SMARTDEST

CITIES AS MOBILITY HUBS: TACKLING SOCIAL EXCLUSION THROUGH 'SMART' CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

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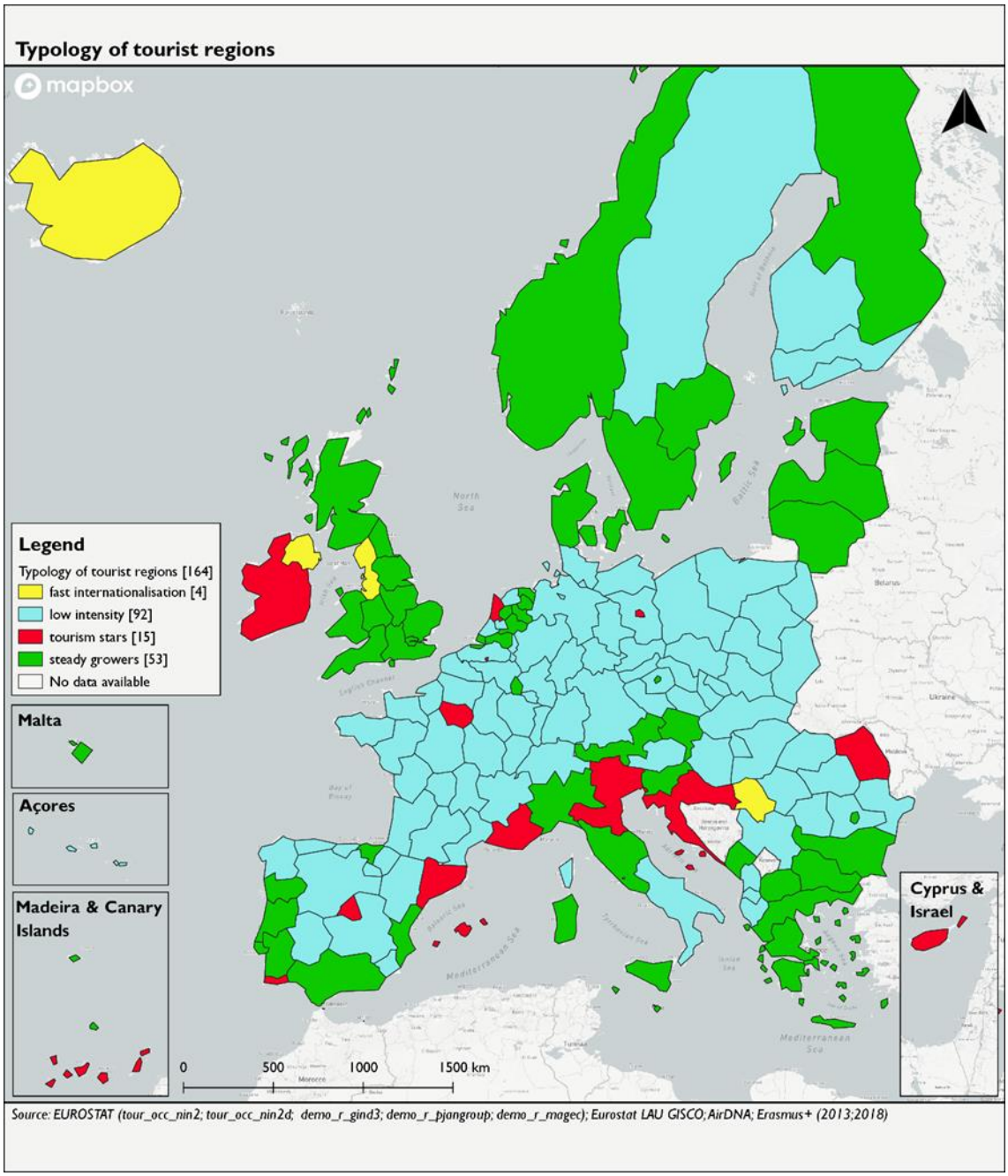
A regional classification of preCOVID trends of tourism in relation to social exclusion, to inform the postCOVID recovery debate.

The H2020-funded SMARTDEST project (2020-2022) examines tourism as a trigger of social exclusion in urban areas. The notion that excessive tourism growth transforms places in ways that could result challenging for local communities, has been widely noted in the public opinion and has become a policy issue from the local to the European level up to a few months ago. Rising unaffordability of housing, casualized and badly remunerated labour, hindrances in the access to basic services and public space are only some of the effects that the increasing penetration of the tourist economy has been imposing to citizens, affecting in particular the most vulnerable groups. This debate has been eclipsed by the COVID-19 crisis and the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs that followed, besides the uneven impacts of the restrictions to mobility, opening yet other avenues of injustice and exclusion. However, looking back at the situation and evolution of the relation between tourism growth and social exclusion before the beginning of the pandemic can inform the stage of recovery, towards urban communities that are more resilient in the face of the uncertain future of tourism. This analysis has been carried out by a team of researchers from seven universities, under the coordination of the Erasmus University Rotterdam.

The first results are based on a classification of European regions according to their profile as attractive regions for tourists and the related mobility of workers and lifestyle migrants. This classification looks at the period 2008-2018, thus spanning over a period marked by the effects of the 2007-2008 financial crisis, the subsequent recovery and the apogee of 'overtourism'. Four groups of regions have been identified, which behave consistently in terms of the situation and evolution of inwards flows of tourists – and of the international or domestic market as the main driver of growth – as well as of migrants of different age groups. They also differ in terms of the prominence of urban areas as hubs as opposed to the performance of smaller towns and rural areas, and of the degree of penetration of short-term rentals mediated by platforms such as Airbnb. Thus, aside from LOW INTENSITY regions (in blue in the map), which generally exhibit below-average trends of attractiveness, we obtain three other groups of regions, namely FAST INTERNATIONALISATION regions (in yellow), STEADY GROWERS (in green), and TOURISM STARS (in red), exhibiting in general a rising degree of attractiveness but differing in terms of the pace and characteristics of tourism growth or the exposure to migration flows which are related to their status as 'tourist places'.



The analysis then focused on the performance registered in these four groups of regions in relation to social trends, possibly hinting at key challenges for social inclusion in specific contexts of tourism growth.

Thus, FAST INTERNATIONALISATION regions concentrate the highest proportions of women and non-European foreigners for whom housing costs represent a financial burden, as well as a sizable share of over-65 living in overcrowded households. These hindrances do not balance out through the share of population that derive rents from property, which is lowest among the four types considered. Additionally, tourism workers in these regions tend to occupy low-quality jobs, with poor conditions in terms of protection. LOW INTENSITY regions present the other side of the coin: though they derive much less benefits from tourism and other inward flows of migration, they also better perform in social equality and inclusion indicators. The remaining

two groups, STEADY GROWERS and TOURISM STARS, are a mixed bag. The former have not reached a stage of development in which tourism pressure could be considered excessive, and present a favourable profile in terms of salaries for tourism sector workers. The latter characterise as places where the intensification of tourism is gradually fostering a process of economic polarisation (for instance between homeowners and tenants), material deprivation, and worsening working conditions. In both cases, the 2000-2018 trend indicate that they may resent from the increasing specialisation in tourism, which expose them to the negative consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic.

These early findings may inform on some of the key challenges that should be tackled in the European urban and regional policy agenda, taking into account the dimension and evolution of tourism and related mobilities as a driver of social change, especially for the most vulnerable segments of resident communities. These, as noted, include housing affordability, socio-spatial polarization, and the casualization and precarious nature of tourism work. These concerns will be the object of in-deep scrutiny in further stages of the SMARTDEST project, both at pan-European and at city level. In any case, while the European Commission and all levels of administration are discussing how to channel recovery funds into the reset of the economy, and the reset of tourism mobility is an important part of it, our initial analysis underlines that for many European regions, bouncing back to the preCOVID trends may not be the best option.

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