



# GreenPaths

EUROPEAN KNOWLEDGE HUB ON  
JUST TRANSITION PATHWAYS

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## Table of Contents

Introduction .....	4
Abstract .....	4
Keywords .....	4
1 Overview .....	5
2 Research questions .....	6
3 Methods .....	7
4 Findings and results.....	7
Tourism as winning card or dependency? .....	7
Cities as machines of growth – and tourism.....	9
City of Zagreb .....	11
City of Split.....	12
City of Dubrovnik .....	13
City of Zadar .....	14
City of Pula.....	15
5 Main results .....	16
6 Discussion and conclusions .....	17
7 Recommendations .....	19
Local level .....	19
National level .....	19
European level.....	20
8 References.....	21

# Introduction

## Abstract

This study explores the state of art and potential for green transformation in Croatian tourism industry focusing on five key urban tourist hubs. Research addressed gap between growth-oriented tourism industry generating nearly 20% of the national GDP and unsustainable extractive practices that irreversibly change urban landscapes with their high environmental footprint, pressure on poor public infrastructure and detrimental impact on spatial/urban planning and housing. Some of the key research questions were: what is the transformative potential for ecological transition of tourism industry in Croatia, with focus on main urban touristic destinations? What are the key adverse environmental and social impacts of touristic activity in selected cities? Where are the key systemic obstacles for ecological transition in tourism sector? What are the cities responses and municipal policies to prevent or address adverse environmental and social impacts of (over) tourism? Findings have demonstrated that green transformation in the tourism industry is still underdeveloped at national/local level and that relatively weak regulation at the EU level does not play a decisive role in the green transformation of the whole sector. Furthermore, it has revealed a number of gaps in coordination between key local and national stakeholders in the tourism industry, cities and ministries accountable for green transition.

## Keywords

Energy consumption; ecological footprint of tourism; sustainable mobility; spatial justice; affordable housing.

# 1 Overview

This case study explores the potential for green transformation in Croatian tourism industry focusing on five key urban tourist hubs (Zagreb, Pula, Split, Dubrovnik, Zadar). Research addresses gap between growth-oriented tourism industry generating more than 20% of the national GDP (and 90.000 jobs) and unsustainable extractive practices that irreversibly change urban landscapes and social wellbeing with their high environmental footprint, pressure on poor public infrastructure and detrimental impact on spatial/urban planning and housing. This study focuses on the environmental and social footprint of tourism activity in five selected Croatian cities (Zagreb, Pula, Dubrovnik, Split, Zadar) thus exploring transformative potential toward green transition and needed policy shifts to counter overtourism. Research also aims to identify evidence of policy gaps that measure and evaluate tourism resilience exclusively in economic and service-related terms, while neglecting severe environmental and social detrimental impacts of overtourism. Additionally, EU, national and local levels of policy making and their potential agency are closely examined to identify blind spots and coordination gaps in the implementation of various green policies.

With almost 20% of the national GDP originates from tourism (15.5 billion euros and more than 20 million tourists in 2024) Croatia profiles itself as one of the key European tourist destinations. Yet, absence of measures to adapt tourism to climate change and mitigate its carbon footprint, environmental degradation and adverse social impacts (mainly on housing, labor rights and public services) have appeared to be instrumental in undermining deeper and systemic ecological transition in this industry. Case study explores seven policy/sectoral areas in selected cities to provide a more detailed and in-depth outlook on the stage of ecological transition in the tourism industry. Furthermore, study places discussion in the contradiction between development of eco-tourism as a specific sub-industry vs. green transformation of the overall tourism sector.

The EU tourism policy, driven by the *European Agenda for Tourism 2030* and the *Transition Pathway for Tourism* aims to develop resilient and sustainable tourism model for Europe by focusing on green and digital transitions, resilience and inclusion, skills development, and an enabling policy framework. Yet, our as our research shows, in case of Croatia, it appears that this policy framework is still too weak and without enforcing mechanisms to support substantive policy shifts toward integration green transition principles within tourism industry. Hence, our research aims to identify number of opportunities where the agency of local/municipal governments can be instrumental in pushing toward green transition objectives.

Accordingly, this study will observe to which extent tourism industry in Croatia, one of the key tourist destinations in the EU, is integrating objectives of the green just transition. Being an 'elephant in the room', adverse social and environmental impacts of tourism are often invisibilised in order to allow 'business as usual', further extraction and generation of profit. Taking into account the high national priority given to tourism sector, solid number of jobs but also irreversible adverse impacts on life of people and the nature, study will explore if and how green just transition is being implemented in the tourism industry.

## 2 Research questions

Case Study Research Question:

*What is the transformative potential for ecological transition of tourism industry in Croatia, with focus on main urban touristic destinations?*

Empirical questions:

- *What are the key adverse environmental and social impacts of touristic activity in selected cities?*
- *Where are the key systemic obstacles for ecological transition in tourism sector?*
- *What are the cities responses and municipal policies to prevent or address adverse environmental and social impacts of (over) tourism?*

Tourism sector is selected as the field of our exploration due to its specific role and place in Croatian economy. While it appears to play a vital breadwinner role in maintaining and strengthening national economy, due to its economic power and related interests, it has a high level of autonomy. That often means its operations are not monitored with scrutiny neither it is exposed to any type of enforcing mechanism in the context of green transition. In our research we depart from premise that key national stakeholders in tourism industry use the coordination gap to continue with monetary extraction and environmental degradation, while not being forced into systemic decarbonisation of the sector or alignment with local community needs. Absence of eco-social state model and prioritisation of short-term profit and increase of growth rates by most of the governments in the past has enabled touristic operators to continue with unsustainable practices. Therefore, green transformation of tourism sector, if implemented, would have a strong impact on decarbonisation of the national economy. Since it is, if not absent, extremely limited, we will explore which obstacles play most significant role and how cities can overcome them in the near future.

In this exercise we will focus on environmental costs of green transition in tourism sector; namely, high carbon/environmental footprint, intense resource consumption, pollution and climate vulnerability comparing it with potential benefits manifested in increased number of sustainable practices, primarily in the transport, energy/resource use and spatial development/construction. Likewise, social costs will be addressed – where applicable – such as wild urbanization, lower quality of life and increased prices of housing compared to significant contribution of tourism to GDP, increase of employment rate and job creation potential.

## 3 Methods

This study uses Green Paths Methodological Matrix and employs mixed-method approach using various tools for data collection: literature overview, secondary data review, discourse analysis and policy review with primary data drawn from field work. Our research focus is relying on the Loss and Damage concept where our analysis aims to demonstrate harmful impact of current extractive model of tourism taking place in key urban destinations in Croatia. Review of literature has been conducted to provide necessary information about the key strategic objectives of tourism at policy level – EU, national and local level. Reviewing secondary data from Ministry of tourism, Croatian Tourist Board, Croatian Bureau for Statistics and EUROSTAT and limited body of research on the topic we explored in-depth environmental and social impact of tourism. Discourse analysis was applied to speeches from key stakeholders, reports and media statements.

The study defines costs as environmental degradation, growth dependency and increase of social inequalities while benefits promoted by tourism industry stakeholders are economic growth, job creation and international reputation.

Environmental impacts are examined in 5 policy areas (1) transport, 2) resource efficiency 3) climate change, 4) energy and waste, 5) spatial and urban planning where objective was to gain basic insights in footprint of current model of tourism. Social impacts were explored in two additional areas, namely 1) housing and 2) public infrastructure and public services. Stating the development of tourism in these areas and relating it to the concept of "growth dependency" research has created a mental map situating tourism as significant disruptive element when addressing green transition objectives. With aim to explore potential of tourism model to be transformed into non-extractive economic activity, we further engaged into stakeholder analysis identifying various roles and interests in green transformation of tourism.

## 4 Findings and results

### Tourism as winning card or dependency?

Key findings in these case study show that recognition of the climate challenges related to tourism sector in Croatia is scarce, non-systemic and slow. Key stakeholders – namely Ministry for tourism and Croatian National Tourist Board – pay insufficient attention to tourism industry climate vulnerability and even less to environmental impacts of tourism. Monitoring of results is primarily related to growth metrics where success – or lack of it – of certain year or season is measured through number of tourists/visitors, duration of their stay, expenditure during their stay etc. That also shows framework through which policy makers approach to tourism, neglecting social and environmental impacts of tourism industry. Yet, water scarcity, heat waves, noise and poor communal infrastructure are increasingly becoming weak points recognised by tourists or local

communities thus decreasing “attractiveness” of destination. In most of the tourist hubs there is increasing number of real estate speculation cases (decreasing availability of affordable housing), overtourism and intense resource consumption (primarily water, energy). Hence, sustainability is still perceived by key policy makers merely in the economic terms. While that is understandable in the country that depends on 15 billion euros earned from more than 20 million tourists (annually) and more than 100 million overnight stays by visitors from Germany, Austria, Slovenia, Poland and Czech Republic, most concerning fact is that both social and environmental costs of industry activity remains neglected or overlooked. Sustainable tourism is therefore often perceived through 'business as usual' that would guarantee continuous growth of industry – and income – without deeper systemic adaptations or coordinated transition to fit the planetary boundaries.

Integration of climate policies in the tourism sector moves rather slowly and without sufficient enforcing power though European Green Deal and National Recovery and Resilience Plan have given stronger impetus to this change. Yet, 'on the paper' there are more evidences that Ministry of tourism aims to integrate some of the measures that have to integrate climate change in the planning procedures, create resilience in relation to extreme weather events, educate personnel working in the sector and increase resilience of local communities which depend on tourism. There are also some positive examples and interventions, though at micro-level, where forestation was implemented to compensate for the carbon footprint of the visitors using road traffic while entering the country.

At the governance level there is weak coordination between Ministry of tourism and Ministry of environmental protection and green transition. Increasingly, Ministry of physical planning, construction and State assets is becoming more and more relevant due to announced legislation which is expected to open doors for tourism related investments. It is expected that new Law will enable investors to further disrupt the real estate market and land-use in the country. Critics of the Law fear that it will create urbanistic chaos to the detriment of local communities and enable plunder that was experienced in previous decades in many other countries (Spain, Greece etc). On the other side, Ministry for environmental protection and green transition which is accountable for implementation of Climate change adaptation strategy identifies tourism as one of the most vulnerable sectors, yet its implementation is lagging behind and reporting on its success remains limited to narrow group of policy makers. Prevailing narratives on role of tourism are framed with positive tone to increase public acceptance of the industry and maintain high status at the level of country's priorities. Innovative campaigns are framed (such as 'Croatia; naturally yours') that aim to connect natural beauty with attractiveness of destination, still often failing to report on the detrimental environmental and social impacts on local community and eco-systems (for example; more than 3 million people annually visit in total 8 national parks in Croatia). There is prevailing 'silent consensus' that detrimental impacts of tourism should not be addressed publicly as they could deepen social conflicts and damage reputation, but also decrease lion's part of the income from tourism (almost ¼ of the GDP).

Local communities and municipalities in this constellation are perceived by State through extractivist lenses, merely as sources of income through taxation and visitors

expenditures, while risks and costs of tourism are fully socialised by local inhabitants and municipalities.

Another positive example, yet with limited visibility and rather low impact, is CROSTO – Croatian Sustainable Tourism Observatory. CROSTO is part of UNWTO International Network of Sustainable Tourism Observatories (INSTO), which was created in 2004 with the main objective to support the continuous improvement of sustainability and resilience in the tourism sector through systematic, timely and regular monitoring of tourism performance and impact and to connect dedicated destinations in order to better understand destination-wide resource use and foster the responsible management of tourism. CROSTO, for example, follows closely consumption of energy, water and creation of waste across the country. Furthermore, in 2024, UN Center for sustainable tourism has been established in cooperation with Ministry of tourism and University of Zagreb but its operations have not yet started.

### Cities as machines of growth – and tourism

In these scheme cities play very important role. In five cities we've selected for our exploration – Zagreb, Split, Pula, Zadar and Dubrovnik – almost 60% of the visitors and related touristic activities take place. With tourism, cities play the role of 'machines of growth' which is of strategic importance for the State, which suffered from severe deindustrialisation in past decades. According to Herman Daly, cities around the world depend on growth, but such growth has become uneconomic—the costs of growth, within and beyond the cities' boundaries, far exceed the benefits. Furthermore, Varvarousis claims that cities should, in order to avoid growth dependency trap, limit the financialization of their assets, socialize basic infrastructures and spaces, redistribute income, and guarantee access to services, decoupling human well-being from growth in this way. Cities have to control tourism by not branding cities as tourist destinations and managing tourism by addressing the underlying forces that drive its growth, not just by limiting visitor numbers.

For example, Herman Daly proposed increasing taxes on social bads, such as resource use and pollution, and decreasing taxes on social goods, such as labour. A major social bad in cities today is real estate speculation. Speculation drives up housing prices, making home ownership and rentals unaffordable for workers and long-term residents. When a city is targeted by speculative real estate markets, this often leaves thousands of housing units vacant, since speculative buyers consider renting unfavourable because they want to quickly sell their properties at the next real estate price hike.

Varvarousis and authors say that tourism is becoming a major source of income in many cities and, in extreme cases of overtourism, a monoculture with distorting effects on the economy, the environment and local culture, driving gentrification, displacement, and job precarity. They invite all cities to end promotion and support of tourism growth—such as closing (publicly financed) promotion agencies, stopping fiscal subsidies and exemptions for tourism investments, cancelling new tourism-related infrastructures, and banning mega-events. This would also involve significant reduction of offers of accommodation by limiting short-term rentals, hotel rooms, and tourist-oriented

restaurants and bars and creating better conditions for tourism industry workers through the prohibition of subcontracting and outsourcing, decent wage standards, and prohibition of work on Sunday and holidays. Also, those who profit from tourism would need to pay for the extra burdens tourists create in public infrastructure while introducing policies that protect leisure spaces used by local.

Although they are increasingly becoming aware of the detriments of tourism, Croatian cities and citizens are still far from tourism degrowth as proposed above. Fast monetary benefits are at this moment much stronger than long term visions of sustainability. Cities like Dubrovnik and increasingly Split and Zadar are irreversibly transforming into Disneyland. With few millions of tourists per year (Dubrovnik 4 million, Zagreb 2.5 millions, Split 4.6 millions) they are not hesitating to use this income for growth, turning some urban areas into sacrifice zones, avoided or literally abandoned by the local residents. Main contradiction originates from the fundamental conflict; cities and municipalities use tourism as engine of their growth, however risks related to social and environmental costs are socialised, where citizens bear the burden of poorer quality of life and extensive pressure on resources and surrounding eco-systems. While tourism brings advantages of jobs creation and decrease of unemployment, distribution of the income is still centralised and benefits the State whereas cities are left with inadequate resources to modernise and adapt their infrastructure to massive influx of tourists and climate challenges.

Except the Zagreb, as Croatian capital, all other tourist hubs are placed in the coastal area of Adriatic sea. There are strong indications, such as in the EU blue economy report, which confirm that climate change is projected to have a profound impact on the coastal tourism sector. Rising global temperatures, rising sea levels, and increased frequency of extreme weather events will alter the physical environment, ecosystems, and amenities that underpin coastal tourism. The erosion of beaches and coastal infrastructure is a major concern, as rising sea levels and increased storm intensity will lead to the loss of tourist facilities, such as hotels, restaurants, and recreational areas. A study on the regional impact of climate change on the demand for tourism in Europe has shed light on the potential effects of a warmer climate on tourist flows. The study, which simulates future impacts up to 2100, reveals that in a scenario of a 1.5°C temperature increase, only 20% of European regions will experience a minor impact, with tourist numbers remaining relatively stable (changing by -1% to +1%). The consequences of climate change will be far-reaching and will affect not only the tourism industry but also the livelihoods of communities that depend on coastal tourism. EU blue economy report also states that in the short term, investments in infrastructure, such as sea walls, dunes, and green roofs, are necessary to protect tourist facilities and amenities. Furthermore, developing and implementing climate change adaptation and resilience plans, including early warning systems and emergency response plans, is crucial for minimising the risks associated with climate-related events. Interestingly enough, Croatia is not covered in the EU statistics on tourism in coastal area.

## City of Zagreb

With 1.5 million of visitors and 2.6 million of stays Zagreb is becoming more attractive destination with increasing number of events. In 2024 more than 4 million passengers have been tracked on Zagreb airport with significant GHG emissions linked to aviation. Some cities like Amsterdam are, with support of Dutch government, actively limiting air traffic to curb nuisance, reduce noise, and control tourism, primarily by cutting flights, raising fees for airlines (like a big 2025 hike), and implementing stricter night curfews, aiming to balance economic benefits with quality of life for residents.

In Zagreb, more and more hotels use solar power systems for water heating and solar panels on their roofs. City of Zagreb also offers subsidies and provides financial support for energy efficiency and restoration of hotels. In 2025 there were more than 10 000 accommodation units, which is 25% of increase in comparison to 2024. Tourist boom creates irreversible changes on the real estate market, leading to drastic annual increase (24%) of housing prices. Increased number of Air'b'n'B accommodation units adds to already detrimental trends on the housing and real estate market.

Though city's green-left government has just voted (2025) new General Urban Plan which should seize the uncontrolled construction place urban planning to work for the public interest, State has adapted new Construction Law that enables lucrative and in many cases tourism induced investments. Croatian construction minister Branko Bačić for example claims that tourism is the largest consumer of the space in the country, which should be key vehicle of the country's development. Such narratives promoted by the state officials, unequivocally demonstrate the official direction that subordinate resource consumption in favour of economic growth provided by tourism.

Accordingly, Zagreb Tourist Board as one of the key stakeholders at local level pays poor attention on environmental and social costs of tourism. Brief review of their documents does not show that green transition is one of the priorities, much more focus is given to consumption patterns, yet without intention to navigate or nudge visitors of Zagreb to change consumption patterns during their stay. Yet, as destination, City of Zagreb does develop various programs and implements measures which contribute to climate mitigation. For example, City of Zagreb is actively working on implementation of cycling outdoor trails (Flow trail) which connect city with the Natural Park Medvednica enabling citizens and visitors to reach the Medvednica mountain without usage of car, what decreases GHG emissions in this ecologically sensitive area. Additionally, increase of public transport and decarbonisation/electrification of public transport fleet is permanently improved. Since 2025 that is supported with the public bicycle system (Bajs) which offers thousands of bicycles which can be used by citizens. Development of various urban biking routes across the city increases use rate of public and privately owned bicycles. Apart from transport, which is one of the most intensive carbon emitters, City of Zagreb invests into energy renovation of public buildings in the city and transition to renewable sources of energy. For example, currently more than 600 MWh is produced

through installed solar panels on public buildings. Furthermore, through new practices in the urban vegetation and forestation, number of urban heat islands is permanently decreased, directly improving quality of life and health both for citizens and visitors. New masterplan for urban planning in Zagreb anticipates increase of green areas in the city directly contributing to reduction of urban heat islands. Yet, most of these measures are result of direct policy making in City of Zagreb, with rare if not absent coordination with key stakeholders in tourism industry.

At the city level, there is still poor coordination among the key stakeholders (hotels, restaurants, private accommodation) to design and develop measures which would place ecological measures as their priority. This type of incentive could be expected from municipal government or tourist board and could results with more orchestrated efforts to enable green transition for the benefit both of Zagreb inhabitants and visitors.

## City of Split

City of Split has always been one of the most favourable destinations and departure for many tourists visiting southern Dalmatia islands. That is often manifested in massive transport movements (more than 3.5 million of passengers on Split airport and almost 6 millions passengers through ferry port (one million cars). Despite severe climate challenges coastal area will face in near future, such high numbers related to transport have not been addressed by the key stakeholders in tourism sector. Increase of number of visitors regardless of their transport mean remains a top priority for majority of tourism operators, often neglecting traffic congestions and severe malfunctioning of public transport services in the city.

Split is known for its sunny climate which makes it suitable to use solar power. Some of the hotels in Split have already been frontrunners in installing photovoltaic panels on their roofs and their number is increasing through support of local renewable energy firms. As many of the buildings in Split centre are very old, there are challenges related to energy efficiency. Apart from that, waste management and protection of drinking water remain huge challenges for the Split region which is particularly affected by climate change.

As one of the most prominent tourist destinations, Split has experienced a rapid increase of housing units' prices, mainly related to tourism. During summer 2024. broader Split region was visited by almost 4 million tourists. Case of Split clearly shows detrimental impacts of tourism leading to gentrification and displacement of local population. Local communities often prioritise tourist demands and revenue over preserving their cultural heritage. Cultural commodification happens when traditions are transformed into products for commercial gain. Disrespectful tourist behaviour can further alienate host communities, discouraging younger generations from embracing their cultural identity. Additionally, tourism can lead to the displacement of local populations, involving forced evictions, restricted access to resources, and the exploitation of natural assets. In case

of Split, many of the local residents, reportedly, rent their apartment during season and move to cheaper areas in hinterland.

Tourism does offer immediate short-term economic benefits (rent, jobs, profit), which are in the cases of poorer communities a mean of survival. Still in long term it ruins the foundation for the sustainable future. Case of Split is an example of creating rentier class which is using tourism as a cash cow, further limiting opportunities for production in already deindustrialised area. Apart from that, Split is one of the destinations facing economic leakage, where money spent by tourists fails to benefit the local economy and instead benefits multinational companies or international hotel chains, leaving host destination with little financial gain. As some reports show, these practices prioritise profit at the expense of local communities, often dispossessing and marginalising the original inhabitants. Apart from that, during season high increase of prices, leads to inflation of living costs, making essentials like food and housing less affordable for locals. In 2025 prices of food in Split have reportedly increased almost 50%. For local population, increase of these prices creates a high discontent with the quality of life in the city. Case of Split shows that further growth of tourism in the city significantly surpasses city's capacity and goes far beyond the biophysical, social and cultural limitations.

## City of Dubrovnik

Many features described in the case of Split can apply even more sharply in case of City of Dubrovnik. Due to natural beauty and UNESCO cultural heritage (old town), Dubrovnik is known as a 'southern Venice' and site where famous Game of Thrones has been filmed. While City of Dubrovnik has a bit more than 40.000 inhabitants outside of the season, its airport traffic is more than 3 million people (2025). Dubrovnik is most visited destination in Croatia, with more than 1.4 million visitors during 2024. Most of them visiting Dubrovnik pass through the old town. Apart from air traffic that clearly demonstrates a striking carbon footprint linked to visit to destination, Dubrovnik is one of the destinations mostly visited through cruising tourism. Almost one million passengers from cruising ships visit City of Dubrovnik throughout the year. Recently, City of Dubrovnik started to limit daily arrivals to around 8,000 passengers to face overtourism. Apart from evident environmental risks linked to cruising tourism, a frequent fluctuation of tourists generates large amount of waste increasing pressure on the communal infrastructure and public services.

Housing and real-estate prices in Dubrovnik are highest in the country already for many years, they are compared with prices in Paris, Rome or Venice. Old town Dubrovnik has experiences full gentrification, losing one third of its inhabitants. Apart from the sky rocketing prices of food and housing, local inhabitants are faced with various pressure to abandon the old town.

Case of Dubrovnik is also known for the speculative investments. Most recent case links to case of Srđ golf playground on plateau Srđ which was used as a paravane for building a luxurious resort for global elite. This project has been opposed and challenged by the local environmental group Srđ je naš which fought its legitimacy for more than 15 years. Though, constitutional complaints have been accepted in 2025 after marathon struggle, the new Construction Law opens door for thousands of similar cases with self-evident extractivist aspirations. Being frontrunner in tourism, Dubrovnik is the first city in Croatia which aims to radically confront the overtourism. According to the Responsible Travel agency, Dubrovnik has been ranked the most overcrowded city in the world, with 27 tourists to every resident at its peak. Municipal government wants to counter further displacement from the Old Town and keep the sense of community, eroded by tourist accommodation and high property prices.

This case shows that municipal governments have enough power to limit the unsustainable model of tourism once the population discontent becomes high making life in the city unbearable. This first step toward tourism degrowth is more 'degrowth by disaster' but still it traces the path for more sustainable tourism.

## City of Zadar

City of Zadar in central Dalmatia is becoming increasingly popular as destination, following the unsustainable pathways of its older predecessors, Dubrovnik and Split. This medieval town with 70.000 inhabitants attracts almost 700. 000 tourists mainly from Germany, Poland and Austria during one year, experiencing stable 20% of increase in last few years. Zadar airport has identified 1.5 million passengers only during 2024.

Zadar is also not exception when it comes to detrimental social impacts of tourism. Due to severe damages experienced during war and needed reconstruction, Zadar has entered in its tourist renaissance much later. Now it is quickly catching up becoming one of the most attractive destinations, being close to many natural parks. While housing prices are rising with slower pace, there is increase of short-term accommodation units, traffic congestions and parking zones. Furthermore, inhabitants report many cases of cultural commodification, particularly in cases of the old town that is adapting to the demands of tourists. Accordingly, justification and overtourism are gradually becoming part of everyday life. Small ports, promenades and green zones are examples of sustainable projects, but traffic and public services remain a huge challenge for local government. Still, city is caught between vision of sustainable tourism and direct response toward the needs. For example, few thousands of new parking spots to be built in few new garages as presented and perceived as solution, without further questioning of the road traffic as the key transport solution.

City of Zadar has developed a regional climate strategy to cope with the detrimental impacts of climate change such as floods, heat waves and biodiversity loss. Yet, again,

this strategy obviously conflicts with general trend of increasing number of tourists, parking spots and air traffic that is supposed to confirm success of tourist season, each time with higher numbers.

## City of Pula

Old roman town Pula on Istrian peninsula is one of the key tourist destinations in the Northern Adriatic. Close to Slovenia and Italy, this 50 000 inhabitants city is hosting almost half a million of tourists during the year, arriving mainly through road traffic from Slovenia, Italy and Germany. City of Pula has its own airport, though the traffic to this airport remains relatively limited. Therefore, most of the GHG emissions originating from transport are directly linked to road traffic.

Due to constant increase of number of visitors City of Pula is also facing rapid gentrification and increase of housing prices. Various investments – primarily new hotels – are planned to emerge in the broader area of Pula responding to demand of the tourist markets. Very often spatial and urban planning is ‘written’ by the investors whereas local government offers a broad range of privileges. Yet, due to developed civil society and inhabitants that appreciate good quality of life, many of speculative investments are directly contested by citizens. Most recent successfully contested case was related to location of water purifier which was planned to be located next to key city promenade.

City of Pula is faced with heat waves, floods, draughts and increase of sea rise. Due to changes in climate, local tourist stakeholders aim to decrease the tourism induced pressure through summer through creation of full year touristic offer which would anticipate climate change impacts.

As one of the most developed regions of Croatia, Istrian peninsula has been for many decades profiled as elite tourist destination in accordance to sustainable development criteria. Unlike the destinations in Dalmatia it has created a profile of eco-tourism destination, still in most of the cases available to upper middle-class visitors. In broader Pula region, there are many tourist operators who implement various best practices, from cyclo-tourism, nature friendly accommodation, incorporating local food producers etc. Due to its mild climate, Istria can develop its touristic offer in more balanced way decreasing number of visitors during the summer and ease the burden of massive influx of tourists during one period of the year.

## 5 Main results

Findings have demonstrated that green transformation in the tourism industry is still underdeveloped at national/local level and that relatively weak regulation at the EU level does not play a decisive role in the green transformation of the whole sector. Furthermore, it has revealed a number of gaps and blind spots in coordination between key local and national stakeholders in the tourism industry, cities and ministries accountable for green transition. Furthermore, key trends in the industry show that sustainable tourism is perceived rather as one of the avenues for industry's development rather than result of the overall systemic transformation of the whole sector.

Taking into account important role of tourism contribution to the GDP and to national economy, our research shows that tourism industry landscape, particularly in selected tourist urban destinations, is characterized by prevailing growth orientation that relies on numerous extractive practices, gentrification and commodification while neglecting environmental and social impacts of tourism activity manifesting in rapid increase of real estate prices, incremental decrease of labour rights and excessive pressure on public infrastructure leading to lower quality of life in tourist urban destinations. Furthermore, findings demonstrate limited capacity for trade-offs between economic benefits from tourism industry on one side and mainly detrimental environmental/social impacts of industry. Absence of enforcement mechanisms at EU level coupled with voluntary nature of stakeholder's commitments at national/local level undermine the green transformation of tourism industry thus placing short-term orientation on immediate monetary gains without significant payback to local community and re-investments in the public infrastructure.

Our findings show that in such constellation key winners are "business-as-usual" players which generate direct profit through massive tourism orientation, mainly multinational companies that offer services accommodation (*Air B'n'b, Booking*) and air transport. These two activities contribute significantly to unsustainable practices in spatial planning and gentrification, but also to a high environmental footprint. Another party that has a key interest in lifting environmental constraints for tourist operators is the State itself, as it highly relies on income from tourism.

Key losers are citizens and local communities who might have limited short-term gains, but in the long term they lose the opportunity for affordable housing in their urban environments and experience further decrease of quality of life and public services. Furthermore, irreversible changes in eco-systems, particularly due to sea pollution, water scarcity, biodiversity loss, and irregular waste management make the life of local communities less sustainable.

In overall, findings also indicate that in cities which are key urban destinations there is, contrary to state, growing awareness of local policy makers based on the need to regulate tourism activity and develop mechanisms and policies which can decrease their climate vulnerability and neutralize local social impacts. Yet, they lack both human and financial resources to address this in systemic manner. In most of the cases, these

interventions are not directly related to green transition itself, but to achieving sustainability if not a mere survival for many.

## 6 Discussion and conclusions

Clearly, tourism industry in Croatia is far from goals of the just green transition. Key protagonists claim that massive tourism is not their ambition, yet figures show opposite. There is also striking contrast between the scale of the profit originating from tourism and poor re-investments into municipal public infrastructure. Cities and municipalities bear the burden of both social and environmental risks caused by tourism activities. Industry's sustainability is perceived primarily through the economic/growth perspective and maintenance of the extractive character of industry. In the official narratives, growth of tourism is closely linked with the continuous focus on the GDP growth thus sidelining potential constraints and limits related to green policies. As many inhabitants particularly in the coastal area live from tourism, they are too, hesitant to support any measure that would limit continuation of touristic activity. Very often that is linked to economic and social status: those who are more privileged to own apartments and earn from rent, very often have different positions from the poorer strata of inhabitants who are less and less able to cope with increasing housing prices, noise, sea pollution, food prices, lack of water etc.

Our research findings have shown striking disparity between official narratives on tourism and its role in the green transition promoted by key stakeholders and prevailing extractive practices which create detrimental environmental and social impacts. They highlight the continuing adherence of economic growth in tourism development and lack of capacity to decouple tourism model from extractive practices and growth dependency. Therefore, green transition in the tourism sector remains extremely limited, without proper reinforcing mechanisms for implementation or developed monitoring categories for environmental and social impacts. Even in the official documents at the EU and national level these destructive linkages are not sufficiently recognised, addressed or monitored in existing policies. We can group key findings in few categories:

*Excessive pressure of tourism activity on public infrastructure and natural resources:* evidence from field research shows that intense resource use significantly contributes to environmental footprint of tourism activity and to increase of social inequalities related to access to public services and infrastructure in selected tourist hubs. Impacts vary from use of drinking water, peaks in energy consumption, in-adequate urban planning, carbon intensive transport to lack of affordable housing and poor material infrastructure. Yet, local governments and stakeholders increasingly recognize that this development pathway is unsustainable and the need to be regulated at local level. Still, policy responses are absent, scarce or underdeveloped.

*Resistance of tourism industry toward systemic transformation:* maintaining 'business-as-usual' model that gives priority to short-term profit and extraction of monetary value in relation to nature protection or responsible use of natural resources. Tourism industry overall perceives green transition as a direction of development only for small, targeted and specific 'enclave' for specific target group rather than complies with imperatives for systemic transformation of whole supply chain.

*Limited trade-off capacity:* cities are perceived as the machines of growth and in this framework, tourism is employed to achieve this goal thus limiting capacity to trade economic growth and generated income with social well-being and environmental justice. Various blind spots and coordination gaps at institutional and governmental level are used to maintain inefficient system characterised with lack of coordination and regulation. Yet, cities and their local communities show increasing level of recognition of detrimental impacts of tourism activity and show need to have stronger agency in creating conditions for green transition.

*Weak enforcement mechanisms:* voluntary commitment of key stakeholders to continue with green transition within the tourism sector and weak/slow regulation of tourism activities don't provide proper framework to implement green measures and policies. Data gaps –which are not accidental and originate from lack of political recognition of the problem– are generated primarily through inadequate framework of evaluation of results in the sector which are framed to present results through lenses of profit/income accumulation and contribution to GDP while neglecting a diverse spectrum of detrimental impacts on ecological and social well-being.

Findings have provided more in-depth overview of tourism impact on the urban infrastructure, public services, quality of life and resource use suggesting need for stronger regulatory agency of local decision makers. Since systemic character of green transformation in tourism industry is still rare or absent, this research is valuable to demonstrate huge disparity and divergencies between notion of sustainable but still extractive tourism (as one operating within 'business-as-usual' framework) and potential degrowth of tourism industry characterised by lower environmental footprint and less damage for local communities. While tourism industry seems to be for the time national "winning card" contributing to job creation and economic growth, status of local communities as key losers of the process remains relatively invisible and necessary capacity to manage trade-offs rather underdeveloped. This also reveals currently locked but large unutilised transformative potential for green transition which needs to eliminate blind spots, improve coordination, democratise governance and provide impetus for key stakeholders. Accordingly, without stronger enforcing mechanisms and more coherent coordination, green transition within the tourism sector is expected to maintain limited and marginal. With further urge for competitiveness voiced by the European Commission, EU policy is unlikely to significantly contribute to local governments in limiting detrimental impact of the industry.

## 7 Recommendations

### Local level

- Enable/allow local governments to introduce and implement measures to motivate tourists to reduce resource consumption in tourist areas (water, energy);
- Introduce local reward schemes for sustainable behaviour changing patterns of behaviour and travel;
- Use local incentives to demotivate passengers to use air traffic to reach destinations;
- Support hotels, tourist operators and private accommodation owners to nudge tourists to use sustainable or public transport (discounts, gratis days);
- Build local public-civic partnerships and alliances to foster sustainable practices in food, transport and urban planning;
- Increase city tourist taxes;
- Limit the number of tourists;
- Provide subsidies for affordable housing in tourist destinations;
- Develop local sustainable eco-systems that ensure local food production, renewable energy use and biodiversity protection
- Introduce forms of tourism that enable longer stays with lower environmental footprint and in-kind contribution to local community
- Motivate local tourist-operators and boards to design sustainable tourism maps and guidelines
- Incentivise and encourage use of public transport and cycling infrastructure
- Support civic or private incentives aiming to decarbonize parts of supply chain in tourism industry

### National level

- Set up coordination body between Ministry of tourism, Ministry of economy, Ministry of construction and Ministry of environmental protection and green transition to align and synchronise monitoring of implemented measures;
- Modify and adjust data collection to follow and monitor social and environmental impacts of tourism
- Introduce re-distributive measures that enable local governments to re-invest significant part of locally generated income from tourist activity in communal infrastructure, services, welfare systems and eco-systems; back to local community
- Ensure policy improvement through feedback loop from monitoring and implementation level
- Increase taxes on aviation transport and give subsidies to railway options

## European level

- Create new policies that recognise detrimental social and environmental impacts of tourism;
- Introduce reinforcing mechanisms to regulate tourism industry and demand monitoring at national level;
- Support regions and cities with funding programs to ensure affordable housing in tourist destinations;
- Introduce mandatory monitoring of wellbeing indicators in tourist destinations

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