

## TOURISM AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF THE HISTORIC AREA OF ATHENS

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**Minas Angelidis**

*Professor Emeritus, National Technical University of Athens*

[angelimi763@gmail.com](mailto:angelimi763@gmail.com)

### **Abstract**

*Tourism has undoubtedly contributed significantly to the economic development and cultural prominence of many historic cities over the last century. But does it contribute today to their sustainable development? This question is of relatively greater importance for Greece, which has a very large number of historic cities with high cultural value. Understandably, this discussion is even more important in the case of Athens. The latter also welcomes very large numbers of tourists and contains a very high number of individual historic sites, which must be protected as a priority.*

*The paper: (a) discusses, using Athens as an example, the question posed. In particular examines the economic - social - environmental "capacity" of tourist historic zones of cities and draws relevant conclusions, (b) formulates more general proposals for the sustainable spatial planning of tourism in historic zones of cities as well as more specific proposals for the historic zones of Greece and Athens in particular.*

**Keywords:** *Overtourism, sustainable development, historic cities, Athens, European Union*

## **1. Modern challenges of tourism development of historic cities in terms of sustainability – “Overtourism”**

### **1.1 Worldwide**

In recent decades, world tourism has grown at an accelerating rate, which has had considerable impacts on the economy, the society and the environment of the expanding tourist areas of cities. These impacts have been more significant in the tourist areas of cities and even more pronounced in the **historic zones of several cities**. Indicatively, see the example of Venice (Figure 1). In 2021, the Italian coastal region of Venice had the highest number of overnight stays in tourist accommodation (27.1 million).

In the last two years, the increase in tourist flows has been clearly more pronounced, since tourist movements that had been suspended during the period of restrictions due to covid were added. See, among others, in: Eurostat 2024.

The fact that the above pressures seem to exceed any “capacity limits” of the reception areas has often been explained in the last two years in terms of «**overtourism**» (overtourism in English, surtourisme in French).

In particular, the use of the term “overtourism” raises the questions of:

(a) whether there are “upper limits” to the development of tourism in the area or  
(b) whether there is some form of «**capacity**» or «**carrying capacity**» to the development of tourism in the area - in general and in particular in the historic cities that interest us here.

In our opinion, several analyses of “overtourism”, as exceeding the “tourist capacity” of reception areas, have been made a few decades ago. That is, we do not now have a completely new discussion.



Photo1:Overtourism in Venice - Snapshot (2024)  
Photo: Stefano Mazzola/Getty Images

At that time -as we will explain in more detail below-, the relevant analyses were not narrowly focused on tourist demand as an explanatory factor of «overtourism», as is largely the case today. On the contrary, the explanation of "overtourism" seemed to be related to multi-sectoral, multi-level, **holistic analyses** of the impacts of tourism development on host zones (in coastal areas, in urban zones, in entire cities and regions, in entire countries) - see in detail, among others, in Angelidis 1994, Angelidis 2000, Angelidis - Economou 2008.

It is also interesting to note that while in the past a type of «hypertourism» appeared mainly in coastal and island zones, for a few years now and especially last year and this year (2024), **we also have «hypertourism» in touristic historical zones of cities or even entire cities**, as we have already mentioned.

Our basic assumption, however, is that in order to be able to approach **today** and in the future this to a certain extent new model of tourism («hypertourism» / tourism that excessively pressures tourist areas) in historical cities, with the sustainable development of the latter, it is necessary to comment holistically on the development of tourism in the latter.

That is, we must take into account the impacts of tourism on the **economy, society, environment and culture** (and not only) of the host areas, instead of limiting ourselves to the analysis of the role of brand-names in attracting tourists to the historic centers of cities and more generally to the ways of attracting additional ... and additional tourists to them ... with the result that tourists and even natives no longer "fit" in these historic centers ...

We clarify, in addition, that overtourism is not only associated with an "excessive" number of tourists in relation to the population (per inhabitant, etc.) and the society of the host areas as well as their natural resources, infrastructure and cultural heritage, but *also brings about a set of negative consequences on the local and regional economy, society and environment.*

At a first level, this intensification of tourism uses, **increasing the pressures on the natural and cultural resources of historical centers, leads to the degradation of their**

quality, which, however, constitutes the main basis for the development of tourism activity.

We clarify that the above are not related to views that support, usually generally, vaguely and "voluntary", the restriction of tourism - culture activities.

Therefore, both for the maintenance of satisfactory environmental quality in the historical areas of Greek cities and for their further tourist development, the implementation of appropriate forms of their management is required - in particular, effective ways of implementing specific spatial policies.

### *1.2. Hypertourism and sustainable development in Greece and Athens*

#### **In Greece**

Here we will discuss the issues related to «hypertourism» and sustainable development in Greece based on the broader/holistic approach to tourism development – which we presented in the previous sections.

In general, overall tourism development and the more specific model of «hypertourism development» constitute a major challenge for Greece – for many reasons, the first of which is that the country derives a very large part of its GDP -25 to 30 percent- from tourism activities (with this number increasing to 90 percent on the island of Santorini) (Norman 2024). Specifically, regarding GDP, as an important indicator of the economic aspect of tourism development: According to a study by the National Bank of Greece (NBG), Greek tourism is projected to have revenues of 22 billion euros in 2024 (see in the newspaper «VIMA Tis KYRIAKIS» -in Greek- of June 7, 2024).

The increased GDP is associated with an increased number of arrivals and overnight stays in the country. The number of visitors to Greece has increased particularly sharply: by 120% between 2019 and 2023. In 2023, approximately 33 million tourists came to Greece, while it is predicted to reach 35 million in 2024 (record of arrivals).

The ratio of the number of tourists to the natives / residents of the country -as an indicator of the deterioration of the population's life conditions and the «excessive» change of the socio-historical physiognomy of the territory- reached 3 to 1 in Greece (3 tourists per inhabitant).

The first international ““**Overtourism Index**”, which analyses 70 of the world’s most popular holiday destinations, seeks to assess their level of exposure to visitors” (Money-tourism 2024). The index was created by management consultancy Roland Berger, based on the travel platform Evaneos. See also: (Fes 2024) and (Roland Berger and Evaneos 2024).

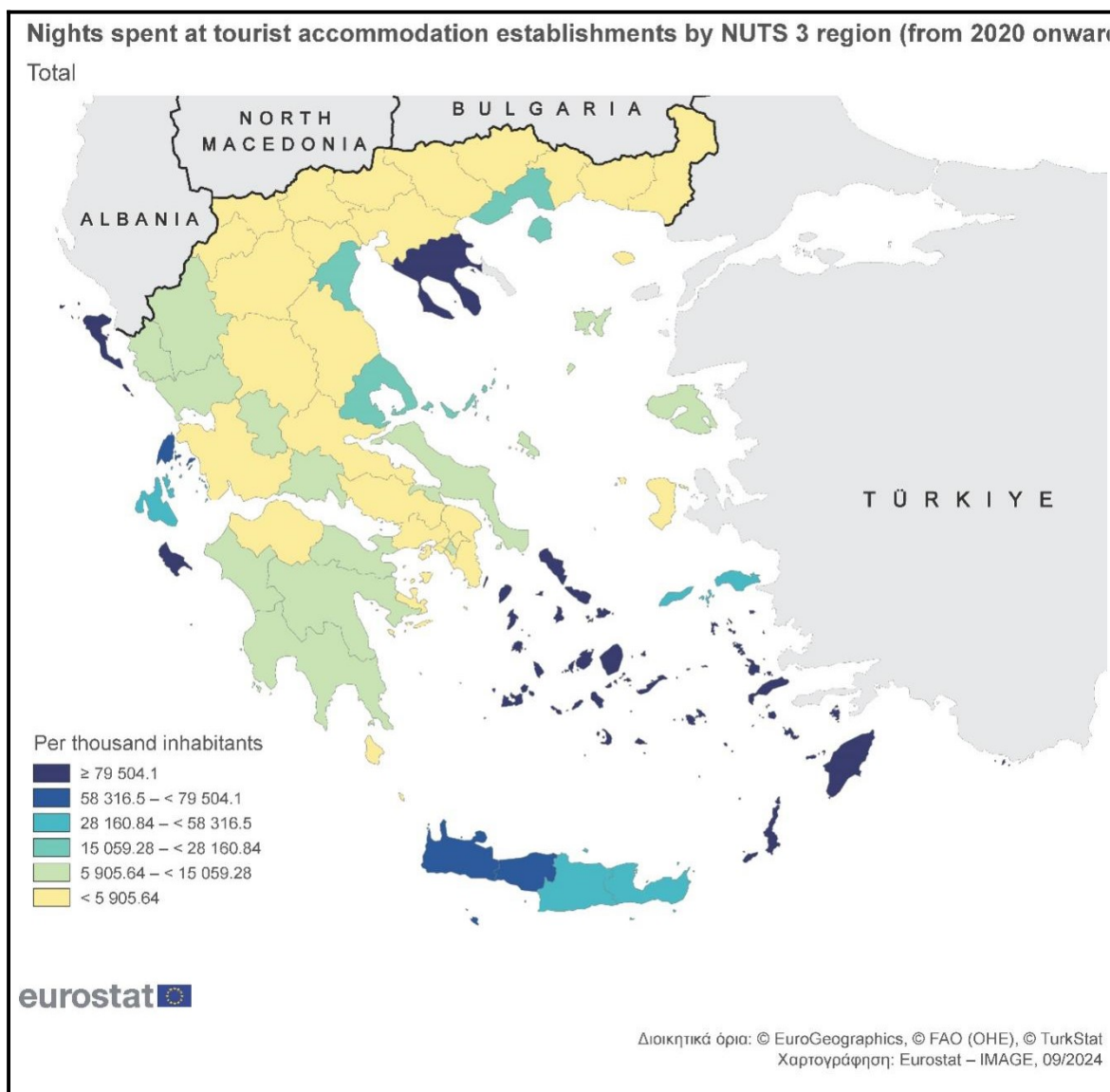
To measure the degree of exposure to overtourism, each destination is scored from 1 to 5 based on four **objective criteria: the number of international tourists per inhabitant, the number of international tourists per square kilometre, seasonality and the maturity of the host country in terms of sustainability**. This last evaluation criterion considers factors such as the social impact of tourism activity, the state of reception infrastructure or the development of transport.

Greece is among the four countries most affected by overtourism. The remaining three are Cyprus, Mauritius and Croatia.

Furthermore, destinations that experience particularly high flows during the summer in a large part of their territory include Spain, Italy, Portugal and France.

It is of great importance that it has been documented that Greece has a very high value of the (above-mentioned) overtourism index compared to other countries. Consequently, an appropriate strategy should be formulated in Greece and measures should be taken to limit overtourism.

We point out here that in Greece there is an overconcentration of tourism in a few areas: Attica, Crete, Dodecanese, Corfu, Cyclades, etc. (Angelidis 2000). See Map 1 for the number of overnight stays per thousand inhabitants in the regional units of Greece in 2020.



Map 1: Overnight stays per thousand inhabitants in the regional units of Greece in 2020.

Data source: Eurostat Processing; Minas Angelidis, using appropriate Eurostat tools

In more detail, the spatial concentration corresponding to the value of the above index is much higher *in certain small zones*, such as in particular in certain coastal areas but also in areas of historical centers. Conversely, however, the value of the index is currently well below the “capacity limit” in many “inland” areas (far from the coasts and historical cities), often very attractive for tourism development.

In the tourist areas of many *Greek historical centers*, similar to what happened in the world (see above), the phenomena of “overtourism” that had appeared in a comparatively slighter form before the covid period, intensified very significantly last year and this year (2024), largely due to the pressure relief for tourist travel after the end of the covid restrictions period.

More specific pressures and tensions due to overtourism today (2024) in general in Greece and in particular in historical cities concern:

- *Infrastructure (transportation, parking, health services ...)*,
- *Housing* - in particular: increase in rents for natives due to excessive expansion of the Airbnb sector (See, among other, in: Balabanidis D., Papatzani E., Pepas D. 2021) as well as
- *Several more specific environmental issues - quality of life issues. The latter includes to a certain extent the change in land use* - at the expense of green and natural spaces as well as areas with traditional buildings.

For several decades in Greece, the greatest pressure has been exerted on the thin, but of great environmental importance, zone between the land area and the sea, which constitutes the extreme part of the wider coastal zones towards the sea.

In recent years, the very intense expansion of Airbnb accommodation in urban areas, especially in historical zones of the cities, has created *a great deal of pressure on the environment of historical zones* - beyond its contribution to the extreme increase in rents in these areas.

### **In Athens**

Tourism developed comparatively earlier (as early as the 1950s) in Athens than in other regions of Greece due to the existence of globally significant historical zones in the Capital.

Subsequently, the “front” of intense tourist development shifted towards the coastal zones and the islands, while in the last decade (and a little before) the arrival of tourists to Athens increased significantly. Despite any (relatively limited) decentralization of tourist development at the levels of the Attica Basin and the Attica Region, the main part of the tourist demand is directed to some, well-known to foreigners but relatively small areas of ancient cultural heritage as well as heritage of more recent times - indicatively: Plaka, Monastiraki, Thisio, Keramikos. These zones were expanded with the implementation of some infrastructures - e.g. “archaeological walk of Athens”, but not on a large scale, nor is it easy to quickly expand on a large scale.

Therefore, *the impressive increase in the number of tourists -with the “addition” of many Airbnb accommodations-* led to “overtourism” in several places. Of course, as is the case in historical cities abroad, at emblematic spots such as the Acropolis, the numbers of visitors “reach the ceiling”, as we will see later.

We refer here to a relevant article in the magazine “reporter” (Norman 2024): “The authorities in Athens have already expressed concerns about this ... exponential increase in tourist numbers, as the crowds have become uncontrollable. In order to stop the attack and bring some control to Athens, last year the maximum number of tourists who could visit the Acropolis was set at 20,000 per day.”

Athens Mayor Haris Doukas told Fortune magazine a few months ago: “...The challenge of too many visitors and the impact it has on local communities and the city itself means that tourism in its current form is not sustainable.” “Every visitor brings €0.40 to the city, and we haven’t seen that money yet,” the mayor told Euronews. “We need to find a way to make tourism sustainable.”

## **2. Tourism/hypertourism, culture and cities in the context of the UN Sustainable Development Goals**

Let’s move on to a **second approach** to the relationship between tourism and sustainable development of historic cities: how this relationship is analyzed and evaluated within the framework of the sustainable development strategy in general and the UN's set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in particular.

- We need to emphasize from the beginning that while the UN SDGs are very useful both for assessing the "degree" of sustainable development of tourist historic cities and for formulating intervention policies in the direction of sustainable development, *they are often characterized by fragmentation and lack of interconnection with strategic priorities of sustainable development.*

In other words, the "literal" use of the SDGs, as well as corresponding indicators, may, for example, distort the image of a "waiters" area (ie, low -level growth and employment tourism and dependent on other areas) in a picture of one area that grows quickly and satisfactorily.

What is needed is to determine the *drivers of change* of the tourist model in historical cities and to find the corresponding weaknesses, so that we can then propose a "reverse model" of really sustainable development of historical cities.

- Regarding the UN SDGs, we will start with which SDGs that are most closely linked to tourism, culture and cities (2.1) and then delve deeper into Goal 8.9 - Promote healthy and sustainable tourism (2.2) and 12.B - Tools for monitoring the impact of sustainable development on sustainable tourism (2.3).

### **2.1. The SDGs related to tourism**

Tourism-related goals have been included in the SDGs:

- Goal 8 - *sustainable and inclusive economic growth*
- Goal 12 - *sustainable consumption and production (SCP) and*
- Goal 14 - *sustainable use of oceans and marine resources*, respectively.

We considered it appropriate to deal more here with the proposals for tourism in Goals 8 and 12 (without underestimating those related to Goal 14) (UN / Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2024).

It is useful to mention here that the *World Tourism Organization* (WHO) defines sustainable tourism as "tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities" (UN / Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2024).

We point out that this definition is to a significant extent global (holistic) because it refers, in addition to the economic, to the social and environmental impacts of tourism.

Finally, the set of SDGs for tourism are strongly related to SDG 11 - sustainable cities and communities (see discussion of this SDG, among other, in: Stefanou I. - Mitoula R. 2024).

### **2.2. Goal 8.9 - Promote beneficial and sustainable tourism**

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development *includes target 8.9: Promote Beneficial and Sustainable Tourism.*

Specifically, SDG 8.9 aims to "by 2030, design and implement policies to promote sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products"<sup>1</sup>.

It is noted that ICCROM<sup>2</sup> has developed a series of indicators that are linked to the achievement of target 8.9 - see ICCROM 2019.

### **2.3. SDG 12.b on tools for monitoring the impact of sustainable development on sustainable tourism**

The importance of sustainable tourism is also highlighted in SDG 12.b, which aims to develop and use tools to monitor the impact of sustainable development on sustainable tourism, which *creates jobs and promotes local culture and products.*

It is interesting that an appropriate (according to those responsible for the SDGs) evaluation *indicator 12.b.1* has already been created: "Implementation of standardized

accounting tools to monitor the economic and environmental aspects of tourism sustainability.”

### 3. Tourism and cultural heritage in the EU and its cities - strategy and policies

The EU institutions (bodies) have formulated strategies and implemented actions and interventions for both tourism and cultural heritage and cities – which are of most (but not exclusively) interest to us here. All these strategies and actions converge, as we will see, in promoting the most “basic” strategies of the Union (“green”, “digital”, etc.).

Of course, the strategies and actions for tourism - culture, etc. influence the actions and interventions implemented in the historical cities of Greece (with Athens at the forefront here), but without fully determining them (see, among others, Angelidis 2004).

It is not possible to expand here more to the spatial impact of strategic tourism -culture policy guidelines in Greece. We refer, inter alia, to: (Lampropoulos V., Panagiotopoulou M, Stratigea A. 2021).

#### 3.1 Strategic framework for tourism

The EU institutions have been developing strategic frameworks for tourism for several years. More recently, the European Council (in 2022) adopted the “**European Agenda for Tourism 2030**” (Council of the European Union 2022) - which, according to the Commission, includes “the commitment of EU countries to make tourism *greener, more digital and resilient*”.

As stated in the Council of the European Union 2022, the agenda includes a programme of actions to be taken by EU countries, the Commission and the tourism ecosystem. “... The agenda covers five priority areas: the green transition, the digital transition, resilience and inclusion, skills and support, and the enabling policy framework and governance”. It is obvious, as a declaration of intentions in principle, of course, that the agenda is called upon to contribute to the implementation of the major current EU policies: “Green Deal”, “Digital Europe”, etc. “Within the framework of each priority, various actions are defined, such as *the differentiation of tourist services between seasons and locations, the reduction of the environmental footprint and the support of accessibility in tourism...*”.

#### 3.2 Strategic framework for EU cultural policy

For cultural policy, the EU has also formulated appropriate strategic frameworks over time. Following the 2007 European Agenda for Culture, the European Commission adopted the **new European Agenda for Culture in 2018** (European Commission 2018), in order to consider recent developments in the cultural sector.

The new agenda and accompanying documents constitute the framework for cooperation in the cultural sector at EU level. They focus on the positive contribution of culture to Europe’s society, economy and international relations. Member States define the main themes and working methods for political cooperation in the field of culture through work programmes for culture, which are adopted by the Council of the European Union. The new agenda consists of *three strategic areas, with specific objectives corresponding to the social, economic and external dimensions*.

Regarding **cultural heritage** in particular, the European Commission proposed the *first European Framework of Action for Cultural Heritage* in December 2018. The *EU policy for cultural heritage* is continuously adapted, to this day, with relevant documents, actions, etc. See, among others, in: EU / European Commission 2024.

### **3.3 Culture and heritage in EU cities and regions**

In this paper we are particularly interested in the Community approach to cultural heritage in European cities and regions. This approach includes the following particular aspects.

#### **Cultural heritage in regional policy**

The first aspect is the place of cultural heritage in EU regional policy. According to EC 2020, "cultural heritage is a key element of the image and identity of EU regions and cities. Cultural tourism accounts for 40% of all tourism activities in Europe."

After all, "... Cultural heritage plays a key role in achieving sustainable ... development and can contribute to the revitalisation of cities and regions".

"European Union (EU) works with cities and regions to provide financial support to culture, raise awareness of the potential of culture and cultural heritage and develop integrated strategies through various instruments" (ibid.).

As regards actions and interventions to support cultural heritage provided by the ERDF (European Regional Development Fund) to cities and regions, *the aim is to "protect, develop and promote cultural goods at local level"* (ibid.). See examples of relevant cultural heritage projects on the European Regional Development Fund website.

#### **EU territorial agendas**

We include here the following agendas for territorial (spatial and urban) EU issues: *Urban Agenda for the EU* (EC / European Commission 2017), *Territorial Agenda 2030* (Ministers for Spatial Planning – EU 2020) and *New Leipzig Charter* (Ministers on Urban Matters - EU.2020).

The EU Urban Agenda (EC/European Commission 2017), which has developed a strategy and objectives for urban actions in the EU, converges substantially with the new partnership launched by EU Member States in 2018 on culture and cultural heritage (New European Agenda for Culture). Basically, it promotes cooperation between cities, Member States, the European Commission and other stakeholders as part of the EU's Urban Agenda. It should be noted here that the EU Urban Agenda aims to improve the formulation and implementation of EU policies on urban issues. In the above strategies and actions, primary importance is attached to *highlighting the role of cultural heritage in sustainable tourism*.

Spatial aspects of cultural heritage (including historic cities) are presented in both the Territorial Agenda 2030 (Ministers for Spatial Planning EU 2020) and the New Leipzig Charter (Ministers on Urban Matters EU 2020). We mention here a very characteristic assessment of the importance of cultural heritage, made in the New Leipzig Charter (2020): "Most cities are unique, historically developed centres of outstanding cultural value that shape Europe's urban heritage and the identity of its citizens. Thus, culture is at the heart of any sustainable urban development, including the preservation and development of built and other cultural heritage..."

### **3.4. The SDGs of EU policies and the UN SDGs – Comparison and notes on SDG implementation**

As stated in the relevant documents, the SDGs of EU policies and the UN SDGs on tourism, culture, cities and especially historic cities are almost identical. The EU has adopted the UN SDGs in their entirety. It has only specialized certain sub-chapters of the Goals.

With this in mind, reports are also being made on the implementation of the SDGs in Member States - including Greece.

But beyond the gaps and ambiguities contained in the SDGs and indicators assessing their implementation, the fact that their implementation is not mandatory significantly limits their contribution to a sustainable development path for cities, etc. and especially the historical centers - which are of particular interest to us here.

#### 4. Conclusions

As we have seen, sustainable development of historic city areas worldwide, but also in Greece and Athens (which was examined as an example) can only be examined, today and in the medium term, in relation to the "hypertourism" model in countries and smaller tourist accommodation zones.

In Greece, it was found that there are pressures of "over-tourism" comparatively intense, in several coastal zones as well as in historical city zones. But the fact that tourism corresponds to a large proportion of its economy restricts measures to stop over-tourism.

In the historic city of Athens (including many individual historical zones) we have found the existence of "overtourism" -which was accelerated by the proliferation of the use of houses as Airbnb accommodation. This had strong negative consequences on increasing rental prices for natives, the serious additional burden on the city's infrastructure and the relative limitation of the use of free spaces by residents.

At emblematic spots, such as the Acropolis, the number of visitors has already set to a upper limit, but this does not substantially contribute to the overturning over-tourism in the historic area of the city.

The UN SDGs, as well as the EU's relevant strategies and actions on tourism, cultural heritage and historical cities are positive, in the sense that they can contribute to the overseeing over-tourism in the context of adapting the overall (holistic, global) model. Development of tourism in historical cities. However, the application of these strategies and actions in several areas of the EU, in Greece and the historic city of Athens is well under the demands.

#### 5. Proposals

In order to stop "overtourism" in general, but also in historic cities in particular, a comprehensive (multi-sectoral, multi-factorial) readjustment of tourism development is required, first of all, with economic, social, environmental and cultural priorities that are related to the UN (and EU) SDGs but also linked to the specific characteristics of sustainable development of each country.

In this direction, appropriate policies -strategies and actions- should be formulated for individual readjustments of tourism territorial development.

*The role of sustainable spatial planning of tourism in historic city zones* should be important here.

Similar proposals need to be implemented in the total of Greece, in the total of Athens and in the more specific zones that face greater pressure from "overtourism": certain coastal zones, certain zones of historic cities, etc.

Specifically for the sustainable development and promotion of the cultural heritage of the historic city of Athens:

- The protection of the city's individual historical areas, such as Plaka, Monastiraki and Keramikos, must be a priority in the planning of the city's tourism product.

- Critical infrastructures of the city need to be improved. This includes both transport and public services, such as health services and waste management. These infrastructures must be sufficient for visitors and permanent residents, so as to maintain a balance between tourism and the local community.

- The implementation of appropriate regulations for Airbnb accommodation is urgently needed: reduction of the total permitted capacity and adjustment of the conditions of their establishment and operation in order to limit or eliminate their negative impacts on the housing sector (rents, etc.) of the city's residents.

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