

THIRD SESSION

REPORT

Sustainable Tourism

On behalf of Birgit Hesse, BSPC Rapporteur on Sustainable Tourism, President of the State Parliament of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern



Ms. Beate Schlupp
BSPC Observer in HELCOM

Honourable President of the 29th BSPC,

Respected Colleagues,

Dear friends,

The unusual format of this year's – first digital – Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference reflects the extraordinary circumstances caused by the global COVID-19 pandemic. It brought the world to a standstill. The tourism industry has been among those economic sectors hit the hardest. Just as we had to cancel our meeting in Vilnius, so too did hundreds of millions of people around the world have to cancel their international business and vacation trips in the past months. The United Nations World Tourism Organisation registered a 58% decrease in international arrivals in Europe in January-May, and this includes the first “shutdown”-free months. In the Baltic Sea region, Denmark, Iceland, Germany, Estonia and Latvia experienced the highest losses with an over or almost 60% decline in international tourist arrivals as compared to the previous year. The tourism industry is one of the major sectors in the Baltic Sea region, contributing between 8.6% and 1.2% to states' total GDP and between 15.7% and 3.4% of total employment. The economic impact of the crisis remains uncertain, but the forecasts are not encouraging.

On a carefully optimistic note: With the cautious lifting of travel restrictions and easing of curfews in June and July, tourism in Europe is slowly resuming. It is expected that domestic tourism would recover faster – and we have indeed experienced this trend first-hand in our federal state Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. As the President of our regional Tourist Board, I would like to provide a brief overview:

“Even under the current circumstances, seasonal tourism demand in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern is high and accommodation capacities are well filled. On average, during the summer vacation time we could register around 400.000 overnight arrivals on a daily basis. According to a poll conducted by the Mecklenburg-Vorpommern Tourist Board, accommodation facilities can offer 85% of their capacities. The absence of day-trippers is indeed noticeable. On one hand, it allows for the better implementation of social distancing regulations, on the other hand, however, it leads to revenue losses in retail, restaurants and cultural institutions. What is particularly stunning: Until now, there has been no acute infection outbreak in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern – despite high tourism intensity. The local tourism industry has – also thanks to the safety standards jointly developed by the Tourism Board and its partners – prepared itself well for the vacation season in times of the pandemic and has taken necessary steps to ensure “safe tourism” in the region.”

The recovery of domestic tourism is good news, but unfortunately not for everyone. There is significant variation in the shares of domestic as compared to inbound expenditures from tourism across the Baltic Sea states – with figures ranging from 85% in Germany to 12% in Estonia.

Yet the pandemic's impact on tourism is not only of a financial nature. Lockdowns and border shutdowns also prevent inter-personal contacts and communication, which are essential to foster understanding, promote trust and build bridges between people and peoples. Under the current circumstances working together – not in isolation – on common solutions for the future becomes more important than ever. Beyond immediate crisis responses to support the industry and prepare recovery plans, we should think about the long-term implications and further pave the way for the structural transformation of tourism. UNWTO, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development and the EU have called

upon states to use the crisis to step up efforts in the direction of sustainable tourism and mobility. Thus, in its Tourism and Transport package from May, the European Commission set the long-term goal of making tourism more resilient and sustainable. In line with the European Green Deal, the strategy aims at developing sustainable transport and tourist accommodation, smart management of tourism flows, as well as sustainability skills among tourist professionals.

Specific emphasis is placed on the digital transition. On this matter, I would like to draw your attention to the first Trend Report on digital tourism in the Baltic Sea region prepared by Baltic Sea Tourism Center in 2019. The publication shows, for example, that both tourism providers and consumers in the region are increasingly open to digital tools and products. Additionally, in its last month's report, Routes4U, a joint project between the Council of Europe and the European Union, proposed that the focus on digital technology and innovation could be one of the building blocks of the Baltic Sea Region brand. Indeed, there are considerable discrepancies in digital tourism trends within the region – with the Nordic states spearheading the development. Digitalisation is also a horizontal and overarching theme within Policy Area Tourism of the revised EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, which was forwarded to the European Commission in July. It notes that digital technologies can contribute to sustainable tourism, for example, through improving the visibility of remote and rural areas in order to redirect tourist flows and minimise “overcrowding”. In addition, controlling and monitoring tourism flows can help reduce negative impacts on the environment. Moreover, digitalisation may serve to raise awareness and promote sustainable consumption. Digital transformation itself should of course be sustainable and environmentally friendly in line with the Green IT concept.

I would also like to mention that green tourism has been identified as one of the priorities of the Lithuanian Presidency at the Council of the Baltic Sea States in 2020-2021. I congratulate Lithuania on assuming presidency at CBSS and also wish the Lithuanian organisation team all the best in the preparation of the 13th Baltic Sea Tourism Forum in Palanga in November. Let us hope that the Forum can be held as planned.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The pandemic has dealt a serious blow to the tourism sector. Upholding the balance between keeping people safe and minimising pressures on travel and tourism will be challenging. Yet the crisis can also be used to reflect on the future of the tourist sector with a view to green transition and digital transformation.

Thank you for your attention!