

# Diverse challenges of tourism spatial planning. Evidence from Italy, Norway, Poland, Portugal, and Turkey

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## Introduction

Tourism is recognised as a contributor to job creation, a wealth of people, economic growth, environmental protection, poverty alleviation, natural and cultural heritage assets upon which it depends, empower host communities, generate trade opportunities, and fosters peace and intercultural understanding (UNWTO & UNDP, 2017, p. 10). However, tourism contributes to greenhouse gas emissions and economic leakages; it pressures landscape, environment, resource management and impacts local residents and cultural assets. In theory, the mitigation of these adverse effects can be executed by employing sustainability principles involving environmental, economic and social aspects (Krippendorf, 1987; Cater & Goodall, 1992; France, 1997; Swarbrooke, 1999; Johnson, 2002; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2020). Sustainability nowadays embraces other dimensions going beyond the threefold configuration, thus including the technological, cultural and political aspects (see Mondini, 2019).

As in many other sectors, spatial planning is an essential tool for achieving sustainability in tourism, so spatial planning concepts are increasingly prominent in discussions and strategies focused on regional and tourism development. Even though spatial planning and the tourism sector are two separate concepts, they are, in fact, closely interlinked. Namely, tourist activity takes place in a particular area and therefore has a spatial character. Also, tourism is of crucial economic importance for many localities, regions and even entire countries worldwide.

Spatial planning is an essential tool for organising tourism activities to facilitate the integration of this sector with other sectors in a given area.

These two dimensions – tourism and spatial planning – form the theoretical framework of this article. Its primary objective is to examine how the challenges of spatial planning in tourism destinations are addressed in the strategic documents of five selected European countries – Italy, Norway, Poland Portugal, and Turkey. The paper presents the outcome of the Erasmus+ Programme project “SPOT. Sustainable Spatial Planning of Tourism Destinations” regarding tourism governance development in those five different countries. These countries are characterised both by their very different location within the continent, the different importance of tourism in creating national income, the different nature of this tourism and, above all, the different ways in which tourism is managed and planned. Therefore, a comparison of such different countries can make an important contribution to discussions on addressing tourism spatial planning challenges in strategic documents prepared by central and sub-central governments. The effect is to help the whole spectrum of final users to implement time-oriented strategies at the local level which can allow to practice sustainability, resilience and circularity paradigms with reference to tourism spatial planning.

## Challenges of spatial planning in tourism

When it comes to the general benefits, tourism planning has the potential to minimise negative impacts, maximise destination economic return, and build positive attitudes toward tourism in the host community (Hall & Lew, 2009). Williams and Lew (2015) argue that in spatial units excluded from effective tourism planning, there is a risk of unregulated, formless or random, and inefficient tourism development that can directly lead to a number of negative economic, social and environmental consequences. Spatial tourism planning provides a primary mechanism through which government policies in tourism can be implemented (Hall, 2000) and has an important role to play in ensuring orderly and appropriate patterns of development and resolving many conflicts that such development can produce (Gunn, 1994; Inskip, 1991).

Spatial planning is an essential mechanism for structuring and ordering tourist space, and the way planning is applied to tourism varies in space and between different locations, creating different tourist places and experiences (Williams & Lew, 2015). Tourism planning can operate at different geographical levels such as destination, region within a country, country and several countries. The way it is applied, and its effects vary from country to country depending on several

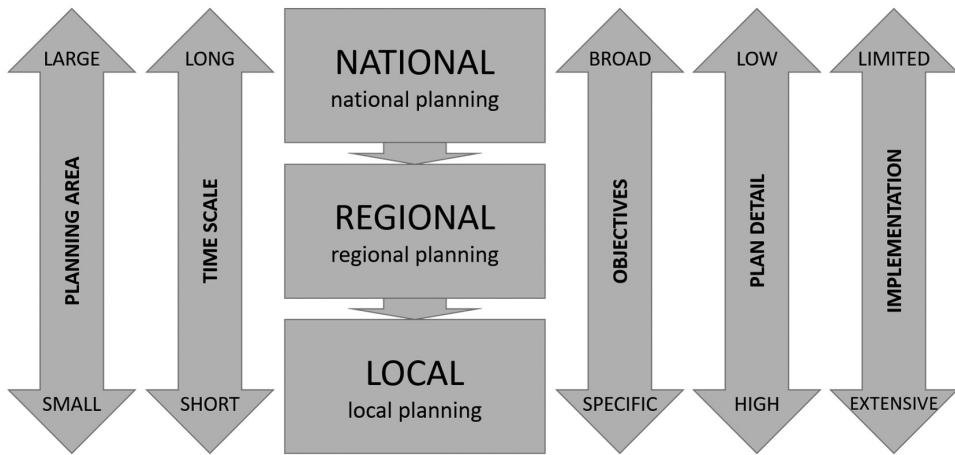
geographical, socio-economic and cultural factors (Lugonja et al., 2017). The important role of spatial planning in the conditions surrounding the development of tourism after the Covid-19 pandemic should also be recognised (Cooke & Nunes, 2021; Collins-Kreiner & Ram, 2020).

The fact that spatial planning is subject to constant adaptation pressure is most likely its main challenge. In the course of ever-changing social and spatial challenges, it has to continually reposition itself, proving its social value and long-term capacity to function and solve problems (Reimer et al., 2014). When tourism, as a dynamic sector both in general and in particular destinations, is added to the spatial planning, challenges of adaptations definitely raise. Spatial planning systems are not exclusively dependent on the legal-administrative systems but also on the different socio-economic, political and cultural structures and dynamics prevailing in each country (Stead & Nadin, 2009), and therefore these are the areas where challenges should be searched. Comparative approaches in the research of planning systems have a long history (see Newman & Thornley, 1996; CEC, 1997; Booth et al., 2007; Nadin & Stead, 2008), but the complexity of comparative approaches to such broad topics across many countries at a time do not allow to establish a framework and common methodology for comparative analysis of spatial planning, and to pinpoint its challenges (see Reimer et al., 2014). A little has changed since Getimis a decade ago (2012, p. 26) argued that comparative studies emphasise different aspects of the institutional, legal and administrative contexts at one scale of analysis, mainly the national level, during a specific period keeping the studies on spatial planning systems static, non-allowing an understanding of the ongoing transformations of planning systems and the important role that actor constellations play in dynamic terms.

The challenges of spatial planning in tourism also come from the tourism industry itself, which is inherently fragmented due to its multiplicity of providers and tourist segments (Williams & Lew, 2015). Different elements, such as accommodation, attractions, transportation, marketing, and a range of human resources, are often required to come together within a tourism plan. This diversity makes tourism planning difficult due to diverse and sometimes conflicting interests. However, even in mixed patterns of ownership and control over tourism elements in most destinations, a planning system that provides both integration and structure to these disparate elements is clearly of value for tourism to achieve its potential (Inskeep, 1991). The system approach recognises interconnections between elements within the system such that a change in one factor will produce significant and predictable changes elsewhere within the system. The comprehensive, flexible, integrative and realistic systems approach to planning can be implemented in a range of geographic scales.

The challenges of the geographical scale of spatial planning in tourism are great, given that these scales are interconnected and not separate spheres of development, as they are often presented in plans where the neat hierarchical arrangements between geographical scales are rarely found (Williams & Lew, 2015). Looking

hierarchically, national policies set a broad development plan that directly shapes agendas at the regional level, and these, in turn, form the framework for local/municipal implementation plans. Of course, descending to a lower geographical and administrative level, the level of detail in the plans also increases, while the general objectives remain complementary and consistent at all levels (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** A geographic scale of spatial planning  
**Source:** Williams & Lew, 2015 (adapted by authors).

Formulation of the relevant policy and implementation of the plan depends on the geographical level of tourism planning. International or transnational interventions and recommendations generally have limited implementation at the local level (Williams & Lew, 2015). However, international planning efforts, which include recommendations from umbrella organisations such as the UNWTO – World Tourism Organization and various international governmental associations of countries in the field of spatial planning, such as, for example, VASAB – Vision and Strategies around the Baltic Sea – all can have a significant impact on tourism planning at lower levels – country, regional and local. Probably the best example of this is the employment of sustainable tourism development in tourism spatial planning.

In the end, economic considerations are one element that may provide a focus of interest at all three geographical scales, as are concerns for infrastructure improvements such as transportation and public utilities (Williams & Lew, 2015). When it comes to practice, the absence of clear policies at the national level can be observed in many countries, while at the regional level, the absence of legal authority for implementing plans can be observed (see Baidal, 2004; Hall & Lew, 2009; Kun et al., 2006; Pigram, 1993; Reimer et al., 2014). Baidal (2004) also argues that the strong national policies have been criticised for concealing or failing to

address regional disparities in some situations. At the local level, where the tourism planning is focused on the physical organisation of tourism facilities, physical development, reducing development conflicts, and harmonising tourism activities with others that use the same spaces and resources, the highest engagement in tourism planning processes has been recognised (see Murphy, 1985; Pearce, 1987; Inskip, 1991; Church, 2004; Lew, 2007; Hall & Lew, 2009).

Recently, various spatial decision support systems – SDSS have been involved in spatial planning at the local level. For example, Brandt et al. (2022) argue that SDSSs can create sustainable tourist destinations by identifying mobility gaps in the transportation system which occur in areas with a relatively high aggregated demand for transport at specific points in time, but where there are very few available transport solutions. Policymakers could identify the mobility gaps in their respective local areas and solve the spatial challenges if the SDSS use data from many resources (Camarero & Oliva, 2019). However, understanding both the supply and the demand of transportation, in this case, is necessary to be able to identify mobility gaps (Hörcher & Tirachini, 2021; Wang et al., 2022). However, publicly available data and its quality should be improved to take the full opportunity of the SDSSs (Brandt et al., 2022).

Therefore, the challenges of spatial planning in tourism are highly variable, reflecting the diversity of countries, regions and local situations in which tourism takes place.

## Methods and Materials

This research was carried out as a desk study research. The empirical layer is based on peer-reviewed theoretical and case study reports on spatial planning systems, concepts and tourism developments in five different countries: Italy, Norway, Poland, Portugal, and Turkey. These reports were developed within the Erasmus+ project SPOT. Sustainable Spatial Planning of Tourism Destinations (2019–2021) by project beneficiaries of different backgrounds in tourism and planning sciences from the Polytechnic of Torino, Italy (Cotella, 2021), Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences, Norway (Tjørve, 2021), University of Lodz, Poland (Leśniewska-Napierała et al., 2021), Polytechnic of Leiria, Portugal (Jorge et al., 2021), and Mersin University, Turkey (Levent et al., 2021). Despite various backgrounds, all authors are grounded in academic teaching, experience in tourism planning issues, and all followed the given structure and depths of the project outputs discussing, among other, challenges of spatial planning in tourism, what was the added value of this cooperation and networking. This approach allowed this paper's authors to compare the challenges across five different countries on all geographical levels: national, regional and local.

The heart of the paper is a content analysis which aims to identify the challenges for spatial planning in observed countries based on the SPOT project's reports. Authors in the paper summarise and underline the common challenges and those specific to a particular area.

## **Diverse challenges of spatial planning of tourism destinations – the evidence**

SPOT project partners carried out a detailed analysis of the spatial planning system at the national level for five countries: Italy (Cotella, 2021), Norway (Tjørve, 2021), Poland (Leśniewska-Napierała et al., 2021), Portugal (Jorge et al., 2021), and Turkey (Levent et al., 2021). Each report has the same structure and a similar level of detail about the phenomena described. Therefore, based on this material, it was possible to attempt to draw a synthesis of the most critical challenges of tourism spatial planning.

It should be stressed at the outset that the overall level of development of the tourism function in a country determines the length of the planning tradition at the national level in this field. Italy has by far the most extended history of spatial planning (Cotella, 2021) and Portugal slightly shorter (Jorge et al., 2021). In both countries, tourism is an important component of national income; they have unique attractions on a global scale and have had a relatively stable political situation for a long time. For this reason, tourism issues have long been given a prominent place in strategic documents. Norway (Tjørve, 2021) and Turkey (Levent et al., 2021) also have a pretty long tradition in this field, several decades-long, although they stand out with significant differences between them. Norway is characterised by a very high level of local autonomy in planning, and tourism challenges are primarily internal. On the other hand, Turkey is characterised by a high hierarchy of top-down planning and a focus on external challenges. Planning in this country broadly began when tourism was massified. Poland has by far the shortest history of spatial planning in relation to tourism (Leśniewska-Napierała et al., 2021). This is mainly due to the fact that the democratic system has only been in place for just over 30 years. Therefore, a characteristic of the spatial planning system in Poland is a very high variability of laws and applied development paradigms. This can be associated with attempts to adapt legislation to changing external conditions. A characteristic feature of this state is also the fact of low integration of various aspects of development planning, e.g. socio-economic planning, spatial planning, tourism planning and planning for nature and landscape protection.

The common feature of tourism spatial planning in all five countries is of course its regulatory layer. Laws and related statutes are created in order to organise the system and give directions for development. In this case, however, it is primarily linked to the desire to ensure the highest possible level of sustainability. In Italy, for example, problems have been identified with a high tourist load in a number of globally known cities and fewer tourists in other destinations. Hence, a unique programme for the development of peripheral areas was created to direct more tourism to these areas (Cotella, 2021). Similarly, Turkey struggles with a very high concentration of tourism in 2–3 regions (especially Antalya). Almost all the touristic areas are heavily/negatively impacted by incompatible land uses, high-density accommodation and related urban development. Therefore, regional development plans indicate the importance of developing tourism based on health and thermal tourism, winter sports, mountain climbing, adventure trips, ecotourism, conference and expo tourism, cruise tourism, yachting, and golf tourism in other regions of the country (Levent et al., 2021). Portugal's policy documents explicitly indicate the need to reduce the seasonality index from 37.5% to 33.5% (Jorge et al., 2021). In Norway, on the other hand, the role of the national regulator in nature conservation is very strong. While several provisions related to planning remain the responsibility of local government, those concerning areas of particular natural value remain the responsibility of central authorities – Nature-Diversity Act “Naturmangfoldloven” (Tjørve, 2021). Polish jurisdiction is very detailed in this respect, and in a number of documents, the environmental elements to be protected are listed in great detail. For example, the study of determinants and directions of land development lists the elements to be protected, such as underground water, mineral resources, and other resources of the natural environment; cultural heritage and landscape; agricultural and forestry space, and spatial order in general (Leśniewska-Napierała et al., 2021). Thus, the national regulations applied are primarily aimed at trying to shape tourism and trying to protect valuable natural elements of the environment – control with and the administration of land use is a central element in spatial planning (Buitelaer et al., 2011).

Another common element in tourism spatial planning is the desire to respond as quickly as possible in the regulatory layer to the challenges of socio-economic development processes. These challenges are of a diverse nature resulting from the specifics of tourism in individual countries, but a common feature is the desire of central authorities to provide a desirable response from the broad perspective of the common interest of the country. A simple example can be pointed out from Poland. As already indicated, the national regulation tries to keep up with the dynamically changing reality, thus, a high variability of legislation is noticeable. In order to ensure the appropriate level of competence and qualification of officials, special training and adaptation programmes are offered (Leśniewska-Napierała et al., 2021). However, the most notable example can be identified in Norway. Due to the increasing development of second homes in mountain areas, the central



government in 2021 introduced a separate strategy for the development of mountain- and inland regions, including energy, bio-economy, food production, and tourism. It is intended to prevent uncontrolled settlement development, especially in parts above the upper forest limit (Tjørve, 2021). In Portugal, this phenomenon is very aptly seen in market terms – the structuring of the tourist offer should have better responded to demand (Jorge et al., 2021). On the other hand, in Turkey and Italy, it is planned to diversify the destinations chosen by tourists as much as possible. There are challenges to diversify tourism activities and increase tourism income by activating the underused tourism potentials of those countries to be explored by the globalised tourist markets (Cotella, 2021; Levent et al., 2021). In conclusion, tourism is resented as one of the main functions of metropolitan development (meetings, incentives, congresses and events), but at the same time, it can lead to an excessive concentration of tourists in small areas. Most countries are therefore promoting solutions to enable a greater diversification of tourist destinations.

An atypical area of challenges related to the social dimension was highlighted by the authors of reports from Poland, Portugal and Turkey. Polish strategic documents draw attention to the inequalities associated to access to tourism services and attractions resulting from accessibility issues, chargeability, and physical difficulties (Leśniewska-Napierała et al., 2021). In turn, the Portuguese legislation highlights the need to improve the qualifications of those responsible for tourism services. In order to improve the quality of services offered and propose new destinations, adequate human and social capital is necessary (Jorge et al., 2021). And it is its lack that is considered one of the main obstacles to the implementation of greater diversification in terms of tourism offer in Turkey (Levent et al., 2021).

Due to the heterogeneous nature of tourism activities in the analysed five countries, the challenges that spatial planning of tourism destinations has to face are various and multifaceted. Among them, it is worth listing (most of them are common for all countries):

- the state has a decisive role in terms of planning and ordering, and within the scope of the territorial management system, various entities of the central administration intervene, as well as municipalities;
- the complex and complicated character of the planning system that causes fragmentation and might create spatial incoherency and functional inconvenience for the same spatial setting;
- the ambiguity of legal frameworks regulating the spatial planning practices that creates a confusion of powers within the domain of spatial planning and eliminates the standardisation of planning practices and the establishment of precedents;
- territorial management system comprises different spatial scales of analysis – usually national, regional and municipal, covered by a variety of programs and strategies;



- despite the law enshrining the general principle of citizen participation in the planning process, in most of the analysed countries there is still a weak adhesion, in the different phases in which they can participate;
- overtourism phenomena in the most renowned coastal and mountain areas in the peak tourism period, that due to their seasonality do not justify the increase of basic services and their maintenance all-year-around;
- overtourism phenomena in the main touristic cities, that generate challenges in relation to services as well as to the emergence of short-term rental activities to the detriment of long-term rentals (and a rise in their prices);
- conflict between production and protection of nature;
- one of the great challenges is to direct the development process toward the common good, towards the quality of life of the populations and towards greater sustainability;
- promotion of tourism-related development in the inner area of the countries, characterised by a large share of natural and landscape resources but often featuring a low level of accessibility and services and scarce institutional capacity due to their reduced size;
- the issue of the multiplicity of actors who perceive the development of individual territories differently. Often private investors take advantage of legal loopholes or the weakness of local authorities and try to use the existing conditions to push through their ideas. Local authorities, in turn, are faced with the dilemma of whether to pursue the economic development of their territory or contribute to ensuring the overriding value of a pristine environment;
- a consistent challenge of most reports was the issue of low quality of human capital in institutions responsible for the development of spatial planning and tourism, especially on local levels. This is very often an obstacle to the creation of interesting and sustainable tourism ideas and solutions, and is sometimes used by external investors to force through their own investments.

## Conclusions

In the introduction to this article it was pointed out that tourism planning has the potential to minimise negative impacts (Hall & Lew, 2009). Actually, tourism planning could prevent exhausting the resources, ensure sustainability, involvement of locals etc. – generally empower the existing values of a given area, both tangible and intangible. A search of reports on spatial planning in tourism destinations showed that all five countries understand the role of their

documents in this way. One of their main roles is to try to prevent spontaneous market processes associated with uncontrolled tourism development. First of all, tourism is a branch of the economy, so it is ultimately about profit for tourism operators. Secondly, tourists going on trips or residents choosing their place for recreation (e.g. building their second homes) are guided by their individual interests. Therefore, the role of regulator in this area is ceded to public institutions. More or less consciously applied provisions influence the greater sustainability of tourism development.

As aptly noted by Williams & Lew (2015) cited in the introduction, unregulated, formless or random, and inefficient tourism development can directly lead to a number of negative economic, social and environmental consequences. It is therefore extremely valuable that this problem is fully recognised in all the countries analysed. However, it should be pointed out that the level of response to these threats and the speed of adjustment of regulations to the changing situation largely depends on the importance of tourism in individual countries. In countries with a long tradition of planning and high importance of tourism as a sector of the economy, spatial planning in this area has a long tradition and is characterised by a high level of institutional sustainability. In countries that are just building their legislative structures, on the other hand, a high variability of regulations and attempts to anticipate the reality only a few years ahead is observed. Therefore, one may be tempted to theorise that areas characterised by long persistence in tourism spatial planning are less resilient to the risks identified by Williams & Lew (2015).

The analysis carried out fully confirmed the theses of Lugonja et al. (2017) that tourism planning on different geographical levels vary from country to country depending on a number of geographical, socio-economic and cultural factors. In addition to the factors indicated above related to the establishment of a tradition of spatial planning, other elements can also be pointed out in this regard. First of all, the division of competences between the different administrative levels is important. Secondly, institutions creating strategic documents must subject them to public consultation. This process takes on very different dimensions depending on the cases analysed – from full participation of diverse social groups, through the activity (lobbying?) of only selected stakeholders (e.g. business or environmentalists), to a complete lack of involvement of anyone in the planning process. Finally, as the last factor, one can indicate the quality of human capital, the level of qualifications and competencies of people preparing strategic documents. These four variables significantly differentiate the level and quality of documents prepared in the field of spatial planning in tourism destinations.

At this point, it is also necessary to take up a polemic with the thesis of Williams & Lew (2015), saying that international interventions generally have limited implementation at the local level. First of all, it should be pointed out that spatial planning at lower levels is usually subordinated to provisions from

higher hierarchical levels. Despite some observed differences across the five countries analysed in the autonomy of local planning, the vector of top-down dependencies is clear. Second, the global factors affecting planning at the lowest level cannot be abstracted from. Municipal or sub-regional governments have to deal with their strategies and plans with external influences on the entity. And while they usually have limited influence on changing these global trends, the impact is more noticeable in the other direction. Therefore, following the analyses carried out, the thesis is that planning systems of equal spatial levels are more dependent, making the local level the most sensitive in this respect.

Finally, it is still necessary to refer to the statements made in the theoretical review on international comparative approaches (Reimer et al., 2014). Clearly, the complexity of such a wide range of topics across many countries poses significant methodological challenges. It is also impossible to compare the legal regulations and planning solutions created to the same extent, as each country is characterised by certain nuances in the regulations applied. However, the formula adopted in the Erasmus+ SPOT project made this task much easier. The reports prepared according to a uniform model by experts from individual countries, containing a critical review of applied legislative solutions, made it possible to undertake this attempt at synthesising the provisions contained therein. An attempt was made to present only the challenges common for the studied countries to identify those factors that have the features of universality and thus should be especially taken into account in the spatial planning of tourism destinations.

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