

TOURISM IN TIME OF CRISIS: SPECIALIZATION, SPATIAL DIVERSIFICATION AND POTENTIAL TO GROWTH ACROSS EUROPEAN REGIONS

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*Tourism is a pivotal economic sector with major social impact on local
communities and a development pillar for both advanced and emerging countries.*

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Tourism development has a valuable impact on employment and output, contributing to post-crisis economic recovery. Under the hypothesis that tourism development is a complex phenomenon shaped by economic growth and negatively influenced by the most recent financial crisis, this study proposes a comprehensive analysis of the spatial distribution of tourism activities across European countries and regions during recession time (2008-2014). Changes in the location quotient of tourism jobs were computed to evaluate the importance of this sector across European regions, providing an informative base for policies enhancing tourism competitiveness. The 2007 recession resulted a spatially-heterogeneous impact on tourism specialization across European regions, maintaining a strong (and sometimes declining) base in southern Europe, promoting tourism diversification with sparse employment growth in western and central Europe and strengthening cultural and natural attraction poles in northern Europe.

Keywords: *Tourism, development, employment, financial crisis, sustainability*

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a fundamental and dynamic pillar of the global economy (Cunha, 2013). Being one of the most important economic sectors at the global scale, tourism relevance has been widely recognized at the European level (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2014), since Europe is considered the most popular tourism destination in the world (World Tourism Organization, 2012) and tourism is a basic developmental factor in the European economy. Moreover, apart from the monetary dimension of this economic activity, tourism has a pivotal social impact (Deery et al., 2012). As a result, tourism may act as a driver for local development especially in regions specialized in tourism and with natural and cultural endowments, such as in the northern Mediterranean region (Bramwell, 2003). Public and private infrastructures aimed at tourism promotion, could contribute to local

development even in economically-disadvantaged regions (Khadaroo and Seetanah, 2007).

Tourism exerts relevant impacts on regional employment, representing a basic activity that positively contribute to the reduction of short-term unemployment (Ahler, 2007) and the progressive recovery of regional systems after a period of prolonged crisis (Tribe, 2016). The contribution of tourism in local development and reduction of employment divides among regions has been widely recognized in Europe (e.g. Balaguer and Cantavella-Jordà, 2002). Results from Paci and Marrocu (2014) demonstrate that regional growth is positively affected by domestic and international tourism. According to a recent policy analysis (European Commission, 2010), the contribution of tourism in European gross domestic product and employment is respectively 10% and 12%, indicating tourism as a labor-intensive economic activity (Kusluvan, 2003). Empirical results from earlier studies demonstrate the joint action of tourism in economic development and social cohesion. Tourism contributes significantly to the improvement of the standard of living in these countries and acts as a factor of convergence (Bramwell, 2003). At the same time, the expansion of the European Union in the 2000s has increased diversity of tourism destinations and specialization of hospitality products, forcing regional and local systems to adapt to rapid societal changes. Relevant impacts of the most recent crisis have been also reported for some regional systems, especially in southern Europe (Dritsakis, 2004). As a result, persisting disparities in the expansion of tourism activities have been observed widely across European macro-areas (Paulo, 2000).

However, despite the important socioeconomic impact of tourism, until recently this economic sector did not constitute a priority for common policies at the European level. Actions promoted by European Community were basically restricted to the primary and secondary sectors with a major emphasis to

competitiveness in the industrial sector and in specific tertiary sectors (Villanueva-Cuevas, 2011). An indirect reference to tourism has been made in the Treaty of Rome (1957), one of the most relevant acts of the European Community. As a result, tourism has been regarded as a minor economic activity and the interpretative framework regarding tourism development at the European level has remained relatively unchanged for over 20 years up to the late 1970s. While interconnections between tourism and broader social and economic structures came into the fore during the 1980s (Lane, 2012), stronger efforts were required since the 1990s to support appropriate policies for hospitality promotion and tourism consolidation (Hall et al., 2006). The adoption of a new legal framework concerning tourism in the Treaty of Lisbon has been suggested with the aim to consolidate an increasing network of attractive tourism destinations in Europe (Villanueva-Cuevas, 2011), emphasizing at the same time the importance of this economic sector for development of rural and coastal areas, especially in southern and eastern Europe (Hall, 2008). Based on the Treaty of Lisbon, the need to better coordinate tourism policies for European countries and the associated funding is recognized. Collaboration of European Union with the European Council, the European Parliament and the Committee of Regions has been progressively improved with the aim to improve European tourism competitiveness (Commission of the European Communities, 2001).

Tourism activities face challenges with implicit opportunities and weaknesses (World Tourism Organization, 2015). On the one hand, tourism should consider social challenges that influence the regional and local demand of hospitality products (Nelson, 2013). On the other hand, tourism should face the restrictions that are imposed by spatial disparities in tourism assets and amenities, the inherent territorial characteristics and the socioeconomic framework. A special attention has been also devoted to the environmental consequences of the tourism industry (Gössling, 2002), proposing interpretative frameworks and empirical findings

to inform national and regional strategies for sustainable local development.

While representing one of the most complex economic productions that depend on volatile or dynamic conditions of supply and demand, the prevailing types of tourism are primarily based on natural and cultural amenities concentrated in coastal and mountainous areas as well as in cities (Teuscher and Lang, 1982). Sports, religious, thermal, gastronomic and cultural aspects also contribute to shape tourism demand and supply (Nelson, 2013). In this way, tourists choose hospitality products according to supplied services and the local specialization grounded on a specific amenity. As a result, structural factors that affect supply and demand of tourism product should be addressed at the required spatio-temporal scale (Wanhill and Buhalis, 1999). In addition, the behavior of tourists is particularly volatile and is subjected to psychological and social influences, personal peculiarities and short-term economic and demographic factors (Candela and Figini, 2012).

Even though tourism constitutes one of the most basic economic activities in Europe, serious concerns have been expressed regarding quality, efficiency, competitiveness and sustainability of the tourism sector at the continental scale (European Travel Commission, 2012). Tourism in Europe is currently experiencing an uncertain period of change following societal and economic transformations, under the spectrum of current financial and economic crisis that has affected European countries since 2007. Evidences have been reported demonstrating that the 2007 crisis has exerted a relevant influence on the demand of tourism products (World Tourism Organization and International Labor Organization, 2013). Financial and social crisis have been intimately linked with economic stagnation, affecting tourists' preferences worldwide. Empirical findings indicate that tourists' cutback decisions on tourism expenditure during an economic crisis depend on climate conditions of the place of origin, gross domestic product level and

growth (Eugenio-Martin and Campos-Soria, 2014). As a result, tourists choose less far destinations, and, at the same time, they have limited duration and overall cost of their stay (European Parliament, 2008). With global recession, the European tourism industry has also faced important challenges because of the increased role of emerging countries that attract a significant number of tourists due to economic competitiveness of their services. However, tourism is supposed to be a victim of its success in cases when this industry grows following unsustainable paths (Salvati and Zitti, 2007). For example, uncontrolled tourism development has frequently threatened biodiversity, ecosystem functioning and natural resources (United Nations Environment Programme and World Tourism Organization, 2005).

Size and share of the tourism sector in total economy was and still is highly heterogeneous across member countries and regions, justifying a comprehensive and diachronic analysis of the spatial distribution of tourism activity in Europe, with special regard to the most recent time interval characterized by global crisis and economic stagnation (2008-2014). Within this analytical framework, our study investigates spatial patterns and concentration of tourism activities as a result of short-term socioeconomic dynamics underlying recession, identifying regional comparative advantages in respect with the rest of Europe (Smeral, 2009). We also discussed selected geographical characteristics of these areas (coastal, mountainous, urban) with the aim to detect specific (or prevailing) types of tourism activities. Analysis of tourism dynamics during crisis time allows identification of regional patterns of specialization, diversification, polarization and convergence in this economic sector (Smeral, 2010). We analyzed variables referring to the real economy based on employment volume in the selected sector and in the whole economy. Such variables have been less studied in respect with the attention European Institutions have deserved to the analysis of financial aspect of the economic systems, both national and regional. Under this framework, the next section

introduces data and methodology on which the results of this study are based, being in turn presented in section 3. Section 4 discusses the main findings of this study deriving some policy suggestions for member countries and the European Union as well.

METHODS

Statistical data concerning employment volume in the European Union and EFTA countries (henceforth named 'Europe') were used in this study. These data are available from Eurostat Labor Force Statistics for the years 2008 and 2014 at the country level and for the years 2008 and 2012 at the regional level. These two-time points were selected with the aim to detect changes in tourism specialization during the most recent crisis period. A Location Quotient (LQ) applied to the share of tourism jobs in total jobs has been computed over time (2008 and 2014 or 2012) and space, considering both national and regional spatial scales. LQs were calculated considering the share of employees in tourism sector at a given spatial scale (country or region) and in the whole European economy as follows:

$$LQ = \frac{\frac{Air}{Ar}}{\frac{Ain}{An}}$$

where A is employment, i refers to the tourism sector, r is the r-th European country (or region) and n refers to Europe as a whole. Employment in the tourism sector was assessed considering the NACE2 'Accommodation and Food Service' category of the international NACE-2 nomenclature of economic activities at the NUTS-1 (countries) and NUTS-2 (administrative regions) of European territorial statistics. Thematic maps were prepared to identify countries and regions specialized in tourism activities.

Location Quotients assume positive values ranging between 0 and infinity. A LQ equal to 1 indicates a country or region which concentrates a share of jobs in tourism activity in the total economy jobs equal to the share observed at the European scale. LQs higher than 1 outline countries or regions concentrating a relevant share of jobs in tourism activities in respect with the European economy. The reverse pattern was indicated by a LQ lower than the unity.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Mediterranean countries (Malta, Cyprus, Spain, Greece, Croatia and Portugal) and some other western European countries (Austria, Ireland) emerge as tourism-specialized economic systems, concentrating a proportion of jobs in the tourism sector 25% (or more) higher than the European average in 2008 (Table 1). Italy ranked lower showing a location quotient of 1.15 due to the more mixed and diversified economic structure compared to other Mediterranean countries such as Spain, Greece and Portugal. Bulgaria, Slovenia, Hungary and Slovakia had a location coefficient higher than the unity and represents emerging countries for tourism industry in eastern Europe. Large countries in western Europe, such as France, Germany and United Kingdom, as well as northern countries and the remaining eastern countries ranked low, with location quotients < 1 .

Changes over time (2008-2014) in the location quotient of tourism jobs were found spatially-heterogeneous in European countries with the highest increase observed in Iceland (+69%) and the highest decline experienced by Luxembourg (-44%). Important differences were also observed within countries belonging to the same macro-region. For example, in Mediterranean Europe, Spain, Italy and Greece grew compared with the European average and the reverse pattern was observed for Portugal, Malta and Cyprus (Figure 1). Maps clearly indicate that concentration of tourism activities in Europe has not changed significantly between 2008 and 2014, since

the countries exhibiting the highest concentration of activities are in the Mediterranean basin with few exceptions found at the continental scale (e.g. Ireland).

Table 1. Location Quotient of tourism activities (accommodation and food service jobs) across European countries, selected years.

Country	2008	2014	Change (%)
Malta	1.87	1.60	-14.4
Cyprus	1.79	1.76	-1.7
Spain	1.71	1.80	5.3
Greece	1.69	1.97	16.6
Portugal	1.58	1.38	-12.7
Ireland	1.40	1.63	16.4
Austria	1.35	1.15	-14.8
Croatia	1.28	1.33	3.9
Bulgaria	1.23	1.16	-5.7
Slovenia	1.22	1.01	-17.2
Italy	1.15	1.25	8.7
Hungary	1.07	1.01	-5.6
Slovakia	1.06	1.14	7.5
United Kingdom	1.01	1.14	12.9
Luxembourg	0.99	0.55	-44.4
Germany	0.87	0.82	-5.7
Czech Republic	0.86	0.91	5.8
Estonia	0.84	0.90	7.1
Finland	0.80	0.75	-6.3
Iceland	0.79	1.31	65.8
France	0.76	0.79	3.9
Belgium	0.71	0.85	19.7
Sweden	0.71	0.70	-1.4
Denmark	0.70	0.85	21.4
Netherlands	0.66	0.87	31.8
Norway	0.66	0.74	12.1
Latvia	0.57	0.66	15.8

Lithuania	0.55	0.54	-1.8
Poland	0.49	0.44	-10.2
Romania	0.41	0.51	24.4



Figure 1. Spatial distribution of the location quotient in tourism sector (accommodation and food service activities) in European countries for the year 2008 (left) and 2014 (right).

Figure 2 indicates a substantial convergence in growth and decline of tourism specialization in the European countries. Growth rates in the location quotient of tourism jobs were linearly correlated ($r = 0.80$) with the location quotient observed at the initial observation year. The largest deviations from the linear trend illustrated in Figure 2 were observed for Luxembourg, Austria, Slovenia, Malta and Portugal (with location coefficients decreasing more than proportionally in respect to the linear trend) and for Greece, Ireland and Iceland (with location coefficients decreasing more than proportionally in respect to the linear trend). Such findings indicate a substantial heterogeneity in tourism development across Europe during the most recent crisis, with leading and lagging countries benefiting from the pre-crisis growth path and the consolidated position in the European hierarchy. Our results are not supporting specific patterns of convergence or divergence in tourism development among macro-regions in Europe. Crisis has stimulated tourism development in both highly affected and less impacted areas

of the continent; however, this pattern is spatially mixed and possibly dependent on country- and regional-specific factors.

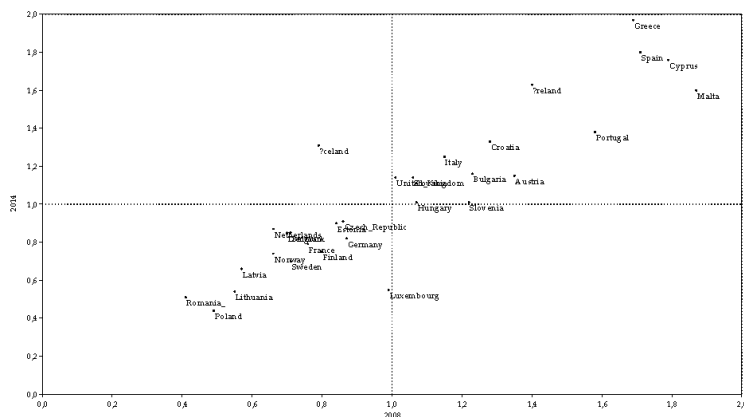


Figure 2. Convergence in location quotients of tourism activities across European countries during recession (dashed line indicates a stable concentration of jobs in tourism proportional to the European average during the study period, 2008-2014).

Figure 3 represents the decline of the location quotient in most internal and rural regions of Europe during 2008-2012. Tourism activities consolidated in coastal Mediterranean regions (especially Spain and Greece) and some mountainous regions in Austria. The highest increases were observed in the Aegean Islands and Crete, Canary Islands and Madeira, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Hamburg and Berlin in Germany, and coastal regions of Andalusia in Spain. All these areas were ranked high in the European LQ distribution already in 2008. In other words, economic crisis impacted more peripheral regions with tourism de-specialization, influencing job concentration in tourism sector in the most specialized areas of Europe only moderately.

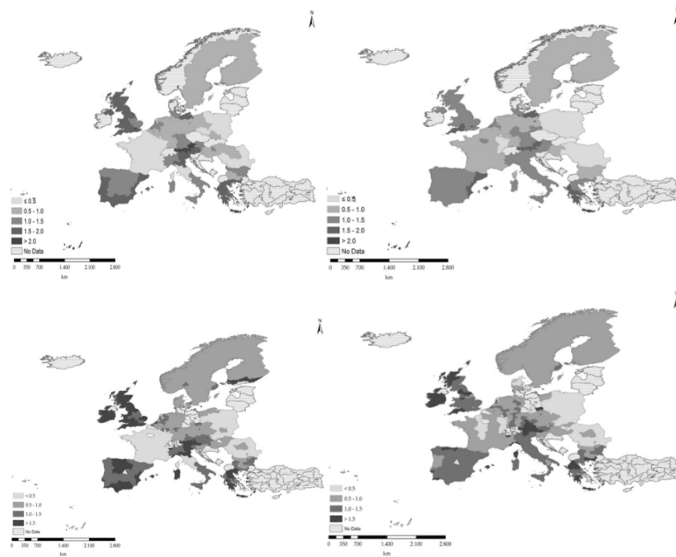


Figure 3. Spatial distribution of the location quotient in tourism sector (accommodation and food service activities) in European NUTS-1 regions (upper panels) and NUTS-2 regions (lower panels) for the year 2008 (left) and 2012 (right).

The rate of change (2008-2012) in tourism jobs at the regional scale in Europe (Figure 4) followed a linear trend with a less-than-proportional growth in respect to the LQ observed for the initial time point (2008). This evidence complements and enrich the results previously illustrated, suggesting that several regions with medium-high specialization in tourism sector ($LQ > 2$) were growing less than proportional the initial level of 2008 and, in some cases, declined markedly. On average, regions with medium-low specialization in tourism grew at a relatively faster rate compared with specialized regions; however, the rate of growth in tourism LQ was relatively modest in absolute terms, reflecting the results obtained at the country scale and presented earlier in this paper.

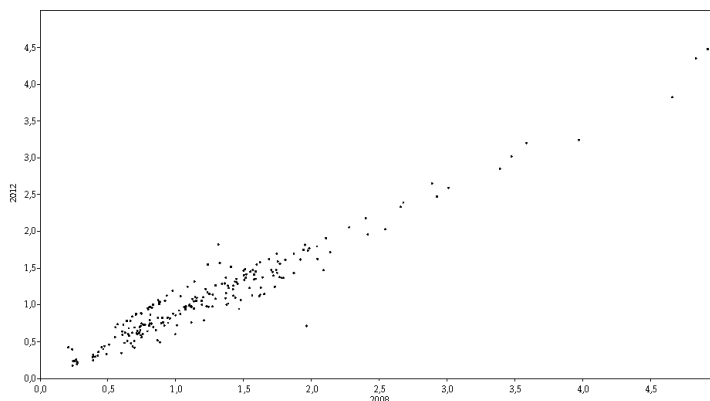


Figure 4. Convergence in location quotients of tourism activities across European NUTS-2 regions during recession (dashed line indicates a stable concentration of jobs in tourism proportional to the European average during the study period, 2008-2012).

Table 2 provides analytical data confirming the results illustrated above. Apart from Berlin and Hamburg (two metropolitan regions in Germany offering mainly cultural and business tourism products) all regions with $LQ > 1.15$ in 2008 experienced negative rates of growth in the LQ during 2008-2012, with particularly heterogeneous values observed in the Mediterranean region and in Western Europe. The highest decline was observed in both urban and peri-urban regions. However, negative rates of growth were also found in some coastal regions (e.g. Aegean islands in Greece, Canary Islands in Spain, Madeira and Azores islands in Portugal).

Table 2. Location Quotient in the sector of tourism (accommodation and food service activities) for European regions (NUTS-2 level) with available data for both years and a $LQ > 1$ for the year 2008.

Region	200	2012	Change
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	8	(%)	
	3.2		
Nisia Aigaiou, Kriti	84	2.846	-13.3
	3.2		
Canarias	66	2.782	-14.8
	3.0		
Região Autónoma da Madeira	96	2.261	-27.0
	2.1		
London	49	1.719	-20.0
	2.0		
Région de Bruxelles-Capitale	49	1.538	-24.9
	2.0		
Westösterreich	24	1.624	-19.8
	1.9		
South West (UK)	03	1.637	-14.0
	1.8		
Scotland	72	1.338	-28.5
	1.8		
Kentriki Ellada	55	1.749	-5.7
	1.7		
North West (UK)	79	1.308	-26.5
	1.7		
Wales	47	1.375	-21.3
	1.7		
Nord-Est	40	1.429	-17.9
	1.7		
Mecklenburg-Vorpommern	27	1.993	15.4
	1.7		
North East (UK)	13	1.200	-29.9
	1.6		
Este (ES)	90	1.530	-9.5
	1.6		
South East (UK)	50	1.229	-25.5
	1.6		
Südösterreich	18	1.351	-16.5
	1.6		
West Midlands (UK)	14	1.137	-29.6

		1.6	
Yorkshire and The Humber	10	1.106	-31.3
		1.6	
Northern Ireland (UK)	08	1.033	-35.8
		1.5	
Voreia Ellada	96	1.397	-12.5
		1.5	
Continente	52	1.266	-18.4
		1.5	
Sur (ES)	14	1.339	-11.6
		1.4	
Noroeste (ES)	74	1.330	-9.8
		1.4	
Comunidad de Madrid	57	1.189	-18.4
		1.4	
Berlin	35	1.628	13.4
		1.4	
East of England	27	1.147	-19.6
		1.4	
East Midlands (UK)	25	1.036	-27.3
		1.4	
Ostösterreich	13	1.203	-14.9
		1.3	
Noreste (ES)	84	1.210	-12.6
Região Autónoma dos Açores		1.3	
(PT)	81	1.028	-25.6
		1.3	
Hamburg	67	1.665	21.8
		1.3	
Centro (ES)	57	1.171	-13.7
		1.2	
Attiki	94	0.900	-30.4
		1.2	
Isole	67	1.079	-14.8
		1.2	
Sud	54	1.09	-13.1
Nord-Ovest		1.2	-13.4

	47		
	1.1		
Zuid-Nederland	92	1.018	-14.6
	1.1		
West-Nederland	89	1.018	-14.4
	1.1		
Åland	50	0.980	-14.8
	1.0		
Bremen	79	1.301	20.6
	1.0		
Közép-Magyarország	68	0.956	-10.5
Severna i yugoiztochna	1.0		
Bulgaria	52	0.991	-5.8
	1.0		
Oost-Nederland	45	0.887	-15.1
	1.0		
Schleswig-Holstein	34	1.144	10.6
	1.0		
Bayern	11	1.134	12.2

The statistical distribution of LQ growth rates for regions with a $LQ < 1$ in 2008 is more mixed (Table 3), presenting both positive rates (especially in German and Austrian regions) and negative rates (mainly observed in eastern European regions). Data for a selection of metropolitan regions in Europe with $LQ > 1$ (Table 4) confirm a mixed pattern of tourism development, as presented in previous analysis. In all cases, apart from Berlin, a relevant reduction in the location quotient was observed, possibly indicating a progressive shift towards other advanced services, indirectly promoted by economic stagnation and progressive reduction in visitors' flows following crisis. Recent findings indicate that specific 'soft' elements of the urban tourism product are keys for cities' attractiveness, and yet they are often overlooked by planning and development strategies (Russo & Van der Borg, 2002).

Table 3. Location Quotient in the sector of tourism (accommodation and food service activities) for European regions (NUTS-2 level) with available data for both years and a LQ < 1 for the year 2008.

Region	2008	2012	Change (%)
	0	0.8	
Noord-Nederland	.998	53	-14.5
	0	1.0	
Hessen	.990	98	10.9
	0	1.1	
Sachsen	.965	09	14.9
Yugozapadna i yuzhna tsentralna	0	0.9	
Bulgaria	.950	70	2.1
	0	0.8	
Östra Sverige	.936	56	-8.5
	0	0.7	
Vlaams Gewest	.917	13	-22.2
	0	0.6	
Dunántúl	.869	10	-29.8
	0	0.9	
Brandenburg	.842	98	18.5
	0	0.9	
Niedersachsen	.829	29	12.1
	0	0.9	
Rheinland-Pfalz	.823	27	12.6
	0	0.9	
Baden-Württemberg	.804	35	16.3
	0	0.7	
Norra Sverige	.798	10	-11.0
	0	0.8	
Sachsen-Anhalt	.797	99	12.8
Région wallonne	0	0.6	-18.6

	.786	40	
	0	0.8	
Thüringen	.779	77	12.6
	0	0.8	
Nordrhein-Westfalen	.747	46	13.3
	0	0.6	
Södra Sverige	.741	98	-5.8
	0	0.6	
Manner-Suomi	.729	66	-8.6
	0	0.8	
Saarland	.711	23	15.8
	0	0.4	
Alföld és Észak	.703	98	-29.2
	0	0.3	
Region Północno-Zachodni	.565	59	-36.5
	0	0.3	
Region Południowy	.545	74	-31.4
	0	0.4	
Macroregiunea unu	.508	45	-12.4
	0	0.3	
Region Północny	.502	23	-35.7
	0	0.3	
Region Południowo-Zachodni	.480	96	-17.5
	0	0.4	
Macroregiunea trei	.460	50	-2.2
	0	0.2	
Region Centralny	.376	97	-21.0
	0	0.3	
Macroregiunea patru	.353	17	-10.2
	0	0.3	
Macroregiunea doi	.346	01	-13.0
	0	0.1	
Region Wschodni	.262	91	-27.1

Taken together, these results evidence a quite heterogeneous picture with a persistent north-south gradient in tourism specialization and a slightly changing east-west gradient. After recession, highly specialized regions in the Mediterranean basin still remain the leaders of the tourism hierarchy in Europe but, in many cases, they are progressively losing activities and jobs. Regions with mixed economic structure and moderate specialization in tourism consolidate or, at least, maintain their position in the continental ranking. Tourism specialized urban regions, especially in western and southern Europe, are losing activities and jobs. Central European regions, especially from Germany, are progressively emerging as local tourism attractors (Ahlert, 2007). Northern regions are relatively stable in the continental ranking and, finally, eastern European regions - apart from few exceptions - occupy a marginal position in Europe, which does not seem to undergo a significant recovery in recent times. Recession has in some way increased the uneven regional disparities in tourism specialization across European countries, indirectly promoting diversification in tourism destination and the emergence of non-specialized regions in affluent economic systems such as Germany.

Table 4. Location Quotient in the sector of tourism (accommodation and food service activities) for selected metropolitan regions in Europe and years.

Metropolitan region	2008	2012	Change (%)
London	2.15	1.72	-20.0
Bruxelles	2.05	1.54	-24.9
Lisbon	1.98	1.74	-11.9
Prague	1.81	1.61	-10.8
Vienna	1.75	1.59	-9.3
Madrid	1.46	1.19	-18.4
Berlin	1.44	1.63	13.4
Athens	1.29	0.90	-30.4

DISCUSSION

Based on the empirical analysis performed in this study, it can be argued that tourism is an economic activity that does not contribute to employment in the same way across European countries. While concentrating jobs in Mediterranean countries and in specific regions of western and northern Europe, including large metropolitan regions, tourism activities are less important in central and eastern Europe, showing a relatively moderate spatial variability. Relative abundance and considerable spatial variability of tourism jobs in Mediterranean countries is justified with concentration of natural and cultural amenities in many places, constituting a relevant advantage in respect to the rest of Europe. However, natural amenities are present also in some other countries, e.g. eastern Europe, that require specific policies of regional development at the country scale for post-crisis recovery of tourism sector. The current size of the international tourism market in the centrally-planned economies of Europe has been long considered as under-performing in comparison with Western destinations. According to Hall (1992), major constraints have included travel restrictions, poor quality of touristic provisions, inadequate marketing and promotion, and political instability, that are only partly addressed and solved in the most recent times. Based on their innate attractiveness, opportunities exist to develop tourism in these countries through increasing openness and receptivity to joint foreign-capital ventures, and improved marketing.

International competitiveness affects concentration and diversification of hospitality products in tourism-specialized places, and especially in the Mediterranean region, showing territorial disparities that have been progressively enhanced by economic crisis (Carlucci et al., 2017; Cuadrado-Ciuraneta et al., 2017; Pili et al., 2017). Regions that have increased competitiveness of tourism

products are more frequently specialized in dynamic tourism assets that were consolidating over time, even in a time of recession (Gunduz and Hatemi, 2005). Regions with a general decline in economic competitiveness are expected to host a stagnating or poorly developed tourism sector, possibly facing a short-term fall in employment driven by crisis or persisting conditions of economic backwardness, in turn influencing tourism competitiveness and potential to change. Growth and spatial redistribution of jobs in tourism sector across European regions during the 2007 recession can be thus explained referring to this interpretative framework.

Empirical results of our analysis indicate that several regions of Greece and Spain, concentrating tourism activities and facing socioeconomic problems and fiscal imbalances, have developed under crisis with moderately increasing or stable tourism jobs. These processes have widened the within-country disparities in tourism specialization already observed in the pre-crisis period, with a progressive increase of tourism's role in the total economy. These recent dynamics can be explained considering the negative impact of crisis on other economic sectors including heavy and light industry and traditional tertiary sectors (e.g. constructions, commerce and public services due to fiscal cuts). In this line of thinking, measures of fiscal discipline applied at the country level and policies of internal devaluation adopted in response to European Union monetary targets, may have an indirect, positive influence on the competitiveness of tourism products. At the same time, the shift toward a tourism-oriented economic structure may be viewed as an effort to respond to the reduction of income from other sources due to financial crisis and a proactive way to face extensive unemployment.

Based on the analysis, the tourism sector is increasingly required to adapt to new challenges and more complex issues of ecological sustainability and socioeconomic resilience which are expected to evolve in a post-crisis global scenario. Due to

heterogeneous socioeconomic conditions at the continental scale, the design of a coherent development action framework at the European level is necessary to ensure sustainability of European tourism and improved resilience of regional systems to economic stagnation and recovery after crisis (Commission of the European Communities, 2007). In this line of thinking, tourism-specialized systems offer a unique opportunity to ascertain (latent and apparent) links between economic development, socio-ecological resilience and environmental sustainability. As an economic activity that integrates social, cultural and natural assets, tourism finally represents a powerful factor improving attractiveness of local and regional communities, acting as an incentive for the adoption of sustainable and environmentally-friendly practices at the European level. According to the challenges and the rising competition in tourism industry, European countries are increasingly competing in supply of sustainable, high-quality tourism production based on comparative advantages that include diversity of natural environment and cultural wealth.

The stable (or only moderately declining) competitiveness of classical touristic places in the Mediterranean region can be attributed to the expanded range of provided tourism services through the development of new activities indirectly driven by the economic crisis (Gavalas et al., 2014; Rontos et al., 2016; Salvati, 2016) and the moderate expansion of urban-rural divides (Salvati et al., 2013; Ceccarelli et al., 2014; Serra et al., 2014). These findings confirm that competitive advantages in the sector of tourism are evolving rapidly. Appropriate state policies should be designed especially for those countries that have limited competitive advantages in other economic sectors because of recession. Greece is one of the best examples in this line of thinking. Intimate characteristics of tourism products and supply conditions deserve further investigation, since products and prices are multifaceted and dynamic over time and space.

CONCLUSION REMARKS

The main efforts of the European tourism policy have been directed to enhance sector competitiveness by promoting sustainable prospects of growth and change responding (and adapting) to global challenges. For this aim, economic, social and environmental sustainability are considered fundamental pillars for supporting and improving competitiveness in tourism sites, increasing the prosperity of people, reducing unemployment, developing and consolidating these natural and cultural poles of attraction. Inter-country collaboration is encouraged especially at the level of best practice exchange. In this way, Europe is expected to consolidate its position as a leading tourism destination at the global scale. As a result, regional systems - and especially the most disadvantaged ones - can improve their economic asset and social background. A research agenda is increasingly required to emphasize the need to investigate the intimate relationship between economic dynamics and policy coordination in regional tourism models across Europe.

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