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Balancing growth and sustainability

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by

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Abstract

For twenty years now, sustainable tourism has become a feature of tourism policy in Europe. However, in just a few years, the neologism "overtourism" has become a buzzword in the media, reflecting and encouraging an increasing politicisation of the issue. Some of the measures aimed at tackling the impacts of overtourism call into question the growth paradigm according to which tourism policies have been framed, and sometimes even create tensions with European single market law. This paper hypothesises a difficulty for overtourism to make it on the European policy agenda, given its antagonistic nature towards the growth paradigm on which tourism policy is based. It also hypothesises that the European institutions will nevertheless take up the matter, because of the political context and of pressure of various entrepreneurs. Building on a qualitative research methodology and on the results of semi-directive interviews, this paper analyses the extent to which there is an awareness of the impacts of overtourism at the European level, looking through the lens of historical institutionalism, policy-cycle and governance theories. It concludes that despite a strong European dimension, reaching the European policy agenda has not been an easy task for overtourism, especially because of the centrality of the growth paradigm in tourism policy, which resulted in a path-dependency. Nonetheless, the fight against overtourism has both benefited from a relative window of opportunity and from a context favouring incremental change in the mindset of the institutions. The growing importance of the sustainability paradigm seems to have enabled the integration of this fight, through the pre-existing sustainable tourism framework, on the European policy agenda. Some questions remain, however, regarding the compatibility of the fight against overtourism with a still predominantly growth-based approach.

1. Introduction

In a speech to the European Parliament Committee on Transport and Tourism (TRAN) in April 2020, Commissioner Thierry Breton called for a 'Marshall Plan for European Tourism'.[1] The tourism industry is probably one of the industries that will be hit the most severely by the current pandemic crisis. It may therefore seem in vain or even provocative to write about overtourism in such a context. On the contrary, especially because of the difficulties the tourism sector is undergoing, now is a particularly timely moment to look back and think. If the tourism sector is to be rebuilt, it may as well be rethought, bearing in mind the realities of the tourism of yesterday.

In a 2019 study for the TRAN Committee, the increasing weight of tourism in the global economy was underlined and described as 'the world's third largest export industry'.[2] In 2018, Europe was 'ranked as the world's number one destination for international arrivals'.[3] The importance of the tourism sector in the EU's economy is well established: its direct share in the EU's GDP in 2018 rose to 3,9%, and 5,9% of the total working population was employed in this sector.[4] Traditionally, tourism has therefore been seen as an economic opportunity generating significant income. Tourism is often thought of according to a growth model:[5] attracting more tourists and generating increased revenue, then reinvested in the economy. Hence, tourism is often portrayed as a positive sum game for both tourists and the local population: when the former enjoy their tourist experience, the latter benefits from tourism revenues. Accordingly, the thorough transformation recently undergone by the tourism sector

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[1] Thierry Breton, *Speech by Commissioner Breton on 'A Marshall Plan for European Tourism'*, 2020, retrieved 21 April 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2019-2024/breton/announcements/speech-commissioner-breton-marshall-plan-european-tourism_en

[2] Richard Weston *et al.*, *Research for TRAN Committee – European tourism: recent developments and future challenges*, European Parliament, Policy Department for Structural and Cohesion Policies, 2019, p. 11.

[3] *Ibid*.

[4] 'Tourisme', *Fiches techniques sur l'Union Européenne*, 2020, retrieved 17 March 2020 https://www.europarl.europa.eu/ftu/pdf/fr/FTU_3.4.12.pdf

[5] Claudio Milano, Joseph M. Cheer and Marina Novelli, 'Overtourism: an evolving phenomenon'; in: Claudio Milano, Joseph M. Cheer and Marina Novelli, *Overtourism: excesses, discontents and measures in travel and tourism*, Abingdon: CABI, 2019, pp. 1-17.

with the development of ICTs – online booking platforms, sharing economy, social media – has been welcomed as an opportunity to improve both the tourist experience and tourism benefits for locals.

Tourism, however, has its share of drawbacks – for locals and visitors alike. While the negative impacts of tourism are not new,[6] the development of mass tourism since the 1990s seems to have gradually brought them to the fore, in an increasingly political manner.[7] For a dozen years now in Europe, tourism policies have been increasingly framed according to "sustainable tourism", thus trying to take better into account the negative impacts of mass tourism, especially for the environment.

The concept of "overtourism" appeared recently in the political and academic debate, to describe growing concerns over negative consequences of tourism. The phenomenon is not new *per se* and the term "overtourism" was already coined in the 2000s. But it only started being increasingly used a few years ago. In 2018, a study on overtourism,[8] overtourism was defined as: 'the situation in which the impact of tourism, at certain times and in certain locations, exceeds physical, ecological, social, economic, psychological, and/or political capacity thresholds'.[9]

At the destination level, policy measures have already been implemented in order to counter overtourism's impacts. Facing increasing politicisation (e.g. protests in Venice or Barcelona), tensions have thus sometimes arisen between destination level decisions aimed at tackling overtourism and a European approach that still seems very growth-oriented in the tourism sector.

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[6] Jeremy Boissevain, 'Tourism and development in Malta', *Development and Change*, vol. n° 4, 1977, pp. 523-538; Ted A. Williams, 'Impact of Domestic Tourism on Host Population', *Tourism Recreation Research*, vol. 4, n° 2, 1979, pp. 15-21; UNWTO. *Risks of Saturation of Tourist Carrying Capacity Overload in Holiday Destinations*, Madrid, 1983.
[7] Claire Colomb, and Johannes Novy, (eds.) *Protest and Resistance in the Tourist City,* London: Routledge/Taylor & Francis, 2016.
[8] Paul Peeters, *et al.*, *Research for TRAN Committee – Overtourism: impact and possible policy responses*, European Parliament, Policy Department for Structural and Cohesion Policies, 2018.
[9] *Ibid*, p. 22.

This article aims to assess the extent to which there is an awareness at the European level of the negative effects of mass tourism. It will then question whether the rise of this awareness reflects a shift in the tourism public policy approach, traditionally thought of according to a growth model. It will also question which actors are pushing for the issue to be put on the European agenda, with what success or difficulties.

The two following hypotheses will be tested throughout this study:

(i) Given the growth paradigm dominant in the European approach, the preference is for sustainable tourism rather than overtourism, especially as some regions suffer from undertourism.

(ii) A number of political entrepreneurs are pushing for overtourism to be taken into account at the European level, thus leading the institutions to reflect on this issue. The Commission will face the question of whether it is possible to derogate from some fundamental principles, particularly with regard to the internal market.

A qualitative research methodology will be used throughout this article, drawing on semi-directive interviews conducted with academics, representatives of institutions or cities, and stakeholders. Complementarily, it will proceed to a review of EU policies and a content analysis of relevant EU official communications and judgements of the European Court of Justice (ECJ). The theoretical framework that will be used is mainly historical institutionalism, but this study will also have recourse to policy cycle theories, multi-level governance and network governance.

The article will present the emergence of the overtourism concept and provide a definition of the concept. It will present and justify the choice of the theoretical framework, then look at overtourism as a political reality with strong European and digital dimension. It will thereupon explore the evolution of the European tourism policy and its growth and

sustainability goals. It will subsequently analyse the irruption of overtourism on the European policy agenda and, finally, conclude.

2. Analytical framework

Historical institutionalism emphasises the historical anchoring of actors and their decisions. By putting emphasis on the role of timing and sequence,[10] it is interested in the way public policies are shaped by political and socio-economic patterns inherent to their historical embeddedness. The concept of *path dependency[11]* 'characterizes specifically those historical sequences in which contingent events set into motion institutional patterns or event chains that have deterministic properties'.[12] This concept can hence shed an insightful light on inertia or 'patterns of change and continuity'.[13]

The paper will also draw on 'public policy cycle'[14] theories that argue the policy-making process follows five stages of a continuous cycle: 'agenda-setting, policy formulation, decision-making, implementation and evaluation'.[15] This cycle is characterised by feedback processes and by 'policy succession':[16] policies are rarely made in a vacuum. Rather, they are developed in a framework of 'already existing policies' that can act as 'obstacles for the adoption and implementation of a particular measure'.[17] The agenda-setting phase of the policy cycle will be of particular interest for this article, as it seeks to assess the extent to which overtourism penetrates the European agenda. Kingdon defines the agenda as 'the list of subjects or problems

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[10] Orfeo Fioretos, 'Historical Institutionalism in International Relations', *International Organization,* vol. 65, 2011, p. 371.
[11] Paul Pierson, 'Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics'*, American Political Science Review*, vol. 94, n° 2, 2000, pp. 251-267.
[12] James Mahoney, 'Path Dependence in Historical Sociology', *Theory and Society*, vol. 4, 2000, p. 507.
[13] Fioretos, *op. cit.*, p. 369.
[14] Charles O. Jones and Robert D. Thomas, *Public Policy Making in a federal system*, Beverly Hills: Sage, 1976.
[15] Werner Jann and Kai Wegrich, 'Theories of the policy cycle', in: Frank Fisher, Gerald J. Miller, Mara S. Sidney (eds), *Handbook of public policy analysis: theory, politics and methods*, Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2007, p. 45.
[16] Brian Hogwood and Guy B. Peeters, *Policy dynamics*, Brighton: Wheatsheaf, 1983.
[17] Jann and Wegrich, *loc. cit.*

to which governmental officials, and people outside the government closely associated with those officials, are paying some serious attention at any given time'.[18]

Agenda-setting thus results in the recognition and selection of a public policy problem, in a competitive environment. The notion of 'windows of opportunity'[19] suggests that a problem can successfully make it on the political agenda when there is an intersection in 'the policy stream (solutions), the politics stream (public sentiments, change in governments, and the like), and the problems stream (problem perceptions)'.[20] These concepts can complete the analysis of change or inertia, by shedding a light on processes that could be overlooked by historical institutionalism.

Furthermore, this article will draw on the insights provided by multi-level and network governance, which present the advantage of focusing on the role of actors beyond European institutions and governments. Multi-level governance stresses the importance of regional actors,[21] as well as the non-monolithic character of institutions and governments.[22] As for network governance, it focuses on interactions between public and private actors and on the 'their strategies, practices, interests, representations and the constraints weighing on them'.[23] These two approaches can consequently bring complementary insights.

The emergence of overtourism on the European political agenda seems an interesting case study for various reasons. The topicality of the debate is one of them: over the past three years, overtourism has to some extent become a buzzword in the media and some destinations are gradually shifting their models from a growth to a quality one. The political debate has already reached the TRAN Committee and, indirectly, the ECJ. Moreover, it is an interesting

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[18] John W. Kindon, *Agenda, alternatives and public policy*, New York: Harper Collins College publishers, 2nd edition, 1995, p. 3.
[19] *Ibid*.
[20] Jann and Wegrich, *op. cit.,* p. 47.
[21] Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks, *Multilevel governance and European integration*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001.
[22] Beate Kohler-Koch and Rainer Eising, *The transformation of governance in the European Union*, London: Routledge, 1999.
[23] Saurugger, *op. cit.,* p. 117.

example of how the European Commission is balancing growth and sustainability goals that sometimes compete with one another. With the joint contexts of the "Green Deal" and the economic recovery, it seems all the more instructive.

The analysis of European tourism policy will go back to the early years of tourism policy. Given the recent events, it was decided to limit the study to developments until early March 2020. The ongoing crisis has already had consequences on the debate over overtourism, since the Commissioner Breton officially mentioned overtourism as one of the challenges of the reconstruction of the tourism sector.[24] But this crisis will potentially constitute a milestone for tourism and it is perhaps too early to draw any conclusions. It is therefore more relevant to limit this article to an analysis of the pre-crisis situation and to leave the study of the crisis and its consequences to further research. Furthermore, it should be stressed that this article does by no means pretend to exhaustivity. Choices were made in terms of methodology and of case selection. These were based on the relevance to the research question, but also on the availability of information.

3. Overtourism, 'old wine in new bottles'?[25]

Although the term "overtourism" appeared only recently in the tourism literature (around 2017),[26] in the 1970s contributions were already realised with a focus on potential negative impacts of tourism for the destinations and their residents.[27] In spite of a first formulation of overtourism in the 2000s,[28] 'it took until late 2016 for it to take off as a counterpart of the Spanish term 'Turismofobia' to describe the outcry among residents in

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[24] Breton, *op. cit.*

[25] Dianne Dredge, *"Overtourism" Old wine in new bottles?*, 2017, retrieved 5 February 2020, https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/overtourism-old-wine-new-bottles-dianne-dredge/

[26] For an overtourism literature review, *c.f.* Peeters *et al.*, *Overtourism: impact and possible policy responses*, *op. cit.*

[27] Boissevain, 'Tourism and development in Malta', *op. cit.*

[28] Nelson, B. *God's Country Or Devil's Playground: The Best Nature Writing from the Big Bend of Texas*, Austin, TX, USA: University of Texas Press, 2002, cited in: Ko Koens, Bernadett Papp and Albert Postma, 'Is Overtourism Overused? Understanding the Impact of Tourism in a City Context', *Sustainability,* vol. 10, 2018, p. 3.

response to the unfettered growth of tourism'.[29] Hence, although the term overtourism is a neologism, this does not mean that the phenomenon is entirely new.

Almost non-existent in the academic literature prior to 2017, overtourism has received a lot of attention since.[30] Today, there is no official definition at the European level. A definition has nevertheless been suggested to the European Parliament in the study commissioned by the TRAN Committee: 'the situation in which the impact of tourism, at certain times and in certain locations, exceeds physical, ecological, social, economic, psychological, and/or political capacity thresholds'.[31]

This definition would probably not get a unanimous endorsement from academia. It is the result of a joint effort from a number of specialists of the issue in synthesising the current knowledge about overtourism. It was also elaborated in a policy-making perspective.[32] Moreover, it is probably the closest definition to the one that could one day be used by European Institutions, should they decide to formulate one. For all these reasons, this article will use this definition of overtourism.

Overtourism must be distinguished from mass tourism. Although the former is certainly linked to the latter, the threshold dimension of overtourism should not lead to an equation with mass tourism. While mass tourism is mainly encompassing a quantitative dimension (i.e. a certain number of visitors), overtourism is a more complex phenomenon in the extent that it builds on 'perceived tourism encounters, environmental changes and infringements on people's lives'.[33] Accordingly, a destination with many tourists may be able to better cope, while a new destination with fewer visitors may suffer from overtourism.[34] Hence the importance of the

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[29] Koens, Papp and Postma, 2018, *loc. cit*.
[30] Koens, Papp and Postma, *op. cit*., p. 2.
[31] Peeters et al. *Overtourism: impact and possible policy responses, op. cit.,* p. 22.
[32] *Ibid.,* p. 15.
[33] Koens, Papp and Postma, *op. cit*., p. 9.
[34] *Ibid*.

'ecological, social, economic, psychological, and/or political capacity thresholds'[35] alongside with physical thresholds in the definition of overtourism used in this article, where:

> Psychological capacity refers to the capacity of people (residents and/or other visitors) to emotionally cope with crowding effects. Political capacity implies the incapability of local governments to grasp, manage, and govern excessive tourism growth consequences, jeopardising host community quality of life. This definition includes all forms of stress caused by high growth and volumes of visitors. It includes social (hosts, guests, citizens), physical (infrastructure, space), economic (tourism commercial zones) and ecological (noise, air quality, water use, water quality, waste, etc.) aspects.[36]

Overtourism should also be distinguished from overcrowding: 'while congestion relates to the physical carrying capacity of a situation, crowding results from the psychological carrying capacity, which is both place specific and influenced by personal characteristics'.[37] Consequently, 'the problems associated with overcrowding can vary, from alienated local residents to overloaded infrastructure. The issues can affect both established and emerging destinations of all kinds'.[38] Hence, if overcrowding can constitute a driver of overtourism, the two phenomena are distinct, as far as 'overtourism is a more complex and multifaceted phenomenon than overcrowding'.[39]

Despite the recent development of the concept, there is already an important set of literature on the topic. However, at the time of writing, little attention has been given to overtourism from the side of European studies. The question of how European institutions deal with this phenomenon remains a gap in the literature and it is precisely this gap that this article seeks to address.

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[35] Peeters et al., Overtourism: impact and possible policy responses, *op .cit.*, p. 22.
[36] *Ibid*.
[37] Bart Neuts, Peter Nijkamp, and Eveline S. Van Leeuwen, 'Crowding Externalities from Tourist Use of Urban Space', *Tourism Economics*, vol. 18, n° 3, 2012, p. 651.
[38] McKinsey & Company, and World Travel & Tourism Council, *Coping with success. Managing overcrowding in tourism destinations*, London, 2017.
[39] Peeters *et al.*, *Overtourism: impact and possible policy responses, op. cit.*, p. 19.

4. The European tourism policy: between growth and sustainability

Tourism was first mentioned in the treaties in 1992[40] but it was not until Lisbon that a specific section for tourism was created. Article 6 of the TFEU considers tourism as one of the areas in which the EU has a complementary competency.[41] it is competent to act, but it does not prevent Member States from acting. A new title (XXII) has also been created and dedicated to tourism: it consists of article 195,[42] which 'does not recognise tourism as a stand-alone policy and excludes any harmonisation of laws and regulations of Member States'.[43] The EU's scope for action is therefore relatively limited. However, 'as tourism policy touches upon many other fields, such as commerce, provision of goods and services, transport and the environment, it is also affected by the relevant EU legislation covering them'.[44] The EU can thus legislate through policy areas for which it has exclusive or shared competency: industry and SMEs, consumer protection, transport and visa policies.[45] This has implied issues of coherence within the Commission between the Directorates-General (DGs) concerned.[46]

According to the Commission's website, EU tourism policy 'aims to maintain Europe's standing as a leading destination while maximising the industry's contribution to growth and employment'.[47] From the outset, EU tourism policy seems primarily framed according to an economic growth paradigm. Given the scarce legal basis, the first developments of European tourism policy happened in the context of the completion of the Single Market, with the aim to foster growth, employment and regional development. Hence, most actions are aimed at 'improving tourism industry competitiveness and creating more and better jobs through

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[40] The Art. 3 TEU mentioned: 'measures in the sphere of energy, civil protection and tourism'.
[41] Art. 6 TFEU.
[42] Art. 195 TFEU.
[43] Maria Juul, *Tourism and the European Union – Recent trends and policy developments*, EPRS, 2015, p. 15.
[44] Vasilis Margaras, *Major challenges for EU tourism and policy responses,* Brussels: European Parliamentary Research Service, 2017, p. 2.
[45] Juul, *op. cit.*, pp. 15-20.
[46] European Parliament, *Resolution of 27 September 2011 on Europe, the world's No 1 tourist destination – a new political framework for tourism in Europe*, P7_TA(2011)0407, p. 4.
[47] 'Overview of EU Tourism Policy', *European Commission*, retrieved 20 February 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/growth/sectors/tourism/policy-overview_en

sustainable growth of tourism in Europe and worldwide'.[48] This tendency seems to have been reinforced over the time and the titles of the three last communications are quite evocative: 'Europe, the world's No 1 tourist destination',[49] 'Implementation and development of the common visa policy to spur growth in the EU',[50] 'A European Strategy for More Growth and Jobs in Coastal and Maritime Tourism'.[51] For some tourism was even more seen as a means toward economic growth in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis.[52]

A look at the organigram of the Commission can only reinforce this analysis. Tourism policy is indeed part of the work of DG Grow, namely, Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs. Inside DG GROW, the Direction F is in charge of 'Industrial policy and innovation' and its Unit F4 is in charge of 'Tourism, textiles and creative industry'.[53] The name of the only DG formally in charge of tourism – 'GROW' and not EAC or ENV – seems already indicative.

The evolution of European tourism policy nevertheless revealed an undeniable sustainability dimension, especially since the 2000's Communications, where sustainable tourism is defined as 'tourism that is economically and socially viable without detracting from the environment and local culture'.[54] For the European Commission, sustainability in tourism

[48] European Commission, *Communication from the Commission: A renewed EU Tourism Policy: Towards a stronger partnership for European Tourism,* COM(2006), 134 final, 2006, p. 4.
[49] European Commission, *Communication from the commission to the council, the European parliament, the economic and social committee and the committee of the regions on Europe. The World's No 1 tourist destination, a new political framework for tourism in Europe*, COM (2010) 352 final, 2010.
[50] European Commission, *Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament on the Implementation and development of the common visa policy to spur growth in the EU*, COM(2012) 649 final, 2012.
[51] European Commission, *Final communication from the commission to the council, the European parliament, the economic and social committee and the committee of the regions on A European strategy for more growth and jobs in coastal and maritime tourism*, COM(2014) 86 final, 2014.
[52] Koens, Papp and Postma, *op. cit.*, p. 1; Also, interview with an official, World Heritage Center, UNESCO, online 16 April 2020.
[53] 'Organisation chart DG Grow', *European Commission*, retrieved 23 March 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/organisation_charts/organisation-chart-dg-grow_en.pdf
[54] European Commission, *A renewed EU Tourism policy, op. cit.,* p. 5.
See also European Commission, *Communication from the commission to the council, the European Parliament, the economic and social committee and the committee of the regions on basic orientations for the sustainability of European tourism*, COM (2003) 716 final, 2003.

implies a balance between the four pillars of economic, social, environmental and cultural sustainability.[55] It is defined as part of the twinned green and digital transition, with the stake to address 'the social, environmental and cultural dimensions, without hampering the economic competitiveness of the industry'.[56] Sustainable tourism is moreover seen as a means to increase the EU's competitiveness, via consolidating 'Europe's image and visibility as a collection of sustainable and high quality destinations'.[57]

A number of EU actions were therefore implemented under this sustainable tourism objective. For instance, the Commission provides project funding through the COSME programme,[58] resulting in the creation of European greenways or the EuroVelo network.[59] It also recourses to rewarding schemes, such as the EDEN[60] initiative. Additionally, the EU seeks to monitor sustainability with the ETIS indicator (which implies a list of voluntary tools that destinations can use)[61] and to develop certification schemes such as EU Ecolabel.[62] Furthermore, it initiated a partnership with UNESCO for the programme 'The World Heritage Journeys of the European Union', to promote sustainable tourism in Europe through marketing.[63]

Over the years, a sustainable tourism dimension has thus been incorporated to the framework of European tourism policy, but it remains arguably subordinated to economic growth and competitiveness objectives. One might wonder if this growth paradigm does not result in a path dependency. This could hinder the emergence of overtourism on the European policy agenda, given that overtourism would call this growth paradigm into question. While

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[55] Interview with Ramune Genzbigelyte, policy officer, Unit F4, DG Grow, 27 March 2020.
[56] *Ibid*.
[57] European Commission, *Europe. The World's No 1 tourist destination*, *op. cit.*, p. 7.
[58] Ramune Genzbigelyte, DG Grow, *op. cit.*
[59] Vivienne Halleux, *Sustainable tourism. The environmental dimension*, European Parliamentary Research Service, Brussels, 2017, p. 8.
[60] European Destinations of Excellence Network
[61] Ramune Genzbigelyte, DG Grow, *op. cit.*
[62] European Commission, *Commission Decision (EU) 2017/175 of 25 January 2017 on establishing EU Ecolabel criteria for tourist accommodation*, C(2017) 299, 2017.
[63] Official, UNESCO, *op. cit.*

sustainable tourism is framed as compatible with this economic paradigm, the question remains whether this would still be the case with overtourism.

5. Overtourism: a political reality, with European and digital dimensions

In the past years, overtourism has experienced increasing media coverage[64] and politicisation. It has already entered the agenda-setting stage and even made it to the policy formulation and decision making stages in some destinations, albeit rather 'rudimentarily'.[65] Despite intensive media coverage for cities, overtourism is also an issue natural and cultural heritage sites have to tackle. Such destinations can indeed face a situation of overuse of the natural resources when carrying capacity is exceeded, due to the increasing numbers of visitors. This has led some natural parks in Croatia and in Italy to implement a cap on the number of visitors.[66] Historical centres and World Heritage Sites also face a threat of 'museumisation', while the local population feels excluded.[67] Movies or TV series can reinforce this trend, like in Dubrovnik with *Game of Thrones*[68] or in the village of Hallstatt with *Frozen*. The latter is considering the introduction of measures to limit the number of coaches allowed.[69]

It is nevertheless in urban settings that overtourism has become an increasingly intense political debate.[70] In Barcelona, the tourism situation has led to strong – sometimes violent – social contestation and to the election of Alda Colau in 2015, whose program promised a limitation of tourism. The city consequently passed a new law 'in response to the need to make

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[64] Koens, Postma and Papp, *op. cit*.
[65] Peeters et al., Overtourism: impact and possible policy responses, *op. cit*., p. 18.
[66] Luís Monteiro, 'Are Protected Areas becoming victims of their own popularity? Protected areas in-sight', *The Journal of the Europarc Federation,* Special Edition Overtourism, 2017, pp. 21-23.
[67] Interview with Isabelle Anatole-Gabriel, Head of Unit, World Heritage Center, UNESCO, 10 April 2020.
[68] Ana Zuvela in 'Venise, Barcelone, Dubrovnik: les ravages du tourisme de masse', *Arte*, 2016, retrieved 17 February 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6bgG5BHBlB0
[69] Rachael Kennedy, 'Is Austrian town of Hallstatt suffering from overtourism due to link with Disney's Frozen?', *Euronews*, retrieved 17 February 2020, https://www.euronews.com/2020/01/20/quality-of-life-has-deteriorated-mayor-of-austrian-town-taking-new-measures-against-overt
[70] Claudio Milano, Marina Novelli and Joseph M. Cheer, 'Overtourism and degrowth: a social movements perspective', *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, vol. 27, n° 12, 2019, p. 1862.

tourist accommodation compatible with a sustainable urban model based on guaranteeing fundamental rights and improving the quality of life for city residents'.[71] In Venice, overtourism has triggered reactions from social movements as well, with protests targeting cruise ships.[72] While the Italian government announced cruise ships would be diverted away from the city center,[73] the city announced its intention to create a visitors entry fee for day trippers, to make them contribute to the upkeep of the city and encourage longer stays.[74] The city of Bruges has also recently expressed concerns over cruise ships and announced its intention to introduce a cap on the number of ships docked in Zeebrugge. The mayor of Bruges insisted on the need to avoid a situation of overtourism 'if we don't want it to become a complete Disneyland here'.[75] The city is therefore trying to spread visitors over the weekdays and quieter periods of the year, and stopped advertising for day trips in nearby cities, to encourage longer stays and avoid overcrowding –[76] hence moving from destination promotion to destination management. Another example consists of the tensions generated in Paris regarding overtourism and peer to peer platforms such as AirBnB, which held a prominent place in the campaign for the election of the mayor in Paris.[77] Hence, in all these settings, an increased politicisation and media coverage has led to the recognition of overtourism as a problem that has to be tackled or prevented. Where local authorities have not come to decision-making yet, the issue is, at least, being debated.

[71] 'About the PEUAT', *Ajuntament Barcelona*, retrieved 25 March 2025, https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/pla-allotjaments-turistics/en/

[72] Michelle Vianello, 'The No Grandi Navi campaign: protests against cruise tourism in Venice', in: Colomb and Novy, *op. cit.*, pp. 185-204.

[73] Hannah Roberts, 'Venice to give cruise ships a wide berth', *Financial Times*, 7 August 2019, retrieved 27 March 2020, https://www.ft.com/content/6e21302e-b922-11e9-96bd-8e884d3ea203

[74] Kara Fox, 'Venice becomes the front line in the battle against overtourism', *CNN*, 15 June 2019, retrieved 27 March 2020, https://edition.cnn.com/travel/article/venice-tourism-overcrowding-intl/index.html

[75] Lilit Marcus, 'Popular medieval Belgian town Bruges makes moves to restrict tourism', *CNN*, 13 June 2019, retrieved 27 March 2020, https://edition.cnn.com/travel/article/bruges-belgium-overtourism-cruise-ship-restrictions/index.html

[76] Interview with Carine Decroos, Deputy Manager, Visit Bruges, online, 16 April 2020.

[77] Elsa Dicharry, 'Haro sur Airbnb à Paris à l'approche des élections municipales'*, Les Echos*, 22 November 2019, retrieved 17 March 2020 https://www.lesechos.fr/industrie-services/tourisme-transport/haro-sur-airbnb-a-paris-a-lapproche-des-elections-municipales-1150125

A local and yet, European challenge

At this stage, one could wonder what added value the intervention of international institutions could bring to an issue that seems mostly a local or destination one. However, only looking at overtourism as a destination issue is arguably missing an important dimension of the problem.[78] In a globalised economy, flows and major economic actors are globalised, and stakes are often cross-border,[79] hence the need for international policies, that can provide a coordinated response.[80] Overtourism implies flight mobility, holiday vacation, rental and transport policies issues, that cannot be solved only at the European level. But, as stressed by Milano, the European level is the one at which important guidelines can be established.[81] In this vein, Jasperse insists that European action can prevent a multiplication of efforts and result in a more efficient organisation.[82] European institutions can also provide data and help in the definition[83] and measurement[84] of sustainability, although Peeters would argue that European data does not really fit yet to address overtourism.[85] The latter highlights that European legislation would nevertheless be an appropriate way to regulate social media or platforms such as AirBnB.[86]

Local or regional actors also started constituting or using the venue of European networks, to carry their political demands or to exchange best practices. Hence, the Barcelonan movement ABTS[87] grouped together with social movements and associations from 15 other European destinations to create the Southern European Cities against Touristification (SET)

[78] Interview with Dr Paul Peeters, Breda University, online, 18 February 2020.
[79] Isabelle Anatole-Gabriele, UNESCO, *op. cit*.
[80] Official, UNESCO, *op. cit*.
[81] Interview with Dr Claudio Milano, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, online, 5 March 2020.
[82] Dr Pieter Jasperse, ERRIN, *op. cit*.
[83] Interview with a member of the working group 'Cultural heritage and Tourism', ERRIN, online, 20 April 2020.
[84] Ramune Genzbigelyte, DG Grow, *op. cit*.
[85] Dr Paul Peeters, *op. cit*.
[86] *Ibid*.
[87] Assembly of Neighbourhoods for Sustainable Tourism.

network[88]. The EUROPARC network of Sustainable Destinations, as well as NECSTouR[89] also represented already existing venues through which overtourism concerns could be expressed and debated.[90] From a Destination Management Office's (DMO) point of view, the European Cities Marketing (ECM) network provided the city of Bruges with opportunities to share best practices with other DMOs and come up with new initiatives,[91] while engaging in a strategy of lobbying the European institutions.[92]

The European dimension of overtourism has also been revealed by tensions between measures implemented locally to address it and European law. The ECJ was recently asked to arbitrate several cases between Paris city hall and AirBnB.[93] In December 2019, the ECJ ruled that the services provided by AirBnB 'must be classified as an 'information society service' under Directive 2000/31'.[94] This judgement caused an uproar in a number of European cities, which resulted in a joint declaration enjoining the European Commission to undertake a thorough revision of the Directive 2000/31.[95] The declaration highlighted that the uncontrolled growth of tourism contributes to housing shortage, to the extent that renting a furnished tourist accommodation through digital platforms is more profitable than a classic long-term rental.[96] Although for the *Cali apartments* case the judgment has not yet been rendered by the Court – at the moment of writing – it will be closely monitored by these cities, as it will address the

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[88] Milano, Novelli and Cheer, 'Overtourism and degrowth', *op. cit.*
[89] Network of European Regions for a Sustainable and Competitive Tourism.
[90] 'XI Charter Network Meeting 2019', *EUROPARC Network,* retrieved 7 April 2020, https://www.europarc.org/sustainable-tourism/network-sustainable-destinations/xi-charter-network-meeting-2019/?utm_source=ep&utm_medium=search&utm_campaign=linktrack&utm_content=results; 'NECSTouR's vision on a well-balanced tourism promotion presented at the aitr's debate on the "overtourism" 31 May 2018', *NECSTouR*, retrieved 7 April 2020, https://necstour.eu/news/necstours-vision-well-balanced-tourism-promotion-presented-aitrs-debate-overtourism
[91] Carine Decroos, Visit Bruges, *op. cit.*
[92] European Cities Marketing, *Tomorrow today*, 2019, p. 12, retrieved 16 April 2020, https://fr.calameo.com/read/000674014f5cc96a8564b
[93] Judgement of 19 December 2019, *Airbnb Ireland*, C-390/18, ECLI:EU:C:2019:1112.
Opinion of advocate general Bobek, 2 April 2020, *Cali Apartments SCI & HX v Procureur général près la cour d'appel de Paris, Ville de Paris*, C‑724/18 and C‑727/18, ECLI:EU:C:2020:251.
[94] *Airbnb Ireland, op.cit.*, §101.
[95] Ville de Paris, *Airbnb: declaration commune de Paris, Bordeaux, Amsterdam, Vienne, Bruxelles, Berlin, Munich et Barcelone*, 20 December 2019, p. 2.
[96] *Ibid.*

question of whether or not 'the objective of tackling a shortage of long-term housing constitutes an overriding reason relating to the public interest'.[97]

A digital dimension with an impact yet to be assessed

The tourism sectors has arguably undergone a thorough transformation with the 'revolution in ICTs',[98] which, for some, can directly be linked to the overtourism phenomenon.[99] Internet and the expansion of the digital world have for sure implied a number of opportunities for the tourism industry, ranging from the 'accessibility of tourism for people with disabilities',[100] to 'data driven policy-making'.[101] While providing opportunities for visitors to access instant services, ICTs also enabled the development of smart mobility and the use of digital connectivity tools in destinations.[102] ICTs can hence provide destinations with solutions or prevention measures against overtourism, for instance by promoting the use of earphones instead of microphones for guided tours. The development of sharing economy platforms also provided the tourism sector with an array of opportunities, including 'easy accessible information',[103] 'low transaction costs',[104] 'global reach',[105] 'trust through social media identity verification and online reviews'[106] and 'low operating risks for the peer-to-peer platforms as ownership remains with the providers'.[107] These digital developments, however, brought a number of drawbacks and challenges, some of which can be related to the phenomenon of overtourism. These platforms can potentially directly affect the lives of residents and the experiences of tourists, while also affecting the real estate market: 'the sharing

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[97] *Cali apartments, op. cit.*, §147.
[98] Dr Paul Peeters, *op .cit*.
[99] Hugues Seraphin, Paul Sheeran, Manuela Pirato, 'Over-tourism and the fall of Venice as a destination', *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management,* vol. 9, 2018, p. 377.
[100] Weston *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 37.
[101] *Ibid*.
[102] *Ibid*.
[103] Peeters et al., *op. cit.*, p. 30.
[104] *Ibid.*
[105] *Ibid.*
[106] *Ibid.*
[107] *Ibid.*

economy provides unfair competition, reduces job security, avoids taxes and poses a threat to safety, health and disability compliance standards […].'[108]

But while a number of studies hypothesise an important role for collaborative economy platforms in overtourism, most of them also note a 'lack of in-depth studies on this topic'.[109] The role of other factors – such as the 2008 crisis – in the housing crisis should not be overlooked.[110] Hence, the real impact of platforms is not easy to assess, especially because of a lack of accessible data, since 'in general, tourism businesses are obliged to provide data transparency, whereas big data owners are not'.[111] This results in difficulties for regulation from the side of authorities.[112] The same observation goes for the role of social media 'in concentrating tourists to a limited number of places causing overcrowding',[113] leading Peeters *et al.* to conclude that 'overall, there is a lack of knowledge about the effects of social media on the way certain destinations become very popular or even 'hype''. [114]

Despite this lack of knowledge, European institutions and their legislations get targeted by some local actors and stakeholders because they are deemed to inadequately regulate sharing economy platforms. In the *AirBnB Ireland* case, the French government and AhTop[115] were pleading for an assimilation of the services provided by AirBnB to an intermediation service, in line with the *Uber* jurisprudence,[116] that would have allowed a stricter regulation. But the Court did not follow this reasoning, and it resulted in the above-mentioned criticism.

Hence, even if the impact of ICTs, social media, and platforms is still to be assessed, it remains a topic that contributed to the politicisation of the debate about overtourism. This

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[108] Weston *et al.*, p. 38.
[109] Peeters *et al.*, 2018, *Overtourism: impact and possible policy responses*, *op. cit.*, p. 29.
[110] Koens, Papp and Postma, *op. cit.*, p. 8.
[111] Weston *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 37.
[112] Pr Paul Peeters, *op. cit.*
[113] Peeters *et al.*, *Overtourism: impact and possible policy responses, op. cit.*, p. 29.
[114] *Ibid.*
[115] Association pour un hébergement et un tourisme professionnel.
[116] Judgment of 20 December 2017, *Asociación Profesional Elite Taxi v Uber Systems Spain SL*, C-434/15, ECLI:EU:C:2017:981.

digital dimension of the problem is also seen as European, to the extent that some question the adequacy of the European legislation framework thereupon. The digital dimension of overtourism could be critical, given the political tensions it causes, especially when it comes to the sharing economy. While ICTs could provide policy-makers with solutions to the overtourism problem, overtourism may also reach the European agenda through the digital dimension of the issue.

6. The irruption of overtourism on the European policy agenda

An array of actors are mobilised to set overtourism from the destinations' to the EU's policy agenda. Multi-level governance's focus on subnational and non-monolithic institutional[117] actors, alongside networks governance's focus on interaction between public and private actors, as well as their strategies,[118] seem indeed particularly appropriate to this analysis. As argued above, local and regional actors have been keen to join forces and get organised through European networks – e.g., NECSTouR or ERRIN on the regional side, ECM on the cities' and DMOs' side, SET on the social movements' side. One can also think about the role of university tourism research centres.[119]

To target the European institutions, some have relied on a knowledge-based influence strategy, through studies[120] or the creation of working groups, such as The ERRIN working group on Cultural heritage and Tourism.[121] Some actors also attempt to put a more direct pressure on politicians and expect them to take their demands in the European institutions. Local social movements hence get in touch with national politicians or governments,[122] and

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[117] Kohler-Koch and Eising, *op. cit.*
[118] Saurugger, *loc. cit.*
[119] E.g. the study for the European Parliament realised in collaboration with the universities of Lund, Barcelona, Breda, Valencia and Brighton.
[120] E.g. Peeters et al., *Overtourism: impact and possible policy responses, op. cit.*
[121] 'Cultural heritage and tourism', *ERRIN*, retrieved 20 April 2020, https://errin.eu/working-groups/cultural-heritage-and-tourism
[122] Milano, Cheer and Novelli, 'Overtourism and degrowth', *op. cit.*, p. 1864.

resort to them as indirect channels to reach the European institutions.[123] Moreover, the organisation of events is also a way to exert influence: during the 2019 EU Green Week organised by the Commission, ERRIN's working group hence organised the workshop 'From policy to practice: knowledge-building for innovative and sustainable tourism in regions'.[124]

As an important success, one can cite the study on overtourism for the European Parliament.[125] the very fact that the European Parliament commissioned this study can in itself be considered as a relative success. Moreover, both Peeters and Milano judge positively the feedbacks they received from the TRAN Committee when presenting the conclusions to the MEPs.[126] They stress indeed a real interest for the issue from the side of MEPs, especially from the Greens.[127] But Milano doubts MEPs will work on something related to overtourism anytime soon.[128] Additionally, Weston *et al*. underline that as from now on, 'for the first time the recognition of the importance of host communities as significant tourism stakeholders is widespread'[129] – another success.

On the other hand, these actors have faced a number of difficulties. First, the lack of a clear and shared definition of the term overtourism results in a fuzziness,[130] hampering the understanding of the phenomenon. Also, the breadth of some networks, representing many members with diverse ambitions and agendas, sometimes results in another difficulty in exposing a clear opinion in the lobbying process, when other organisations can expose a very clear one.[131] Additionally, overtourism is sometimes only part of the topics these networks debate or focus on: while in the ECM one working group focuses on the challenge of growing

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[123] Dr Claudio Milano, *op. cit.*
[124] Member of the working group 'Cultural heritage and Tourism', ERRIN, *op. cit.*
[125] Peeters et al., *Overtourism: impact and possible policy responses, op. cit.*
[126] Dr Paul Peeters, *op. cit.*; Dr Claudio Milano, *op. cit.*; European Parliament, *Committee on Transport and Tourism Ordinary meeting*, 6 November 2019, retrieved 18 February 2020, https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/committee-on-transport-and-tourism-ordinary-meeting_20191106-1000-COMMITTEE-TRAN_vd
[127] Dr Paul Peeters, *op. cit.*
[128] Dr Claudio Milano, *op. cit.*
[129] Weston *et al*., *op.cit.,* p. 36.
[130] Koens, Papp and Postma, *op. cit*., p. 2.
[131] Dr Peter Jasperse, ERRIN, *op. cit*.

visitor numbers, it is not the 'overruling topic'.[132] This suggests that the advocacy of the fight against over-tourism is suffering from an absence of strong and stable policy community[133] suited for the issue. Therefore, the overtourism nebula is maybe best describe as a policy network[134] or even as a thematic network[135] that suggests a fragmentation of the lobbying task, given the multi-faceted nature of overtourism. A look at the European Commission through non-monolithic lenses is also insightful: the only DG dealing with tourism is DG Grow's Unit F4.[136] This can be counterintuitive (although indicative) for overtourism stakeholders that come from an environmental, cultural or regional perspective,[137] and may also lead to divergences between DGs (or inside them).[138] Moreover, the term overtourism is not consensual, as for some it is attached with a negative connotation and deemed biased because it implies that a threshold for the acceptability of tourism has already been established.[139] Furthermore, some underline the existence of a growth-led paradigm for tourism policy in the EU – albeit not only in the EU – favouring quantity over quality,[140] to the detriment of sustainability. Hence the difficulty to weigh in against a well organised and lucrative tourism industry, especially when the European Commission tends to be protective – as seems to be the case for sharing economy platforms.[141]

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[132] Carine Decroos, Visit Bruges, *op. cit*.
[133] Tanja Börzel, 'Organizing Babylon – on the different conceptions of policy networks', *Public Administration*, vol. 76, 1998, pp. 253-276.
[134] John Peterson, 'Policy networks', in: Antje Wiener and Thomas Diez (eds), *European integration theory*, Oxford: Oxofrd University Press, 2004, pp. 117-135.
[135] Andreas Dür, 'Interest groups in the European Union: how powerful are they?', *West European Politics,* vol. 31, n° 6, 2008, pp. 1212-1230.
[136] Weston *et al*., *op. cit*., p. 35.
[137] Member of the working group 'Cultural heritage and Tourism', ERRIN, *op. cit*.
[138] *Ibid*.
[139] Isabelle Anatole-Gabriel, UNESCO, *op. cit*.
[140] Dr Claudio Milano, *op. cit*.; Dr Paul Peeters, *op. cit*.
[141] Member of the working group 'Cultural heritage and Tourism', ERRIN, *op. cit*.

A window of opportunity for overtourism

To assess the existence of a window of opportunity for overtourism, this section will apply the concepts of 'policy stream',[142] 'politics stream'[143] and 'problem stream'[144] introduced earlier.

Overall, there seems to be a quite strong 'politics stream'[145] for overtourism. The increased mediatisation and politicisation of the issue at the local level has indeed been highlighted above. The debate even made it to the European Parliament, with the TRAN Committee commissioning a study on the issue. The minutes of the hearings during which the study was presented to the MEPs reveal a relatively shared willingness to tackle the issue.[146] Moreover, a larger context of environmental concerns and trends such as *flygskam* (or *flight shame*)[147] may prove enabling for overtourism. Furthermore, the current Commission, with its *Green Deal*, is committed to taking environmental issues to heart. The so-called twin transitions,[148] including the ecological transition and the digital transition, could therefore represent an enabling context for overtourism.

With respect to the 'problem stream',[149] overtourism is perceived as a policy problem (be it as an actual or as a potential threat) in more and more destinations. At the European level, it has been recognised as a problem by the TRAN Committee, albeit not unanimously.[150] The Commission's perception of the problem is less straightforward. While the institution seems quite reluctant to use the term in official communications, the interview with a policy officer

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[142] Jann and Wegrich, *op. cit.*, p. 47.
[143] *Ibid*.
[144] *Ibid*.
[145] *Ibid*.
[146] European Parliament, Committee on Transport and Tourism Ordinary meeting, *op. cit*.
[147] ''Flight shame' could halve growth in air traffic', *BBC*, 2 October 2019, retrieved 17 April 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/business-49890057
[148] European Commission, *Making Europe's businesses future-ready: A new Industrial Strategy for a globally competitive, green and digital Europe*, press release, 10 March 2020, retrieved 15 April 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_416
[149] Jann and Wegrich, *loc. cit.*
[150] European Parliament, Committee on Transport and Tourism Ordinary meeting, *op. cit.*

from DG Grow, has revealed that overtourism is a problem the Commission considers and is 'trying to address'.[151] Hence, the problem stream may not be as strong as the politics stream, but it is still noteworthy.

Lastly, the 'policy stream'[152] seems the weakest of the three streams. While some destinations have already implemented policies aimed at tackling or preventing overtourism, they are still in their infancy, or rudimental.[153] Their impact is still to be assessed and it is unclear yet whether or not they constitute real solutions for the problem. The same goes for propositions of action at the European level in the absence of precise studies and impact assessments – especially when it comes to social media or the collaborative economy. One of the issues underlined above, stressed by the study for the TRAN Committee[154] and mentioned by the Commission, is the lack of available and accurate data that would help to create indicators to measure overtourism and implement adequate measures.[155] Another element that is likely to hamper the 'policy stream'[156] is the question of the compatibility of measures tackling overtourism with the growth paradigm on which tourism policy is based.

Hence, if the 'politics stream' and the 'problem stream' seem to intersect with one another, the 'policy stream' seems to interact only partially with them. Therefore, there is only a partial window of opportunity for overtourism. While this should not completely prevent overtourism to make it on the EU's policy agenda, it can make it relatively more difficult.

The difficult emergence of overtourism on the European policy agenda, a path dependency?

As argued above, the European tourism policy has been framed primarily according to a growth paradigm, even though a sustainable dimension has been integrated over the years. Overall, it

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[151] Ramune Genzbigelyte, DG Grow, *op. cit*. It is interesting to note here that the interviewee spontaneously mentioned overtourism as one of the stakes of sustainable tourism.
[152] Jann and Wegrich, *loc. cit.*
[153] Peeters *et al.*, Overtourism: impact and possible policy responses, *op. cit.*, p. 18.
[154] *Ibid.,* p. 106.
[155] Ramune Genzbigelyte, DG Grow, *op. cit*.
[156] Jann and Wegrich, *loc. cit.*

seems that sustainability is still subordinated to the growth paradigm when it comes to the European tourism policy. One may therefore wonder whether this growth paradigm implies a path dependency.[157] Peeters[158] and Milano[159] both stress the centrality of this growth paradigm in the difficulties encountered by overtourism to make it on the EU's agenda, hence abounding in the sense of a path dependency. This concept is maybe best explained by Levi's tree metaphor:

> From the same trunk, there are many different branches and smaller branches. Although it is possible to turn around or to clamber from one to the other - and essential if the chosen branch dies - the branch on which a climber begins is the one she tends to follow.[160]

This begs the question of whether the growth paradigm is a branch one can 'turn around'[161] from, or if overtourism represents a branch one can clamber to starting from this paradigm.[162] In a word, it begs the question of the compatibility of the fight against overtourism with this growth paradigm.

If sustainable tourism was deemed compatible with the growth paradigm framing the tourism policy, it seems unlikely that the same could not be true of overtourism. While sustainable tourism has been integrated in the goals of tourism policy, it is worth remembering that it is framed in a way that does not hamper economic growth. When it comes to overtourism, it seems that the concept is in itself more antagonistic.[163] Moreover, some supporters of the fight against overtourism, especially on the side of social movements, openly ask for a 'shift,

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[157] *C.f.* Mahoney, *loc. cit.*
[158] Dr Paul Peeters, *op. cit.*
[159] Dr Claudio Milano, *op. cit.*
[160] Margaret Levi, 'A Model, a Method, and a Map: Rational Choice in Comparative and Historical Analysis.', in: Mark I. Lichbach and Alan S. Zuckerman (eds), *Comparative Politics: Rationality, Culture, and Structure*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 28.
[161] *Ibid*.
[162] *Ibid*.
[163] *C.f.* Claudio Milano, Marina Novelli and Joseph M. Cheer, 'Overtourism and Tourismphobia: A Journey Through Four Decades of Tourism Development, Planning and Local Concerns', *Tourism Planning & Development*, vol. 16, n° 4, 2019, p. 354; Mary Mostafanezhad and Roger Norum, 'The anthropocenic imaginary: Political ecologies of tourism in a geological epoch', *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, vol. 27, n° 4, 2019, pp. 421-435; C. Michael Hall, 'Constructing sustainable tourism development: The 2030 agenda and the managerial ecology of sustainable tourism', *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, vol. 27, n° 7, p. 13.

from "growth for development" to "degrowth for liveability"'.[164] Hence, the integration of overtourism on the EU's policy agenda proves more difficult or problematic than that of sustainable tourism. The 'change of paradigm'[165] asked by some, reflecting the idea that 'locals are now more interested in their quality of life than the income generated by the tourism industry',[166] appears indeed as a branch it is difficult to 'clamber' to[167] given the path dependency created by the growth paradigm – and despite the integration of sustainable tourism goals. That being said, one may wonder why the European Commission is nevertheless paying some attention to the problem.

The concept of 'intercurrence'[168] was developed to explain how institutional change could occur even in strongly path-dependent environments. Change may indeed result 'from the interactions of different institutional orders within a society',[169] that is, from tensions – 'intercurrence' –[170] between different but contemporaneous political processes or orders, that 'do not necessarily fit into a coherent, self-reinforcing, let alone functional, whole'.[171] In the case under study, the growing importance and mainstreaming of environmental concerns in European politics could lead to some shift in the balance, more in favour or sustainability over economic growth. If not sufficient to create a completely new paradigm, the interaction of these two orders could at least create more favourable conditions for the emergence of overtourism on the EU's policy agenda.

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[164] Milano, Cheer and Novelli, 'Overtourism and degrowth: a social movements perspective', *op. cit.,* p. 1859.
[165] Seraphin, Sheeran and Pirato, *op. cit.*, p. 375.
[166] *Ibid.*
[167] Levi, *loc. cit.*
[168] Karren Orren and Stephen Skowronek, 'Beyond the Iconography of Order: Notes for a New Institutionalism', in Lawrence C. Dodd and Calvin Jillison (eds), *The Dynamics of American Politics: Approaches and Interpretations*, New York: Routledge, 1994, p. 321.
[169] Kathleen Thelen and James Conran, 'Institutional Change', in: Orfeo Fioretos, Tulia G. Falleti and Adam Sheingate (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Historical Institutionalism,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 12.
[170] Orren and Skowronek, *op. cit.*
[171] Thelen and Conran, *op. cit.*

The concept of 'layering'[172] emphasises that 'institutional change can be the product of conscious strategies, working within and around the constraints that produce path dependence'.[173] In this view, 'new designs are added to existing ones'[174] hence leading to incremental change rather than confrontation. Thelen and Conran emphasise the 'conscious' character of these strategies in a path-dependent environment, adding that 'sometimes these changes are intended – or at least advertised – as a way of saving or shoring up the existing system'.[175] Applied to overtourism, one could conceive that the progressive creation of policies or mechanisms serving sustainable tourism goals have created room for incremental change, hence altering the domination of the growth paradigm and leaving some room for the acknowledgement of overtourism concerns. Additionally, one could envision that, as had been the case with sustainable tourism, measures aiming at tackling overtourism could be branded as serving the competitiveness of the European tourism industry by selling it as more 'qualitative'.

'Conversion',[176] another concept developed by historical institutionalists, accounts for the capacity of actors 'to redirect institutions or policies toward purposes beyond their original intent'.[177] With conversion, 'rules on the books remain the same but are interpreted and enacted in new ways'.[178] Streeck and Thelen thus emphasised the role of Courts in this process.[179] In the case under study, while judgements such as *Airbnb Ireland*[180] may have infuriated actors

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[172] Eric Schickler, *Disjointed Pluralism: Institutional Innovation and the Development of the U.S. Congress. Princeton*, Princeton University Press, 2001.

[173] Thelen and Conran, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

[174] Orfeos, *op. cit.*, p. 389.

[175] Thelen and Conran, *ibid*.

[176] Kathleen Thelen, *How Institutions Evolve: The Political Economy of Skills in Germany, Britain, the United States, and Japan*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

[177] Jacob S. Hacker, Paul Pierson, and Kathleen Thelen, 'Drift and conversion: hidden faces of institutional change', in: James Mahoney and Kathleen Thelen (eds.), *Advances in Comparative-Historical Analysis*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, p. 180.

[178] Thelen and Conran, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

[179] Wolfgang Streeck and Kathleen Thelen, 'Introduction: Institutional Change in Advanced Political Economies', in: Wolfgang Streeck and Kathleen Thelen (eds), *Beyond Continuity: Institutional Change in Advanced Political Economies*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 14.

[180] *Airbnb Ireland, op. cit.*

that emphasise the role of sharing economy platforms in overtourism, the *Cali apartments*[181] case could lead to an interpretation of internal market rules that would satisfy these actors.[182] This could be indicative of a shift and would hence represent an example of conversion serving the interests of campaigners against overtourism.

It stems from the above that despite the still ongoing domination of the growth paradigm in the framing of the European tourism policy, some processes and contextual elements could make the European Commission more inclined to consider the overtourism problem. Indeed, the European Commission does demonstrate a certain awareness about overtourism.[183] However, the issue is not new and a number of policies or programmes of the Commission has been addressing it for years through sustainable tourism. EDEN and the 'World Heritage Journeys of the European Union' are also seen as ways to reduce the pressure on overcrowded destinations and spread visitors towards less-visited destinations. Although the Commission seemed aware that some destinations are asking for action from its side on sharing economy platforms, interviews indicated caution over the real impact of such platforms or social media on overtourism and the need for further study.[184]

Hence, despite a relatively narrow window of opportunity and a still strong dependence to the growth paradigm, the European Commission acknowledges the problem of overtourism, and it is on the European policy agenda. However, the Commission seems to intend to tackle overtourism through the pre-existing framework of sustainable tourism. Rather than emphasising overtourism's conflicting nature with the growth paradigm, the Commission tends to frame it as a new word for an old problem, already tackled through sustainable tourism –[185] framed as relatively compatible with growth. Hence, if the Commission is ready to admit that

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[181] *Cali Apartments*, *op. cit.*
[182] *C.f.* §147, *ibid.*
[183] Ramune Genzbigelyte, DG Grow, *op. cit.*
[184] *Ibid*.
[185] Ramune Genzbigelyte, DG Grow, *op. cit.*

'the focus has been too much on the volume, with extremes',[186] it also insists on the fact that sustainability should not hamper the economic competitiveness of the tourism industry. It therefore insists on the necessity to build a synergy between growth and sustainability rather than seeing them as conflicting, especially since sustainability is seen as a prerequisite for competitiveness in the longer term.[187] If some tensions between growth and sustainability are recognised, they are framed as 'discussions' rather than 'conflict'.[188]

It can therefore be concluded that attention is paid by the European Commission to the issue of overtourism. But Kindon's definition of agenda includes the affixing of the epithet 'serious' to the word 'attention'.[189] If the tools enumerated above appear relevant in the fight against overtourism, one could however wonder whether overtourism completely made it on the European tourism policy agenda, since the question of its compatibility with the growth paradigm has been relatively circumvented. It could therefore be concluded that awareness is growing in the European Commission, but it is still difficult to translate it into an agenda-setting that could easily be turned into concrete policy formulation and decision-making. It seems indeed unlikely that the European Commission will be immune from tensions between growth and sustainability when dealing with it in the future.

7. Conclusion

Throughout this article, it has been argued that the incremental emergence of overtourism on the European policy agenda has not been an easy task. The different methodologies and theoretical frameworks have indeed demonstrated that in spite of a European dimension in the problem, a number of elements have hindered its translation from the destinations to the EU's policy agenda. Among these, the fact that most measures taken at

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[186] *Ibid*.
[187] *Ibid*.
[188] *Ibid*.
[189] Kindon, *op. cit.,* p. 3.

the destination level are still in their infancy results in a lack of evaluation of their adequacy, which is to be linked with the lack of precise and established indicators. Additionally, the lack of tangible studies on the impact of sharing economy platforms has proved to be an important impediment, especially when the European level would represent the appropriate level to address it. The main obstacle however, as hypothesised, seems to have been the historical centrality of the growth paradigm in the European tourism policy and the path dependency implied. Facing an increasing political salience of the matter and in the context of the rise of sustainability concerns, the European institutions have progressively taken up the file: the European Parliament has commissioned a study, the ECJ has progressively faced linked cases, and the European Commission initiated a reflection on the matter. If some evolutions can hence be underlined, it should however be stressed that there has not been a revolution in the approach, in particular in the approach of the European Commission. The latter seems to have, for the time being, circumvented the question of the compatibility of overtourism with its growth approach by addressing it through the pre-existing framework of sustainable tourism. Thereby, while some already existing tools and goals can prove appropriate, some questions – such as the possibility to derogate from some fundamental principles of the internal market or of the growth paradigm – remain relatively unanswered.

Hence, while limited in its scope, this thesis has shed a light on the emergence of the overtourism debate on the European political scene, a topic that had remained relatively unaddressed by European studies. This thesis carried out a mapping of the actors of the debate while assessing the difficulties encountered in the task to integrate overtourism on the EU policy agenda. This analysis of a potential change of approach for tourism policy has also highlighted the complexity of shifting away from past decisions and the historical contingency of policy-making, thereby assessing the difficulty to balance growth and sustainability goals when they happen to be conflicting.

The irruption of the global pandemic in the middle of the redaction process of this article, surely, represents a challenge for its scope. It does not, however, call into question the analyses it has drawn, as they reflect the situation as it was before the crisis. In the coming months or years, it would therefore be of interest to analyse how the global pandemic and the economic crisis it implies have impacted the overtourism debate. While one could think that this new context will operate to the detriment of sustainable tourism and to the fight against overtourism, it stems from the conclusions of the interview realised in the context of this study, that this crisis could on the contrary be an occasion for a reform of the tourism policy that would take these elements into account. The speech by Commissioner Breton to the TRAN Committee on 21 April 2020[190] could indeed abide in the sense of seeing this crisis as an enabling exogenous source change (or what historical intuitionalists would call a 'critical juncture').[191] The glass can be seen half empty or half full: in the recovery phase, the economy goes first and sustainability second, but the Commissioner himself used the word overtourism, hence officially recognising it as one of the elements on the European tourism policy agenda. Only time, however, and further research in the field, will confirm whether this crisis could constitute the beginning of a new era for tourism policy or if a 'business as usual' stance will take precedence over these considerations.

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[190] Breton, *op. cit*.

[191] Ruth Berins Collier and David Collier. *Shaping the Political Arena*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991.

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