TOURAL

Multidimensional model of tourism verticals driving the sustainable balanced growth among rural & remote grids and urban clusters of rural regions, fostering macro-regional cooperation

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Executive Summary

The TOURAL project addresses the sustainable growth of rural and remote areas in the Adriatic-Ionian and Black Sea Basin regions through a multidimensional model of tourism development. This model aims to balance the growth of urban clusters with their surrounding rural cells, fostering macro-regional cooperation and leveraging tourism as a driver of inclusive, resilient, and digitally enabled development.

Deliverable D6.4, as a **Policy Brief**, provides comprehensive analysis and **actionable recommendations to address the challenges and opportunities related to rural tourism in these regions.** The brief is structured to align with current EU priorities, strategies, and regulations, ensuring that tourism development is integrated into broader objectives of economic diversification, green-digital transformation, and cultural heritage protection.

Key challenges identified:

- **Economic dependence on traditional sectors:** Rural economies remain highly reliant on agriculture, forestry, and related activities, making them vulnerable to external disturbances.
- **Need for policies with integrated scope (interregional/cross-sectorial):** Existing policies often encourage short-term resource exploitation rather than fostering innovative, cross-border, and cross-sectoral value chains.
- **Strategic undervaluation of tourism:** Tourism is frequently seen as a traditional service sector rather than a catalyst for innovation, limiting its integration with other productive & cultural domains and emerging technologies.
- **Digital and skills gaps:** Rural areas lag in digital maturity (including infrastructures) and skilled workforce availability, hindering their ability to participate in digitally empowered tourism models.
- **Funding complexity:** Rural stakeholders face significant barriers in accessing and utilizing EU funding, often due to complex procedures and administrative requirements.
- **Environmental and cultural risks:** Unregulated tourism growth threatens natural assets and CH (both tangible and intangible), risking loss of authenticity, environmental degradation, and diminished local identity.
- **Protection of cultural heritage:** CH sites and assets are increasingly at risk from looting, degradation, and climate change (i.e. especially in coastal areas and underwater), necessitating targeted monitoring and protection measures.

Related policy recommendations:

- **Prioritize economic diversification with tourism among the core drivers:** Integrate tourism into regional development plans and RIS3 strategies to strengthen cross-sectoral value chains and resilience.
- **Enhance demographic resilience:** Support youth retention, skills development, and social inclusion through integrated tourism initiatives.
- **Foster multi-level governance and cooperation:** Encourage cross-border and cross-sectoral collaboration through integrated policy instruments and participatory planning.

- **Promote bottom-up approaches:** Engage local stakeholders in the co-creation and implementation of tourism policies to ensure relevance and effectiveness.
- **Reposition tourism as a strategic asset for regional innovation:** Update RIS3 strategies to reflect the transversal role of tourism in resilience-building and sustainable transformation.
- **Embed environmental and cultural preservation principles:** Ensure that tourism strategies and business models prioritize environmental stewardship, circular economy methods and CH protection.
- **Improve connectivity and digital integration:** Invest in ICT infrastructure and digital skills to bridge urban-rural divides and enhance competitiveness.
- **Simplify access to funding:** Streamline procedures and provide targeted support to rural stakeholders to reduce administrative exclusion. Empower risk-sharing to incentivise private investments and PPPs.
- **Establish a European Observatory on impacts of tourism and climate change on Cultural Heritage:** Create a centralized platform for monitoring and addressing the impacts of tourism and climate change on CH and the environment.
- **Protect cultural heritage from looting, degradation, and climate change:** Implement advanced monitoring technologies and targeted policy measures to safeguard CH sites and assets.

List of Symbols and Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Meaning
AR	Augmented Reality
AUV	Autonomous Underwater Vehicle that operates independently underwater without a human operator/diver or tether
CE	Circular Economy
CH	Cultural Heritage
COHESION FUND	Financial instrument aimed at reducing disparities between the levels of development of different regions within EU
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)
EUSAIR	EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region
EUSBSR	European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region
EUSDR	Renewed EU Strategy for the Danube Region
FTTH	Fiber to the home, is a broadband internet connection using Fiber-Optic cables to deliver high-speed internet directly to individual buildings (homes/businesses)
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies
Intangible CH	UNESCO definition: practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups, individuals recognize as part of their CH. It is transmitted from generation to generation, constantly recreated by communities/groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity
IoT	Internet of Things
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
PPPs	Public-private partnerships
RIS3	Research and Innovation Strategy for Smart Specialization
UWCH	Underwater Cultural Heritage. According to UNESCO includes all traces of human existence having a cultural, historical or archaeological character which have been partially or totally under water, periodically or continuously, for at least 100 years
VR	Virtual Reality
XR	Extended Reality

1. Introduction

1.1 Scope and objectives of the deliverable

The present report represents the Deliverable D6.4 "Policy Brief (v1)" of the TOURAL project.
The TOURAL project focuses on the sustainable growth of rural and remote areas across the Adriatic-Ionian and Black Sea Basin regions through a multidimensional tourism development model, balancing the growth of urban clusters in the targeted regions with the growth of their corresponding rural cells.

In this rural tourism context, the Deliverable D6.4 elaborates on:

- ✓ The policy landscape framing the implementation of the TOURAL project in terms of EU priorities, strategies, policies and regulations defining the vision and the pathways for sustainable, inclusive, and digitally enabled tourism development in Europe; while also considering policy aspects related to culture and cultural heritage.
- ✓ The major challenges faced by rural and remote areas, which require policy support to trigger transformative or structural improvements.
- ✓ The localisation of the above identified challenges across the six TOURAL regions.
- ✓ The recommendations for policy measures or strategies to reinforce the tourism's potential as a driver of impactful transformation across borders and across corroborating sectors of economic activity.

1.2 Structure of the deliverable

- **Chapter-2**: analyses the policy landscape framing the implementation of the TOURAL project in terms of EU priorities, strategies, policies and regulations; complimented by references to UNESCO and EU policy elements related to culture and cultural heritage.
- **Chapter-3**: identifies the major challenges faced by rural and remote areas, which require policy support (new or updated measures and instruments).
- **Chapter-4**: localises the above challenges across the six TOURAL regions.
- **Chapter-5**: provides policy recommendations towards reinforcing the tourism's potential as a driver of impactful transformation across borders and across corroborating sectors of economic activity.
- **Chapter-6**: presents the conclusions of the present Report.
- **Chapter-7**: lists relevant reference sources.

2. Policy Landscape

At the European level, the policy landscape framing the implementation of the TOURAL project is shaped by a coherent set of EU priorities, strategies, policies and regulations defining the vision and the pathways for sustainable, inclusive, and digitally enabled development (including tourism development) in rural and remote areas.

Starting with the **European Commission's Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas**[1], this fundamental instrument provides a comprehensive roadmap aimed at revitalizing rural communities by 2040 through integrated actions in economic diversification, innovation, and enhanced quality of life. Within this strategic context, the development of sustainable tourism models grounded in cultural, creative, and scientific sectors has been prioritised, recognising their potential to strengthen social cohesion, preserve cultural identity, and diversify territorial economies.

The **Tourism Transition Pathway**[2] further articulates the transformation of the tourism sector as elaborated within the updated EU Industrial Strategy[3], setting out the reconfiguration of tourism ecosystems across environmental, digital, and resilience dimensions. In this policy environment, tourism is expected to evolve according to principles of circularity, energy efficiency, data-driven innovation, and social inclusion. Green and Digital transitions are framed not merely as technological shifts but as comprehensive systemic changes requiring coordinated governance, stakeholder collaboration, and institutional adaptation. Participatory design approaches, integrated policy planning, and the deployment of intelligent digital technologies and data-driven services are positioned as key enablers of this multidimensional transition.

The **European Commission's Working Document "Scenarios towards co-creation of transition pathway for tourism for a more resilient, innovative and sustainable ecosystem"**[4] provides further policy background identifying key structural vulnerabilities such as workforce shortages, digital asymmetries, and dependence on mono-sectoral economies, particularly in peripheral and remote regions. Promoting responsible tourism, strengthening value chains, and fostering resilience are highlighted as strategic priorities to enhance the sustainability and inclusiveness of the European tourism ecosystem. In this context, the need for targeted interventions addressing both economic and social resilience at the local level is recognised as critical for long-term success.

In the digital realm, the **Digital Europe Programme**[5], the **Digital Decade Policy Programme 2030**[6], and the **EU strategy "Shaping Europe's Digital Future"**[7] set a comprehensive framework for ensuring that digitalization becomes an enabler of competitiveness and inclusion. The deployment of smart platforms, the promotion of interoperability, and the integration of technologies such as XR/VR applications, geospatial mapping, and data analytics are encouraged, particularly in sectors like tourism where digital gaps remain pronounced in rural and peripheral territories. Addressing these asymmetries is seen as essential to ensuring that innovation ecosystems become accessible to a broader range of actors.

[1] https://rural-vision.europa.eu/index_en
[2] https://transition-pathways.europa.eu/tourism
[3] https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/industry/strategy_en
[4] https://ec.europa.eu/docsroom/documents/45977
[5] https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/activities/digital-programme
[6] https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/digital-decade-policy-programme-2030
[7] https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en

The **European Green Deal**[8] objectives promote a broader strategic coherence with a focus on sustainable land use, biodiversity protection, and the transition towards low-carbon tourism models. Environmental sustainability is increasingly recognised not as a secondary goal but as a structural foundation for the future viability of tourism. Complementary inspiration is drawn from the **New European Bauhaus**[9], which promotes the integration of sustainability, aesthetics, and cultural identity as guiding principles for territorial development.

Instruments such as the **SME Strategy for a Sustainable and Digital Europe**[10] and the **Single Market Programme**[11] highlight the need to support the small and medium-sized enterprises in the tourism sector. These frameworks aim to ensure that rural and small-scale tourism players have access to innovation support, market opportunities, and digital transformation tools, thereby enhancing their resilience and competitiveness within a rapidly evolving tourism sector.

The **European Agenda for Tourism 2030**[12], adopted by the Council of the European Union[13], provides an overarching reference for coordinated action across five strategic axes: green transition, digitalisation, resilience, territorial cohesion, and workforce sustainability. The operationalisation of these pillars requires the development of place-based tourism strategies that support innovation, enhance social inclusion, and strengthen under-represented tourism actors in structurally weaker regions.

Social inclusion objectives are further reflected in the **European Pillar of Social Rights**[14], which emphasises the need for equitable access to economic opportunities, including those within the tourism sector. Ensuring that marginalised groups, such as ageing populations and communities facing demographic decline, are empowered through targeted actions in tourism planning and development; this is seen as an essential element of achieving a socially balanced transition. Intergenerational knowledge transfer, community participation, and the strengthening of local governance capacities are highlighted as key levers for enhancing social resilience and cohesion across rural territories.

These policy directions are expected to converge in the objectives articulated in regional **Smart Specialisation Strategies (RIS3)**, which for the case of the TOURAL regions, identify tourism particularly in its cultural, creative, and digitally enhanced forms as a sector with strong potential to drive innovation-led territorial development. By aligning with RIS3 frameworks, the strategic orientation of tourism policy is reinforced through place-based innovation, cross-sectoral synergies, and the mobilisation of local knowledge and assets. This alignment ensures that tourism is no longer treated as a peripheral service activity, but rather as an integral component of regional transformation agendas. It also facilitates better integration of tourism into regional funding priorities and innovation ecosystems, enhancing both the policy relevance and the absorptive capacity of rural and less-developed areas. As such, the desired coherence between EU-level strategies and RIS3 pathways could provide a robust foundation for advancing inclusive, sustainable, and innovation-driven tourism development across Europe's diverse territorial contexts.

[8] https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en
[9] https://new-european-bauhaus.europa.eu/index_en
[10] https://digital-skills-jobs.europa.eu/en/actions/european-initiatives/sme-strategy-sustainable-and-digital-europe
[11] https://commission.europa.eu/funding-tenders/find-funding/eu-funding-programmes/single-market-programme/overview_en
[12] https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/news/european-tourism-agenda-2030-commission-welcomes-commitment-eu-countries-make-tourism-greener-more-2022-12-02_en
[13] https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/council-eu/
[14] https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/european-pillar-social-rights-building-fairer-and-more-inclusive-european-union_en

Moving from the regional to the **European Sea-basin / Macro-regional** level, tourism is highlighted in the context of relevant **Strategies**, such as:

1. **EUSAIR** (Adriatic-Ionian Region)[15]: Pillar-4 is about sustainable tourism. Priorities include year-round tourism diversification, cultural heritage valorisation (e.g. via thematic routes), green tourism and SME networks to promote eco-rural destinations.
2. **EU Strategy for the Black Sea Region**[16]: Pillar "Sustainable Growth and Prosperity". Priorities include a connectivity agenda to improve transport/digital networks for rural tourism corridors; heritage-based experiential tourism; coastal community resilience to mitigate environmental risks and support blue economy sectors.
3. **EUSDR (Danube Region)**[17]: Priority area-3 "Promote Culture & Tourism, People-People Contacts". Key goals include development of a Danube Brand for the entire Region and a 'Blue Book' on cultural identity (including marketing of joint green tourism products); Cultural Routes integration to link heritage sites and rural economies; sustainable preservation of landscapes via clusters of museums and visitor centres (i.e. similar to TOURAL KACs); harmonised tourism monitoring system providing statistical data.
4. **EUSBSR (Baltic Sea Region)**[18] [19]: related pillar "Sustainable Tourism Development". Priorities include transnational tourism development in remote/rural areas to reduce urban-rural migration and enhance community resilience; skills and technology investment for digital and green transitions in tourism sectors; cultural/natural heritage protection through eco-friendly infrastructure and low-impact tourism products.

All the above four (4) Strategies integrate (rural) tourism as a key component of sustainable development, highlighting the need for economic diversification, heritage preservation, green/digital transitions and public-private partnerships for sustainable capacity building.

Additionally, at world-wide level, since TOURAL touches upon culture and cultural heritage on its core tourism modelling dimensions, it is important to mention the widely accepted work, guidelines and standards of **UNESCO** in the realm of **Culture** through the established international **Conventions**[20], such as the **Convention on the Protection of World Cultural & Natural Heritage**[21] (e.g. cultural & natural heritage are increasingly threatened with destruction by changing socio-economic conditions, their protection at national level often remains incomplete, need to be preserved as part of the world heritage of mankind), the 2001 **Convention on the Protection of Underwater Cultural Heritage** (e.g. public's right to enjoy the benefits of responsible non-intrusive access to in situ UWCH, threats in UWCH by unauthorized activities requiring prevention measures, operational guidelines for the protection of UWCH[22]), the **Convention on Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage**[23] (e.g. importance of intangible CH as mainspring of cultural diversity and guarantee of sustainable development, need for safeguarding, maintenance and re-creation, need for public awareness raising of its importance).

Finally, on the same topic (i.e. culture and CH), at EU level the European Commission and other EU bodies have developed a number of policies and programmes[24] aimed at preserving and promoting Europe's shared cultural

[15] https://www.adriatic-ionian.eu/about-eusair/
[16] https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/new-eu-strategy-secure-prosperous-and-resilient-black-sea-region-2025-05-28_en
[17] https://danube-region.eu/targets/
[18] https://eusbsr.eu/
[19] https://eusbsr.eu/policy-area-tourism/
[20] https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/standard-setting/conventions
[21] https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/convention-concerning-protection-world-cultural-and-natural-heritage?hub=66535
[22] https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000234177
[23] https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/convention-safeguarding-intangible-cultural-heritage?hub=66535
[24] https://culture.ec.europa.eu/cultural-heritage/eu-policy-for-cultural-heritage/eu-competences-in-cultural-heritage

heritage, recognizing its value for identity, social cohesion, and economic development. These include the **European Framework for Action on Cultural Heritage**[25], reflective the set-up for heritage-related activities at a European level in terms of 5 thematic areas (CH for an inclusive Europe, CH for a sustainable Europe through smart solutions, CH for a resilient Europe through safeguarding endangered heritage, CH for an innovative Europe mobilizing R&I, CH for stronger global partnerships mobilizing reinforcing international cooperation); the **New European Agenda for Culture**[26] which provides a strategic framework for EU cultural policy, focusing on social, economic, and external dimensions; and the **European Council 2023-2026 Work Plan for Culture**[27], which outlines four key priorities for cultural cooperation (empowering artists and cultural professionals, enhancing cultural participation, promoting culture's role in environmental sustainability, and strengthening cultural partnerships in the EU's external relations).

[25] https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/5a9c3144-80f1-11e9-9f05-01aa75ed71a1

[26] https://culture.ec.europa.eu/document/a-new-european-agenda-for-culture-swd2018-267-final

[27] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32022G1207%2801%29&qid=1671635488811

3. Challenges for rural tourism requiring policy support

The TOURAL project focuses on the sustainable growth of rural and remote areas across the Adriatic-Ionian and Black Sea Basin regions through a multidimensional tourism development model built around culture and cultural heritage and other corroborating tourism verticals. In this rural tourism context, we present below major challenges faced by rural and remote areas, which require policy support to trigger transformative or structural improvements.

1. Reducing reliance on traditional productive sectors

Key facts:

- According to the European Commission's Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas, in the respective Action Plan ("prosperous rural areas" block) it is claimed that "*rural areas can become more prosperous by diversifying economic activities to new sectors with positive effects on employment, and improving the value added of farming, agri-food, forestry*", while the "resilient rural areas" block highlights the goal of promoting the environmental-friendly tourism development.
- Rural regions are disproportionately dependent on primary sectors (agriculture, forestry, fishing). In the EU, these sectors accounted for 4,3% of total employment but over 20% in rural regions[28].

Challenge: Local economies in rural territories are highly dependent on a few traditional sectors of economic activity, increasing their vulnerability to both supply chain disruptions (e.g. irregularities, tariffs) and external economic or environmental factors (fluctuations in global agricultural markets, the impacts of climate change, and the degradation of natural resources). The need is evident to increase their resilience by reducing their reliance in traditional sectors such as agriculture, farming and forestry, and integrating diversified forms of economic activity. Policy instruments stimulating cooperation beyond territorial boarders and implementation of sustainable multidimensional tourism models could strengthen cross-sectoral economic activities triggering new economic value chains, while capitalising on the unique characteristics and local identities, capacities, and comparative advantages of each territory.

2. Need for policy instruments with integrated scope (interregional/cross-sectoral) for boosting value chain innovation in tourism

Key facts:

- According to OECD, 70% of tourism policies in developing economies focus on hotels and attractions, neglecting linkages of tourism with other productive sectors and digital services[29].
- Tourism economies are dominated by micro-enterprises and SMEs, which account for approx. 90% of all tourism businesses in the EU[30].

Challenge: The existing situation with fragmented policy instruments at regional level encouraging short-term resource exploitation approaches, does not encourage the redesign of value chains in terms of exploiting innovation capacities towards sustainability and resilience. Integrated policy instruments are needed targeted at

[28] Eurostat (2020) – Agriculture, Forestry and Fishery Statistics: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/3217494/12069644/KS-FK-20-001-EN-N.pdf

[29] OECD Tourism Trends and Policies 2024: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-tourism-trends-and-policies-2024_80885d8b-en.html

[30] OECD Tourism Papers - A Review of Effective Policies for Tourism Growth: https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2015/03/a-review-of-effective-policies-for-tourism-growth_g17a25ed/5js4vmp5n5r8-en.pdf#:~:text=large%20group%20of%20SME%2Fmicro%2Dbusinesses

both horizontal (i.e. geographic) and vertical (i.e. sectorial) levels: cross-border interregional scope fostering innovative value chains with actors cooperating to offer innovative value propositions within a borderless value-network (e.g. sea-basin/macro region cooperation and beyond); cross-sectoral scope fostering synergies among stakeholders from different but potentially corroborating sectors. Such integrated policy instruments could promote an upgraded (pivotal) role of rural tourism for the development of cross-border dynamics empowering the transition towards multi-level models of growth.

3. Lack of strategic integration of tourism into regional / sectoral development plans

Key facts:

- The majority of regional smart specialisation strategies do not explicitly incorporate tourism as a key growth sector, despite its economic potential. More specifically, only 9% of RIS3 priorities explicitly address tourism, cultural, and creative industries, compared to much higher shares for sectors like agrifood (21%), ICT (15%) and health (15%)[31].

Challenge: Tourism continuous to be systematically undervalued as a lever for innovation, as in most regional strategies and development plans it is perceived as a traditional service sector with insufficient integration with the creative industries, cultural revitalisation processes, or emerging technologies (e.g. ICT immersive techs, smart personalisation services). The absence of such a cross-sectoral perspective deprives regions of the potential benefits that could arise from linking tourism with other productive (e.g. food, creative) and cultural domains. When developed in synergy with the local creative economy, cultural heritage, education or science, technology, or the agri-food sector, tourism can act as a catalyst for new forms of employment, micro-entrepreneurship, and social innovation. Rather than functioning as an isolated hospitality service, it transforms into a multidimensional platform that attracts diversified investment and enhances the overall attractiveness of the territory. The lack of this strategic integration of tourism into regional or sectoral development plans limits its ability to build sustainable value chains within a regional (or inter-regional or even macro-regional) value network, to strengthen local ownership in the production of content and experiences, and to support the emergence of a more cohesive and resilient socio-economic fabric.

4. Low digital maturity and skilled workforce in rural & remote areas

Key facts:

- The European Commission reports that 40% of adults lack basic digital skills, and more than 70% of businesses identify a lack of digital skills among their staff as an obstacle to growth. These challenges are greater in rural areas where access to broadband internet lags behind urban areas[32].
- According to the EU Rural Pact Community Platform, "*digitalization in rural regions is severely hindered by inadequate infrastructure, with many areas lacking access to high-speed broadband and reliable mobile networks*". Despite the significant investments committed, notable disparities remain, especially in remote areas[33].

Challenge: Digital maturity remains critically low across many rural communities, which often lack both the necessary infrastructure such as broadband connectivity, equipment and IoT technologies, smart mobility

[31] European Journal of Cultural Management and Policy, 2024: https://www.frontierspartnerships.org/journals/european-journal-of-cultural-management-and-policy/articles/10.3389/ejcmp.2024.12393/full

[32] European Commission (2020)-Digital Skills and Jobs: https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/digital-skills-and-job

[33] EU Rural Pact Community Platform - Advancing digitalization in rural areas: https://ruralpact.rural-vision.europa.eu/news/advancing-digitalisation-rural-areas-new-position-paper_en

solutions, and digital networks; and the skills required to effectively utilise digital tools and platforms (i.e. need for upskilling and vocational training).

These result in disparities in service provision quality and in exclusion from digitally empowered tourism models; which in turn limits the visibility and networking capacity of rural destinations and exacerbates the risk of further widening the digital divide between urban and rural / remote areas.

5. Funding complexity - absence of flexible funding instruments & support schemes

Key facts:
According to the European Committee of the Regions[34]:

- Rural tourism SMEs highlight that access to EU funding requires a high level of administration, skills and work, acknowledging that bureaucracy is a serious issue for stakeholders seeking funding. They also highlighted the difficulty of getting targeted support when it comes to the complicated funding rules.
- As the bureaucracy needed to access funding is completed, a lot of businesses decide to apply for bank loans, as this is considered easier and more time-effective.

Challenge: The absence of flexible funding instruments and support mechanisms adapted to the specificities of rural territories further reinforces dependence on traditional economic activities, promoting a development paradigm that restricts the potential for active integration into the broader European innovation and development landscape.

The inability to interpret technical requirements of funding instruments, the lack of specialised staff to draft and submit proposals for funding, and the disproportionate demands for documentation and administrative capacity constitute systemic barriers for many local actors, particularly in areas with limited access to support services or institutional networks. The complexity of funding calls and the lack of transparent information frequently lead to phenomena of "administrative exclusion", where even well-formulated proposals are rejected due to non-compliance with highly restrictive or technically specialised criteria. In addition, a temporal mismatch between funding cycles and the operational pace of small local organisations often makes it difficult to mobilise partners or mature project ideas in time. This situation not only limits the absorption of available resources but also reinforces the unequal spatial distribution of investments, effectively excluding the most peripheral and disadvantaged areas from the very support instruments designed to empower them.

Finally, risk-sharing instruments (e.g. funds matching private investments, guarantees) are needed targeting sectors such as rural tourism to incentivize private investments and public-private partnerships.

6. Tourism growth needs to respect the environment, the cultural heritage (tangible-intangible) and the cultural identity of rural and remote areas

Key facts:

- Tourism relies on natural assets (e.g. landscapes, biodiversity) as primary attractions, yet unregulated development accelerates environmental degradation (e.g. deforestation, pollution, habitat loss). For instance, tourism infrastructure projects in sensitive ecosystems increase CO_2 emissions and deplete water resources, undermining the very assets tourism depends on[35].

[34] European Committee of the Regions- Tourism and Rural Development (https://case-research.eu/app/uploads/2024/06/QG0523426ENN20Tourism20and20rural20development.pdf)

[35] Impact of tourism development upon environmental sustainability: a suggested framework for sustainable ecotourism: https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9389488/

- Cultural heritage assets (e.g. intangible like traditional crafts, or tangible like historical sites) provide unique selling points for rural and remote destinations, distinguishing them in competitive tourism markets. However, "over-tourism" may distort intangible heritage assets (e.g. supress craftmanship for the benefit of more profitable tourism services) and may increase the risk for harming tangible heritage assets (e.g. polluting the asset or deteriorating its original state).
- Excess tourism pressure commodifies traditions, eroding the authenticity of the area (e.g. tradition transformed to tourism commodity), while old unsustainable tourism models suppress local distinctiveness (e.g. development of touristic identity at the expense of the traditional distinctive identity), destabilizing cultural heritage and communities (e.g. Barcelona, Venice).

Challenge: Unregulated tourism growth can harm natural and cultural assets and contribute to the loss of the local cultural identity, requiring sustainable management practices. Sustainable tourism practices for rural and remote areas (i.e. applicable also in any tourism area) need to balance growth with the requirements for environmental and natural capital preservation, the protection of cultural heritage (tangible-intangible) and the preservation of local cultural identity to ensure long-term viability.

7. Need to protect cultural heritage assets in tourism areas from looting or degradation or climate change impacts

Key facts:

- High touristic flows increase the risk for deterioration of tangible heritage assets or even looting (e.g. high risk for unattended UWCH assets). According to INTERPOL figures[36], 854,742 cultural objects were seized globally by law enforcement agencies in 2020, but the illicit traffic and looting of cultural heritage increased dramatically in the last decade all over the world.
- 73% of global heritage sites face significant degradation risks due to tourism pressures, with physical wear accounting for 39% of damage cases[37].
- Cultural heritage sites face existence threats from climate extremes (e.g. heat-waves, storms, sea levels). Coastal sites are particularly vulnerable, with rising sea levels and intensified storms damage 44% of cultural landmarks[38] [39] (e.g. Venice, Danube Region).
- Underwater cultural sites are also exposed to a series of climate change threats, such as ocean acidification, global sea-level rise (i.e. coastal), rise in water temperature, and extreme weather phaenomena, among others[40].

Challenge: Looting and degradation of cultural heritage assets directly erase irreplaceable cultural heritage, depriving communities from their historical roots. For tourism-dependent areas, this translates to eroded authenticity and diminishing of cultural distinctiveness; thus, reducing their long-term tourist appeal.

On the other hand, policy actions are needed to protect the cultural heritage from the climate change impacts. Without intervention, these impacts could render sites inaccessible or unrecognizable, also, affecting regional tourism economies built on heritage appeal.

[36] https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/returning-loot
[37] https://theeducationjournals.com/index.php/JTCMS/article/download/167/151
[38] UNESCO World Heritage and Tourism in a Changing Climate: https://whc.unesco.org/en/tourism-climate-change/
[39] EU Parliament Briefing: The Impact of climate change on cultural heritage: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2024/762282/EPRS_BRI(2024)762282_EN.pdf
[40] Underwater cultural heritage, climate change: adaptation and mitigation, 2025 (https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000393900).

At the same time, the Report of UNESCO's World Heritage Centre UNEP's Tourism and Environment Programme highlights that although climate change is likely to exacerbate problems caused by unplanned tourism development and uncontrolled or poorly managed visitor access (as well as by other threats and stresses), tourism can also play a positive role in helping to secure the future of many World Heritage sites in a changing climate[41].

Overall, tourism in cultural heritage sites (particularly underwater / coastal) affected by climate change has the potential to generate positive socio-economic benefits while fostering environmental conservation and cultural appreciation. By leveraging tourism as a tool for sustainable development, communities can effectively manage and preserve these valuable cultural resources for future generations.

[41] UNESCO World Heritage and Tourism in a Changing Climate: https://whc.unesco.org/en/tourism-climate-change/

4. Localization of challenges across TOURAL regions

The main challenges faced by rural and remote areas, as elaborated above, are also relevant for the six TOURAL regions. Based on the Deliverable D2.2 "Policy Pathways for TOURAL regions and Macro-regions", the following table connects the above broad challenges with the issues that prevail in each of the six project's regions / pilot sites.

Table 1: Localising policy challenges to TOURAL regions.

Broad challenges	Challenges identified in TOURAL regions	North Sporades	Province of Teramo	Island of Pag	Nessebar	Danube Delta LAG	Kutsurub region
Reliance on **traditional productive sectors**	Short tourism season / seasonal dependency						
	Need for sustainable development beyond agriculture						
Funding complexity - absence of **flexible funding instruments & support schemes**	Limited employment opportunities inland						
	Uneven tourism distribution between coastal - rural areas						
	Drain of young talents						
Need for **policy instruments with integrated scope** for **boosting value chain innovation** in tourism	Underdeveloped infrastructure (rural)						
	Connectivity issues to urban clusters						
	Weak collaboration among tourism providers						
	Limited tourism offerings						
Lack of **strategic integration of tourism into regional / sectoral development plans**	Need for higher-quality tourism						
	Unexplored heritage assets						
	Absence of sustainable heritage management						
Low **digital maturity & skilled workforce** in rural & remote areas	Global competitiveness						
	Lack of tourism-related skills						
Tourism growth to **respect**	Loss of local identity						

environment, CH & cultural identity of rural/remote areas	Pollution from visitors						
Protect CH assets in tourism areas **from looting or degradation or climate change impacts**	Loss of local identity						
	Absence of sustainable heritage management						
Other	Damages from military invasion						

5. Policy recommendations for addressing rural tourism challenges

Analysing the above challenges faced by rural and remote areas, we present below recommendations for policy measures or strategies to reinforce the tourism's potential as a driver of impactful transformation across borders and across corroborating sectors of economic activity.

1. Prioritization of diversification of rural economies with tourism among the core drivers.

The diversification of rural economies to increase their resilience to external factors should be among the top priorities of regional development plans (including RIS3 strategies) and EU policy instruments, recognising tourism not merely as an ancillary activity but as a core driver of sustainable value chains. Policy frameworks and development plans need to expand the scope of tourism to encompass cultural, creative, scientific, and community-based sectors, enabling the structuring of locally embedded, multidimensional economic ecosystems that can withstand sectoral volatility and foster long-term territorial resilience.

Expected impact: more resilient rural economies, with tourism as a catalyst for strengthening cross-sectoral economic activities.

Related challenges: 1

2. Targeted policy measures increasing demographic resilience of rural areas.

Targeted measures are needed to strengthen the demographic resilience of rural communities through integrated approaches and funding schemes which link tourism with youth retention, skills transfer and acquisition, and social inclusion. Furthermore, tourism initiatives should be designed to support intergenerational renewal, empower women and minorities, and diversify socio-economic participation in ways that sustain local growth and cohesion.

Expected impact: regeneration of local communities in rural areas, fighting of brain-drain, capacity building of skilled workforce.

Related challenges: 1, 5

3. Integrated tourism policies fostering multi-level governance stimulating horizontal & vertical cooperation.

New integrated policy instruments are needed for tourism, encouraging the establishment of governance schemes across vertical and horizontal axes. At horizontal level (geography), cross-border interregional cooperation should be encouraged through systematic integration within macro-regional strategies, creating conditions for replication and mutual reinforcement of successful models. This calls e.g. for the development of interoperable procedures, joint programming tools, and shared evaluation methodologies capable of supporting the establishment and scaling of cross-border tourism value chains. At vertical level (sectorial), integration of cross-sectoral priorities and participatory planning processes should be encouraged, enabling synergies such as those linking local agri-food production, culture-creativity-traditions, technology innovations & tourism services tailored to the needs and characteristics of local communities.

Expected impact: leverage factor for multisectoral inter-regional and resilient growth, with spill-over effects for the European economy.

Related challenges: 2

4. Bottom-up approaches with local stakeholders' participation in formulating tourism policies.

The integrated tourism policies should consider bottom-up design practices, establishing mechanisms to encourage the engagement and participation of regional stakeholders (including local actors and community representatives) in co-creation processes. This will enable rural and peripheral actors, as well as regional / interregional stakeholders to contribute actively to the formulation, implementation, and monitoring of tourism strategies and integrated policy instruments, ensuring that development trajectories are rooted in local or regional knowledge and aspirations.

Expected impact: Community engagement in policy design would make the policy instruments fit-for-purpose, incorporating the voice of the affected stakeholders at regional and local levels.

Related challenges: 2, 3

5. Repositioning tourism as a strategic asset for regional innovation.

In the domain of regional innovation, tourism must be repositioned as a strategic asset capable of generating knowledge spillovers, fostering cross-sectoral linkages, and driving cultural and creative economy development. Research and Innovation Strategies for Smart Specialization (RIS3) need to be updated to reflect the transversal role of tourism, explicitly connecting it to objectives of resilience-building, demographic regeneration, and sustainable economic transformation. Supplementary measures should be designed to foster sustainable value-chains with interregional / macroregional scope, within a cross-sectorial value-network.

Expected impact: Reinforcement of tourism as a driving force for the interregional economy; emergence of new sustainable cross-border and cross-sectorial value-chains; increase of value-adding prospects for the economy.

Related challenges: 3

6. Embedding of environmental, cultural preservation and CE principles in tourism strategies.

Promoting the sustainability of tourism practices and business models requires the embedding of environmental stewardship, cultural preservation, and circular economy principles at both strategic and operational levels, with respect to planning and management processes, and with respect to action plans for strategies' implementation. Priority must be given to models including community-based tourism, nature-based tourism, CE-based tourism, and heritage-led regeneration initiatives, securing the long-term contribution of tourism to sustainable territorial development and to the achievement of the EU Green Deal goals.

Expected impact: tourism sector respecting the natural capital, the cultural heritage and the local identities; also, actively contributing to the achievement of the EU Green Deal goals.

Related challenges: 2, 3

7. Fostering connectivity of urban clusters with rural/remote cells leveraging ERDF and Cohesion Funds.

Tailored ERDF and Cohesion Fund instruments should become available to invest in ICT infrastructure, transport networks and public transport services, enhancing digital/telecoms integration and rural-urban connectivity, which is essential for balancing the growth of urban clusters with their surrounding rural cells. This will be instrumental for embedding rural destinations within regional development dynamics, facilitating flows of

visitors, capital, and innovation, and reinforcing the systemic contribution of tourism to balanced, inclusive growth across territories.

Expected impact: Sustainable balanced growth between urban clusters and their surrounding rural cells. Reduced disparities between the levels of development of EU urban-rural regions.

Related challenges: 2, 5

8. Better integration of rural/remote areas into digital transition policies.

Addressing digital inequalities and low digital maturity of rural and remote areas must be systematically integrated into digital transition policies through dedicated digital infrastructure investments, the support for the provision of broadband value-added services (FTTH, location based services, personalisation services, other data-driven services) adapted to territorial realities, and the mainstreaming of digital skills initiatives targeted at tourism operators and tourism service providers. Digital tools, notably XR/VR applications, geospatial mapping systems, tourism Data Spaces, knowledge-sharing platforms (e.g. for peer learning, innovation uptaking), and smart tourism platforms (e.g. with could-based collaboration-enabled data-driven services), should be deployed not as isolated interventions but as integral components of regional development strategies, ensuring that the digital transformation effectively enhances competitiveness, accessibility, and sustainability in peripheral areas.

Expected impact: increased digital maturity and digital capacitation of tourism workforce in rural/remote areas.

Related challenges: 4

9. Simplified access to funding for tourism stakeholders in rural/remote areas.

Improving access to funding remains indispensable for empowering local actors and bridging operational gaps. Funding instruments must be adapted to reflect the administrative and technical capacities of rural stakeholders through the simplification of procedures, the alignment of eligibility criteria across instruments, and the establishment of integrated pre-application support services. Such mechanisms should aim to reduce the structural asymmetries between funding availability and absorptive capacity, thus enabling a more equitable distribution of innovation resources. To this end, the establishment of new support schemes could offer significant added value – e.g. establishment of "regional funding angels" as one-stop-shop for funding support; combined with systemic tourism entrepreneurship acceleration schemes; complimented with risk-sharing instruments targeting rural tourism to incentivize private investments and public-private partnerships.

Expected impact: Bridging funding gaps between tourism stakeholders in strong and less developed areas; lower administrative barriers and less "bureaucratic exclusion"; triggering of private investments and public-private partnerships.

Related challenges: 5

10. Establishment of a European Observatory on impacts of tourism and climate change on cultural heritage and the environment.

Establishing a European Observatory dedicated to monitoring tourism impacts on CH and the environment, and climate change impacts on CH could address evidence-gaps and accelerate adaptive responses at European and regional levels. Currently, there is no single, centralized European Observatory specifically dedicated to this aim. The state-of-the-art is represented by efforts such as the European Environment Agency/EEA Climate-ADAPT

platform[42] (information and tools on climate adaptation, strategies, risk assessments; section on CH, but no relation with tourism impacts), the international Observatory for Cultural Heritage (IOCH)[43] established in 2016 by the Italian Academy in collaboration with Columbia University / USA (focus on protection, conservation, and use of CH; currently seems inactive); and related efforts from EU-funded projects[44] such ProteCHt2save, HERACLES (monitoring systems to assess and protect CH from climate change, GIS and DSS tools, manuals); as well as STORM[45] (decision making tools to safeguard CH from climate change and natural hazards) and Hyperion[46] (climate change & geo-hazards resilience assessment platform for CH sites).

The new specialised EU Observatory could act as central point of reference, inventory (data, protocols, case studies, measures, etc.), and risk assessment map for CH under climate and tourism pressures; offering a horizontal data-driven governance layer for systemic threats triggered by such pressures. Such an EU Observatory could also operationalise Horizon Europe Cluster-2 ("Culture, Creativity & Inclusive Society") by converting academic outputs from funded projects into actionable data sets, protocols, tools, best practices.

Expected impact: addressing the evidence deficit for data and standardized metrics to quantify climate-tourism pressures on CH sites; availability of auditable metrics for UN SDG 11.4 (heritage safeguarding) and SDG 13 (climate action); enable policymaking evidence-based accelerated adaptive responses at European and regional levels.

Related challenges: 6, 7

11. Targeted policy measures to protect cultural heritage from looting-degradation-climate change.

There are compounding and interrelated threats to CH which call for relevant integrated policy measures: looting-climate nexus (climate pressures could increase degradation, while climate-induced site abandonment could increase looting in vulnerable regions), tourism-CH degradation cycle (accelerated physical wear from overcrowding – e.g. Venice), climate multipliers (especially for CH in coastal areas or underwater where flooding or irreversible erosion is an increasing risk). Targeted policy measures need to address such threats considering the support for deployment of advanced monitoring technologies in the CH field (e.g. smart cameras and AI-powered machine vision, automated DSS systems for alerting and for response actions, deployment of drones and AUVs for automated assessment of CH sites' degradation status). The costs for deployment-operation-maintenance of these technologies could be covered by EU funds coupled with regional development funds; while a small percentage of tourism growth revenues in an area with CH sites could be devoted to this purpose.

Finally, the European Collaborative Cloud for Cultural Heritage[47] (ECCCH) could paly a pivotal role in this, providing the cloud infrastructure with European CH related datasets, as well as tools for CH sites digitization and monitoring. Among these tools, the Digital Twins for CH sites could be leveraged for reflecting the current status (e.g. degradation, preservation, conservation, safeguarding issues) of CH sites' monitoring.

[42] Climate-ADAPT platform by EEA: https://climate-adapt.eea.europa.eu/en

[43] Italian Academy IOCH: https://italianacademy.columbia.edu/content/international-observatory-cultural-heritage

[44] https://climate-adapt.eea.europa.eu/en/data-and-downloads/?size=n_10_n&filters%5B0%5D%5Bfield%5D=cca_adaptation_sectors.keyword&filters%5B0%5D%5Btype%5D=any&filters%5B0%5D%5Bvalues%5D%5B0%5D=Cultural%20heritage&filters%5B1%5D%5Bfield%5D=language&filters%5B1%5D%5Btype%5D=any&filters%5B1%5D%5Bvalues%5D%5B0%5D=en&filters%5B2%5D%5Bfield%5D=objectProvides&filters%5B2%5D%5Btype%5D=any&filters%5B2%5D%5Bvalues%5D%5B0%5D=Research%20and%20knowledge%20project&sort-field=issued.date&sort-direction=desc

[45] https://www.heritageresearch-hub.eu/project/storm/

[46] https://www.hyperion-project.eu/

[47] ECCCH: https://www.echoes-eccch.eu/objectives/

Expected impact: targeted measures integrating security (looting prevention), sustainability (monitoring of degradation status), and climate resilience (monitoring and alerting | triggering counter-measures) for multifaceted protection of CH sites against looting, degradation and climate pressures.

Related challenges: 7, 6

The following table provides a tabular synopsis of the above elaborated argumentation, making the association between the policy recommendations, their expected impacts, and the related challenges (from previous chapter – pls. see above):

Table 2: Policy recommendations – expected impacts- related challenges.

Policy Recommendations	Main Expected Impact	Related Challenges
Prioritization of diversification of rural economies with tourism among the core drivers.	More resilient rural economies, with tourism as a catalyst for strengthening cross-sectoral economic activities.	Reliance on traditional productive sectors.
Targeted policy measures increasing demographic resilience of rural areas.	Regeneration of local communities in rural areas, fighting of brain-drain, capacity building of skilled workforce.	Reliance on traditional productive sectors. Funding complexity-absence of flexible funding instruments & support schemes.
Integrated tourism policies fostering multi-level governance stimulating horizontal & vertical cooperation.	Leverage factor for multisectoral inter-regional and resilient growth, with spill-over effects for the EU economy.	Policy fragmentation hinders value chain innovation in tourism.
Bottom-up approaches with local stakeholders' participation in formulating tourism policies.	Community engagement in policy design would make policy instruments fit-for-purpose, incorporating the voice of affected stakeholders.	Policy fragmentation hinders value chain innovation in tourism. Lack of strategic integration of tourism into regional / sectoral development plans.
Repositioning tourism as a strategic asset for regional innovation.	Reinforcement of tourism as a driving force for interregional economy; emergence of new sustainable cross-border and cross-sectorial value-chains; increase of value-adding prospects for the economy.	Lack of strategic integration of tourism into regional / sectoral development plans.
Embedding of environmental, cultural preservation and CE principles in tourism strategies.	Tourism sector respecting the natural capital, the cultural heritage and the local identities; actively contributing to achievement of the EU GD goals.	Policy fragmentation hinders value chain innovation in tourism. Lack of strategic integration of tourism into regional / sectoral development plans.
Fostering connectivity of urban clusters with rural/remote cells leveraging ERDF and Cohesion Funds.	Sustainable balanced growth between urban clusters and rural cells. Reduced development disparities of EU urban-rural regions.	Policy fragmentation hinders value chain innovation in tourism. Funding complexity-absence of flex funding instruments & support schemes.

Better integration of rural/remote areas into digital transition policies.	Increased digital maturity and digital capacitation of tourism workforce in rural/remote areas.	Low digital maturity & skilled workforce in rural & remote areas.
Simplified access to funding for tourism stakeholders in rural/remote areas.	Bridging funding gaps between tourism stakeholders in strong & less developed areas; lower administrative barriers and less "bureaucratic exclusion"; triggering of private investments and public-private partnerships.	Funding complexity - absence of flexible funding instruments & support schemes.
Establishment of a European Observatory on impacts of tourism and climate change on cultural heritage and the environment.	Addressing evidence deficit for data & metrics to quantify climate-tourism pressures on CH sites. Availability of auditable metrics for UN SDGs 11.4 | 13 (CH safeguarding, climate action); enable policy adaptive-responses at European and regional levels.	Tourism growth to respect environment, CH & cultural identity of rural/remote areas. Need to protect CH assets in tourism areas from looting-degradation-climate impacts.
Targeted policy measures to protect cultural heritage from looting-degradation-climate change.	Enable targeted measures integrating security (looting), sustainability (degradation monitoring), and climate resilience (monitoring-alerting-counter-measures) for CH sites protection.	Need to protect CH assets in tourism areas from looting-degradation-climate impacts. Tourism growth to respect environment, CH & cultural identity of rural/remote areas.

6. Conclusions

TOURAL highlights the important role of sustainable tourism for a balanced resilient and diversified growth in rural and remote areas of the Adriatic-Ionian and Black Sea Basin regions.

The present policy brief has analysed the related policy landscape and the TOURAL policy pathways deliverable (D2.2) and identified systemic challenges requiring further policy support to trigger a transformative progress. For the areas in focus, these challenges include economic over-reliance on traditional sectors, linking tourism with other productive and cultural domains, digital and skills disparities, funding complexities, and environmental-cultural vulnerabilities. Some key insights, include:

- **Economic diversification** is important for the resilience of rural/remote areas, where the tourism could be pivotal for cross-sectoral and cross-border value chains and reduced vulnerability to external disturbances.
- **Integrated policymaking** could bridge geographic and sectoral silos, fostering macro-regional cooperation to unlock synergies between tourism, culture and cultural heritage, and other innovation ecosystems.
- **Digital and green transitions** require targeted infrastructure investments and skills development to close urban-rural divides while aligning tourism growth with green EU initiatives (e.g. Green Deal).
- **Simplification of funding instruments** is important for rural tourism stakeholders to reduce their "administrative exclusion", especially when coupled with support-schemes and risk-sharing instruments to incentivise private investments and PPPs.
- **Protection of Cultural Heritage assets in tourism areas (**and beyond) requires proactive measures against looting, degradation, and climate impacts, supported by data-driven monitoring frameworks like the proposed European Observatory.

The provided recommendations for policy measures could be considered as an actionable blueprint for policymakers and stakeholders involved in rural tourism. The recommendations range from simplified funding access and demographic resilience, fostering of macro-regional and cross-sectorial cooperation along with improved urban-rural connectivity, rural integration into digital transition policies, embedding of environmental, cultural preservation and CE principles in tourism strategies; up to the protection of CH from over-tourism, from looting, from degradation and from climate pressures.

A potential implementation of these recommendations could not only enhance the competitiveness of rural tourism but also advance the EU's broader goals of territorial cohesion, climate resilience, and cultural preservation.

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