (2008). The literature stresses that without establishing credible control groups or counterfactuals, evaluations risk misattributing effects and inflating success claims.

Figure 24. Main objectives of tourism-related Cohesion Policy evaluations



Source: own elaboration with data from EU Cohesion policy platform

Figure 25. Main methods used in tourism-related Cohesion Policy evaluations



Source: own elaboration with data from EU Cohesion policy platform

The analysis also confirms that over two-thirds of evaluations faced limitations, most commonly related to data availability. This aligns with Christoforou Livani et al. (2024), who found that data remained underutilised due to accessibility, acquisition, and cross-border cooperation challenges, including fragmented information, limited data services, and legal, linguistic, and compatibility barriers. Evaluators cited difficulties in measuring results due to ongoing implementation and in attributing outcomes directly to specific interventions, problems that could be addressed through better ex-ante planning, the use of logic models, and stakeholder-informed indicator frameworks (European Commission, 2013, 2024d; Gertler et al., 2016).

The evaluations revealed several recurring themes across both quantitative and qualitative findings. Quantitative results highlighted positive impacts, such as increased tourist numbers and infrastructure improvements. Some projects also achieved notable outcomes, including the enhancement of natural and cultural heritage and the development of innovative services. Moreover, many measures were deemed unlikely to have been implemented without external support, underscoring the critical role of funding programmes in enabling tourism-related initiatives. However, challenges were frequently noted, particularly the complexity of application procedures and administrative rules, as well as inadequate project selection criteria, which posed significant obstacles to effective project execution. These limitations often reduced the broader effectiveness and sustainability of the initiatives.

Qualitative findings highlighted further structural issues, such as weak coordination, limited market intelligence, and poor complementarity with other measures. The literature supports the view that tourism projects often lack strong strategic grounding, which constrains their transformative potential, requiring innovative methods to better capture changes (Montano et al., 2024). While some projects noted positive effects on heritage valorisation or service innovation, these were often offset by limited durability or narrow beneficiary engagement.

External factors, including the Covid-19 pandemic, were reported to have complicated the measurement of long-term outcomes.

Discussion of overall findings

The analysis of tourism-related evaluations under the EU Cohesion Policy framework highlights a critical gap between methodological guidance and practical application. While the 2014–2020 period shows a shift towards more rigorous and mixed-method evaluation designs, combining surveys, monitoring data, interviews, and case studies; this progress is constrained by persistent data limitations, underreporting, and low sectoral visibility. Out of over 3,000 recorded evaluations, fewer than 1% explicitly address tourism, reflecting the cross-sectoral dispersion of tourism interventions across themes like transport, rural development, and heritage (European Commission, 2023a). This low coverage hinders the comparability and strategic use of evaluation results. Overconfidence in policy design continues to limit the demand for rigorous, learning-oriented evaluations (Manski, 2013). To address this, evaluation must be better integrated across the programme cycle, with a shift from compliance-driven exercises to processes that support continuous improvement and strategic learning (Montano et al., 2023; Storey, 2008).

Indicator selection remains a significant challenge. Commonly used metrics such as visitor numbers or job creation often fail to capture tourism's broader or long-term impacts, particularly in rural or cultural contexts where intangible benefits prevail (Dunphy et al., 2020). Social, cultural, and environmental indicators are underrepresented and require more deliberate inclusion. Drawing lessons from sectors such as LIFE or regional programmes could help broaden indicator sets (Vanclay, 2013). Furthermore, evaluations need to account for tourism's multi-sectoral nature, including its indirect beneficiaries and systemic linkages, which are often neglected in sector-based assessments (Guix & Font, 2022).

Similar challenges have been identified in maritime spatial planning, where tourism is also a key component (Christoforou Livani et al., 2024). Monitoring and evaluation are complicated by overlapping policy objectives, external socio-economic and environmental influences, and the lack of structured data collection frameworks. Limited mechanisms for systematic data analysis further hinder impact assessment, while challenges in evaluating coordination structures, integrating relevant data, and defining clear indicators add to the complexity. Developing a regional monitoring programme with standardised indicators requires strong stakeholder collaboration and consensus to enhance effectiveness and ensure meaningful outcomes. Notably, collaboration itself can be a key outcome of Cohesion Policy programmes. Some analysed projects acknowledged that without EU funding, they would not have been developed at the same scale or scope, highlighting the importance of strengthening synergies. However, fully evaluating collaboration requires its inclusion as a specific project objective, and measuring it remains challenging due to its intangible nature (Lawrence, 2011).

The application of Logic Models and Theories of Change, highlighted in the Evaluation Handbook (European Commission, 2024d) and the broader literature (Gertler et al., 2016; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2012), remains uneven in tourism. These frameworks help articulate causal pathways, assumptions, and mechanisms, yet are rarely employed in

practice (Montano et al., 2023). Ex-post evaluations often fail to identify causal links due to the absence of robust baselines, counterfactuals, or clearly defined objectives (Angrist & Pischke, 2009; Sekhon, 2008).

Building evaluation capacity remains an urgent priority. Administrative fragmentation, insufficient staff training, and limited organisational learning all hinder the ability to design, implement, and benefit from evaluation. The risk of knowledge loss after project closure is especially acute in tourism, where institutional memory is often weak. Capacity-building, improved resource integration, and the adoption of new tools such as big data analytics, as suggested by the European Court of Auditors (2021) can help modernise tourism evaluation and improve long-term outcomes.

Conclusions

This paper has examined the evaluation frameworks applied to EU-funded tourism-related interventions, drawing on evaluation reports, audits, and programme assessments from the European Commission's Cohesion Policy data platform. The findings reveal that although methodological progress has been made, particularly through increased use of participatory and mixed-method approaches, tourism remains under-evaluated within EU policy, representing less than 1% of all Cohesion Policy evaluations. With only two thematic audits by the European Court of Auditors to date (2011 and 2021), this evaluation is minimal to the sector's economic importance in Europe.

The study contributes to the academic literature by systematically identifying methodological gaps, including the data and fragmented use of indicators, weak integration of theory-based and mixed approaches, and limited dissemination of findings. Despite the EU's evaluation guidance encouraging the use of logic models and theories of change, their adoption in tourism remains sparse. Stronger alignment with regional contexts, clearer causal pathways, and greater emphasis on long-term monitoring and stakeholder engagement are essential to improve evaluation relevance and impact.

For policymakers and practitioners, the findings underscore the need for standardised protocols, enhanced baseline data, and consistent, accessible reporting. Tools such as big data analytics and improved dissemination, through full executive summaries, permanent links to reports, and multilingual access, can help strengthen transparency and reduce duplication. These improvements are particularly timely in light of the upcoming EU Sustainable Tourism Strategy and the proposed Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for 2028–2034, which includes commitments to greater transparency and public access to data on fund beneficiaries (European Commission, 2025). Incorporating evaluation mechanisms from the outset of programme design will be key to fostering learning and adaptive policymaking.

This study also reinforces the importance of addressing governance challenges in tourism evaluation, specifically, the sector's marginal and fragmented treatment across funding instruments. If left unaddressed, this fragmentation risks undermining the sector's potential contribution to cohesion, sustainability, and innovation objectives. Strengthening evaluation

foundations is therefore not only a technical necessity but a policy imperative to ensure that public investment in tourism supports long-term development goals.

The analysis is based solely on secondary data from publicly available EU sources. As such, it is constrained by data availability, language barriers, and inconsistent methodological detail across evaluations. Future research should conduct comparative analyses across Member States to identify divergent evaluation practices and transferable good practices. Primary research involving interviews with evaluators, implementing bodies, and beneficiaries would further enrich understanding of the effectiveness, added value, and long-term outcomes of EU-funded tourism interventions.

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Article IV – EU-funded tourism projects for a green transition: The case of Tourism Sustainability Plans in Destinations (PSTD) in Spain

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EU-funded tourism projects for a green transition: The case of Tourism Sustainability Plans in Destinations (PSTD) in Spain

Abstract

Tourism is a key sector in the European economy, yet EU tourism policy remains weakly integrated into broader sustainability and cohesion frameworks. This paper analyses Spain's Tourism Sustainability Plans in Destinations (PSTD), funded under the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) of *Next Generation EU*. Of the €140 billion in EU-backed investment allocated to Spain, €1.86 billion has supported PSTD implementation in over 400 destinations. Using a combination of policy and literature review and a systematic analysis of 540 funded interventions between 2021 and 2023, the study assesses whether the PSTD contribute to a green and sustainable tourism transition. Results show a strong focus on infrastructure and energy efficiency, but limited incorporation of climate action, circular economy, or governance innovation. The paper concludes that while PSTDs represent a major financial commitment, their transformative potential remains constrained. Greater policy coherence and stronger evaluation frameworks are needed to align these initiatives with the European Agenda for Tourism 2030 and long-term sustainability goals.

Keywords: EU tourism policy, sustainable tourism, green transition, Spain, Plan Sostenibilidad Turística en Destino (PSTD)

Introduction

Europe remains the world's leading tourist destination, welcoming over 747 million international arrivals in 2024 – 1% above pre-pandemic levels (UN Tourism, 2025). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism contributed approximately 10% to the EU's GDP and supported over 23 million jobs (WTTC, 2023). As such, the European Union (EU) has increasingly sought to maintain its global leadership while transforming the sector into a more sustainable, resilient, and inclusive one (European Commission, 2010, 2022).

However, despite the sector's importance, tourism policy at the EU level has historically evolved very slowly, lacking institutional power (Estol & Font, 2016; Torres et al., 2025a). The COVID-19 pandemic catalysed unprecedented public investment, notably through the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), which offered a window of opportunity to accelerate the transition towards more sustainable tourism models. Spain, one of the top recipients of RRF funding, launched the Tourism Sustainability Plans at Destinations (PSTD) as a flagship initiative to support modernisation, smart destination development, and green transition.

This paper investigates to what extent these plans reflect the EU's stated ambitions for a green transition in tourism. It introduces the theoretical evolution of EU tourism policy, analyses the nature and distribution of PSTD funding, and assesses the degree to which supported interventions align with sustainability objectives. In doing so, it contributes to current debates on the role of EU funding in delivering place-based and environmentally responsible tourism futures.

Theoretical framework

The trajectory of EU tourism policy has been marked by incremental recognition rather than structural consolidation. Initial communications from the 1980s were followed by the Treaty of Lisbon (2007) which for the first time formally acknowledged the EU's role in promoting tourism. Yet, as scholars argue, this formalisation has not translated into substantial influence or budgetary power (Anastasiadou, 2011). Tourism remains an area of shared competence, with limited authority delegated to EU institutions.

The policy framework has evolved through strategic documents emphasising competitiveness, sustainability, and digitalisation. Estol & Font (2016) note that the sector's positioning within the EU has been increasingly shaped by broader goals of market integration and sustainable development. The European Commission has sought to address this gap through strategic guidance documents and by embedding tourism within broader agendas of cohesion, sustainability, and resilience. A significant turning point came with the publication of the Transition Pathway for Tourism (European Commission, 2022), which outlined a collaborative roadmap for the green and digital transformation of the sector. The pathway encourages voluntary commitments and action from Member States and stakeholders, supported by initiatives such as the European Agenda for Tourism 2030, which further outlines priorities around resilience, innovation, and cohesion. While a new EU Sustainable Tourism Strategy is currently being developed, stronger efforts and more coherent and holistic approaches are needed to achieve enhanced policy enforcement (Torres et al., 2025a).

The green transition in tourism is increasingly understood as part of a broader “twin transition” that also includes digital innovation. Jones (2023) emphasises that the EU's Transition Pathway for Tourism promotes a systemic shift toward climate neutrality, circularity, and sustainable mobility, underpinned by stakeholder pledges and public funding. However, evidence suggests that digitalisation alone may increase emissions unless paired with strong environmental technologies. Bianchini et al. (2023) find that while green research and development reduces emissions, digital technologies can raise them, unless integrated with robust environmental strategies. This highlights the need for coordinated green and digital investments in tourism. At the same time, the EU has activated a series of financial instruments to support this transition, including extensions to traditional structural funds, such as *Recovery assistance for cohesion and the territories of Europe* (REACT-EU), and temporary mechanisms such as the *Recovery and Resilience Facility* (RRF) and *Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency* (SURE) (Kiss-Gálfalvi et al., 2024).

Among EU member states, Spain has adopted these narratives while designing its post-pandemic tourism recovery. The PSTD, financed via the *Next Generation EU* (NGEU) mechanism, represents an attempt to operationalise sustainability in tourism through decentralised action. However, Spain's recovery approach has privileged economic reactivation over environmental and social transformation, echoing pre-existing growth paradigms (Capdepón Frías, 2023). Similarly, evaluations of previous EU-funded tourism programmes have flagged significant

shortcomings in planning, needs assessment, and impact tracking (European Court of Auditors, 2021).

Spain, one of the main beneficiaries of EU recovery funds, has long faced the challenges of mass tourism and seasonal overconcentration. The Spanish tourism model, rooted in rapid coastal development in the second half of the nineteenth century, has led to environmental degradation, infrastructural pressure, and socio-economic imbalances. Planning efforts since the 1990s have attempted to diversify tourism offerings and introduce sustainability principles through national strategies such as Plan Horizonte 2020 and the Plan Nacional e Integral de Turismo (2012-2015), yet implementation has often been fragmented or short-lived (Ivars Baidal, 2014; López Palomeque et al., 2022).

With the adoption of the Plan de Recuperación, Transformación y Resiliencia (“España Puede”), Spain committed to accelerating its tourism transition through the Plan de Modernización y Competitividad del sector turístico. This includes the expansion of the Planes de Sostenibilidad Turística en Destinos (PSTD), co-financed by the RRF. These plans aim to empower regional and local authorities to implement projects across four strategic axes: green transition, energy efficiency, digitalisation, and competitiveness (Gobierno de España, 2021).

Initial results have been mixed. While the PSTD initiative has succeeded in mobilising significant resources –over €1.8 billion between 2021 and 2023– and activating over 500 projects nationwide, it is unclear the impact and alignment with tourism sustainability policies. Recent research highlights several structural limitations in the implementation of the Planes de Sostenibilidad Turística en Destino (PSTD), particularly regarding territorial coherence and planning integration (Capdepón Frías et al., 2024). For instance, the implementation of PSTDs within natural protected areas has been marked by fragmentation and territorial imbalance, fostering the continuation of growth-oriented logics within sensitive ecosystems, instead of integrated management approaches that reconcile conservation objectives with tourism development limitations (Capdepón Frías, 2023). While these plans have enabled significant funding mobilisation, their application in some regions has led to overlaps, fragmented strategies, or support for locations with questionable suitability as tourism destinations. Garzón García & Ramírez López (2025) observe that in Andalusia, multiple PSTD were approved for small municipalities with limited tourism capacity or for areas already covered by other plans, contributing to incoherence and administrative inefficiency. Furthermore, the content of many PSTD remains publicly inaccessible, limiting transparency and hindering critical evaluation of their strategic orientation.

The literature consistently points to a gap between strategic discourse and implementation. Scholars have warned of the risk of path dependency, where investments reproduce established patterns rather than catalysing change (Ivars Baidal, 2014; López Palomeque et al., 2022). Despite the narrative of sustainability, tourism planning in Spain remains deeply conditioned by economic recovery imperatives and local absorptive capacity, echoing broader concerns identified at the EU level regarding the dilution of cohesion policy’s long-term objectives in the face of successive crises (Kiss-Gálfalvi et al., 2024). This paper builds on these insights to interrogate whether the PSTD signify a substantive shift towards sustainability, or whether they reflect a continuation of infrastructuralist, growth-driven approaches covered in green rhetoric.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach combining a literature review with a systematic analysis of publicly available data on the implementation of the Tourism Sustainability Plans in Destinations (Planes de Sostenibilidad Turística en Destinos, PSTD) in Spain from 2021 to 2023. Three main sources were used: i) Official calls and results from the Spanish Ministry of Industry, Trade and Tourism for the PSTD (2021, 2022, 2023), identifying 540 interventions with €1.808 billion allocated; ii) The complete funding and intervention dataset for the Comunitat Valenciana (CV), obtained from Turisme Comunitat Valenciana, including 122 individual actions within 21 interventions; and iii) The territorial PSTD strategy for CV (2022), which provided a regional case to analyse priorities, implementation choices, and typologies of funded actions.

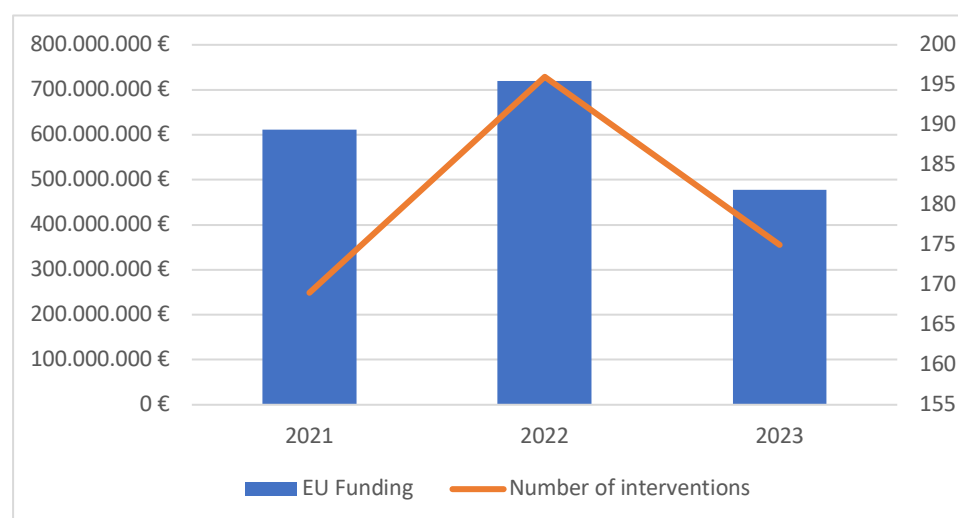
All interventions were categorised according to the four strategic axes defined by the national PSTD framework: 1) Green and sustainable transition, 2) Energy efficiency, 3) Digital transition and 4) Competitiveness. Special emphasis was placed on analysing axis 1 and 2 (green transition and energy efficiency), to assess whether systemic sustainability principles, such as circular economy, climate change adaptation, or low-carbon mobility; were integrated into project design. A categorisation system was developed to group actions by type of investment (e.g., infrastructure, services, planning tools) and by thematic area (e.g., solid waste, renewable energy, mobility). Descriptive statistics and comparative analysis were used to assess funding distribution over time, by region, and by intervention type. The results were interpreted in relation to national tourism priorities, and the EU's green transition objectives.

Results

National funding allocation

Between 2021 and 2023, the Spanish government allocated a total of €1.808 billion to 540 PSTD interventions across the country (Figure 26). The annual distribution of funds was relatively balanced, with slight increases year-on-year and a decrease in the last call in 2023. Interventions were implemented across a diversity of destination types, including rural areas, coastal towns, natural areas, and urban tourism zones.

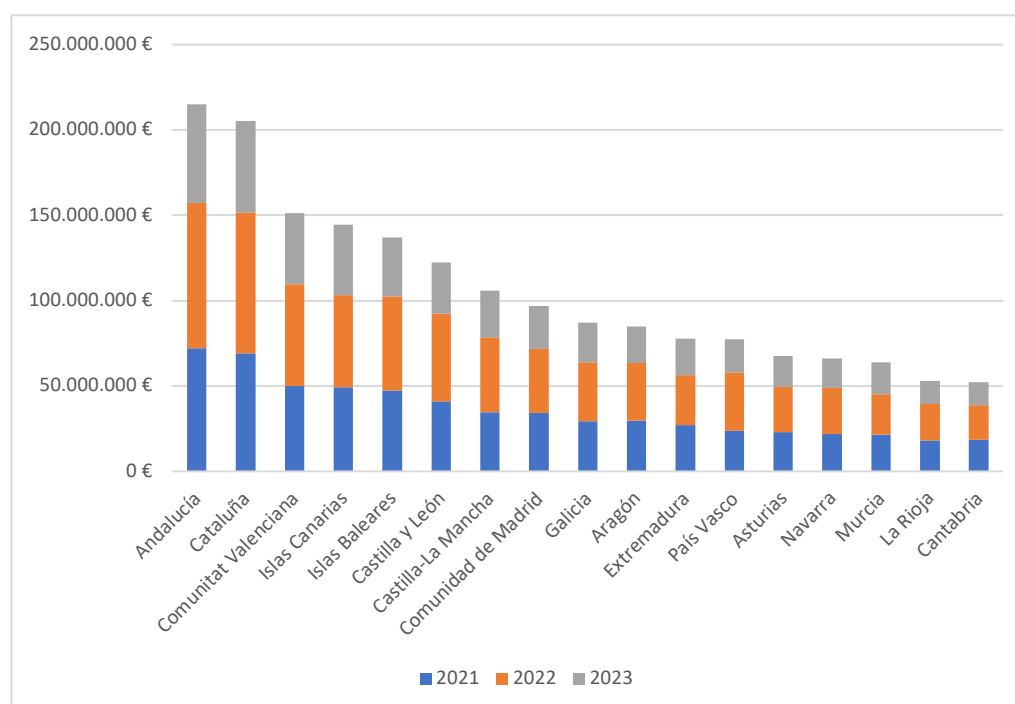
Figure 26. EU Funding for Tourism Sustainability Plans at Destinations in Spain and Number of funded interventions (2021-2023)



Source: own elaboration with data from the Ministry of Industry, Trade and Tourism (2023)

The five regions with the highest tourism arrivals in 2023 –Cataluña, Illes Balears, Islas Canarias, Andalucía, and Comunitat Valenciana– also received the largest shares of funding. For example, Cataluña, with 18.2 million tourist arrivals in 2023 (INE, 2024), received over €200 million during the three-year period, while Andalucía with 12.2 million tourist arrivals also received a similar amount (Figure 27).

Figure 27. Total funding for PSTD by region and year

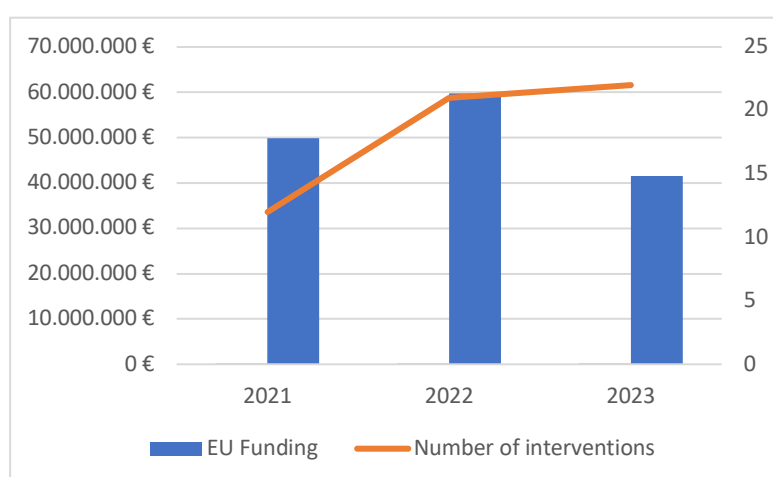


Source: own elaboration with data from the Ministry of Industry, Trade and Tourism (2023)

Focus on Comunitat Valenciana

A more detailed analysis was conducted for the Comunitat Valenciana, which received over €151 million through 55 interventions between 2021 and 2023. Within the 2022 programme alone, €31.3 million –equivalent to 52% of the total budget– was allocated to actions under axes 1 and 2 (Figure 28).

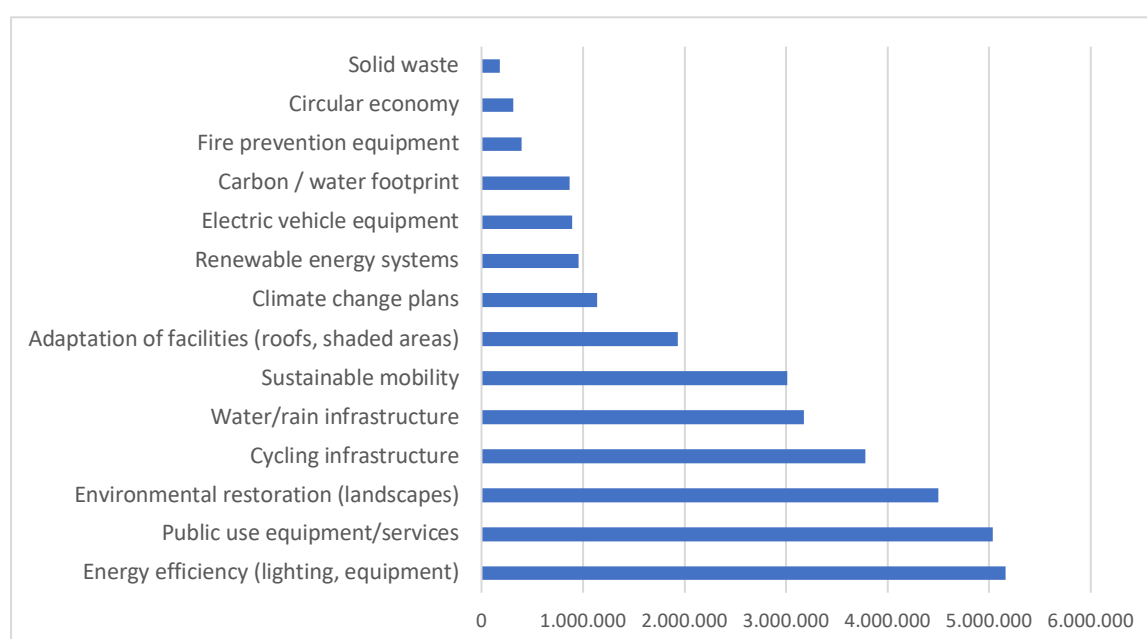
Figure 28. EU Funding for PSTD in Comunitat Valenciana and Number of funded interventions (2021-2023)



Source: own elaboration with data from Turisme Comunitat Valenciana (2023)

Figure 29 illustrates the distribution of funding by type of intervention within the 2022 PSTD for the Comunitat Valenciana. A total of €31.3 million—representing 52% of the overall PSTD budget for that year—was allocated to 122 individual actions implemented across 21 different plans. The funding was heavily concentrated in infrastructure and environmental improvement projects. The largest share was directed toward energy efficiency upgrades, particularly in lighting and equipment, which accounted for approximately 16% of the total allocation. This was matched by investments in public use infrastructure and tourism service facilities, also at 16%. Environmental restoration initiatives, such as landscape rehabilitation, received 14% of the funds, while cycling infrastructure projects made up a further 12%. By contrast, less emphasis was placed on systemic sustainability tools, such as solid waste management, circular economy practices, and fire prevention, which received minimal investment. Notably, only three destinations incorporated climate action or circular economy frameworks into their plans. This distribution reflects a continued prioritisation of visible, short-term infrastructure over long-term transformational strategies.

Figure 29. Funding by type of intervention (PTSD CV 2022)



Source: own elaboration with data from Turisme Comunitat Valenciana (2023)

Discussion

The analysis of the 2022 Tourism Sustainability Plans in Destinations in the Comunitat Valenciana reveals a series of important patterns and limitations in both the design and the execution of the programme. The 122 actions funded that year were, according to the original plans, predominantly oriented toward infrastructure-based investments that could be implemented within short timeframes and produce visible, quantifiable outputs. These included energy efficiency upgrades (such as lighting and equipment), construction of cycling paths, improvements to public use facilities, and environmental restoration efforts. Such measures are politically attractive, relatively low-risk, and facilitate straightforward compliance with funding and reporting requirements.

By contrast, more complex interventions, such as climate vulnerability assessments, stakeholder engagement processes, circular economy strategies, or governance innovation; were largely absent from the submitted plans. Their limited inclusion suggests a structural bias in the programme towards short-term, deliverable actions, possibly shaped by limitations in local planning capacity or by the technical structure of the call itself. This observation resonates with critiques in the literature that point to a gap between sustainability narratives and their actual implementation on the ground (Capdepón Frías, 2023).

The diversity of interventions across municipalities also points to considerable variation in how different localities approached the PSTD framework. Some opted for a broader interpretation of sustainability, while others focused narrowly on physical infrastructure upgrades. This unevenness likely reflects differences in administrative capacity, political leadership, and

existing institutional arrangements. However, it is important to emphasise that these observations are based on the initial plans submitted in response to a national call launched during a period of acute pressure caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. As an extraordinary funding mechanism linked to Spain's Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Plan, the PSTD call required rapid mobilisation and proposal development, which may have constrained the ability of many destinations to engage in strategic, long-term planning.

Given this context, further research is necessary to assess the actual implementation and impact of the PSTD interventions. It remains unclear to what extent the original measures were executed as planned, or whether they were modified during the course of delivery in response to evolving local priorities, technical challenges, or administrative requirements. In addition, the specific content of the plans is not always publicly available, hindering its analysis (Garzón García & Ramírez López, 2025). A systematic evaluation of the final projects, beyond their initial design, will be essential to understand whether these plans have contributed meaningfully to the goals of sustainability, resilience, and territorial equity. Such an evaluation would also shed light on whether the PSTD initiative has fulfilled its potential as a transformative policy instrument, or whether it has largely reproduced pre-existing development patterns under the banner of sustainability.

Moreover, these findings echo concerns raised by the European Court of Auditors (2021, 2022b), Kiss-Gálfalvi et al. (2024) and Valente & Uršič (2025) regarding the limitations of performance tracking and monitoring systems within EU crisis-response funding instruments. The voluntary nature of performance indicators, the lack of harmonised frameworks, and the urgency of fund disbursement have often undermined transparency and accountability. In the case of the PSTD, the absence of robust evaluation mechanisms means that assessing long-term sustainability outcomes remains an open challenge.

In summary, while the PSTD programme has enabled the mobilisation of substantial resources and has offered municipalities a platform for recovery-focused tourism investment, its potential as a tool for systemic transition appears limited. To bridge the gap between discourse and delivery, future calls must prioritise governance capacity, systemic planning, and evaluation practices capable of aligning short-term recovery with long-term transformation.

Conclusions

This paper has examined the contribution of EU-funded tourism programmes to advancing a green and sustainable transition, with a particular focus on Spain's Tourism Sustainability Plans in Destinations (PSTD) under the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF). Based on a mixed-methods analysis of policy frameworks and intervention data, the study shows that while the PSTD represent a significant mobilisation of resources—totalling €1.808 billion between 2021 and 2023—the nature of funded actions remains largely conventional. The emphasis continues to fall on infrastructure investments, particularly energy efficiency and public amenities, with limited integration of more transformative approaches such as circular economy strategies, climate adaptation planning, or mechanisms for community empowerment.

These findings highlight a persistent gap between the EU's evolving policy discourse, notably the European Agenda for Tourism 2030 and the Transition Pathway for Tourism, and the way these ambitions are operationalised at national and regional levels. Despite growing recognition of the need for a sustainability-driven tourism transition, implementation remains uneven, and governance systems often lack the capacity or incentives to move beyond traditional project formats.

Addressing these challenges will require the reinforcement of sustainability governance across multiple dimensions. In particular, improved monitoring frameworks, more inclusive and participatory planning processes, and stronger policy coherence between levels of government are essential. Unlocking the transformative potential of EU-funded tourism interventions demands not only financial investment but also institutional alignment, robust evaluative tools, and support for place-based innovation tailored to local needs and ecological contexts.

The analysis presented in this paper offers several policy-relevant recommendations:

- Strengthen alignment between EU-level policy objectives and national implementation mechanisms to ensure consistency and ambition.
- Establish standardised, outcome-oriented evaluation criteria to measure the sustainability impact of tourism investments.
- Promote planning frameworks that support localised, participatory, and adaptive approaches to tourism development.
- Ensure equitable access to funding and technical support, particularly for territories with weaker institutional capacity or emerging tourism potential.

Future research should prioritise the longitudinal tracking of PSTD implementation outcomes, including changes introduced during project delivery, and the extent to which these initiatives generate measurable progress toward decarbonisation, territorial cohesion, and social equity. More broadly, there is a pressing need to critically assess the institutional and political conditions that enable, or constrain, the systemic transformation of tourism through EU recovery instruments.

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Article V – Rethinking evaluation in European Union-funded tourism projects: towards a practical protocol for maximising impact

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Rethinking evaluation in European Union-funded tourism projects: towards a practical protocol for maximising impact

Abstract

This study examines how evaluation practices can maximise the impact of European Union (EU)-funded tourism projects by integrating Theory of Change and Principal-Agent theory within a comprehensive project cycle framework. Drawing on thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with 31 donors, programme managers, evaluators, implementers, and consultants, the research identifies persistent weaknesses across the evaluation process. Projects often begin without sufficient diagnostic groundwork or local participation, and are constrained by limited institutional capacity, fragmented data, and a focus on short-term outputs rather than long-term outcomes. These shortcomings are reinforced by compliance-driven monitoring and incentive structures that prioritise fund absorption over impact. The paper proposes an eight-step protocol to strengthen evaluation and enhance learning across the four phases of the project cycle: ex-ante, mid-term, final, and ex-post. It calls for a shift toward participatory, adaptive, and knowledge-oriented evaluation embedded within institutional practice. As the EU prepares its Sustainable Tourism Strategy and Multiannual Financial Framework 2028–2034, this framework offers timely guidance for improving accountability, governance, and the transformative potential of EU investments in tourism.

Keywords: tourism projects, evaluation, impact, Theory of Change, Principal-Agent theory

Introduction

Tourism has gained increasing prominence within the European Union (EU) policy agenda, with funding channelled through diverse programmes in regional development, territorial cooperation, culture, competitiveness, research and innovation, environment, and education (Torres et al., 2025a). More recently, the Recovery and Resilience Facility, a flagship instrument of *NextGenerationEU*, has invested over €1.8 billion in destination-level sustainability plans in Spain to mitigate the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 (Gobierno de España, 2021). These projects, often implemented under demanding timeframes and strict administrative procedures, highlight a persistent weakness: evaluation is frequently reduced to compliance and output reporting. While significant attention is devoted to project selection and approval during the design or ex-ante phase, subsequent evaluation rarely provides meaningful insights into long-term outcomes, governance, or learning.

The academic literature confirms these shortcomings. Studies on tourism grants show mixed effects on firm performance, with gains often dependent on context and raising questions about efficiency (Bernini & Pellegrini, 2013; Srhoj et al., 2022; Tundis et al., 2017). Research on flagship initiatives, such as the European Capitals of Culture, points to positive tourism outcomes but highlights discrepancies between ex-ante expectations and ex-post evidence, as well as weak legacy planning (Fox & Rampton, 2015; Srakar & Vecco, 2017). Evaluations of cross-border and

territorial cooperation projects similarly identify governance challenges and limited learning (Lawrence, 2011; Shepherd & Ioannides, 2020; Stoffelen & Vanneste, 2017).

Despite the proliferation of evaluation handbooks and guidelines produced by the European Commission, UN agencies, the OECD, and multilateral development banks (European Commission, 2012, 2014c; Gertler et al., 2016; Kusek & Rist, 2004; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2012; United Nations Development Programme, 2002), implementation progress remains uneven. In the case of the EU Recovery and Resilience Facility, emerging analyses stress the need to strengthen institutional capacity and embed mechanisms for continuous, adaptive evaluation rather than one-off assessments (Mileva & Lyutova, 2023; Valente & Uršič, 2025). Too often, evaluation is framed as an accountability exercise undertaken at project closure, rather than as a developmental process that creates the conditions for impact throughout the project cycle (European Commission, 2013; Lawrence, 2011; Volden & Welde, 2022).

Theoretical and empirical research increasingly call for frameworks that bridge this divide. The Theory of Change (ToC) approach advances understanding of *how* interventions are expected to work by articulating causal pathways, underlying assumptions and anticipated outcomes across the project cycle, while also making explicit the contextual enablers and barriers that influence implementation barriers (Montano et al., 2023; Rogers, 2008; Twining-Ward et al., 2021; Weiss, 1997). In contrast, Principal-Agent (P-A) theory explains *why* these causal logics often fail to translate into practice, by exposing incentive misalignment, information asymmetries, administrative capacity constraints, and projectification dynamics that characterise multi-level EU governance (Bachtler & Ferry, 2015; Eisenhardt, 1989; Sjöblom & Godenhjelm, 2009). Integrating these two perspectives provides a more comprehensive analytical lens for evaluation, while ToC highlights the conditions under which learning-oriented and outcome-focused evaluation should occur, P-A theory clarifies the institutional and behavioural factors that shape, constrain, or impede their effective implementation.

For clarity, this paper distinguishes between objectives (the goals defined at project approval), outputs (the immediate deliverables of project activities), outcomes (the short- to medium-term effects of those outputs), and impact (the longer-term changes to which projects contribute). In this study, impact is defined not solely as the statistical attribution of causal effects (Gertler et al., 2016), but more broadly as the capacity of projects to generate sustained and meaningful outcomes over time. From this perspective, evaluation is conceptualised not as a methodology for measuring impact in a causal sense, but as a mechanism for enabling the conditions under which impact may be achieved, by integrating governance, institutional capacity, and learning alongside outputs and outcomes. Against this backdrop, and in light of the forthcoming EU Sustainable Tourism Strategy and the proposed Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2028–2034, which placed increased emphasis on transparency and accountability (European Commission, 2025b), this study draws on expert interviews with donors, programme managers, implementers, and consultants to identify systemic factors that hinder project impact across all stages of the evaluation cycle: ex-ante, mid-term, final, and ex-post. Based on these insights, the paper proposes the main steps and guiding principles of a practical protocol aimed at strengthening the conditions for impact, and supporting learning and long-term project legacy in tourism projects.

Literature review

The literature review is structured around two main theoretical strands. The first examines how projects should be designed, implemented, and evaluated across the phases of the project cycle, primarily through the Theory of Change approach. The second applies Principal-Agent theory to explain why this logic often breaks down in practice due to misaligned incentives, weak administrative capacity, and the projectification of governance in EU funding systems. Both strands converge on a central aim: to understand how evaluation can maximise the impact of tourism projects and contribute to long-term policy learning.

Theory of Change and complexity-aware evaluation

Programme theory has become a widely used tool in evaluation, typically through logic models that represent causal chains from inputs to outcomes. The emergence of theory-based evaluation marked a shift from assessing whether programmes worked to examining how and why they did so, by making assumptions and causal mechanisms explicit (Weiss, 1997). Within this, ToC has increasingly focused on implementation theory, clarifying how activities are expected to generate outcomes under specific contextual conditions. However, as Rogers (2008) argues, many interventions are neither simple nor fully linear. She distinguishes between complicated interventions, characterised by multiple actors, parallel causal pathways, and coordination across jurisdictions; and complex interventions, in which outcomes emerge through non-linear interactions, feedback loops, adaptation, and context-dependent dynamics. Conventional, linear applications of ToC are well suited to complicated programmes but are less capable of capturing the uncertainty and emergence inherent in complex interventions. A complexity-aware use of ToC therefore requires moving beyond fixed causal chains to incorporate iterative learning, explicit treatment of assumptions, and attention to feedback effects and unintended outcomes. This distinction is particularly relevant for EU-funded tourism programmes, where multi-level governance, diverse institutional contexts, and long implementation horizons demand evaluation approaches that support adaptation and learning rather than linear attribution alone.

Stame (2004) identifies an ‘evaluation deficit’ in EU programmes, whereby local assessments focus on outputs, while higher-level evaluations measure aggregate impacts without examining the mechanisms through which results are produced; a pattern also observed in tourism projects (Torres et al., 2026). This vertical gap reflects multi-level governance arrangements in which strategic objectives are defined centrally while implementation is delegated to local actors, often leading to misalignment between local actions and programme goals, with implementers focusing on their own activities, rather than their contribution to collective outcomes. Theory-oriented approaches seek to address this gap by opening the “black box” of programme logic, clarifying theories of change, causal mechanisms and contextual influences (Stame, 2004).

ToC typically begins by identifying key stakeholders and clarifying the desired long-term impacts, and then works backwards to map intermediate and short-term outcomes, barriers and enabling conditions, and the interventions required to address them. This process makes causal

assumptions explicit and informs the selection of indicators and measurement strategies, helping align implementation and evaluation across the project cycle. While ToC has been widely used in development contexts to surface and test assumptions, its application to tourism evaluation remains limited (Twining-Ward et al., 2021). Phi et al. (2018) apply ToC to anti-poverty tourism interventions, arguing that existing evaluations rely excessively on quantitative, economic-centric indicators while overlooking multidimensional poverty, contextual influences, and stakeholder perspectives, resulting in evaluations that measure outcomes without explaining how and why change occurs. Drawing on World Bank experience, Twining-Ward et al. (2021) position ToC as a practical alternative to linear planning tools such as the Logical Framework, as it makes explicit the assumptions, mechanisms, and pathways underpinning interventions. ToC further distinguishes between programme theory, which explains causal logic, and implementation theory, which captures operational and contextual factors shaping delivery (Phi et al., 2018), thereby strengthening the link between indicators and intervention logic. When indicators are aligned with causal pathways and project assumptions, they enable evaluation processes to assess not only whether activities were delivered, but whether they contributed to the intended outcomes and longer-term impacts.

ToC is particularly valuable during the ex-ante phase, when projects are being designed, as it enables the mapping of causal pathways and the testing of assumptions before implementation (Montano et al., 2023). Learning and co-creation are central to this process (Montano et al., 2023; Roodbari & Olya, 2024; Suno Wu et al., 2021). However, large-scale EU-funded tourism interventions are typically assessed through summative, output-driven evaluations that fulfil accountability requirements but offer limited scope for learning or legacy building. Montano et al. (2023) observe that traditional impact evaluations frequently reduce assessment to a checklist exercise, leaving limited space for co-learning. Their study of the Experience Interreg project demonstrates how ToC, through the co-development of nested ToCs, can articulate both programme theory and implementation theory, foster partner ownership, and reframe evaluation from external audit to collaborative learning. Such formative approaches are especially useful for mid-term evaluations, when assumptions, and strategies can be reviewed and adapted. Twining-Ward et al. (2021) likewise emphasise participatory stakeholder engagement and the need for realistic, attributable indicators that go beyond visitor numbers or short-term outputs.

Building on this, Roodbari and Olya, (2024, p. 11) propose ToCRESA, an integrative framework combining ToC, Realist Evaluation (RE), and Stakeholder Analysis (SA) to explain ‘what works, for whom, why, and under what circumstances’. In this model, ToC establishes causal plausibility and testability; RE identifies the contextual mechanisms that generate outcomes through a context–mechanism–outcome logic; and SA ensures meaningful actor engagement. Similarly, Suno Wu et al. (2024) introduce Realist Appreciative Evaluation, which combines realist rigour with appreciative inquiry to reposition evaluation as a learning and co-creation process rather than a judgemental exercise. Such approaches are particularly relevant in final and ex-post phases, where knowledge transfer, institutional learning, and long-term capacity building are critical.

Driven by stakeholder perspectives, ToC has been critiqued for not constituting a theory in the strict explanatory sense. Early theory-based evaluation work conceptualised programme theory as a set of context-specific assumptions rather than a generalisable causal framework (Weiss, 1997). Phi et al. (2018) argue that, in practice, ToC is often applied under time and resource constraints in a reductionist manner, producing simplified and linear causal representations shaped by stakeholder narratives rather than analytically grounded or evidence-based explanations of complex change processes. As a result, the quality and usefulness of ToC depend heavily on institutional capacity, methodological expertise, and the extent to which causal assumptions are critically examined rather than merely articulated.

At the same time, defining 'success' in collaborative, multi-actor settings remains contested. Lawrence (2011) shows that in cross-border collaborations, actors operate with explicit, assumed, and hidden aims at the organisational and individual levels, each influencing how success is perceived. He argues that success should encompass not only measurable outputs but also more intangible results such as learning, capacity-building, and knowledge exchange. This diversity of perspectives reinforces the need for ToC and other participatory, complexity-aware approaches that recognise differing interpretations of outcomes and impact.

Principal-Agent (P-A) Theory, accountability and governance

While ToC informs the analysis of implementation processes across the project cycle, Principal-Agent theory is used here to frame programme-level dynamics, including delegation, accountability, incentive structures, and administrative capacity within EU multi-level governance. At its core, P-A theory examines relationships in which one party (the principal) delegates work to another (the agent), generating problems of goal conflict, information asymmetry, and divergent risk preferences (Eisenhardt, 1989). These propositions make P-A theory especially relevant for evaluation, as it explains not only *what* is evaluated, but *why* monitoring systems, indicators, and reporting practices tend to privilege certain behaviours and outcomes over others. Despite its extensive use in economics, public administration, and EU governance studies, P-A theory has been rarely applied in evaluation research, and even less so in tourism studies.

Within the EU funding system, the European Commission and national governments act as principals, while regional authorities, local governments, consultancies, or SMEs serve as agents responsible for implementation. From a P-A perspective, persistent challenges in EU programmes reflect misaligned incentives and costly monitoring. While EU institutions emphasise long-term sustainability and cohesion benefits, local actors often prioritise short-term political visibility, rapid fund absorption, or infrastructure-heavy projects. As Eisenhardt (1989) notes, agency problems occur when principals' and agents' goals diverge and performance is difficult to observe or verify. P-A model has been applied in international development (Amin et al., 2024) and European governance (Kassim & Menon, 2003), though rarely in tourism (Font et al., 2012; Steele & Scherrer, 2018). Font et al. (2012) show that donor-funded tourism projects tend to assess success through spending and outputs rather than long-term impacts, with evaluation often perceived by implementers as a compliance requirement rather than a learning opportunity, rarely volunteering for evaluation unless required by donors.

Within the EU context, a central challenge is ensuring that Member States implement Structural Funds in line with EU priorities despite divergent interests and information asymmetries. Bachtler and Ferry (2015) analyse the use of conditionalities as control mechanisms, focusing on three key instruments: the decommitment rule ($n+2/n+3$), the performance reserve, and earmarking linked to the Lisbon Agenda. The decommitment rule, which required funds to be spent within two or three years, accelerated absorption rates but also incentivised spending speed over project quality, discouraging innovation. The performance reserve, allocating a small proportion of funds to well-performing programmes, had limited behavioural impact. Earmarking ensured formal alignment with EU priorities but, due to broad definitions, allowed Member States to classify loosely related projects as compliant. Knippschild and Vock (2017) argue that such conformance-based evaluation is insufficient for complex programmes like INTERREG, and call for a shift towards performance-oriented evaluation that assesses outcomes alongside processes such as collaboration, communication, and institutional learning.

A recurrent theme is the role of institutional capacity in shaping performance. In this study, institutional capacity refers to the ability of organisations and governance systems to plan, implement, coordinate, and evaluate interventions effectively, extending beyond administrative capacity, which more narrowly concerns the technical and managerial ability to manage funds and comply with programme requirements. Bachtler et al. (2024) emphasise that the effectiveness of Cohesion Policy depends on the ability of national and regional administrations to design strategies, allocate resources, and balance compliance and outcomes. Empirical evidence from Hungary and Slovakia illustrates how institutional instability and political interference can undermine this capacity, resulting in high absorption rates alongside high correction levels (Výrostová & Nyikos, 2024). Financial dependency further distorts priorities. As Dredge (2001) observes, limited local resources have fostered a ‘grantsmanship’ culture in which municipalities follow funding opportunities regardless of alignment with local needs. Tourism policy thus becomes project-driven rather than strategically planned, shaped by ad hoc funding streams and local political interests, a pattern widely documented across EU programmes (Bohn et al., 2023; Godenhjelm et al., 2015; Prokkola, 2011; Shepherd & Ioannides, 2020; Stoffelen & Vanneste, 2017).

Similar dynamics are observed in cross-border cooperation. Ioannides et al. (2006) note that partnership rhetoric often masks state-led, projectified initiatives that deliver superficial outputs without embedding sustainable collaboration. Shepherd and Ioannides (2020) describe this as ‘project syndrome’, whereby actors repeatedly apply for new funding despite limited lasting impact. Such practices reinforce path dependence and uneven development, privileging established actors and successful destinations (Bohn et al., 2023), while weakening learning mechanisms as evaluations prioritise short-term outputs over systemic outcomes and institutional learning (Godenhjelm et al., 2015).

A further challenge concerns how *impact* itself is conceptualised and measured. Within the P–A framework, EU evaluation practices have often prioritised spending efficiency and procedural compliance, while neglecting whether projects generate meaningful change. Gertler et al. (2016) define impact evaluation as the systematic assessment of a programme’s causal effect on specific outcomes, stressing that methodological rigour must be supported by timely planning and institutional commitment. Impact evaluation should be embedded from the ex-ante phase,

ensuring baseline data collection and the integration of accountability and transparency mechanisms into programme design. They highlight that impact evaluation is most effective when supported politically and used to inform decision-making. Integrating these principles would enable EU-funded tourism projects to move beyond output monitoring toward evidence-based policymaking, reinforcing the links between accountability, learning, and long-term impact.

Overall, the literature indicates that P–A dynamics, administrative fragility, and projectification help explain why EU-funded tourism projects frequently underperform relative to their intended impact. ToC provides a structured approach for articulating how change is expected to occur by making explicit the causal assumptions, mechanisms, and contextual conditions underpinning interventions; however, as a largely constructivist and stakeholder-driven framework, it tends to underplay power relations, incentive structures, and strategic behaviour. P–A theory addresses these limitations by explaining how incentive misalignment, information asymmetries, and capacity constraints shape behaviour within multi-level governance systems, but offers limited guidance on how change should be designed, monitored, or adapted over time. Integrating these perspectives therefore allows evaluation to engage simultaneously with causal reasoning and institutional realities, providing a more holistic lens through which EU-funded tourism projects can strengthen accountability, support learning, and create the conditions for long-term impact.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, drawing on semi-structured expert interviews to explore how evaluation practices shape the capacity of EU-funded tourism projects to generate impact across the project cycle. A qualitative approach is particularly well suited to examining complex governance processes, institutional dynamics, and learning mechanisms that are not easily captured through quantitative indicators alone. Interview data were examined using thematic analysis, allowing systematic identification and interpretation of patterns across diverse perspectives while retaining sensitivity to context (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In total, 28 interviews were conducted with 31 participants representing 27 organisations involved in the design, implementation, evaluation, or support of EU-funded tourism projects. Most interviews were individual, although a small number involved two participants from the same organisation to capture complementary perspectives. The sample covered a broad institutional and geographical range, including participants based in Spain, Belgium, Italy, Ireland, the United States, and Honduras, and was purposively selected to represent different roles, programme types, geographical contexts, and all phases of the project cycle. While the study focuses primarily on EU-funded tourism programmes, it also incorporates insights from international donors, notably the World Bank, to provide comparative perspectives on the use of ToC in project design and evaluation. Twenty participants were initially identified based on professional expertise, and snowball sampling was subsequently used to recruit additional experts until thematic saturation was reached.

Participants were classified into five main stakeholder groups: 1) Donor/funder (D), including programme managers involved in ex-ante formulation and selection; 2) Evaluator (E), including independent experts and contributors to ex-post assessments such as those associated with the

European Court of Auditors; 3) Intermediary support or technical assistance providers (I/TA) involved in coordination and capacity building; 4) Implementer, including local or regional authorities (I/LRA), academic and research institutions (I/AR), and networks (I/N); and 5) Consultant or service provider (C) engaged in project execution, particularly those supporting Tourism Sustainability Plans at Destinations (PSTD) in Spain financed through *NextGenerationEU*. An overview of participating organisations is provided in Table 4.

Ethical considerations were addressed throughout the study. All participants provided informed consent, and interviews were conducted under conditions of anonymity and aggregate reporting. Given the involvement of experts from small organisations and specialised roles, individual identifiers were not assigned to quotations to avoid potential indirect identification.

Table 4. Organisations and stakeholder groups participating in the interviews

Organisation	Group
World Bank	Donor / Funder (D)
Central American Bank for Economic Integration	Donor / Funder (D)
European Innovation Council and SMEs Executive Agency - EISMEA (European Commission)	Donor / Funder (D)
Interreg NEXT MED Programme (Co-funded by the European Commission)	Donor / Funder (D)
Secretaría de Estado de Turismo / SEGITTUR (<i>Next Generation EU</i>)	Donor / Funder (D)
European Court of Auditors	Evaluator (E)
Independent evaluator / consultant (EU, IDB, World Bank)	Evaluator (E)
ART-ER Attrattività Ricerca Territorio - Emilia-Romagna	Evaluator (E)
Interact Programme (Co-funded by the European Commission)	Intermediary Support / Technical Assistance (I/TA)
Interreg TESIM (Co-funded by the European Commission)	Intermediary Support / Technical Assistance (I/TA)
Member European Commission Expert Group 'Together for EU Tourism -T4T'	Intermediary Support / Technical Assistance (I/TA)
Generalitat Valenciana	Implementer / Local - Regional Authority (I/LRA)
Diputació de Barcelona	Implementer / Local - Regional Authority (I/LRA)
Ajuntament de Castelló	Implementer / Local - Regional Authority (I/LRA)
Fundació Visit València	Implementer / Local - Regional Authority (I/LRA)
University of Surrey	Implementer / Academic-Research (I/AR)
Technological University Dublin	Implementer / Academic-Research (I/AR)
University of Bologna	Implementer / Academic-Research (I/AR)
Network of European Regions for Competitive and Sustainable Tourism (NECSTouR)	Implementer / Network (I/N)
Phoenicians Cultural Route	Implementer / Network (I/N)
KOAN Consulting	Implementer / Network (I/N)
RLA Global	Consultant / Service Provider (C)

Castro Tourism Advisors	Consultant / Service Provider (C)
Daleph	Consultant / Service Provider (C)
Soluciones Turísticas	Consultant / Service Provider (C)
SIEN Consulting	Consultant / Service Provider (C)
Independent consultant (EU programmes, <i>Next Generation EU</i>)	Consultant / Service Provider (C)

Source: Own elaboration

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, conducted between March to September 2025 mainly online via MS Teams, with a small number held in person. All interviews were recorded with participant consent and fully transcribed for analysis. A structured interview guide was used to maintain consistency across discussions, while allowing flexibility to adapt questions based on the interviewee's role in project design, implementation, or evaluation. Topics included the relevance and purpose of evaluation, roles and responsibilities, indicator selection, measurement of results, procedural steps, and perceived challenges and good practices.

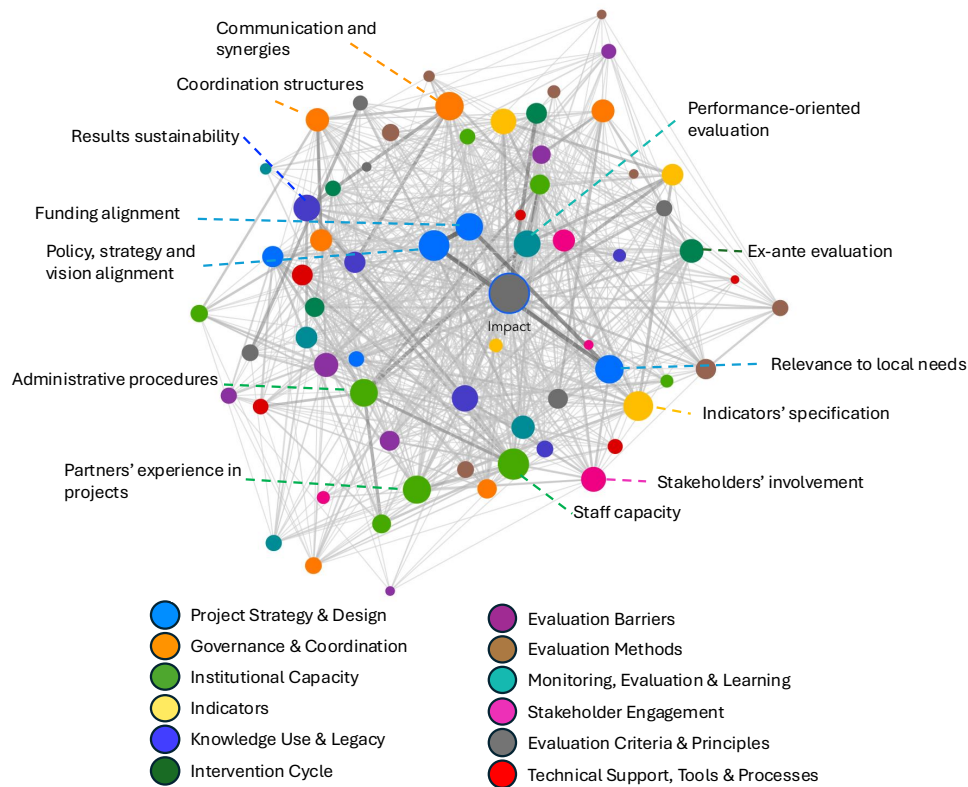
The qualitative data were coded and analysed using Atlas.ti 25, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software. Atlas.ti facilitated systematic organisation, retrieval, and visualisation of coded data, supporting transparency and rigour in the analytical process (Friese, 2019). The analysis followed a hybrid inductive-deductive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The deductive dimension was guided by the theoretical frameworks of ToC and P-A theory, which informed the initial codebook structure, ensuring alignment with the study's conceptual foundations. The inductive dimension allowed new, unanticipated insights to emerge from participants' accounts, enriching the theoretical analysis with empirically grounded findings. This dual strategy enabled the study to balance theoretical guidance with openness to contextual complexity and stakeholder experience.

In total, 66 codes were generated and grouped into 12 thematic categories: (1) Project strategy and design; (2) Governance and coordination; (3) Institutional capacity; (4) Knowledge use and legacy; (5) Monitoring, evaluation and learning; (6) Stakeholder engagement; (7) Technical support, tools and processes; (8) Indicators; (9) Evaluation methods; (10) Intervention cycle; (11) Evaluation criteria and principles; and (12) Evaluation barriers. Further code co-occurrence and code-document analyses were conducted to identify relationships and overlaps among themes. Rather than treating themes as discrete, the analysis focused on identifying those concepts that were most central across the dataset.

These analyses identified *impact* as the most recurrent and structurally central concept, closely linked to governance arrangements, institutional capacity, and monitoring and evaluation practices. References to impact consistently co-occurred with codes related to strategic alignment; funding coherence and local relevance; coordination and synergies with other projects; sustainability of results; administrative procedures; partners' experience and capacity; stakeholder involvement; indicator specification; and performance-oriented evaluation. This pattern indicates that challenges in achieving impact are embedded in broader governance and organisational dynamics. Figure 30 provides visualises these relationships through a force-directed network graph, complemented by a second network visualisation illustrating interconnections among the most frequently occurring codes. Together, these analyses offer a

nuanced understanding of how evaluation practices, institutional arrangements, and learning processes shape the capacity of EU-funded tourism projects to achieve and demonstrate impact.

Figure 30. Force-directed graph highlighting ‘Impact’ as the central code



Source: Own elaboration

Results

The results are organised around the principal codes identified in the network visualisation (Figure 31). At the centre of the network lies *Impact*, the most frequently discussed and interconnected theme. The visualisation distinguishes between enabling and limiting factors influencing impact: *green* relationship lines represent codes that support, strengthen, or enhance impact, while *red* lines indicate codes that hinder, constrain, or negatively affect it. Additional codes connected through *orange* lines reflect neutral or associative relationships, depicting elements that define or shape the overall system without a clear positive or negative influence. Building on this representation, the subsequent sections discuss the main factors and interconnections influencing impact, following the four phases of the evaluation cycle (ex-ante, mid-term, final, and ex-post) and integrating insights from interview participants (named with the role initials as showed in Table 4) to illustrate how these relationships manifest in practice.

[illegible]

Ex-ante evaluation: project design and early capacity

In the case of Tourism Sustainability Plans in Spain funded by *NextGenerationEU* programme, municipalities often drafted ‘strategic plans’ simply to access funds, without a clear mid and long-term reflexion. Respondents pointed to questionable investments, such as parking shade structures or ‘smart’ platforms with no demonstrated need, and warned that “a large share of

such projects risked failure” (C). Such designs sometimes conflicted with existing local strategies. “It is completely senseless when projects are designed without any alignment to the development plans municipalities already have. Just because there’s EU money, they throw together a project that has nothing to do with what the region has already decided to follow for the next three years. And then the municipality is expected to be happy to receive this new project and deal with it” (I/AR).

Respondents also pointed to the absence of rigorous ex-ante diagnostics as a structural weakness. In Spain in particular, diagnostic work was described as weak or missing, leaving projects without clear baselines or a grounded understanding of needs. As one expert put it, “ex-ante evaluation means identifying what the needs really are and assessing where you have to put the emphasis and resources. Having a diagnosis of the situation is key, and in Spain we are usually quite weak in that” (I/LRA). Without adequate diagnostics, indicators lose their purpose: “we often start projects without having a baseline to then compare changes to it” (C). This weakness led to distortions in target-setting, with some proposals offering “total nonsense, as people promise things that could never exist” (I/AR), while others deliberately under-promised to avoid sanctions: “we chose a conservative figure we knew would happen anyway. Then COVID came, and we had to explain that” (I/AR). Several respondents argued that these problems could be avoided if monitoring and evaluation were integrated into project design from the outset; “having someone with evaluation expertise in the design phase is crucial to contribute to building a good baseline” (E). Starting with monitoring and evaluation not only improves measurement but strengthens the design itself: “working through a Theory of Change early on, starting with what you want to achieve and how you’ll know if it’s been achieved, can help shape what you actually do, rather than jumping straight to your favourite solution and trying to fit indicators to it afterwards” (D).

Despite these shortcomings, interviewees also identified examples of good practice, where design started with a territorial diagnosis and stakeholder consultation, ensuring alignment with broader tourism plans. “We don’t start with the call for proposals. We start by analysing the needs of the territory. Every time we have a new partner, we organise a meeting with the community, not only with the mayor or the local administration, but also with technicians, local associations, hotels, restaurants and producers, depending on the main product of the place. We make a list of needs and, from there, we develop the strategy” (I/N).

At the ex-ante stage, respondents highlighted major capacity and governance weaknesses that undermine both the design of project proposals and their later implementation. At the EU level, a respondent pointed to the limited staff dedicated to tourism “there are only about eleven people working in tourism in the European Commission, compared to 850 in agriculture...They are very good, highly knowledgeable and committed, but it’s simply not enough” (I/TA). These constraints affected not only programme management but also the evaluation of proposals. Calls were often reviewed under tight timeframes and budgets, with reliance on external experts. While some programmes had solid systems with multiple reviewers and consensus meetings, others were more limited, focusing on the legal entity rather than the real competences of the teams behind the proposals. Respondents warned that this could lead to strong proposals on paper but weak implementation capacity, as “projects can be very well designed but with weak

partners, and the overall impact drops because of their administrative or operational limitations” (I/AR).

Many municipalities lacked the technical and human resources to prepare robust proposals, often delegating the work to external consultants. As one expert observed, “many destinations contracted an external consultancy to write the project, and when the approved project had to be implemented, they realised that what was written was far removed from the reality and needs of the destination” (C), in some cases, having “copy-paste text from other municipalities’ plans” (C). While reliance on consultants was often unavoidable in contexts of administrative overload, it carried the risk of producing ‘white elephant’ projects disconnected from local capacities and priorities. At the municipal level, projects worth several million euros were sometimes assigned to just one or two overstretched staff. Capacity constraints were repeatedly highlighted by the consultants themselves, who were hired by municipalities either to draft the sustainability plans required to apply for *NextGenerationEU* funding, to support administrative implementation of approved projects, or to carry out specific project actions. Their close contact with municipalities allowed them to follow first-hand the management and operational difficulties generated by this overload. Despite these challenges, some respondents acknowledged that the programme provided municipalities with a “unique opportunity” to access significant funding (I/LRA).

Others, however, stressed the absence of a forward-looking governance perspective at this stage: “a project should only be approved if the municipality not only requests what is aligned with its destination but also guarantees that it will be able to maintain it in the next five years” (C). As another expert explained, “an investment without subsequent maintenance makes no sense... and that investment should be agreed with those who are going to have to maintain it” during project formulation (I/LRA). Beyond maintenance, interviewees noted that municipalities often lacked the legal competences to carry out certain actions, which required advance approval from other authorities such as the environment, the coastal authority or regional departments. Having these reports ready was considered essential to avoid delays and was sometimes used as an evaluation criterion.

A related concern was the capacity gap among project partners themselves. Some institutions, particularly well-connected universities, were described as being “extremely adept at getting funding... they hire in consultants or they employ people full time. And so they can draw down funding... But how fair is that? How useful is that? Not very useful. It’s just creating inequalities and maintaining inequalities” (I/AR). Respondents noted that this uneven playing field reproduces disparities across Europe, where a small circle of experienced actors dominates, while less-resourced municipalities, SMEs, or organisations struggle to gain access. At the same time, implementers with established networks described how they consolidate their advantage through deliberate continuity strategies. “We follow a thematic selection strategy. We deal with many topics, and for each one we develop a model through one or two projects... If a project is not funded in the first round, we adapt it and resubmit it. Usually, there are new calls the following year, so we always have a portfolio of active projects. Not all of them will be funded, but we need continuity” (I/N). This contrast illustrates how institutional experience and networks can be converted into systematic funding success, but in ways that risk reinforcing inequalities and limiting opportunities for newcomers.

During implementation and mid-term review: monitoring and adaptability

The implementation phase was marked by tensions between the formal monitoring requirements of programmes and the need for projects to adapt to changing conditions. Many interviewees stressed that mid-term evaluations were essential for making adjustments, providing an opportunity to revisit strategies and indicators before it was too late. Several respondents stressed their importance during COVID-19, which forced projects to justify deviations from original targets. Yet respondents cautioned that rules for adjustment must be clear, defining what can be changed and within which limits. In the case of the *NextGenerationEU* tourism sustainability plans, proposals were prepared under pressure in the post-pandemic context, with tight timelines, strict procurement rules, and municipal elections that altered local priorities. Under these conditions, scope changes were later approved, leading to further deviations from the original plans, and with pressure for budget execution over achieving outcomes.

Despite their importance, interviewees noted structural limitations. Evaluations often arrived too late to influence programming cycles: “the big problem is the timing. Many times, evaluations arrive when the new programming is already advanced, or very late when impacts can no longer be corrected. That is why mid-term evaluation can be more useful” (D). Others worried about impartiality, since interim assessments were frequently carried out internally: “we don’t have specific mechanisms to guarantee impartiality, because those of us who review are programme staff and the secretariat. We act professionally, but we know the projects and have long-standing relationships with organisations, and that can create a certain bias” (D).

Mid-term reviews were also described as uneven across programmes. In some cases, they worked well as a tool for dialogue: “in our 30-month project, we did two interim reports. The Project Officer in Brussels was aware of progress, obstacles, and deviations, and even provided guidance when we asked for help. It was quite effective” (C). In other contexts, however, feedback focused more on compliance than on learning. As one interviewee explained: “in Interreg, the Secretariat and Managing Authorities watch closely how you spend the money and whether you spend it on time... towards the middle of the project they visit, you show them the deliverables, and you justify your choices. But I don’t remember receiving feedback specifically on impact, more on whether the outputs were consistent with the application form” (I/AR).

Others flagged weaknesses in indicator use and partner coordination at mid-term. “Indicators are often set by the lead entity without consultation. Halfway through the project, some partners still didn’t know what they were supposed to do, or didn’t monitor it properly. And if you can’t demonstrate what you did, those actions are useless” (I/LRA). Mid-term was also the right moment to revisit indicators for sustainability, so they could ensure continuity beyond the formal project period. Finally, some cautioned against over-reliance on mid-term approval: “we worry more about the mid-term than the final. If the evaluator or the Commission gives us the green light halfway, we relax. But has anyone looked at whether the end-user can really use this, and what problems they face? We’ve discovered a lot of issues there” (I/N).

Capacity challenges and procurement bottlenecks weighed heavily during implementation. Tendering processes expected to take two months often stretched to six or more. One

respondent captured the frustration “the system is administrative, not touristic” (C), while another argued that consultants did not understand public procurement processes and timing, leading to implementation failures. The overload of annexes and justifications often meant staff dedicated more time to compliance than to managing outcomes.

Final evaluation: closure and accountability

At the closure stage, the final evaluation was seen as a compliance exercise more than an outcome assessment. As one respondent explained, “in the final evaluation, at the verification stage, no field visits are carried out. This is precisely why a new practice is being introduced, because deficiencies have been identified in the evaluations conducted so far” (D). Donors and evaluators emphasised the need for sound methodologies, highlighting the importance of qualitative approaches and mixed-method evaluations to capture a fuller picture of project outcomes, given the cross-sectoral nature of the tourism sector.

Most final evaluations reviewed whether outputs matched what was promised, rather than whether outcomes were achieved. “In the final reports you must verify that the planned objectives and indicators have been met” (D). For some projects, budget constraints limited final assessments to a light-touch check: “in smaller projects, no final audit is required. If we comply with the rules and there are no irregularities, nobody asks for more” (I/N). Where more detailed assessments were carried out, external evaluators were often contracted only at the end of projects. Although they were expected to provide objectivity and independence, they were frequently perceived as lacking contextual knowledge: “they come in at the end, they have no idea what has happened, and they write a general report” (I/N). Indicators used at closure were often limited to outputs: “how many kilometres of cycling routes, how many people trained”, with little attention to whether outputs translated into outcomes. However, “the objective was not to publish documents but to generate a useful model. If nobody applies it, it is meaningless” (I/LRA).

Ex-post evaluation: sustainability, legacy and learning

Ex-post evaluation consistently was described as the weakest link in the cycle. “It is assumed there will be a legacy, but in reality it is not verified. There is usually no follow-up evaluation, for example, 12 months later, to check whether that impact or transfer has actually taken place” (I/LRA). Another highlighted the same problem from the perspective of resource allocation: “one challenge is the limitation of support beyond the co-financing period. Once a project ends, we rarely have the resources to track what happens next. That’s why it’s crucial to understand what has been achieved from day one until the final day” (D). Where ex-post audits existed, they focused mainly on invoices, not outcomes. By contrast, the European Court of Auditors’ 2021 tourism audit was cited as a rare example of independence and rigour, even though it had to be conducted largely as a desk review due to the pandemic.

The absence of systematic ex-post reviews meant that long-term impacts and sustainability were rarely demonstrated. Sustainability concerns were especially acute for digital tools. Respondents repeatedly described platforms and apps becoming obsolete. “We are building Ferraris for people who don’t know how to drive an electric scooter. All that money is going to

waste” (C). Others noted: “Municipalities don’t have staff or training to maintain websites or apps. Projects generate data that are uploaded into platforms that are no longer functioning. Money and time are lost” (I/LRA). Respondents argued that sustainability assessments should include maintenance and organisational capacity, not only initial investment.

Knowledge capitalisation was another major gap. Respondents lamented that results “go nowhere” (C), with duplication of toolkits and indicator systems across programmes, instead of fostering communication and synergies amongst projects. Even when partners themselves tried to recycle outputs, the system provided little incentive: “we are recyclers... we look for what was done in other projects and reuse it, but nobody asks us to” (I/N). As one interviewee observed: “we created an observatory of best practices, a series of databases and technological solutions. All of this was in operation during the life of the project, but if there is no one to pass it on to, it will be lost” (C). While some projects capitalised on previous results, especially if project partners had implemented previous projects, or voluntarily shared the created tools and knowledge with initiating projects, these were exceptions. More often, knowledge remained siloed in closed partner platforms, or even deliberately withheld: “We didn’t release all the data from the first contract because we wanted to win the second. This happens all the time” (I/AR).

Respondents stressed that evaluation should be a multistakeholder learning process (I/TA), not only accountability. “If evaluators are involved earlier in the process, you can co-create the project, help guide it, and correct course as you go” (I/AR). Yet in practice, evaluation was often perceived as surveillance: “Sometimes you feel observed, and as a result, you’re on your best behaviour” (I/AR). This hinders the possibility of establishing a learning relationship.

Discussion

This section discusses the main findings from the interviews through the theoretical analytical lenses. ToC is used to interpret how project logics, assumptions, and learning mechanisms are articulated across the project cycle, while P–A theory helps explain why these logics often break down in practice due to incentive misalignment and capacity constraints.

Findings indicate that, despite the availability of extensive guidelines and evaluation frameworks, many projects still begin without adequate planning or diagnostic groundwork based on local needs. Although projects are often nominally aligned with broader EU strategies and agendas, their connection to the local level remains weak. Interviewees consistently noted that local stakeholders are insufficiently involved across all phases of the project cycle, not only in implementation or evaluation, but also in the initial formulation stage. As Tirado Ballesteros and Hernández Hernández (2017) argues, when local actors are excluded from design processes, interventions risk becoming disconnected from real needs and therefore unsustainable. This aligns with Shepherd and Ioannides (2020), who found that while recipients value EU funding, the short-term duration of projects constrains the implementation of long-term strategies. Similarly, several authors have highlighted that more bottom-up, territorially embedded approaches, which prioritise local participation and long-term objectives; are more effective than short, grant-driven initiatives (Godenhjelm et al., 2015; Prokkola, 2011; Stoffelen & Vanneste, 2017).

At the design stage, a key mechanism for impact is the articulation of a shared long-term vision and coherent causal logic. From a ToC perspective, where interventions are expected to be anchored in explicit long-term objectives and coherent causal pathways; many respondents described organisations applying for funding opportunistically, driven by the availability of calls rather than by strategic planning (Montano et al., 2023; Twining-Ward et al., 2021). This ‘following the pot of money’ phenomenon (Dredge, 2001, p. 374) leads to the proliferation of fragmented or even counterproductive initiatives. Given the complexity and diversity of the tourism sector, adopting a holistic and integrative planning perspective becomes essential. Interviewees observed that isolated actions, such as creating rural accommodation or launching isolated promotional activities; often fail to contribute to destination sustainability and may even generate unintended territorial impacts (Bohn et al., 2023; Tirado Ballesteros & Hernández Hernández, 2017).

Another major challenge identified is the absence of baseline data and the resulting difficulty in assessing progress or attributing outcomes to specific interventions, which undermines the ability to test or revise the underlying ToC over time. This gap extends across all phases of the evaluation cycle, including ex-ante, implementation, and ex-post stages. Interviewees noted that relevant data are often inaccessible, fragmented, or presented in incompatible formats, making them of limited practical use (Christoforou Livani et al., 2024). The lack of robust baselines and appropriate indicators undermines the ability to assess additionality or causality, an issue repeatedly noted in evaluation literature (European Commission, 2013; Gertler et al., 2016). To be effective, indicators must be defined across all levels of the intervention logic (outputs, outcomes, and impacts) and aligned with the project’s ToC. As Gertler et al. (2016) emphasise, establishing baselines and integrating evaluation design from the outset are prerequisites for credible impact assessment, yet these are rarely addressed systematically in EU-funded tourism projects.

Institutional capacity emerged as another cross-cutting constraint. Interviewees underscored weaknesses in both project management and evaluation capacities, confirming findings by Bachtler et al. (2024). Tourism administrations, particularly at local levels, remain under-resourced compared to the sector’s economic and social importance (Torres et al., 2025b). This imbalance results in limited analytical capacity and an overreliance on performance and compliance monitoring rather than genuine impact assessment, a pattern consistent with P–A dynamics, where reporting obligations substitute for learning-oriented evaluation (Gertler et al., 2016). As noted by Bachtler and Ferry (2015), financial and administrative pressures, such as the decommitment rule; reinforce short-term spending priorities, echoing the incentive asymmetries described by P–A theory (Eisenhardt, 1989).

For evaluation to become effective, a cultural and institutional shift is required. At the same time, the literature cautions against overestimating what evaluation can realistically achieve. Realist evaluation scholarship emphasises that most public interventions operate within open, complex systems where evaluation cannot directly engineer systemic transformation, but can instead support incremental and context-sensitive change (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). Evaluation should be embedded within organisational processes and embraced not merely as an accountability mechanism but as a learning and improvement tool (Capano & Malandrino, 2025; Font et al., 2012), while ensuring evaluators’ independence (Mathison, 2018). This transformation requires

commitment from leadership, investment in evaluation capacity, and institutional incentives that value adaptive learning over procedural compliance. In the context of sustainable tourism, such learning-oriented evaluation is essential to reconcile short-term project delivery with long-term environmental, social, and territorial objectives.

Building on these insights, and informed by recurring mechanisms and constraints identified across project phases, this study proposes a step-by-step approach to enhance project impact across all evaluation phases. The framework integrates institutional capacity, governance, adaptive management, and knowledge use, comprising eight key steps to maximise the impact of EU-funded tourism projects (Table 5). It is intended for use by the range of actors involved in the design, management, delivery, and evaluation of publicly funded tourism projects, including funding bodies, project implementers, evaluators, and supporting organisations. Rather than prescribing responsibilities to specific institutions, it is designed to be applied flexibly across governance contexts, recognising that responsibilities for planning, oversight, implementation, and evaluation are often distributed and may overlap in practice.

Table 5. A step-by-step approach to enhancing project impact across evaluation phases

Step	Ex-Ante	Mid-Term	Final	Ex-Post
1. Engage Stakeholders	Identify and involve stakeholders in design	Consult stakeholders and confirm buy-in and ownership	Engage stakeholders in evaluation	Sustain stakeholder engagement and partnerships
2. Define Impact, Outcomes and Assumptions	Define impact, outcomes and assumptions	Review progress and test assumptions	Verify outcomes achieved	Assess long-term impacts
3. Plan and Deliver Outputs and Activities	Plan activities and outputs	Monitor delivery and use outputs	Verify outputs through field visits	Confirm continued use of outputs, built into legacy
4. Set and Monitor Indicators	Set SMART indicators and baselines	Update data and monitor indicators	Report on indicators and compare with baseline	Use indicators to measure long-term project results' sustainability /impact
5. Strengthen Institutional Capacity and Governance	Assess capacity, mandate and feasibility	Reassess capacity and governance risks, and provide training	Evaluate governance performance	Review governance and institutional legacy
6. Manage Financial Performance and Resources	Plan budget and assess risks	Monitor budget execution and efficiency	Verify efficiency	Ensure financial sustainability
7. Apply Adjustments and Adaptive Management	Define rules for adjustments	Apply rules and adapt project	Document justified changes	Incorporate adaptation lessons into new programmes
8. Capture Knowledge, Learning and Legacy	Design knowledge management systems and sustainability plan	Check knowledge management systems and early legacy signs	Transfer tools, document knowledge in adequate formats, and disseminate lessons	Institutionalise knowledge and feed back into policy and structures

Source: Own elaboration

Although many of the principles reflected in Table 5, such as intervention logic, indicator alignment, stakeholder engagement, and adaptive learning are well established in evaluation literature, the contribution of the framework lies in their systematic operationalisation across project phases and governance contexts within the tourism policy. By explicitly linking each step to both ToC logic (how change is expected to occur) and P–A dynamics (how incentives and information shape behaviour), the protocol advances existing guidance by showing how evaluation principles can be applied coherently in multi-actor, multi-level funding environments. In this sense, the framework does not introduce new evaluation concepts, but provides a practical structure for translating established theory into evaluative practice aimed at strengthening the conditions under which impact may be achieved.

Overall, the findings reaffirm that the effectiveness and impact of tourism projects are shaped not only by formal regulatory requirements, but by how evaluation principles are operationalised in practice across diverse funding schemes, including EU and other international donor programmes. Despite differences in regulatory design, similar challenges recur across these contexts, particularly with respect to governance arrangements, institutional capacity, coordination, and learning. From a ToC perspective, improving project performance requires stronger causal logic, participatory planning, and adaptive learning mechanisms embedded across the evaluation cycle. From a P–A standpoint, overcoming short-termism, compliance-driven monitoring, and capacity asymmetries is essential to realign incentives and enhance accountability. Together, these insights underscore the need for integrated evaluation frameworks that are both theory-informed and context-sensitive, enabling tourism projects to move beyond procedural outputs toward sustained, demonstrable impact. Consistent with transition management research in EU tourism governance, which frames learning and reflexivity as prerequisites for transformation rather than guarantees of impact (Crabolu et al., 2026), the findings of this study suggest that evaluation can enable impact, but not by itself deliver, unless governance, capacity and accountability conditions are addressed.

Conclusions

This study has examined how evaluation practices can enhance or constrain the impact of EU-funded tourism projects, adopting a comprehensive project cycle perspective informed by ToC and P–A theory. By incorporating the views of diverse stakeholders involved in project design, implementation, and evaluation, the research identified critical gaps in current practices. A major weakness emerges during the ex-ante phase, where project formulation and design often fail to adequately assess local contexts, needs, and institutional capacities. This disconnect between EU policy priorities and local realities results in limited ownership and weak foundations for sustainability. The problem is compounded by the scarcity of ex-post evaluation and an excessive focus on outputs rather than long-term outcomes and learning.

To address these shortcomings, the paper has proposed a step-by-step protocol for strengthening impact across all evaluation phases. The approach emphasises participatory planning, capacity building, adaptive management, and the systematic capture of knowledge and legacy to ensure that results are both measurable and lasting. However, as the findings suggest, applying this framework will require a cultural and institutional shift within funding bodies, implementing agencies, and evaluation institutions. Embedding evaluation as a learning-

oriented and developmental process, rather than as a compliance exercise, is essential for maximising the transformative potential of EU investments.

This is a timely moment for change. The Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) has already introduced a stronger results-oriented logic in EU funding by linking disbursement to predefined milestones and targets, and the forthcoming EU Sustainable Tourism Strategy and the design of the Multiannual Financial Framework 2028–2034 offer an opportunity to further integrate transparency, accountability, and long-term impact as core principles of tourism funding. Given the substantial resources allocated to the sector, ensuring robust evaluation, particularly in relation to Step 8: Capturing knowledge, learning, and legacy, will be key to avoiding repetitive, short-term initiatives and fostering genuine transformation at destination level.

This study has several limitations. First, it does not differentiate systematically between specific funding instruments (e.g. Interreg, Horizon, Erasmus+, or *NextGenerationEU*), as many interviewees, particularly implementers and consultants, were involved across multiple programmes, limiting attribution of observed challenges to individual scheme. While the findings suggest that governance, capacity, coordination, and learning challenges recur across funding contexts, future research could examine how these vary depending on programme design and regulatory frameworks. Second, although the sample included diverse institutional profiles, this study did not conduct a comparative analysis of perspectives across actor types (e.g., academic institutions, public administrations, NGOs, or private organisations). Further research with larger and more differentiated samples could explore these differences in greater depth. Finally, future studies could apply and test the proposed protocol in ongoing and future projects, including the final and ex-post phases of Tourism Sustainability Plans at Destinations in Spain, to assess its usefulness across funding instruments, destination types, and institutional contexts.

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CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

This thesis set out to address a persistent gap in the understanding of the results and impact of tourism projects funded by the European Union. Although tourism has long been recognised as a significant economic and social sector across Europe, and although a growing number of initiatives have been supported through various EU programmes, the actual volume of funding allocated to tourism projects and the extent to which these projects achieve meaningful results has remained largely unknown. More importantly, even when funding data are available, the evidence on outcomes, impact, and long-term sustainability is extremely limited.

Across the different chapters, an overarching finding emerges: EU-funded tourism projects are seldom evaluated systemically, and the absence of evaluation practices structured around the full project cycle constrains the potential for learning, improvement, and accountability. The fragmentation of EU data systems, the limited dissemination of evaluation information, and the absence of transparent and consistent reporting mechanisms all contribute to a landscape in which evidence remains scattered, incomplete, or inaccessible to most stakeholders.

This discussion chapter synthesises the findings of the thesis as a whole. It integrates the historical evolution of EU policy, empirical results on funding allocation, insights from evaluation frameworks and practices, and qualitative evidence from expert interviews. It also reflects on the implications of these findings for tourism governance, institutional capacity, territorial cohesion, and future EU programming. Finally, it discusses the proposed evaluation protocol as a practical and conceptual response to the identified challenges.

5.1 Understanding the evolution of EU Tourism Policy

Analysing the trajectory of EU tourism policy (Article I) was essential for understanding the broader institutional environment in which EU-funded tourism projects are designed and implemented. As documented in the thesis, EU tourism policy has evolved in slow, non-linear, and often fragmented ways. In the 1980s and 1990s, policy priorities were dominated by the creation of the Single Market, where tourism was framed as a mechanism to promote mobility, strengthen cohesion, and reinforce the notion of a shared European identity. Initiatives such as the European Tourism Year in 1990 symbolised political attention, yet lacked deeper structural support or long-term vision.

The critique formulated by Estol & Font (2016) that EU tourism policy had advanced slowly, remained largely voluntary, and lacked institutional clarity, provided an important analytical lens. The findings of this thesis show that although considerable progress has occurred since their analysis, several of their concerns remain valid. The recognition of tourism as an EU competence in the Treaty of Lisbon (2007) represented a landmark moment, giving tourism formal status within the EU's legal and institutional framework and paving the way for strategic documents aimed at competitiveness, innovation, and sustainability.

The 2010 Communication, positioning Europe as the “world's No. 1 tourist destination”, signalled renewed ambition. Subsequent policy agendas, on coastal and maritime tourism (as part of the Blue Growth Strategy), or on cultural tourism (through the European Agenda for Culture), further

broadened the focus of EU tourism. However, the findings confirm that implementation efforts lagged behind policy rhetoric. Only with the introduction of the European Green Deal (European Commission, 2019), the commitment to climate neutrality by 2050, and the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic did tourism become more embedded in broader debates about resilience, sustainability, and transition pathways.

The Transition Pathway for Tourism (European Commission, 2022) and the future EU Agenda for Tourism 2030 represent important advances. Yet, stocktaking reports show that while policy and governance structures are beginning to take shape, momentum is uneven: digitalisation, resilience building, skills development, and inclusion progress more slowly. These observations align with this thesis's broader findings: the benefits of EU tourism policy are unequally distributed, with the most institutionally capable, networked, and better-resourced stakeholders advancing more quickly, exacerbating territorial imbalances.

In summary, the analysis shows that EU tourism policy has broadened its ambitions considerably, yet structural challenges limit its effectiveness. Understanding these limitations is crucial for interpreting both funding allocation patterns and evaluation shortcomings.

5.2 EU funding for tourism projects

Article II provided the first comprehensive mapping of EU funding allocated to tourism projects across the two most recent complete programming periods (2007–2013 and 2014–2020). The results confirmed that tourism receives a disproportionately small share of EU funding relative to its economic, social, and territorial relevance. Despite representing around 10% of EU GDP, only 2.23% of EU funding in the analysed programmes was directed to tourism projects.

The majority of funding originated from the Structural Funds, which remain the primary mechanism through which tourism receives support. In contrast, the participation of tourism in other key programmes, such as Creative Europe, LIFE, research and innovation, rural development, and youth and education; remains minimal. The finding that tourism constitutes only 3% of Creative Europe funding is particularly striking given that culture is among Europe's most important tourism assets.

This uneven funding landscape raises concerns about strategic coherence. Numerous EU discussions acknowledge tourism's cross-sectoral nature and its potential to contribute to climate goals, innovation, skills, and cohesion. Yet the funding patterns observed suggest that tourism is not fully integrated into these agendas. Tourism stakeholders, particularly MSMEs, receive limited targeted support, and only COSME provided a dedicated tourism call during the periods examined.

Spatial distribution patterns further reveal important territorial inequalities. Italy, Spain, and Germany dominate EU-funded tourism project participation, reflecting the advantages of institutional capacity, experience, and access to professional networks. Conversely, regions with weaker governance structures or limited experience in EU project management participate far less, reinforcing the territorial asymmetries described by Bachtler & Ferry (2015). This raises

concerns not only about fairness but also about the ability of less-resourced destinations to participate in transformative projects that could support sustainable development.

Finally, the analysis highlighted significant limitations in data transparency and consistency. The lack of standardised information across EU datasets made it challenging to identify, quantify, and categorise tourism projects, signalling a systemic barrier to accountability and policy learning.

5.3 Evaluation frameworks and practices

Article III demonstrated that evaluation of EU-funded tourism projects remains weak, fragmented, and insufficiently disseminated. Despite considerable investments and numerous EU and international guidelines promoting evidence-based approaches (European Commission, 2012, 2013, 2024; Gertler et al., 2016; OECD, 2012; UNDP, 2002), evaluation outputs are scarce, inconsistent, or inaccessible. Less than 1% of Cohesion Policy evaluations focus on tourism, and those that do often emphasise financial compliance over qualitative assessment.

This finding aligns with the concerns raised by the European Court of Auditors (2021), which identified recurrent weaknesses in project planning, cost management, timeliness, and duplication of initiatives. The ECA's recommendations underscore the need for stronger selection mechanisms, better diagnostics, and more coherent evaluation frameworks.

The literature review revealed that evaluation practices remain predominantly quantitative and focused on outputs (e.g., visitor numbers, facilities built, training sessions delivered) rather than on outcomes or long-term impacts. Dunphy et al. (2020) highlight the difficulty of assessing tourism's multifaceted impacts, yet the absence of mixed methods, Theory of Change approaches, and logic models persists despite strong recommendations from methodological literature.

Furthermore, the fragmentation of evaluation data mirrors the fragmentation found in funding datasets: evaluations are dispersed across platforms, often unpublished, or produced in formats that hinder reuse (Christoforou Livani et al., 2024). Without standardised protocols and baseline information, evaluations cannot be compared, synthesised, or used to inform evidence-based improvements. This severely limits the capacity of institutions to learn from previous experiences, replicate successful practices, or avoid repeating mistakes.

5.4 Systemic and cross-cutting factors limiting project impact

The qualitative study presented in Article V allowed a deeper understanding of the structural and institutional barriers affecting tourism project performance. Through interviews with donors, implementers, evaluators, consultants, and multilateral organisations, several cross-cutting factors emerged.

A consistent observation was that projects often begin without robust diagnostics or sufficient baseline assessments. Many proposals reflect broad policy alignments but lack detailed analyses of local needs, existing initiatives, or socio-economic conditions. Delays between formulation and implementation exacerbate the problem, leading to outdated or irrelevant

project designs. This prevents the articulation of realistic outcomes and inhibits the ability to measure change meaningfully.

Stakeholders from multiple contexts described a persistent dynamic whereby projects are driven by available funding opportunities rather than long-term strategic visions, echoing theoretical concerns raised in the literature (Godenhjelm et al., 2015; Prokkola, 2011; Stoffelen & Vanneste, 2017). This leads to short-term thinking, isolated initiatives, duplication of efforts, and a lack of continuity. Montano et al. (2023) and Twining-Ward et al. (2021) similarly highlight the absence of long-term planning, noting that projects often do not build on past results or contribute to systemic change.

Interviewees repeatedly emphasised the lack of baseline data, difficulties accessing or interpreting existing information, and inconsistencies in reporting formats. These issues mirror the challenges encountered in this thesis when estimating EU funding allocations. Without reliable data, causal attribution becomes nearly impossible, reducing the credibility and usefulness of evaluations.

Many public administrations, particularly those in smaller municipalities or peripheral regions, lack the technical expertise, human resources, and budgetary capacity required for effective project management and evaluation. These gaps echo the findings of Bachtler et al. (2024), who note that evaluation often receives minimal resourcing. Administrative pressures such as the decommitment rule create incentives that prioritise rapid spending over strategic planning (Bachtler & Ferry, 2015), illustrating the incentive asymmetries described by Principal-Agent theory (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Evaluation is often perceived as a compliance exercise rather than a learning opportunity (Font et al., 2012). This cultural barrier reduces openness to reflection, experimentation, and adaptive management; elements crucial for project improvement. Several interviewees described resistance from leadership or political actors, a tendency to avoid external scrutiny, or a belief that evaluation is unnecessary, consistent with Manski's (2013) concept of 'incredible certitude'.

Collectively, these structural constraints prevent the establishment of a systemic, learning-oriented evaluation culture.

5.5 The case of Tourism Destination Sustainability Plans

The case study of the Tourism Destination Sustainability Plans offers a clear illustration of how the structural limitations identified in the preceding chapters manifest within a real-world EU-funded tourism programme. Drawing on evidence from the systematic review of PSTD actions in the Comunitat Valenciana (Article IV) and from expert interviews with consultants, programme managers, and local authorities, the analysis reveals that the design and implementation of the programme were shaped by the exceptional context of the EU Recovery and Resilience Facility, particularly the urgency surrounding fund absorption and the compressed execution timelines.

As shown in Article IV, municipalities in the Comunitat Valenciana tended to prioritise actions that could be mobilised rapidly within the constraints of public procurement procedures. This

resulted in a predominance of infrastructure and equipment investments, while more complex interventions aimed at long-term transformation, such as improved governance processes, capacity-building, or community-based initiatives; were comparatively limited. The interview data helps to contextualise these patterns by illuminating how administrative pressures, time constraints, and institutional realities influenced local decision-making and the types of interventions ultimately selected.

Taken together, the regional analysis and interview evidence highlight the need to understand the PSTD not only through their formal objectives, but also through the systemic conditions that shaped their implementation. The following sections discuss these conditions in depth, structured around seven interrelated themes that emerged across the case study. These themes provide insight into the broader governance, planning, and evaluation challenges that affect the transformational potential of EU-funded tourism interventions.

5.5.1 Misalignment between project design and destination needs

A first and persistent finding concerns the disconnect between PSTD-funded actions and the strategic needs of destinations. Interviewees across all stakeholder groups emphasised that many municipalities approached the PSTD as an opportunity to ‘fit projects into the call’ rather than to articulate interventions grounded in pre-existing diagnoses or strategies. This dynamic reflects a deeper structural issue: the absence of robust ex-ante planning frameworks at the municipal level. In practice, project design was often driven by the content of the funding call, especially its predefined axes, rather than by an assessment of what was most relevant for the destination’s long-term development (Dredge, 2001). Consultants noted frequent cases where politically favoured projects were included irrespective of strategic rationale, while others described the widespread use of template-based, copy–paste project formulations with minimal territorial specificity. As a result, the coherence of many PSTD was weakened from the outset, with important implications for later stages of implementation and evaluation.

5.5.2 Fragmented governance and weak coordination mechanisms

The governance architecture of the PSTD emerged as another critical area of concern. Although the programme design anticipated multi-level collaboration between municipalities, autonomous communities, and the national administration, the interviews demonstrate that coordination processes were often fragmented, reactive, or insufficiently institutionalised. At local level, interdepartmental technical commissions, considered essential for ensuring coherence between tourism, urban planning, environmental management, and economic development; were inconsistently established or used merely as procedural formalities. Furthermore, complex administrative arrangements between certain Destination Management Organisations (DMOs), municipal departments, and regional tourism bodies generated delays, uncertainty, and repeated redesigns of project portfolios.

At the political level, electoral cycles introduced additional instability, as changes in leadership frequently resulted in the modification of previously approved actions, sometimes in ways that contradicted the strategic orientation of the original plans. These findings highlight the need to

strengthen governance arrangements to ensure continuity, clear role distribution, and more consistent multi-level alignment.

5.5.3 Institutional capacity constraints and reliance on external consultancies

Institutional capacity, especially at municipal level, was identified as one of the most significant barriers to effective PSTD implementation. Municipalities accustomed to managing relatively small budgets and simple administrative processes suddenly faced multi-million-euro portfolios, high procurement demands, and stringent accountability requirements. Unsurprisingly, local administrations were often unable to absorb the operational and technical workload, leading to widespread reliance on external consultancies.

While in some cases consultants played a constructive role by providing technical guidance and supporting destinations with planning, procurement, and follow-up, the interviews also revealed important limitations of this outsourcing model. Many consulting firms managed several PSTD simultaneously with minimal on-the-ground engagement, while some municipal officials reported receiving generic project proposals with little contextual relevance. Moreover, dependence on consultants did not necessarily translate into capacity-building for local staff, raising concerns about the sustainability of the programme's outcomes once external support is withdrawn. These findings underscore a systemic mismatch between the ambitions of the PSTD and the administrative realities of the entities responsible for their implementation.

5.5.4 Monitoring practices centred on administrative execution rather than impact

Another dominant finding concerns the misalignment between monitoring requirements and the broader objectives of the PSTD. Interviewees across all profiles consistently described monitoring processes as almost entirely focused on administrative and financial performance (e.g., contracting phases, expenditure justification), with little attention to whether the actions generated meaningful changes in the destination. Monthly reporting templates required municipalities to detail the status of each action in terms of procurement and budget execution, but there were no mechanisms for collecting baseline data, measuring changes in tourism indicators, or assessing socio-environmental outcomes.

Although initial project documentation often included expected results or impact-oriented statements, these indicators were seldom operationalised, systematically measured, or linked to a clear theory of change. In practice, compliance with financial and procedural requirements became the primary measure of success. This reinforces the gap between the programme's stated transformational goals and the actual tools available to verify progress towards them. The absence of standardised evaluation frameworks and methodological guidance from national or regional authorities further weakens the capacity of destinations to engage in meaningful learning processes.

5.5.5 Thematic drift and questionable legitimacy of funded actions

The interviews also reveal notable inconsistencies in the nature and relevance of funded actions. Under pressure to execute budgets within tight deadlines, and hindered by procurement bottlenecks, many municipalities prioritised actions that were easy to contract and justify, rather

than those aligned with tourism sustainability objectives. Examples include the installation of urban cameras, renovation of non-touristic infrastructure, or acquisition of equipment with limited strategic value.

A particularly influential factor behind thematic drift was the requirement to comply with climate tagging. Several interviewees noted that substantial effort was devoted to reclassifying actions to fit climate categories, sometimes at the expense of more coherent tourism or sustainability planning. This illustrates how compliance mechanisms, when not accompanied by strategic clarity, can inadvertently distort investment priorities.

5.5.6 Limited stakeholder engagement and weak participatory processes

Despite widespread recognition in the literature that stakeholder participation is crucial for ensuring the coherence, legitimacy, and long-term sustainability of tourism projects, interview evidence indicates that genuine participatory processes were rare in PSTD design and implementation. Except for a few cases, engagement with local businesses, civil society, or tourism actors was typically superficial or absent, particularly in the initial design phase. Time pressures, limited capacity, and a procedural focus on fulfilling call requirements contributed to this neglect.

Where participation did occur, interviewees noted positive outcomes: better strategic alignment, broader community ownership, and even electoral benefits for local governments. However, in most destinations, the failure to involve stakeholders resulted in limited awareness of the PSTD, weak integration into broader territorial dynamics, and reduced potential for long-term behavioural or institutional change.

5.5.7 Lack of long-term sustainability and maintenance planning

Finally, the interviews show that PSTD projects often lacked consideration for long-term sustainability, both financially and institutionally. Digital tools, such as observatories, apps, smart signage; were frequently developed without maintenance budgets or service contracts, leading to rapid obsolescence. Infrastructure investments created new operational burdens for municipalities without associated staffing or financial provisions. Consultants and local implementers alike emphasised that many municipalities would struggle to maintain systems or interventions over the required five-year periods, reflecting a structural disconnect between the programme's expectations and the economic and administrative capacity of local entities.

This lack of planning for post-project continuity increases the risk of producing 'white elephants', this is infrastructures or technological systems that deteriorate or become unused once project funding ends. It also highlights the absence of a broader strategic framework guiding the integration of PSTD outcomes into local development mechanisms.

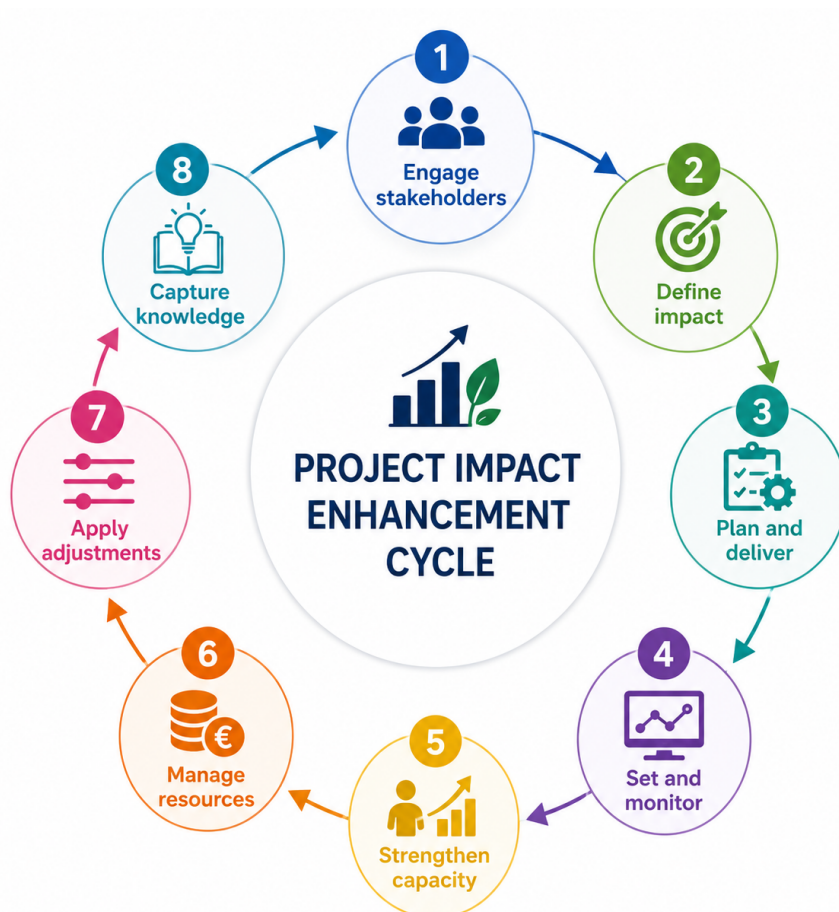
Collectively, these findings demonstrate that the challenges observed in PSTD implementation are not isolated operational issues but are embedded in a broader system characterised by weak ex-ante strategic planning, fragmented governance, insufficient institutional capacity, and a monitoring culture centred on procedural compliance rather than developmental impact. While individual projects have achieved positive outcomes, the overall picture suggests that the PSTD

in their current configuration face significant limitations in fulfilling their intended role as catalysts for sustainable tourism transformation at the local level. Addressing these structural issues, through clearer evaluation frameworks, stronger governance architectures, improved capacity-building, and mechanisms that prioritise learning and impact; will be essential for enhancing the effectiveness of future tourism funding programmes.

5.6 Proposed evaluation protocol: a framework for strengthening learning, accountability, and impact

In response to the challenges identified across the thesis, an evaluation protocol grounded in the principles of the Design Science Research methodology was developed. This protocol integrates eight sequential, yet iterative steps designed to support learning-oriented evaluation, strengthen governance structures, and improve project performance throughout the project cycle (Fig. 32). The steps are described below, and the full guiding questions are presented in Annex 1. The protocol is not intended as a rigid template but as a flexible framework adaptable to different tourism contexts.

Figure 32. Project impact enhancement cycle



Source: Own elaboration

5.6.1 Step 1. Engage stakeholders

Stakeholder engagement is foundational for ensuring relevance, legitimacy, and sustainability. Tourism projects involve a highly diverse range of actors (Gonzalez-Urango & García-Melón, 2018), reflecting the sector's multisectoral nature. Effective engagement requires early mapping, clarity of roles, and continuous involvement across all phases. Mid-term and final evaluations should examine both the quality and depth of stakeholder participation, ensuring that the perspectives of communities, private sector actors, and civil society are incorporated into decision-making processes.

5.6.2 Step 2. Define impact, outcomes and assumptions

Clear articulation of desired impacts and outcomes provides direction and coherence. Outcomes must be evidence-based, aligned with territorial priorities, and realistic within the project timeframe. Identifying assumptions, which are conditions necessary for success; supports risk management and enables corrective measures when assumptions no longer hold. Evaluations across all phases must verify whether outcomes are on track, whether assumptions remain valid, and whether the project is contributing to broader policy objectives.

5.6.3 Step 3. Plan and deliver outputs and activities

The translation of outcomes into concrete outputs and activities is central to project success. However, many tourism projects focus excessively on delivering tangible outputs without clarifying how these outputs contribute to higher-level outcomes. Theory of Change tools (Jensen et al., 2025) help make causal linkages explicit. Evaluations should therefore assess not only the quantity of outputs but also their quality, relevance, and utilisation. This is particularly relevant for final evaluations, which often verify delivery but fail to assess whether outputs have produced meaningful change.

5.6.4 Step 4. Set and monitor indicators

Indicators are essential for measuring progress and fostering collective reflection. They must be aligned with the Theory of Change and supported by credible baselines. Tourism evaluations frequently rely on narrow quantitative indicators, overlooking broader socio-cultural and environmental impacts (Dunphy et al., 2020). This protocol emphasises the need for indicators at all levels (impact, outcome, and output) and for integrating qualitative evidence. Mid-term and final evaluations should assess progress against baselines, while ex-post evaluations should examine the sustainability and durability of results.

5.6.5 Step 5. Strengthen institutional capacity and governance

Institutional capacity is a decisive factor in determining project success. Capacities should be assessed during the ex-ante phase, including staffing levels, technical expertise, and organisational structures. Multilevel governance arrangements, common in tourism, require explicit coordination mechanisms. Targeted capacity-building measures, such as training, mentoring, peer learning; can strengthen implementation and support sustainability. Evaluations

should assess whether institutional improvements have been achieved and whether governance structures remain functional and coherent.

5.6.6 Step 6. Manage financial performance and resources

Effective financial planning ensures that resources enable (not constrain) project performance. Mid-term evaluations often reveal delays related to procurement or initial under-spending followed by compressed delivery periods. Evaluations must therefore examine spending patterns, efficiency, and alignment between expenditures and expected outcomes. The ex-post phase should determine whether maintenance arrangements and financial provisions exist to sustain activities beyond the funding period (van Voorst & Mastenbroek, 2019).

5.6.7 Step 7. Apply adjustments and adaptive management

Projects operate in dynamic contexts and must be flexible enough to adapt. For adaptations to be legitimate and transparent, adjustment rules must be defined during the ex-ante phase. Final evaluations should examine the rationale and quality of adjustments and their alignment with project objectives. Ex-post evaluations should assess whether adaptive decisions contributed to longer-term relevance, particularly in cases of political turnover or external shocks and contingencies.

5.6.8 Step 8. Capture knowledge, learning and legacy

Knowledge management is often the weakest component of tourism projects. To avoid duplication and ensure legacy, knowledge systems must be included from the outset. Synergies with previous projects should be analysed at ex-ante stage; mid-term reviews should assess whether learning mechanisms are functioning; and final evaluations should examine the dissemination of tools, results, and lessons learned. Ex-post evaluations must consider whether knowledge has been institutionalised, this is embedded into daily practices, policies, or governance structures (Volden & Welde, 2022).

5.6.9 Implementation considerations and organisational culture

While the protocol offers a structured and pragmatic approach, its effectiveness depends on institutional willingness, leadership support, and allocation of time and resources. There is a risk of organisational resistance to evaluation, often stemming from the belief that current practices are already optimal or from fear of negative scrutiny. Addressing this requires reframing evaluation as a collaborative learning process and strengthening capacity at all institutional levels.

In many cases, institutions are overstretched, managing day-to-day responsibilities with limited resources. Allocating dedicated staff time to evaluation, developing internal expertise, and fostering a culture that values transparency, adaptation, and learning are essential preconditions for the protocol's successful application.

CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSIONS

This thesis set out to demonstrate the need for a stronger and more coherent relationship between EU tourism policy, the projects funded under different EU instruments, and the real developmental needs of destinations, sectors, and communities. Across the chapters, the research has shown that while tourism holds substantial economic and social significance in the European Union, the governance, funding, and evaluation structures currently in place do not fully reflect this importance. The findings consistently indicate that policy ambitions, institutional capacities, and evaluation practices remain misaligned. To address this gap, the thesis has called for a more transparent, equitable, and learning-oriented approach to how EU-funded tourism projects are designed, implemented, and assessed.

A central institutional change underway – the transition of the tourism portfolio from the Directorate-General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs (DG GROW) to the Directorate-General for Mobility and Transport (DG MOVE), and its explicit inclusion under the new Commissioner for Transport and Tourism – marks an important and potentially transformative moment. The consultation process for the forthcoming EU Sustainable Tourism Strategy signals political recognition of tourism’s cross-cutting relevance. Yet, as tourism policy actions remain non-binding, progress depends heavily on voluntary commitment from Member States and stakeholders. In a highly competitive tourism landscape, this voluntary nature has contributed to slow implementation and limited success in addressing socio-cultural and environmental sustainability challenges. As European destinations face intensifying climate risks and evolving crises, the need for more robust, binding, and future-oriented policies becomes increasingly urgent.

The findings of this thesis show that progress is uneven, often concentrated among larger destinations, experienced institutions, and well-connected stakeholders. This pattern echoes the Transition Pathway stocktaking reports, which highlight persistent territorial and structural imbalances; reflected also in the funding analysis, where a small number of countries dominate project participation and budget absorption. Such disparities undermine cohesion objectives and restrict opportunities for micro and small enterprises, rural destinations, and less-resourced regions to engage meaningfully with EU initiatives.

In the digital era, and with rapid advances in data analytics and artificial intelligence, it is no longer viable for the tourism sector to operate in silos or continue duplicating efforts across programmes, levels of governance, or territories. The thesis confirms the urgent need for consistent data collection, interoperable systems, and structured knowledge-sharing mechanisms capable of bridging the gaps between institutions, sectors, and Member States. Strengthening these systems is particularly vital to ensure that knowledge and benefits are distributed more equitably across Europe’s diverse tourism ecosystem.

A recurring theme across the research is the critical importance of visibility and transparency. Tourism represents a significant share of Europe’s socio-economic activity, yet its funding remains dispersed and relatively modest compared with its contribution to GDP. More importantly, the impacts of EU-funded tourism policy and projects remain insufficiently known.

Increased transparency would not only enhance accountability regarding the use of public funds; it would also elevate awareness of the positive contributions of tourism development, strengthening support from local communities, destination stakeholders, and public institutions. Crucially, this requires that projects genuinely address local needs and are grounded in meaningful stakeholder participation from the earliest formulation phases.

From the perspective of evaluation, some progress has been made through the publication of guidelines, frameworks, and methodological recommendations. However, this thesis demonstrates that the main challenge lies not in the absence of guidance but in the lack of systematic, practical application. Evaluation continues to be undertaken sporadically, often limited to compliance reporting, and rarely extended to final or ex-post stages. As a result, opportunities for learning and improvement are missed, and the sector continues to reinvent tools, repeat mistakes, or overlook synergies with past initiatives.

This research has emphasised that evaluation must be reframed as an essential mechanism for strengthening project design, improving implementation, and generating knowledge that benefits both policymakers and practitioners. The eight-step evaluation protocol developed in this thesis offers a practical and theoretically grounded framework to advance this objective. The protocol emphasises stakeholder engagement, clear definition of impact and outcomes, alignment of activities with robust indicators, institutional capacity-building, financial efficiency, adaptive management, and systematic knowledge capture. Applied across the ex-ante, mid-term, final, and ex-post phases, the protocol enables weaknesses to be identified early, adjustments to be made in a timely manner, and evidence to be built in a structured and credible way.

For such a framework to become effective, however, evaluation must be embedded within institutions and programmes, not added as an afterthought. Political commitment, adequate resources, and dedicated evaluation capacity are essential. Equally important are mechanisms that ensure that findings are disseminated, used, and embedded into governance structures and policy cycles. Looking ahead, the protocol presented in this thesis has the potential to inform not only future EU funding programmes but also the practices of multilateral development banks and bilateral cooperation agencies. It can also contribute to global discussions on sustainable tourism governance, helping ensure that international investments foster long-term, transformative change for destinations and communities.

This is a decisive moment for rethinking how tourism is governed in Europe. The development of the new EU Sustainable Tourism Strategy and the negotiation of the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF 2028–2034) provide unique opportunities to embed transparency, accountability, resilience, and long-term impact as core principles of EU tourism funding. Ensuring robust evaluation, particularly in relation to knowledge capture, learning, and legacy; will be essential to shifting from repetitive short-term interventions toward systemic, transformative action.

6.1 Further lines of research

This thesis provides a broad EU-level analysis, complemented by a focused case study on the Tourism Destination Sustainability Plans in Spain. While this has generated new insights, it also reveals important avenues for further research.

1. Comparative studies across Member States

Future research should compare tourism project evaluation practices across different Member States to identify variations, constraints, and examples of good practice. Such studies would reveal whether institutional capacity, governance models, or political cultures explain differences in evaluation quality and learning outcomes.

2. Application and testing of the proposed evaluation protocol

The next step is empirical validation of the eight-step evaluation protocol. Researchers should test it in ongoing or future EU-funded projects, including the PSTD programme during its final and ex-post phases. This would help determine its usability, adaptability, and effectiveness in varying institutional and territorial contexts.

3. Full impact assessment of PSTD implementation

A systematic comparison between the original PSTD plans and their final implemented actions is needed to understand: i) how priorities evolved during implementation, ii) the extent to which funded activities reflected real local needs, and iii) the achieved outcomes relative to initial objectives. Such analysis would inform future national and regional tourism strategies.

4. Assessment of institutional capacity and the role of external support

Given the reliance of many municipalities on external consultants for PSTD design and implementation, further research should examine: i) how much local capacity was actually transferred or strengthened, ii) whether external technical assistance compensated for institutional weaknesses or reinforced dependency, and iii) how governance structures evolved over the project cycle.

5. Research on green and digital transition capacities

Future studies should analyse destinations' ability to use and maintain the digital tools, platforms, and datasets generated through EU-funded projects. Understanding how these tools contribute to sustainability transitions, and under what conditions they become operational, is essential for long-term resilience.

6. Improved methodologies for tracking EU funding distribution

A major difficulty encountered in this thesis was the lack of transparent and consistent data across EU platforms. Further research is needed to: i) develop more refined methodologies for tracking EU-funded tourism projects, ii) analyse transnational project distribution at country,

NUTS region, and institutional levels; and iii) explore the potential of new data technologies to address data gaps and improve transparency.

Together, these research directions would deepen understanding of the structural and institutional conditions needed to improve tourism governance, enhance territorial equity, and maximise the impact of EU-funded interventions.

6.2 Final remarks

In sum, this thesis demonstrates that achieving a more sustainable, equitable, and learning-oriented approach to EU-funded tourism development requires structural change in how policies are implemented, how funding is allocated, and how projects are evaluated. As Europe faces new environmental, social, and institutional challenges, strengthening the governance of tourism is not an optional enhancement but a necessary condition for resilience and transformation. The evidence presented throughout this research shows that better data, stronger institutional capacities, and systemic evaluation practices can unlock the full potential of EU investments and generate meaningful benefits for destinations, communities, and businesses across the region. With the forthcoming EU Sustainable Tourism Strategy and the next Multiannual Financial Framework, there is now a pivotal opportunity to embed these principles into future programmes. If embraced, the lessons and tools developed in this thesis can support a new generation of tourism initiatives that are more strategic, transparent, and impactful; ultimately helping Europe move from fragmented efforts to coherent, long-term pathways for sustainable tourism development.

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Note: This bibliography contains the references cited in Chapters 1–3 and 5–6 only. References for Chapter 4 are listed within the individual articles included in that chapter.

ANNEXES

Annex 1. Protocol for projects' evaluation across all phases – Guiding questions

This protocol defines roles by function rather than by institution, recognising that different actors contribute to project design, oversight, delivery, appraisal, and evaluation across the project cycle. This distinction is necessary to avoid role confusion and unfair attribution of responsibility, particularly in donor-funded programmes where appraisal, supervision, and evaluation are often conflated.

Six main roles are used in the tables that follow. Programme Authorities (PA) (donors/managing authorities) set strategic priorities, funding rules and reporting requirements, approve projects and major modifications, and support programme-level learning. Technical Reviewers (TR) (ex-ante) conduct proposal appraisal against call criteria, assessing the quality and feasibility of the design (e.g., Theory of Change, indicators, risks), and making recommendations to the programme authority. Project Designers (PD) or applicants develop the project logic and implementation plan, including stakeholder engagement in design, assumptions, outputs, indicators, and feasibility assessments. Implementing bodies (I) deliver the project, manage procurement and reporting, maintain stakeholder engagement during implementation, and apply adaptive management within approved rules; after completion, they often remain responsible for sustaining outputs. Independent Evaluators (IE) conduct impartial assessments at mid-term, final, and ex-post stages, using appropriate methods and verification to assess relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability. Beneficiaries (B) and partners provide experiential evidence on relevance, uptake, and longer-term use of results.

Each question in the protocol is tagged with the actor(s) holding primary responsibility for the function being assessed at that stage. Other actors may contribute evidence or validation, but the tagging clarifies accountability and supports a learning-oriented interpretation of findings.

EX-ANTE EVALUATION

Question	Responsible actor(s)	Yes/No/ Partially	Evidence/ Comments	Action required
Step 1. Engage Stakeholders				
Have all relevant stakeholders (public, private, community, civil society, knowledge institutions, tourists) been identified?	PD / TR / I			
Has a stakeholder map showing roles, interests, and influence been developed?	PD / TR			
Have stakeholders been meaningfully involved in the design phase?	PD / TR / I / B			
Has evidence of stakeholder ownership or commitment (endorsements, agreements, consultation records) been provided?	PD / TR			

Step 2. Define Impact, Outcomes and Assumptions				
Is the ultimate project impact clearly stated in one sentence?	PD / TR			
Is the impact aligned with EU, national, regional, and/or local policy priorities (specific objectives cited)?	PD / TR / PA			
Is the project aligned with local needs and priorities, not only donor agendas?	PD / TR / I			
Are intermediate outcomes clearly specified (e.g. stronger SMEs, improved governance, better visitor management)?	PD / TR			
Have key assumptions (causal links, context, sequencing) been explicitly stated?	PD / TR			
Have the main barriers/challenges to each outcome been identified (capacity, financial, institutional, governance, infrastructure, environment)?	PD / TR			
Is each barrier supported by evidence (diagnostic studies, baseline data, evaluations, stakeholder input)?	PD / TR			
Are barriers realistically within the project's sphere of influence (not purely external)?	PD / TR / I / PA			
Step 3. Plan and Deliver Outputs and Activities				
Are proposed activities clearly linked to identified challenges and outcomes?	PD / TR / I			
Are expected outputs (deliverables) defined and measurable?	PD / TR / I			
Do outputs directly benefit target groups and stakeholders?	PD / TR / B			
Are interventions designed to be inclusive (women, youth, marginalised groups) and environmentally sustainable?	PD / TR / PA			
Step 4. Set and Monitor Indicators				
Are indicators defined for outputs, outcomes, and impact?	PD / TR			
Are indicators SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound)?	PD / TR			
Are baseline values available for each indicator, or is there a plan to collect them before implementation?	PD / TR			
Are data sources and collection frequency specified?	PD / TR / I			

Is there a M&E plan with an adequate budget to cover baseline and ongoing monitoring and evaluation?	PD / TR / I / PA			
Do indicators ensure attribution to the project (not just sector-wide trends)?	PD / TR			
Step 5. Strengthen Institutional Capacity and Governance				
Has the institutional capacity of the implementing body been assessed (staffing, technical skills, monitoring and evaluation skills, absorptive capacity)?	PD / TR / I			
Are institutional roles and responsibilities clear, without overlap or conflict?	PD / TR / PA			
Does the implementing body have the legal mandate and competence to carry out proposed activities?	PD / TR / PA			
Is there a plan for capacity-building where gaps exist?	PD / TR / PA			
Have administrative, procurement, and reporting requirements been assessed for feasibility during project design?	PD / TR / PA			
Step 6. Manage Financial Performance and Resources				
Has the budget been assessed as realistic for the scope of activities?	PD / TR / I / PA			
Are financial risks (delays, over-dependence on one source) identified and mitigated?	PD / TR / I / PA			
Step 7. Apply Adjustments and Adaptive Management				
Have rules and procedures for project adjustments (e.g., permissible changes, approval processes, limits) been established?	PA			
Step 8. Capture Knowledge, Learning and Legacy				
Are project governance and accountability structures clearly described (decision-making bodies, coordination mechanisms, responsibilities)?	PD / TR / PA			
Are communication and coordination mechanisms with other institutions and partners defined?	PD / TR / I			
Has the project identified synergies with, and build on, past or ongoing projects and programmes?	PD / TR / PA			

Have mechanisms for knowledge management, learning, and dissemination (to ensure lessons are shared and replicated) been integrated into the design?	PD / TR / I			
Is there a plan to ensure institutional memory and learning beyond the project lifetime?	PD / TR / I / PA			
Is there a clear plan for the maintenance and sustainability of outputs (infrastructure, digital tools, capacity built) beyond project completion?	PD / TR / I / PA			

MID-TERM EVALUATION

Question	Responsible actor(s)	Yes/No/Partially	Evidence/Comments	Action required
Step 1. Engage Stakeholders				
Have stakeholders (public, private, community, civil society, beneficiaries) been consulted in the mid-term review?	IE / I / B			
Has stakeholder ownership been maintained or strengthened since project start?	IE / I / B			
Step 2. Define Impact, Outcomes, and Assumptions				
Is the project still aligned with its long-term impact goal?	IE / I			
Are intermediate outcomes being achieved as expected?	IE / I			
Are the causal and context assumptions identified ex-ante still valid?	IE / I			
Have new external factors (political, economic, social, environmental shocks) affected progress?	I / IE			
Has the project adapted adequately to these external changes?	I / IE / PA			
Step 3. Plan and Deliver Outputs and Activities				
Are planned outputs being delivered on schedule and to expected quality standards?	I / IE			
Are activities being implemented as designed?	I / IE			
Are outputs being effectively used by intended beneficiaries?	I / B / IE			

Step 4. Set and Monitor Indicators				
Is monitoring data being collected regularly and of acceptable quality?	I / IE			
Are indicators still relevant, realistic and measurable?	IE / I			
Have baseline data been updated with mid-term values?	I / IE			
Are monitoring systems transparent and accessible (e.g., shared dashboards, open data)?	I / IE			
Have discrepancies between planned and actual performance been identified and analysed?	I / IE			
Step 5. Strengthen Institutional Capacity and Governance				
Has the institutional capacity of the implementing body remained adequate for project delivery?	I / IE			
Are project governance and accountability structures functioning as intended (decision-making, coordination, responsibilities)?	I / IE			
Are governance or political risks affecting delivery (e.g. turnover, coordination failures)?	I / IE / PA			
Are corrective measures (capacity-building, new agreements, technical support) being introduced where needed?	I / PA / IE			
Step 6. Manage Financial Performance and Resources				
Is the budget being executed as planned (disbursements, allocations)?	I / PA / IE			
Are financial delays or bottlenecks affecting delivery?	I / IE / PA			
Is there evidence of efficient resource use (avoiding under/overspending, duplication)?	IE / I			
Step 7. Apply Adjustments and Adaptive Management				
Are justified recommendations being made to adjust activities, outputs or targets?	I / IE			
Are changes respecting the rules and limits for modifications defined ex-ante?	PA / IE			
Are adjustments justified, documented and approved through transparent procedures?	I / PA / IE			

Is the project applying lessons from monitoring and stakeholder feedback in real time?	I / IE			
Step 8. Capture Knowledge, Learning and Legacy				
Are knowledge management and learning mechanisms functioning (reports, exchanges, peer learning)?	I / B / IE			
Are outputs (infrastructure, digital tools, systems) being maintained and used effectively at mid-term?	I / B / IE			
Are synergies with other projects and institutions being pursued?	I / PA / IE			
Are there early signs that practices and tools will be sustained beyond project end?	I / IE / PA			

FINAL EVALUATION

Question	Responsible actor(s)	Yes/No/ Partially	Evidence/ Comments	Action required
Step 1. Engage Stakeholders				
Have stakeholders (implementers, beneficiaries, partners, donors) been involved in the final evaluation?	IE / I / B			
Have diverse perspectives been included (gender, youth, vulnerable groups)?	IE / I / B			
Have stakeholders validated the findings and conclusions?	IE / I / B			
Has the evaluation been conducted as a participatory and learning exercise?	IE / PA			
Step 2. Define Impact, Outcomes and Assumptions				
Have project outcomes been relevant to identified local needs and priorities?	IE / B / I			
Has the project remained aligned with EU, national, regional, and local strategies during its lifetime?	IE / PA / I			
Have outcomes achieved at completion contributed to the project's intended impact?	IE			
Step 3. Plan and Deliver Outputs and Activities				
Have planned outputs been delivered in full and to expected quality standards?	IE / I			

Have outputs contributed to the immediate outcomes defined in the Theory of Change/logframe?	IE			
Have delays or modifications been justified and documented?	IE / PA			
Have outputs been verified through qualitative methods and field visits where relevant (especially for infrastructure/ physical/ social actions)?	IE			
Step 4. Set and Monitor Indicators				
Have indicators been tracked and reported accurately at project completion?	IE / I			
Do reported indicators confirm achievement of planned outputs and outcomes?	IE			
Step 5. Strengthen Institutional Capacity and Governance				
Has the project strengthened institutional capacity (staff, systems, processes)?	IE / I / PA			
Have governance and coordination mechanisms functioned effectively?	IE / I			
Have administrative, procurement and reporting requirements been clear and proportionate during implementation?	IE / I / PA			
Step 6. Manage Financial Performance and Resources				
Have financial and human resources been used efficiently?	IE			
Has the budget been executed as planned, avoiding waste or duplication?	IE			
Step 7. Apply Adjustments and Adaptive Management				
Have project modifications been justified, documented, and effective in achieving outcomes?	IE / I / PA			
Step 8. Capture Knowledge, Learning and Legacy				
Have lessons learned been documented and communicated to relevant actors?	IE / I / B			
Have results been disseminated to stakeholders, partners and the public?	I / PA / B / IE			
Have knowledge products (databases, observatories, digital tools) been transferred to institutions capable of maintaining them?	I / IE / PA			

Have tools, databases, or outputs been made accessible, avoiding closed or siloed platforms?	I / IE / PA			
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EX-POST EVALUATION

Question	Responsible actor(s)	Yes/No/ Partially	Evidence/ Comments	Action required
Step 1. Engage Stakeholders				
Have beneficiaries and key stakeholders remained engaged with or benefited from project results?	IE / B / I			
Have partnerships or networks created by the project been maintained?	IE / I / B			
Has ownership by local institutions and communities been sustained?	IE / I / B			
Step 2. Define Impact, Outcomes and Assumptions				
Have the intended long-term impacts (e.g., competitiveness, sustainability, inclusiveness) become visible?	IE			
Can observed impacts be attributed to the project (rather than external factors)?	IE			
Have unintended positive or negative impacts been identified?	IE / B / I			
Has the project influenced policies, regulations or broader institutional practices?	IE / PA / I			
Has the ex-post evaluation included field verification of sustained outputs and outcomes?	IE			
Has a mixed-methods approach (quantitative + qualitative) been used to assess long-term impacts?	IE			
Step 3. Plan and Deliver Outputs and Activities				
Are project outputs (infrastructure, digital tools, institutional arrangements) still functional and in use?	IE / B / I			
Have financial or institutional arrangements ensured ongoing use of results?	IE / I / PA			
Have beneficiaries continued to use and benefit from outputs/services?	IE / B			
Has scaling-up or replication of results occurred?	IE / PA / I			

Step 4. Set and Monitor Indicators				
Have post-project indicators been used to track sustainability and impact?	IE / PA / I			
Is post-project data available, reliable, and comparable with baselines/mid-term values?	IE / I			
Have responsibilities and schedules for post-project monitoring been defined and followed?	IE / PA / I			
Step 5. Strengthen Institutional Capacity and Governance				
Have governance mechanisms, policies, or institutions established by the project remained active?	IE / I / PA			
Have institutional capacities remained adequate to sustain results?	IE / I			
Have coordination and accountability arrangements persisted since completion?	IE / I / PA			
Step 6. Manage Financial Performance and Resources				
Have funding sources been secured to operate and maintain project outputs?	IE / I / PA			
Have responsible institutions maintained budget allocations to sustain results?	IE / I / PA			
Step 7. Apply Adjustments and Adaptive Management				
Have lessons from this project been incorporated into subsequent programmes or policies?	IE / PA			
Step 8. Capture Knowledge, Learning and Legacy				
Has knowledge products and tools been institutionalised (repositories, curricula, ongoing training)?	IE / I / PA			
Are tools and data accessible (open where appropriate) rather than siloed?	IE / I / PA / B			
Has a multi-stakeholder learning process been conducted and documented?	IE / I / PA / B			
Has the ex-post evaluation been openly disseminated to inform future policy and practice?	PA / IE			

Annex 2. Interview guides

INTERVIEW GUIDE – GROUP 1

Target: Project and programme managers from donor organisations (e.g. EU agencies and programmes, the World Bank and the Central American Bank for Economic Integration), programme support officers and project evaluators (European Court of Auditors and individual evaluators)

QUESTIONS

Introduction

1. Please state your name, role and experience in (tourism) projects, in particular, if you have been involved in design, planning, implementation, monitoring and/or evaluation phases.
2. Do you directly conduct evaluations of projects or are these outsourced to other departments or external consultants?

Principles

3. In your words, why is it important to evaluate (tourism) projects?
4. How can we ensure that evaluations are objective, transparent and methodologically sound?
5. What methods work best in evaluating tourism projects?

Relevance and indicators

6. How should we assess whether a tourism project aligns with public policy objectives and local development goals?
7. What would you suggest for the selection of indicators? Are there minimum indicators a tourism project should have? If so, which ones?

Steps

8. What would be the key steps to be followed to ensure that the evaluation process is successfully conducted?
9. What governance structures should be in place to ensure accountability in tourism projects? Which stakeholders should be involved in the evaluation process?

Challenges and good practices

10. What are the main challenges that are encountered when conducting evaluations? What challenges typically arise in measuring the long-term effectiveness of tourism projects? How could those challenges be addressed?

11. Are there any good practices you would suggest considering in the design of a protocol for the evaluation of tourism projects?
12. How can evaluation findings be effectively used to inform future public funding decisions?
13. What recommendations do you have for improving the overall evaluation process of tourism projects?
14. Do you have any further comments?

INTERVIEW GUIDE – GROUP 2

Target: EU-funded project and programme managers, either involved as partners in a consortium, as lead implementers or as associate partners

QUESTIONS

Introduction

1. Please state your name, role and experience in tourism projects, in particular, if you have been involved in design, planning, implementation, monitoring and/or evaluation phases
2. In the projects in which you have participated, did you participate in the design phase or only in implementation?

Relevance

3. How did you ensure that they aligned with public policy objectives and local development goals?

Evaluation process and indicators

4. How were progress and results measured? Did you have any monthly or annual reviews? Who conducted this process? Which methods did they use?
5. Did you have any performance indicators? Did you set them up or where these dictated by the call for proposals? Please explain.
6. How did you define the targets that the project had to achieve? Did you monitor the results? If so, how?
7. What would be the key steps to be followed to ensure that the evaluation process is successfully conducted?
8. What governance structures should be in place to ensure accountability in tourism projects? Which stakeholders should be involved in the evaluation process?

Challenges and good practices

9. What are the main challenges that are encountered when measuring or demonstrating project results? What challenges typically arise in measuring the long-term effectiveness of tourism projects? How could those challenges be addressed?
10. Are there any good practices you would suggest considering in the design of a protocol for the evaluation of tourism projects?
11. How can evaluation findings be effectively used to inform future public funding decisions?
12. What recommendations do you have for improving the overall evaluation process of tourism projects?
13. Do you have any further comments?

INTERVIEW GUIDE – GROUP 3

Target: Involucrados en los Planes de Sostenibilidad Turística en Destino (PSTD) financiados con fondos europeos Next Generation EU, ya sea consultores que participaron llevando la Secretaría Técnica de los PSTD, los propios beneficiarios o trabajadores de los destinos en los cuales se ejecutaron los planes, o la propia Secretaría de Turismo de España

PREGUNTAS

Introducción y participación en proyectos

1. Por favor, indique su nombre, función y experiencia en proyectos turísticos, en particular, si ha participado en las fases de diseño, planificación, ejecución, seguimiento y/o evaluación de los PSTD.

Relevancia

2. ¿Cómo se definieron los objetivos que debía alcanzar el proyecto? ¿Cómo se aseguró de que se ajustaban a los objetivos de las políticas públicas y a los objetivos de desarrollo local?

Proceso de evaluación e indicadores

3. ¿Cómo se midieron los avances y los resultados? ¿Se realizaron revisiones mensuales o anuales? ¿Quién llevó a cabo este proceso? ¿Qué métodos utilizaron?
4. ¿Existían indicadores de resultados? ¿Estaban descritos en la memoria de la convocatoria o se crearon o ajustaron posteriormente?
5. ¿Cuáles serían los pasos clave a seguir para garantizar que el proceso de evaluación se lleva a cabo con éxito?

6. ¿Qué estructuras de gobernanza deberían existir para garantizar la rendición de cuentas en los PSTD? ¿Qué partes interesadas deberían participar en el proceso de evaluación?

Retos y buenas prácticas

7. ¿Cuáles son los principales retos que se plantean a la hora de medir o demostrar los resultados de los PSTD? ¿Qué retos suelen plantearse a la hora de medir la eficacia a largo plazo de los PSTD? ¿Cómo podrían abordarse esos retos?
8. ¿Existen buenas prácticas que sugeriría tener en cuenta en el diseño de un protocolo para la evaluación de PSTD y otros proyectos?
9. ¿Cómo pueden utilizarse eficazmente los resultados de la evaluación para fundamentar futuras decisiones de financiación pública?
10. ¿Qué recomendaciones tiene para mejorar el proceso general de evaluación de proyectos de turismo?
11. ¿Tiene algún comentario adicional?

