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Article

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Spatial distribution and challenges in European Union funding: A perspective from tourism projects

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ABSTRACT

Tourism is a key economic sector, yet its prominence within European Union funding remains limited. This paper presents the first multi-programme estimate of tourism-related EU funding between 2007 and 2020, covering eleven major programmes. An estimated €5.45 billion—2.23 % of total EU funding—was allocated, primarily through regional and structural funds. Support from other instruments was marginal, despite tourism's multi-sectoral relevance. The findings reveal spatial disparities linked to institutional capacity and governance structures, reflecting broader challenges associated with project-based funding. This study contributes to ongoing policy debates around the future Multiannual Financial Framework (2028–2034) and the EU Sustainable Tourism Strategy, calling for more coherent and inclusive support for tourism across Member States.

1. Introduction

Tourism is a globally significant economic sector, with Europe leading as the world's top destination, welcoming over half of international visitors, totalling 747 million arrivals—1 % above pre-pandemic levels in 2024 (UN Tourism, 2025). In 2019, tourism contributed 9.6 % to European GDP and provided employment for over 38.5 million people (WTTC, 2024). European Union (EU) policies aim to maintain this leading position while promoting Europe as a sustainable destination, with a strong focus on social and environmental considerations (European Commission, 2023a; Torres et al., 2025). In line with these goals, the European Commission adopted the European Agenda for Tourism 2030 and launched the Tourism Transition Pathway, outlining funding sources to support destinations and the tourism sector in accelerating toward a more resilient and sustainable tourism ecosystem (European Commission, 2022). This financial support enables the development of sustainable tourism practices, fosters innovation and strengthens collaboration between Member States. The EU is the highest funder of cross-border tourism cooperation projects, not just within EU border, but also as a means to strengthen cooperation with neighbouring countries and those wishing accession to the EU (Makkonen et al., 2018).

In the tourism sector, EU funding is distributed through multiple programmes, reflecting the broader trend of project-based governance (Godenhjelm et al., 2015; Setoodegan et al., 2022). Much of research

conducted in EU funded tourism projects has been centred around regional and cross-border projects to analyse cooperation, regionalisation, governance, regional identity, visitor attractions and destination development issues, among others (Bohn et al., 2023; Ioannides et al., 2006; Mayer et al., 2019; Montano et al., 2024; Nash et al., 2006; Prokkola, 2011; Prokkola et al., 2015; Setoodegan et al., 2022; Shepherd & Ioannides, 2020; Stoffelen, 2018; Stoffelen & Vanneste, 2017). However, despite its recognised importance, tourism remains largely absent from strategic EU budgetary frameworks, often embedded within broader policy domains such as regional development, culture, research, or environment. This limited recognition has contributed to persistent gaps in knowledge regarding the actual volume and distribution of EU support for tourism-related activities.

Previous studies on the spatial distribution of EU funding and its impact on territorial development have largely focused on specific country regions when assessing the tourism sector, such as in Hungary (Badar et al., 2023; Czuczor et al., 2023) and Poland (Puciato & Oleśniewicz, 2023). Other research has examined broader funding programmes, such as research and development funding, but without direct relevance to tourism (Piro et al., 2024; Rubiera Morollón & Fernández García, 2023). The only prior study that analysed tourism at the EU-wide level was Butowski (2010), which assessed the role and financial support for tourism within the EU's Cohesion Policy, focusing on Structural Funds for the 1994–1999 and 2000–2006 programming periods. Since then, the range of EU funding mechanisms has diversified

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significantly.

The objective of this paper is to comprehensively analyse EU funding allocated to tourism-related projects during the last two most recent complete programming periods, 2007–2013 and 2014–2020, identifying trends and spatial distribution patterns. This analysis adopts a broad EU-wide perspective, encompassing multiple funding mechanisms beyond European Structural and Investment Funds, examining other EU programmes and providing a more holistic view of the sector. This study is innovative, as it represents the first critical analysis of this topic, addressing a significant gap in the existing literature. This study offers not only a descriptive account but also a diagnostic tool that can inform policy reform and funding strategy. Its findings are particularly relevant for EU policymakers currently engaged in consultations for the new EU Sustainable Tourism Strategy, and for negotiators shaping the forthcoming Multiannual Financial Framework (2028–2034). Moreover, the analysis serves national and regional tourism authorities, policy makers, and funding applicants seeking to better understand past allocation patterns, identify barriers to access, and advocate for more targeted and transparent support. By exposing country disparities and programme-level imbalances, the study provides an empirical foundation for advancing more equitable, cohesive, and evidence-based approaches to EU tourism funding.

Considering this, the theoretical framework begins by examining the role of tourism within the EU, particularly in relation to spatial justice, institutional and absorptive capacity, and projectification and EU governance. The methodology section details the approach and sources used to collect and analyse data on EU funding allocated to tourism. The results are then presented, broken down by thematic areas and programmes in four main areas: 1) Structural and investment; 2) Research, innovation and competitiveness; 3) Education, training and youth; and 4) Culture and Environment. The discussion places particular emphasis on the scale and distribution of funding across various programmes and Member States, providing insights into resource allocation within the EU and raising concerns about potential power imbalances.

2. Theoretical framework

This study is situated at the intersection of EU cohesion policy, regional development, and tourism governance. To interpret the distribution of EU funding for tourism-related projects, the analysis draws on three interlinked conceptual lenses: spatial justice, institutional and absorptive capacity, and projectification within multi-level governance. Together, these offer a framework for understanding how disparities in tourism funding emerge across Member States, and how they reflect broader structural and governance dynamics within the EU.

2.1. Spatial justice

Spatial justice provides a normative and analytical foundation for evaluating how public resources are geographically distributed, calling for the fair territorial distribution of resources and opportunities (Soja, 2010). EU cohesion policy is explicitly designed to reduce disparities between regions and foster balanced development. However, funding allocations do not always reflect these aims, raising questions about whether existing mechanisms deliver spatially just outcomes or reinforce pre-existing inequalities (Fritsch et al., 2024; Madanipour et al., 2022).

Scott (2023) describes spatial justice as a core objective of EU territorial policy, while also recognising that broader demographic and institutional shifts challenge its implementation. He advocates for better alignment between policy instruments and place-based needs. Similarly, Fritsch et al. (2024) frame spatial justice as both a policy imperative and a condition of legitimacy, emphasising that uniform solutions are insufficient. They argue for context-sensitive approaches that acknowledge governance asymmetries and the need for enabling conditions and local empowerment. Madanipour et al. (2022) advance a

multidimensional model, encompassing spatiality, integration, and inclusion; that challenges the rigid distinction between distributive and procedural justice. Their analysis underscores how spatial justice in the EU remains more rhetorical than operational, with structural imbalances continuing to shape access to cohesion resources.

This literature provides critical insights for analysing the geography of tourism funding, particularly in cross-border and peripheral regions where EU support is positioned as both a development tool and an instrument of integration. Tourism has played a role in fostering cross-border regionalisation (Prokkola, 2011; Timothy, 2006), enabled through initiatives such as INTERREG, which have supported the development of shared infrastructures, cooperative frameworks, and joint destination branding (Prokkola, 2011). Yet, despite its potential to contribute to territorial cohesion beyond national borders, such as in the case of Cultural Routes (Camatti et al., 2022), tourism remains underfunded relative to other sectors, such as transportation and environmental infrastructure (Butowski, 2010).

2.2. Institutional and absorptive capacity

The second analytical lens is institutional and absorptive capacity, defined as the ability of public and private actors to access, manage, and deliver EU-funded projects (Bachtler & Ferry, 2015). Tourism, being a multisectoral and often fragmented domain, may lack the consolidated administrative structures needed to effectively engage with complex EU funding procedures. This fragmentation makes it difficult for tourism actors to navigate the procedural and competitive requirements of EU funding, which often include strict eligibility criteria, technical documentation, and co-financing obligations that many lack the capacity to meet. As a result, access to EU funds depends heavily on local institutional readiness, technical expertise, and co-financing ability.

According to Bachtler and Ferry (2015), cohesion policy conditionalities are only effective when they are credible, proportionate, and adapted to national administrative contexts. They emphasise that both structural mismatches, such as misalignments between EU funding design and domestic governance systems; and administrative capacity gaps, including limited expertise, staffing, or procedural knowledge, contribute to lower absorption rates, particularly in less experienced or under-resourced regions. In cross-border cooperation, for example, research has shown that funding often circulates among the same networked actors and more capable institutions, while small businesses and community-based actors struggle to engage due to administrative complexity, low awareness, and weak institutional support (Bohn et al., 2023; Ioannides et al., 2006; Stoffelen & Vanneste, 2017).

Disparities persist in how resources are accessed and absorbed across regions (Piro et al., 2024; Sánchez Trujillo et al., 2024). These asymmetries not only impact funding uptake, but also affect the nature and quality of project outcomes. Regions with higher capacity tend to dominate coordination roles and shape funding priorities, while others are left with symbolic or fragmented participation (Ioannides et al., 2006). This dynamic reinforces systemic inequalities rather than correcting them.

2.3. Projectification and EU governance

The third conceptual lens is projectification, this is the increasing use of short-term, competitive, and externally funded projects as the dominant governance model in EU policymaking (Hodgson et al., 2019; Sjöblom & Godenhjelm, 2009). As Büttner (2019) highlights, this co-financing model has fostered a professionalised ‘project world’ reliant on managerial standards, specialised consultants, and standardised procedures. This has created both opportunities and structural barriers, especially for sectors like tourism, where capacity and project readiness vary widely across Member States, reinforcing administrative hierarchies and limiting the role of non-professional actors. Sjöblom and Godenhjelm (2009) similarly warn that project proliferation creates

fragmented decision-making structures and undermines institutional continuity, particularly in policy fields that require cross-sectoral alignment and long-term investment. In the tourism sector, this trend is particularly evident; without a dedicated EU funding line, tourism projects must compete within broader frameworks (e.g. European Regional Development Fund, Competitiveness of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises – COSME – or Erasmus+), aligning their objectives with general programme priorities rather than sector-specific needs.

Hodgson et al. (2019) argue that projectification represents not just a technical innovation, but a political shift in public governance; one that favours short-termism, audit culture, and managerial logics over democratic accountability and long-term planning. This is echoed by Ponzo and Milazzo (2025), who describe ‘project-driven governance’ as a system where policy interventions are shaped primarily by funding availability rather than long-term strategic goals. Their findings, drawn from the field of migrant integration, are highly applicable to tourism, where externally defined funding cycles often determine the scope, partnerships, and sustainability of initiatives.

These critiques are especially relevant in the context of EU Territorial Cooperation programmes, where short project durations, rigid thematic priorities, and difficulties in securing follow-up funding often hinder sustained development pathways (Godenhjelm et al., 2015; Makkonen et al., 2018; Mayer et al., 2019; Shepherd & Ioannides, 2020; Stoffelen & Vanneste, 2017). While cross-border tourism projects have contributed to infrastructural improvements and the creation of cohesive regional identities (Prokkola, 2011), their strategic potential is often undermined by administrative complexity, limited integration with broader planning processes, and the weak engagement of non-governmental actors (Bohn et al., 2023; Ioannides et al., 2006; Stoffelen & Vanneste, 2017). This insufficient involvement of civil society and local stakeholders has been criticised for producing initiatives that are more symbolic than substantive, lacking depth, continuity, and the foundations necessary for long-term impact (Prokkola, 2011).

2.4. EU funding logic and sectoral context

The evolution of EU project-based funding is inseparable from its cohesion policy architecture. Originating in the 1980s in regional development project pilots, this approach laid the groundwork for the establishment of the EU’s cohesion policy and the introduction of Multi-annual Financial Frameworks (MFFs), with approximately half of the EU budget now distributed through project instruments such as the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), Cohesion Fund (CF), European Social Fund (ESF), European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF) (Büttner, 2019). As Büttner explains, these funds are channelled via Operational Programmes negotiated with Member States, based on EU-wide strategic objectives, and typically require national or regional co-financing. This co-funding model creates both opportunities and constraints: while it promotes joint ownership, it also favours territories with the fiscal and institutional capacity to meet EU requirements, further entrenching disparities in access and influence.

In tourism, this logic has had mixed outcomes. While the sector contributes significantly to local economies and cross-border regionalisation (Camatti et al., 2022; Timothy & Saarinen, 2013), its visibility within EU programmes remains low, and access to funding remains dependent on administrative competence, prior experience, and the ability to align project objectives with broader programme goals. As recent research has shown, this creates structural barriers that disproportionately benefit regions with strong institutional ecosystems, leaving others, particularly in the periphery, at a disadvantage (Sánchez Trujillo et al., 2024; Varela-Vázquez et al., 2019).

While previous studies have explored the role of tourism in regional development and the strategic relevance of EU Territorial Cooperation (Faby, 2006; Makkonen et al., 2018; Prokkola et al., 2015), there remains a lack of systematic analysis of how EU funding for tourism-

related projects has been distributed across programmes, countries, and time. This paper addresses that gap by providing the first comprehensive, multi-programme mapping of EU tourism funding between 2007 and 2020. By applying the conceptual lenses of spatial justice, institutional capacity, and projectification, the study moves beyond descriptive mapping to critically examine the underlying dynamics of funding distribution and their implications for territorial cohesion, policy design, and governance equity in the tourism sector.

3. Method

This study adopts a qualitative and exploratory research approach, based on systematic document and database analysis. Its primary aim is to map and interpret the distribution of EU funding for tourism-related projects across multiple programmes, rather than to produce generalisable statistical models. While some quantitative data, such as project counts and estimated funding shares; are used to support the analysis, the focus remains on identifying patterns, inconsistencies, and governance dynamics within the EU funding landscape. Due to the lack of standardised and fully comparable data across programmes, a qualitative and exploratory lens is more appropriate. This approach allows for an interpretive examination of how tourism-related funding is structured, which actors benefit, and how institutional, territorial, and policy factors influence outcomes.

Given the diversity of EU funding programmes applicable to tourism, the initial phase of the research involved a systematic review of tourism-related projects funded by the European Union during the last two full programming periods (2007–2013 and 2014–2020). In order to identify which EU programmes supported tourism-related actions, various guides and sources were consulted, particularly the European Commission’s publication for the 2014–2020 period (European Commission, 2016) and the online platform or guide for the 2021–2027 period (European Commission, 2023b). The latter source was used to provide a comprehensive overview of the current funding landscape, despite some

Table 1
Categorisation of EU funding programmes by thematic area.

Thematic area	EU programmes
1. Structural and investment	European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), Cohesion Fund (CF), European Social Fund (ESF), European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF)
2. Research, innovation and competitiveness	FP7/Horizon, Competitiveness of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (COSME)
3. Education, training and youth	Erasmus+
4. Culture and Environment	Creative Europe and LIFE Programme

current programmes not being available in previous periods. In total, eleven programmes were analysed by reviewing their respective EU programme websites, which provided details on objectives, target groups, and budget allocations. Subsequently, further project-specific information for each programme was gathered from various EU websites, datasets, data hubs and programme documentation.

The information was categorised into four main thematic areas, each representing an aspect under which EU programmes allocate funds for tourism-related projects. These are: 1. Structural and investment; 2. Research, innovation and competitiveness; 3. Education, training and youth; and 4. Environment and culture (Table 1). Sources included ERDF/CF/ESF raw data, Rural development EAFRD payments, ESIF Finance implementation details, EMFF and COSME datahubs, Keep.eu platform for cross-border, transnational and interregional cooperation programmes, CORDIS, Erasmus+ projects, Creative Europe projects, and the LIFE public database from CINEA. All platforms and data used are publicly accessible, ensuring transparency and replicability of the data

collection process. Hyperlinks to each database are included in the Endnotes.¹ Initial data collection was conducted between April and July 2024, with verification and updates carried out in January–February 2025 to estimate tourism-related allocations as a share of overall programme budgets.

Due to inconsistencies across the datasets and the inability to make exact data comparisons, the data selection process was adjusted accordingly to ensure the most accurate and comprehensive analysis. For instance, in some datasets from the 2007–2013 period, project titles were not always available. In the EAFRD dataset, the code ‘tourism activities’ was chosen from the ‘measure name’ variable. For data from the Keep.eu website, which is the largest database of cross-border, transnational and interregional cooperation programmes, projects were initially identified through keyword searches using the terms ‘tourism’ and ‘tourist’ across project titles. In the EMFF datahub, although there was a filter for the relevant topic ‘Tourism & nautical routes’, it did not return a complete list of tourism-related projects. As a result, a manual search using the terms ‘tourism’ and ‘tourist’ was conducted to complement the data. A similar approach was applied to the COSME datahub. Downloadable zip files from CORDIS for the FP7 and H2020 programmes were retrieved, and the same keywords were used to search project titles. For Erasmus+, Creative Europe and the LIFE Programme, online databases were accessed using the same keyword search in project titles. In the case of Creative Europe and LIFE Programme, all search results were included, even if the terms did not appear in the project title, as their relevance was confirmed in the project descriptions. In all cases, only publicly available data from official EU websites was examined. Consequently, information found on individual EU Member States’ websites was neither searched nor included in the analysis. As a result, most of the findings discussed pertain to cooperation projects implemented across multiple countries, with the exception of the EAFRD actions from the 2007–2013 period, which cover single-country initiatives but are included in the EU dataset. This approach aligns with the methodologies used by Butowski (2010), who analysed EU Structural Funds for the 1994–1999 and 2000–2006 programming periods, and Bellini et al. (2017), who examined tourism’s contribution to regional development strategies through an exploratory analysis of Smart Specialisation Strategy documents using EU databases.

This approach successfully identified the majority of projects explicitly labelled as tourism-focused. However, it is acknowledged that this method may have excluded projects framed under adjacent terms such as ‘heritage’, ‘culture’, ‘leisure’, ‘travel’, ‘attraction’, ‘destination’, ‘outdoor recreation’, or ‘hospitality’, which could have provided a more comprehensive picture of the funding landscape. Nevertheless, the selected search strategy yielded a substantial dataset of over 4800 tourism-related projects and offered a high degree of accuracy in identifying relevant initiatives. A full manual screening of all projects across databases was not feasible due to significant limitations in data comparability and structure. For example, the EAFRD dataset did not

provide individual project-level data but only grouped expenditures under broad measures such as ‘tourism activities’. In other cases, such as the Keep.eu database, the volume of entries was too extensive to allow for manual screening, with more than 11,700 projects listed for the 2014–2020 period alone.

Several limitations arise due to inconsistencies in the available datasets. For example, the Keep.eu website acknowledges that its data is not consistently complete or up-to-date across all programmes due to differences between them. Furthermore, during the 2007–2013 period, publicly available data is incomplete for certain programmes. Additionally, some websites for inactive programmes are either no longer updated or contain broken links, making comprehensive data collection challenging. Efforts to clarify and resolve inconsistencies through email inquiries to the EU have gone unanswered.

The data was examined to estimate the number of EU grants awarded for tourism-related projects under each programme. Where possible, it was further disaggregated by the country of project partners and by year. The analysis was conducted at the country level, as available data did not consistently support a breakdown by region. While some funds, particularly under Cohesion Policy, are allocated to specific sub-national areas based on eligibility criteria, the retrieved datasets did not allow for systematic analysis at that territorial scale. Only EU contributions or grants were considered, although some datasets included the total project amount and specified the percentage of EU funding. This allowed for a more detailed analysis of the distribution of EU funding across different programmes, countries and time periods, enabling the identification of trends and variations in tourism-related project funding.

Despite efforts to cross-check datasets and minimise duplication, variations in data quality, format, and completeness across programmes limit the precision of the results. Therefore, the figures presented should be interpreted as indicative rather than exact. Nonetheless, they offer a robust and systematic approximation of EU funding directed toward tourism-related actions between 2007 and 2020, allowing for a comparative assessment of which programmes contributed most, and which countries captured the largest shares of funding.

4. Results

This section first provides an overview of the objectives and key features of the various EU funding programmes that support tourism-related actions. It then presents the main findings from the data collection, illustrating the contribution of EU funds by programme, year and the countries of the project partners. To support clarity and comparability, the figures included in this section display the number of tourism-related projects, partner participation, and estimated funding volumes, based on the available data. While figure captions indicate the primary focus of each chart, detailed interpretation and discussion are provided in the accompanying narrative.

4.1. Structural and investment (ESIF)

Since their inception, the Structural Funds have played a pivotal role in promoting the development of tourism, with a primary focus on achieving the Community’s objectives of economic and social cohesion. These funds have been particularly directed toward providing support to underdeveloped regions, areas experiencing industrial decline, and those engaged in rural development (European Commission, 1995). Such regions are prioritised for European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) allocation, including the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the European Social Fund (ESF), the Cohesion Fund (CF), the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and the European Fisheries Fund, later called European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF).

ERDF has long been a key financial instrument supporting the economic development of European regions, particularly through tourism (Council of the European Union, 1984). INTERREG (European

¹ Note 1: Links to used EU websites and databases are as follows: ERDF/CF/ESF raw data https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu/2007-2013-Categorisation/2007-2013-Cohesion-categorisation-raw-data-from-cl/qt3c-wiyg/about_data, Rural development EAFRD payments https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu/2007-2013-Finances/2007-2013-EAFRD-expenditure-declaration-by-measure/sfx-zkte/about_data, ESIF Finance implementation details https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu/2014-2020-Finances/ESIF-2014-2020-Finance-Implementation-Details/99js-gm52/about_data, EMFF datahub <https://emff-datahub.eisma.eu>, COSME datahub <https://cosme-datahub.eisma.eu>, Keep.eu platform for cross-border, transnational and interregional cooperation programmes <https://keep.eu/projects/>, CORDIS FP7 <https://data.europa.eu/data/datasets/cordisfp7/projects?locale=en> CORDIS Horizon 2020 <https://data.europa.eu/data/datasets/cordish2020/projects?locale=en>, Erasmus+, <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/projects/search/> Creative Europe <https://culture.ec.europa.eu/creative-europe/projects/search/>, and the LIFE public database from CINEA <https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/life/publicWebsite/search/advanced>

Territorial Cooperation), supported by ERDF, is the EU's leading programme for fostering cross-border cooperation at both regional and national levels, aimed at benefiting all EU citizens. First introduced in 1990, INTERREG operates across several strands: cross-border (Interreg A), transnational (Interreg B), interregional (Interreg C), and cooperation with the outermost regions (Interreg D) (European Commission, n.d.). Fig. 1 highlights the top regional and structural EU tourism funding programmes during the 2007–2013 period, where a total of €1.29 billion was allocated to 1441 projects, predominantly in Eastern Europe and Mediterranean EU countries. These programmes, which include several Cross-Border Cooperation (CBC) initiatives funded by the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) and the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA), targeted transnational cooperation in regions such as the Adriatic, South-East Europe, and the Mediterranean Sea Basin. These play a vital role in fostering tourism-related projects that strengthen economic ties and promote sustainable tourism development across borders, particularly in regions that benefit from structural and cohesion funding.

Fig. 2 examines the number of regional/structural projects and partners by country during the same period. Italy leads in terms of both project numbers and partner involvement, participating in over 300 projects and engaging more than 800 partners. Other significant contributors include Germany and France. This imbalance highlights the leadership role that countries like Italy play in cross-border cooperation and the management of tourism-related structural projects.

ISO2 Country codes for all figures: AT (Austria), BE (Belgium), BG (Bulgaria), CY (Cyprus), CZ (Czech Republic), DE (Germany), ES (Spain), GR (Greece), FR (France), GB (United Kingdom), HR (Croatia), HU (Hungary), IT (Italy), LT (Lithuania), NL (Netherlands), NO (Norway), PL (Poland), PT (Portugal), RO (Romania), SE (Sweden), SI (Slovenia), SK (Slovakia), TR (Turkey).

Fig. 3 illustrates the top regional and structural EU tourism funding programmes for the 2014–2020 period, with a total of €2.49 billion allocated to 2281 unique projects. The increase in project numbers and funding in comparison to the previous period reflects the growing prioritisation of tourism as a driver for regional cohesion and economic growth.

Regarding the distribution of regional and structural funds for tourism projects and partners by country during the 2014–2020 period (Fig. 4), Italy once again leads in both the number of projects and partners, with over 400 projects and more than 1200 partners involved. France and Germany follow, also showing high levels of partner involvement, though with fewer projects compared to Italy.

The EU's rural development policy, through the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, supports rural tourism by fostering business creation, promoting agri-tourism, and enhancing the cultural and natural heritage of rural and mountainous regions. Initiated with projects in the 1970s and 1980s, EAFRD funds were directed toward

developing activities that complemented agricultural and farming efforts. These funds were primarily aimed at developing skills, particularly through tourism training courses, to facilitate the diversification of rural areas into tourism-related activities. Moreover, the funds encouraged the promotion of rural and farm tourism, alongside craft trade activities, with a focus on improving or adapting facilities to better accommodate and attract tourists.

Fig. 5 illustrates the analysis of EAFRD tourism funding from 2006 to 2015, amounting to €887.9 million, and reveals significant variation in how countries allocated funds, despite the absence of data on the total number of projects per country. Germany received the most funding overall, followed by Romania and Hungary, though initially receiving no funding, saw rapid increases and secured funding in later years. Data for the 2014–2020 period is not available.

The European Fisheries Fund, active from 2007 to 2013, focused on promoting sustainable development in fisheries regions by supporting diversification into activities such as eco-tourism and alternative employment to mitigate the socio-economic impacts of fisheries decline (European Commission, 2006). It evolved into the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund for the 2014–2020 period, aiming to promote sustainable fishing, assist coastal communities in diversifying their economies, create jobs and improve the quality of life in coastal areas. Of the total budget of €6.4 billion, 89 % was directly distributed to Member States for national programmes (European Commission, 2015), and the remaining is allocated to other projects managed by the European Commission through the Executive Agency for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (EASME). As shown in Fig. 6, approximately €7.1 million was allocated to 18 tourism-related projects across 21 countries, with Italy, Greece, and Spain receiving the largest shares of funding (Fig. 7), due to their higher number of participants and projects.

4.2. Research, innovation and competitiveness

Research and innovation in the EU are funded through various framework programmes. During the 2007–2013 period, the 7th Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development (FP7) was in place. It was followed by the Horizon 2020 Programme in 2014–2020.

An analysis of tourism-related projects under FP7 and Horizon 2020 reveals differences in scope, funding and focus. FP7 funded 13 tourism-related projects, focusing primarily on sustainability, heritage and the socio-economic impacts of tourism. The EU allocated a total of €11.85 million to FP7 tourism projects, with Spain being the top recipient, followed by Germany (Fig. 8). In contrast, Horizon 2020 funded 25 tourism-related projects, with a broader scope covering rural development, youth employment, smart tourism, and the impact of media on local communities. The total funding for these projects was significantly higher, at €46.82 million, with Italy and Spain receiving the largest shares (Fig. 9).

The instruments of the Competitiveness and Innovation Framework Programme during the 2007–2013 period (European Commission, 2014b), evolved into the Programme for the Competitiveness of Enterprises and Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (COSME) for 2014–2020 (Lajarthe, 2012). COSME is the only EU initiative specifically focused on tourism, aiming to enhance the sector's competitiveness and promote sustainable management. It supports SMEs by improving access to markets and financing, helping them remain sustainable and competitive. The programme also aids public authorities in improving the business environment and fostering entrepreneurship, driving economic growth across the EU (Svášek, 2016). Key tourism projects funded under COSME focused on addressing seasonality by supporting low-season tourism flows, diversifying the tourism offer through transnational products, enhancing cultural and natural routes, and increasing accessibility in tourism services. COSME funded 102 tourism projects, allocating approximately €28.63 million to organisations in 39 countries (Fig. 10). Italy led in participation, followed by Spain (Fig. 11).



Fig. 1. Regional / structural EU tourism funding (Top programmes) (2007–2013). Source: own elaboration with data from Keep.eu.

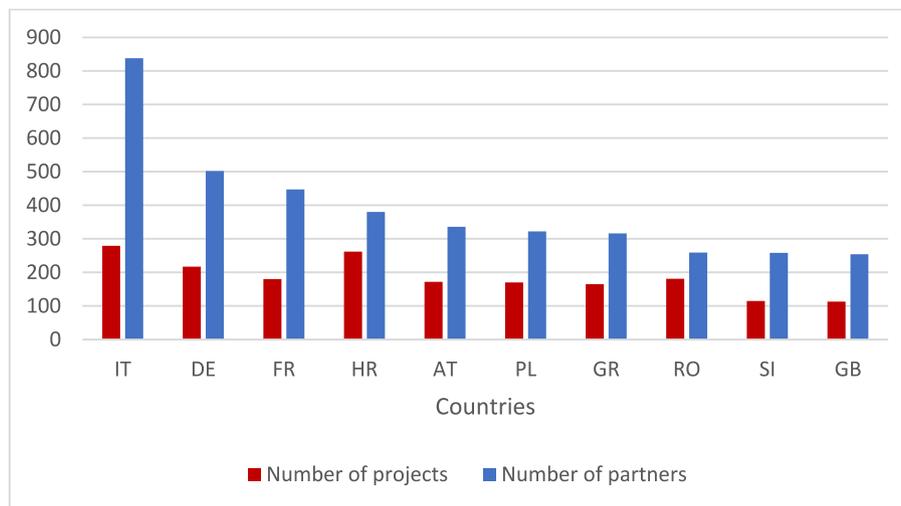


Fig. 2. Regional / structural funds – tourism projects and partners (Top countries) (2007–2013). Source: own elaboration with data from Keep.eu.

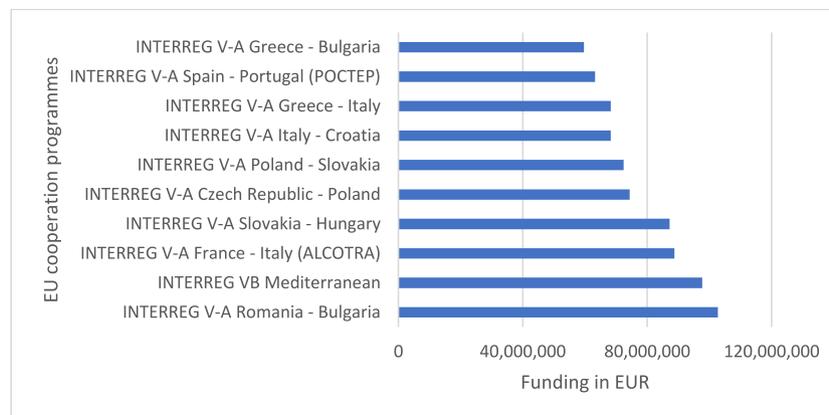


Fig. 3. Regional / structural EU funding (Tourism Top programmes) (2014–2020). Source: own elaboration with data from Keep.eu.

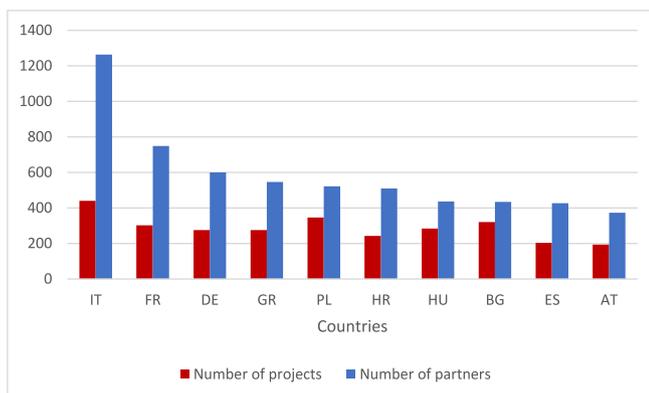


Fig. 4. Regional / structural funds – tourism projects and partners (Top countries) (2014–2020). Source: own elaboration with data from Keep.eu.

4.3. Education, training and youth

Erasmus has expanded from its initial focus on higher education to now include all areas of education, training, youth and sport. In 2014, the EU consolidated these efforts under a single programme, Erasmus+, which focuses on three key areas: student and staff mobility, cooperation through strategic partnerships and capacity building, and support for

policy reform (European Commission, 2020). Fig. 12 illustrates annual Erasmus+ tourism funding from 2014 to 2020, with a total of 640 projects receiving approximately €120.85 million in EU funding. A clear trend is the consistent increase in the number of supported projects, rising from around 70 in 2014 to approximately 150 in 2020, as well as in funding amounts, despite fluctuations. This growth reflects the expanding reach of Erasmus tourism initiatives, fostering educational and cultural exchanges across Europe.

In terms of project coordination, Italy clearly leads with over 120 projects, followed by Turkey follows with around 90 projects. Although the dataset suggests trends in funding distribution by country, breakdown of figures per country and project are unavailable (Fig. 13).

4.4. Culture and environment

From 2014 to 2020, Creative Europe aimed at fostering cultural diversity, artistic expression, and boosting the economic potential of the creative industries. It supported a range of projects in areas such as architecture, music, literature, performing arts, films, festivals and cultural tourism (European Commission, 2024a). The Creative Europe dataset includes 36 tourism-related projects, with a total grant of approximately €8.55 million from 2014 to 2020 (Fig. 14). Germany and France led project coordination with 7 projects each, while Belgium followed with 4, mostly in the last two years of the programme (Fig. 15). As with Erasmus+, a detailed breakdown of figures by country and project is unavailable.

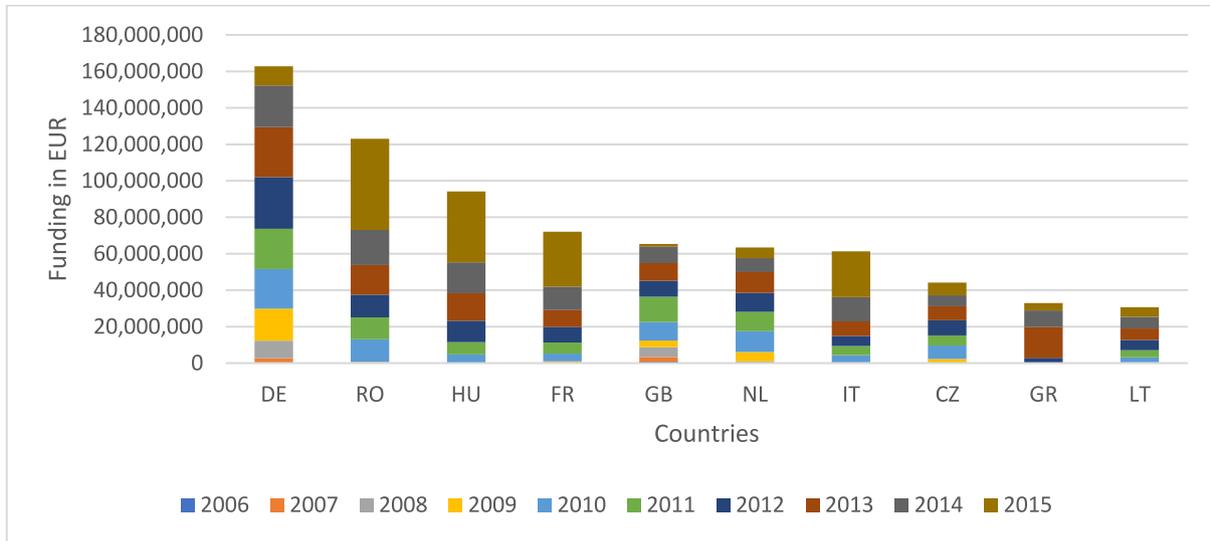


Fig. 5. EAFRD tourism funding by country (Top 10 countries) (2006–2015). Source: own elaboration with data from EAFRD.

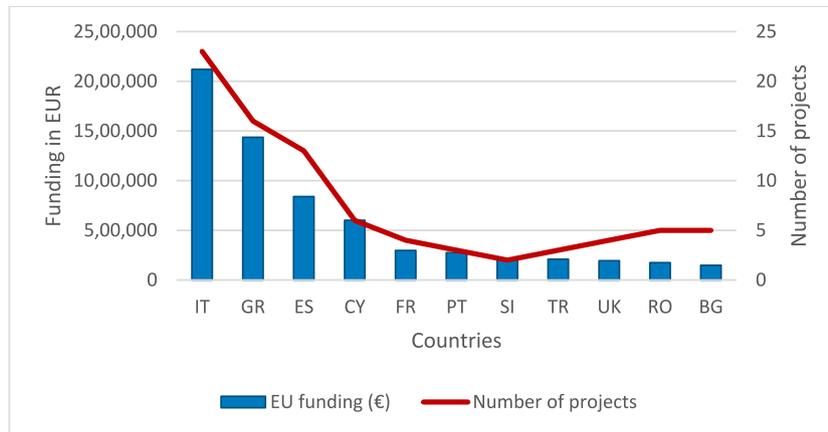


Fig. 6. EMFF tourism funding by country and number of projects (Top countries) (2014–2020). Source: own elaboration with data from EMFF Datahub.

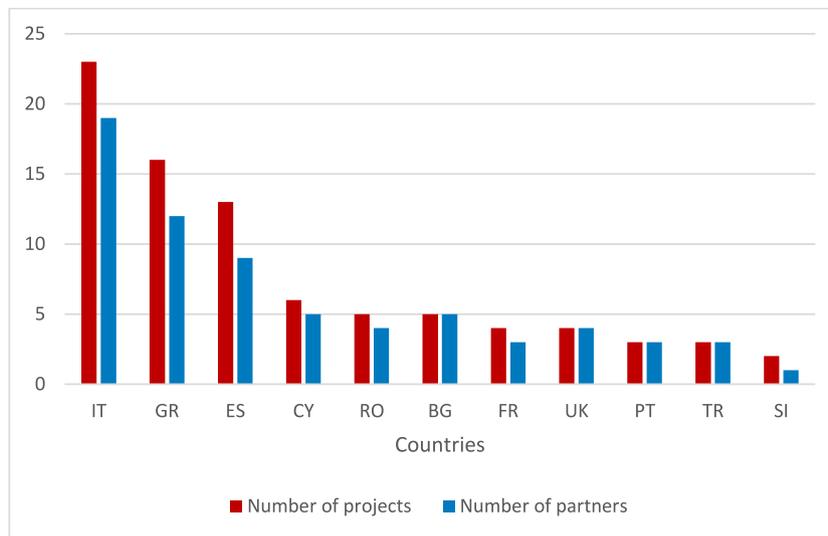


Fig. 7. EMFF tourism projects and partners by country. Source: own elaboration with data from EMFF Datahub.

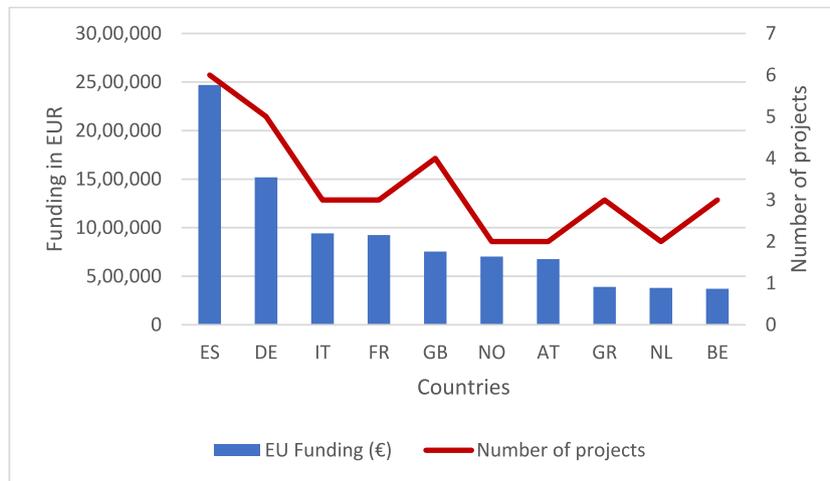


Fig. 8. FP7 tourism funding by country and number of projects (Top countries) (2007–2013). Source: own elaboration with data from CORDIS.

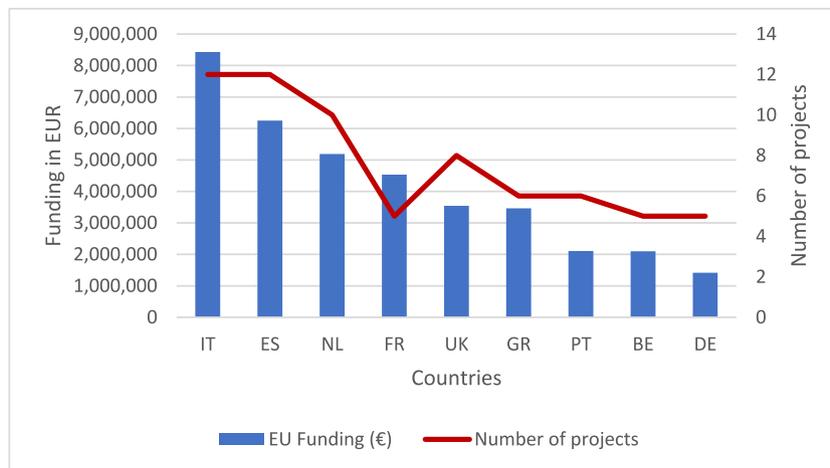


Fig. 9. Horizon 2020 tourism funding by country and number of projects (Top countries) (2014–2020). Source: own elaboration with data from CORDIS.

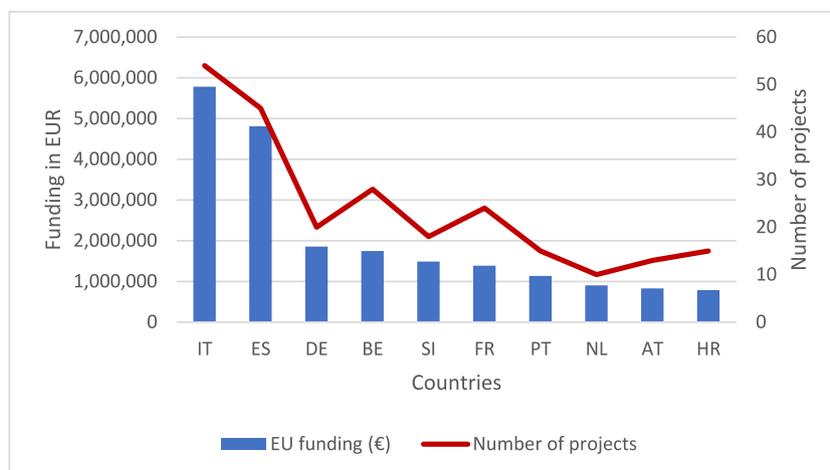


Fig. 10. COSME tourism funding by country and number of projects (Top countries) (2014–2020). Source: own elaboration with data from EISMEA.

The LIFE Programme is the EU’s funding instrument for environment and climate action. From 2007 to 2013, LIFE+ consisted of three sub-programmes: Nature and Biodiversity, Environment Policy and Governance, and Information and Communication. In the 2014–2020 period, the programme was streamlined into two sub-programmes:

Environment; and Climate Action. LIFE has supported various initiatives that promote sustainable tourism, particularly by safeguarding natural, cultural and traditional assets in regions that are economically dependent on them (European Commission, 2024b). The LIFE dataset from 2007 to 2013 reveals a total of 177 tourism-related projects with an EU

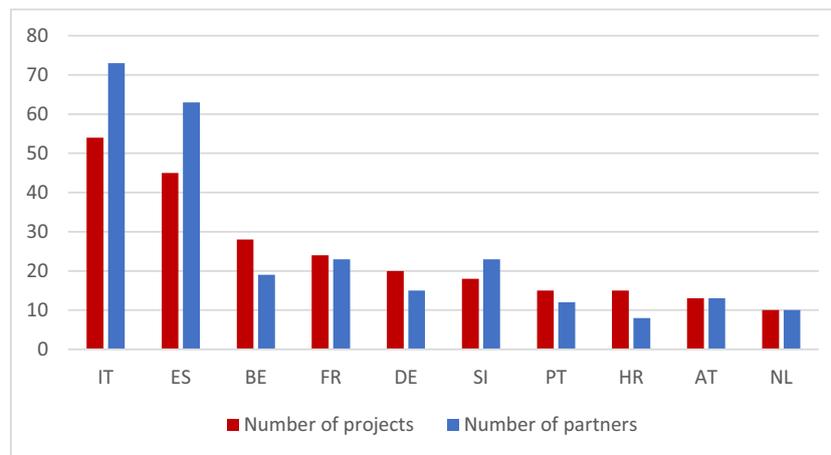


Fig. 11. COSME tourism projects and partners by country. Source: own elaboration with data from EISMEA.

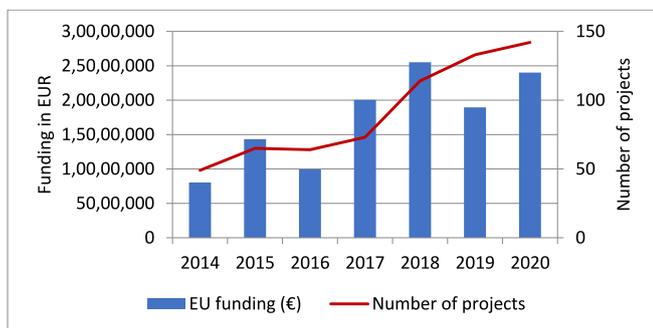


Fig. 12. Erasmus+ tourism funding and number of projects (2014–2020). Source: own elaboration with data from Erasmus+.

contribution of approximately €247.71 million (Fig. 16).

Fig. 17 depicting the number of LIFE projects by coordinating country from 2007 to 2013 highlights Italy as the leader, followed closely by Spain; and Poland, in third place, shows steady participation in the final three years.

The analysis of LIFE programme projects from 2014 to 2020 reveals several key insights. A total of 120 projects were funded during this period, with a cumulative EU contribution of approximately €318.97 million (Fig. 18).

Fig. 19 shows Italy and Spain as the leading coordinators, with Italy

overseeing 25 projects and Spain 22.

4.5. Funding overview

This study has presented the first comparative, cross-programme mapping of EU funding for tourism-related projects over the 2007–2013 and 2014–2020 programming periods. The findings highlight substantial differences in how various programmes support the tourism sector, revealing both structural imbalances and governance challenges. Across these two periods, a total of €5.45 billion was allocated to 4852 projects (Table 2).

Overall, this funding spans a wide range of programmes. During the 2007–2013 period, €2.43 billion was allocated across 1630 projects. The largest share was provided by regional and structural funds, which contributed €1.29 billion to projects promoting regional development and cooperation. Additionally, EAFRD allocated €888 million, playing a significant role in supporting rural tourism development. Funding from the LIFE programme and, especially from research and innovation through the FP7 programme, were lower. The 2014–2020 period saw a significant increase in funding, with €3.02 billion allocated to 3222 projects. Regional and structural funds remained a major source, contributing €2.49 billion and reinforcing their pivotal role in supporting cross-border and regional tourism initiatives. The LIFE programme allocated €319 million to tourism-related projects. Although the budget for research and innovation projects through Horizon 2020 doubled to almost €47 million in this period, it remains insufficient for equipping

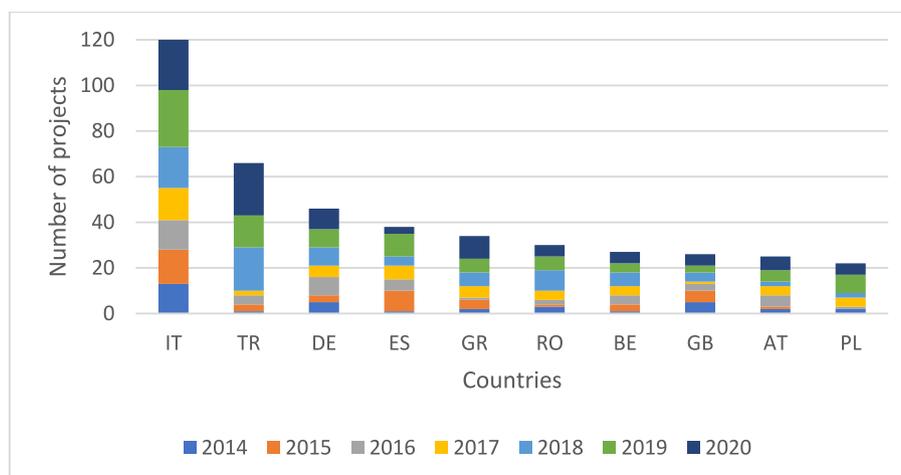


Fig. 13. Number of Erasmus+ tourism projects by coordinating country and year (Top countries). Source: own elaboration with data from Erasmus+.

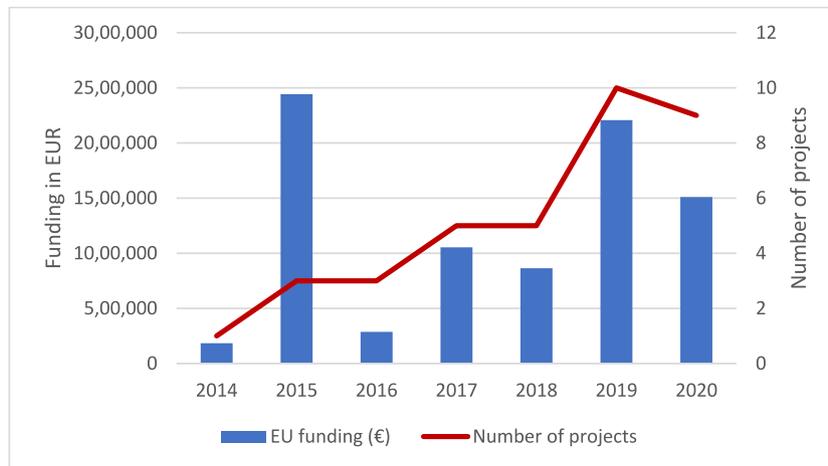


Fig. 14. Creative Europe tourism funding and number of projects (2014–2020). Source: own elaboration with data from Creative Europe.

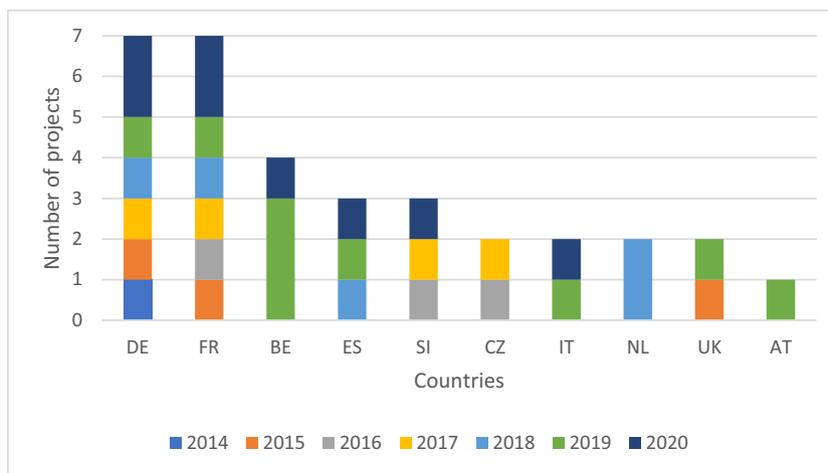


Fig. 15. Number of Creative Europe tourism projects by coordinating country and year (Top countries). Source: own elaboration with data from Creative Europe.

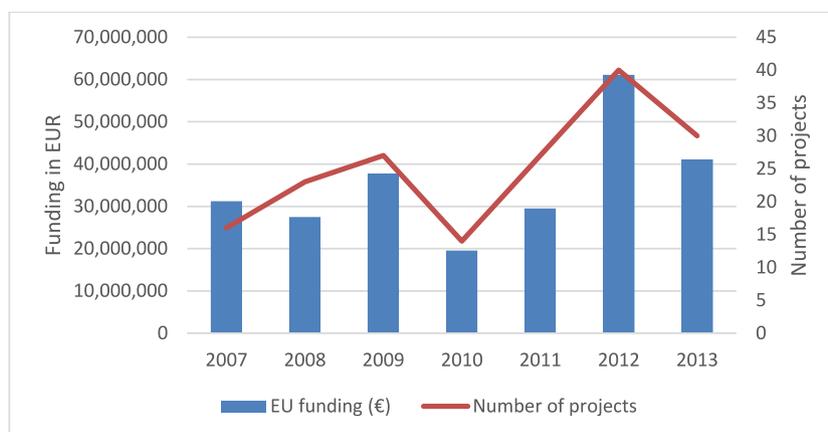


Fig. 16. LIFE tourism funding and number of projects (2007–2013). Source: own elaboration with data from LIFE Programme.

the sector to address future challenges and prepare for sustainable growth. New programmes during the 2014–2020 period contributed to tourism funding, with Erasmus+ allocating €121 million to educational and youth tourism projects, and COSME providing almost €29 million to initiatives aimed at enhancing the competitiveness and innovation of SMEs. Creative Europe contributed about €9 million to cultural tourism

projects. EMFF allocated only €7 million for sustainable tourism projects in coastal and maritime areas.

5. Discussion

In this section, we interpret these findings through the lens of spatial

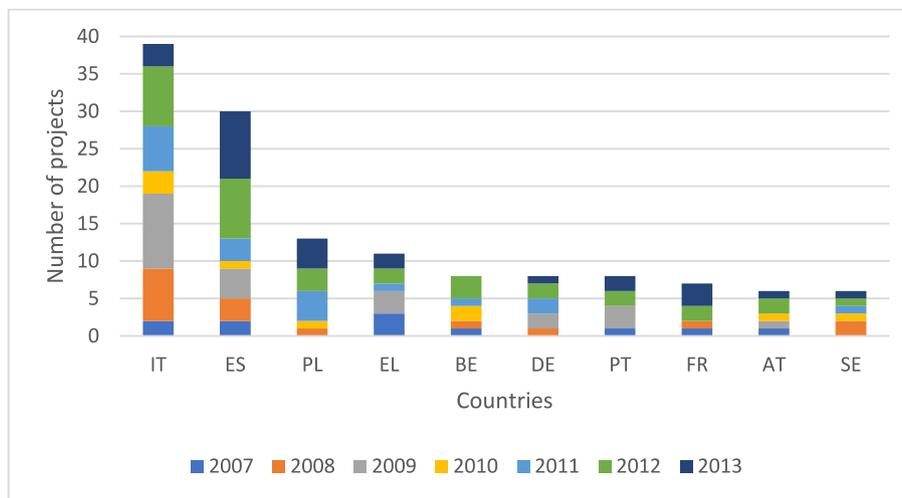


Fig. 17. Number of LIFE projects by coordinating country and year (Top countries) (2007–2013). Source: own elaboration with data from LIFE Programme.

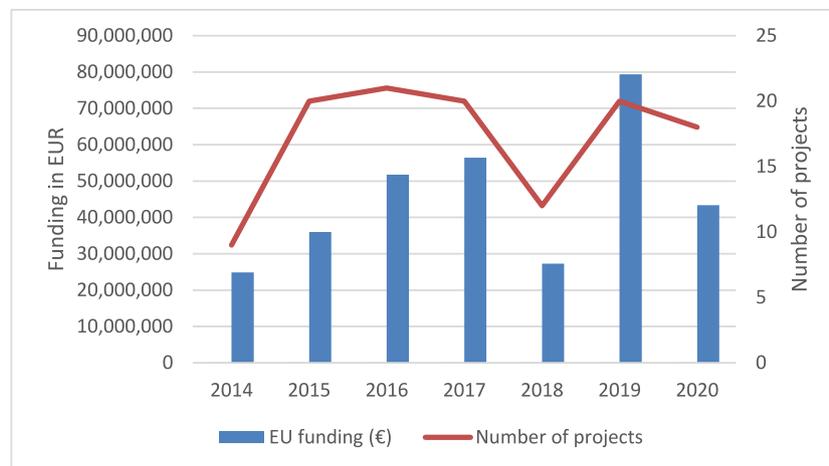


Fig. 18. LIFE tourism funding and number of projects (2014–2020). Source: own elaboration with data from LIFE Programme.

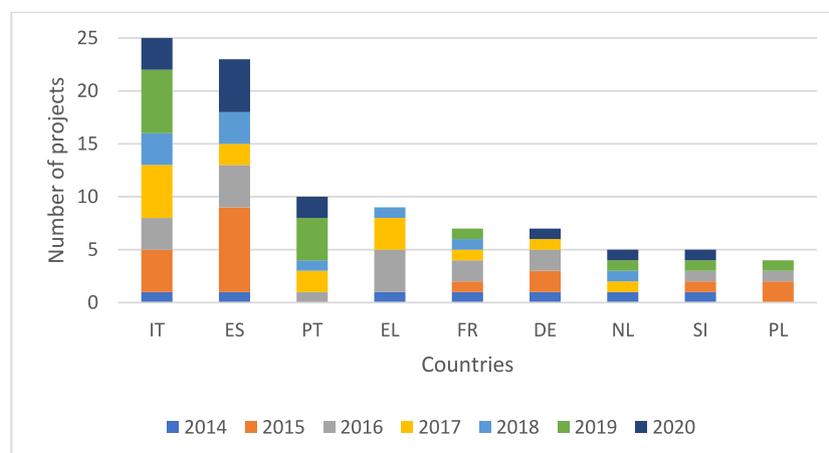


Fig. 19. Number of LIFE projects by coordinating country and year (Top countries) (2014–2020). Source: own elaboration with data from LIFE Programme.

justice, institutional capacity, and projectification, as outlined in the theoretical framework and explore their implications for future EU tourism programming and policy reform.

Despite its macroeconomic relevance, tourism receives a small share of EU funding, with an average of 2.23 % for both periods. Tourism

funding is only substantial within Structural Funds for cooperation, where it accounted for 16 % in 2007–2013 and nearly 24 % in 2014–2020. However, across other funding streams, tourism remains underfunded, representing only 3 % in the Creative Europe Programme, even though culture is a key driver of tourism demand in Europe; and

Table 2

Overview of EU funding tourism programmes by programming periods, number of projects and countries.

Funding programme	Tourism funding (EUR billion)	Number of projects	Programme total budget (EUR billion)	% of funding allocated to tourism	Top grant receivers (1st, 2nd and 3rd)		
2007–2013							
Regional / structural funds (cooperation)	1.29	1440	8	16.08 %	Italy	Germany	France
EAFRD	0.89	N/A	93.37	0.95 %	Germany	Romania	Hungary
LIFE Programme	0.25	177	1.72	14.40 %	Italy	Spain	Poland
FP7	0.01	13	40.78	0.03 %	Spain	Germany	Italy
Subtotal	2.43	1630	143.87	1.69 %			
2014–2020							
Regional / structural funds (cooperation)	2.49	2281	10.37	23.97 %	Italy	France	Germany
LIFE Programme	0.32	120	2.64	12.08 %	Italy	Spain	Portugal
Erasmus+	0.12	640	14.7	0.82 %	Italy	Turkey	Germany
Horizon 2020	0.05	25	68.33	0.07 %	Italy	Spain	Netherlands
COSME	0.03	102	3.6	0.80 %	Italy	Spain	Germany
Creative Europe Programme	0.01	36	0.29	2.95 %	Germany	France	Belgium
EMFF	0.01	18	0.66	1.08 %	Italy	Greece	Spain
Subtotal	3.02	3222	100.59	3.00 %			
TOTAL EU FUNDING (billion)	€ 5.45	4852	244.46	2.23 %	Italy	Spain	Germany

Source: own elaboration with data from EU programmes.

around or below 1 % in key programmes such as EAFRD, Erasmus+, COSME, and EMFF, despite its critical role in regional development and economic growth. Although the LIFE programme shows relatively higher allocations, further scrutiny reveals that many projects only superficially reference tourism, with very few explicitly focused on tourism activities in natural environments. This reflects a broader issue of limited thematic alignment, where tourism is acknowledged in funding narratives but rarely prioritised in practice.

Particularly striking is the almost non-existent presence of tourism within research and innovation programmes. Despite the recognised potential of these programmes to support tourism research, such as in ICTs, cultural heritage, and land use; and the European Commission's call for results to be disseminated to policymakers and stakeholders (European Commission, 2006), funding for tourism-related research remains insignificant given the overall budgets. Although percentages for Horizon 2020 shows a higher investment in tourism-related R&D than FP7, it remains a low-funded sector. These findings, while slightly lower, align with the EU Blue Economy Report (European Commission, 2021), which estimated that €53 million were allocated through Horizon 2020 to 33 coastal tourism projects, though the report acknowledges potential overlaps with other funding portfolios.

Regarding EMFF funding, despite the launch of a 2014 EU Communication on a 'European strategy for more growth and jobs in coastal and maritime tourism' (European Commission, 2014a), the funding allocated to blue tourism remains insignificant compared to the overall budget. Tourism is a core pillar of the coastal and maritime economy, accounting for 45 % of the gross value added and 64 % of jobs in the EU Blue Economy. Yet, it receives disproportionately low funding compared to fisheries, aquaculture, and marine renewable energy (European Commission, 2021). Investments in these sectors are prioritised due to their higher perceived economic returns and strategic role in supporting climate neutrality objectives under the European Green Deal. This funding gap is particularly evident in the Mediterranean, a world-leading tourism destination that significantly contributes to economic growth and employment. While blue tourism has received support from regional and cooperation funds, including Interreg Mediterranean basin projects, overall funding remains inadequate relative to its economic importance.

While limited funding could be due to lower proposal volumes from the tourism sector, when compared to other sectors, linked to limited awareness, capacity, or eligibility; this does not fully explain the consistent underrepresentation across programmes that are otherwise aligned with tourism goals (e.g. culture, blue economy, SMEs).

Moreover, this raises concerns of equitable access, as sectors with weaker governance structures may struggle to secure an adequate share of public resources, particularly when no thematic budget line exists to ensure visibility and strategic coherence (Fritsch et al., 2024; Scott, 2023).

The distribution of EU tourism-related funding further illustrates these challenges, with significant disparities among Member States that call into question the fairness and territorial balance of existing funding frameworks. Italy, Spain, and Germany consistently rank among the top recipients and project coordinators across most programmes, reflecting strong institutional capacity, technical expertise, and embeddedness in EU funding networks. Notably, France, despite being the world's leading destination in terms of international tourist arrivals, does not feature among the highest recipients, whereas Spain and Italy do. This suggests that factors beyond tourism demand, such as institutional readiness and funding experience, strongly influence outcomes. In contrast, countries such as Ireland, Malta, Estonia, Latvia, Luxembourg, and Denmark are notably underrepresented. While some variation may relate to later accession, market size, or Cohesion Policy targeting, the observed concentration of funding in wealthier and more experienced Member States suggests persistent structural imbalances. These patterns indicate that, despite cohesion policy's aim to reduce territorial disparities, current allocation mechanisms may reproduce rather than reduce inequalities, undermining the EU's commitment to spatial justice (Fritsch et al., 2024; Scott, 2023).

A preliminary review of the EASME and Creative Europe databases which shows budget distribution by project partners, reveals a recurring pattern of specific organisations participating in multiple projects, suggesting the existence of a core group of experienced entities adept at securing EU funding. These findings are consistent with research by Sánchez Trujillo et al. (2024) and Piro et al. (2024), who highlight that prior participation in EU-funded projects and familiarity with application procedures confer cumulative advantages to certain institutions and regions, creating a capacity gap between high-performing and low-performing territories. This gap reflects not only administrative weaknesses, but also a misalignment between programme conditionalities and local realities, a point stressed in Bachtler and Ferry (2015) concept of the 'effectiveness threshold'. Regions with limited financial flexibility or technical staff may struggle to meet the procedural demands of EU calls, despite having high tourism potential or development needs. This reinforces imbalances in funding access and underscores the need for capacity-building measures that extend beyond basic awareness-raising to include sustained investment in administrative systems, skills

development, and institutional learning at regional and local levels. Uneven absorption patterns should be seen not merely as technical challenges, but as symptoms of deeper governance deficits that ultimately weaken the EU's spatial cohesion objectives and its ambition for territorially balanced development (Sjöblom & Godenhjelm, 2009).

This observation is in line with the efforts by the [European Innovation Council and SMEs Executive Agency - EISMEA \(2024\)](#) to enhance awareness of funding opportunities within the ecosystem. Through initiatives like the Pilot Project – Building Capacity for Tourism Ecosystem, EISMEA seeks to improve SMEs' knowledge and expertise, enabling them to navigate and apply for EU programmes more effectively. This initiative addresses concerns raised by stakeholders regarding the lack of knowledge, skills and resources within the tourism sector, which hinder access to EU funding through calls or grants. Moreover, these findings align with spatial justice theory and broader concerns regarding regional disparities not just in EU funding absorption but in the ability to access it (Fritsch et al., 2024; Madanipour et al., 2022; Ponzo & Milazzo, 2025). As identified by Piro et al. (2024), there is a pressing need to strengthen the capacity of low-performing regions, preventing the perpetuation of long-term growth inequalities (Varela-Vázquez et al., 2019). However, these must be scaled up and better integrated into mainstream funding logic. Without targeted support for low-capacity regions and actors, in particular MSMEs, the EU risks reinforcing a geography of exclusion.

The structure and delivery of EU tourism-related funding is heavily shaped by the broader trend of projectification in EU governance, an increasing reliance on short-term, competitive project-based mechanisms to implement policy across sectors and territories (Hodgson et al., 2019; Sjöblom & Godenhjelm, 2009). Due to its multisectoral nature, tourism is particularly affected by this logic, as funding is often accessed through scattered, general-purpose programmes, requiring project promoters to frame tourism initiatives in terms aligned with other priorities such as innovation, entrepreneurship, or environmental protection. As a result, tourism actors must strategically reframe their initiatives to fit shifting programme objectives, often at the expense of long-term vision and sectoral coherence. This fragmented positioning reflects a key characteristic of projectification: the dilution of sector-specific goals to broader, time-bound funding agendas. It also weakens tourism's institutional visibility, legitimacy and strategic integration within the EU policy framework. These dynamics contradict the recommendations of the [European Economic and Social Committee \(2019\)](#), which called for the creation of a dedicated budget line for tourism in the 2021–2027 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) to enhance visibility and funding allocation. This aligns with [Varela-Vázquez et al. \(2019\)](#) who advocates for greater integration between research and innovation programmes and ESIF to maximise their impact and effectiveness. The issue is particularly relevant now, as the EU prepares the next MFF which will start in 2028 and conducts consultations aimed at achieving a higher impact of the EU budget ([European Commission, 2025a](#); [Torres et al., 2025](#)).

Another key finding is the challenge of data transparency in publicly funded sectors, including tourism. While transparency is an expected standard, available data remains fragmented and inconsistent across EU platforms and reports, even within same programmes. This issue is particularly evident in the Framework Programmes for Research and Innovation, where the complexity of data structures has been noted as a barrier to combining datasets and enabling comparisons ([Varela-Vázquez et al., 2019](#)). The problem is even pronounced for previous programming periods, where information is often scattered or, in some cases, entirely unavailable. Additionally, the reliance on projectification further exacerbates these challenges, as data on individual projects is often limited, despite the growing number of funded initiatives each year ([Godenhjelm et al., 2015](#)). To address these shortcomings, it is essential to establish a more open, transparent, and accessible system for EU-funded projects. Such a system should provide comprehensive and cohesive data, encompassing not only projects implemented by multiple

EU partners but also funds directly allocated to Member States for local implementation categorised by sector and project, not only in tourism but across all sectors. Ensuring access to this information would enable stakeholders to better understand the distribution and impact of EU funding and enhance the overall transparency and effectiveness of EU-supported initiatives. Moreover, this would help address current limitations in evaluating intervention effectiveness, a challenge further complicated by tourism's multisectoral nature ([O'Sullivan et al., 2003](#); [Tirado Ballesteros & Hernández Hernández, 2017](#)).

To address these challenges, stronger institutional support is needed for long-term tourism strategies. The appointment of a dedicated European Commissioner for Sustainable Transport and Tourism in September 2024, with a focus on investment, decarbonisation and cross-border connectivity, marks a critical shift in the EU policy agenda, a long-sought achievement advocated by the sector. This development could shape future programming periods and give it the needed visibility it deserves, not only in economic terms, but also for its contribution to address social and environmental development goals.

6. Conclusions

The novelty of this paper lies in its presentation of the first comprehensive attempt to examine and estimate EU funding allocated to tourism-related projects from a multi-programme perspective. The findings of this study hold significant implications for EU tourism policy, particularly in the context of the ongoing stakeholder consultations for the Sustainable Tourism Strategy and the upcoming Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for 2028–2034. The fragmented and often marginal treatment of tourism within EU funding streams not only limits the sector's capacity to contribute to cohesion, innovation, and sustainability goals; it also reveals deeper governance challenges related to visibility, accessibility, and policy coherence.

From a spatial justice perspective, the uneven distribution of funding, both geographically and across programmes, undermines the EU's commitment to balanced territorial development. Regions with strong institutional capacity and prior experience consistently benefit more, while others remain disadvantaged despite high tourism potential. Addressing these disparities through enhanced capacity-building efforts is crucial to achieving balanced regional development and preventing the further exacerbation of funding inequalities across the EU. Greater alignment between programme design and regional realities is essential to enable broader participation and fairer access to EU resources. In this regard, the explicit inclusion of tourism in a Commissioner's portfolio in 2024 with the shift from the Directorate-General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs (DG GROW) to Directorate-General Mobility and Transport (DG MOVE) presents a significant opportunity to elevate the sector's relevance and strengthen its strategic position within EU policies.

A significant finding of this study is the challenge of data transparency, characterised by fragmented and inconsistent information across EU platforms, particularly for earlier programming periods. This limits evaluation and learning, and weakens public accountability, underscoring the urgent need for a cohesive and accessible system that provides comprehensive data on both multi-partner projects and direct allocations to EU Member States. Encouragingly, the proposal for the MFF 2028–2034 explicitly states that the EU will enhance transparency and oversight of budget beneficiaries, with information on fund recipients to be published in a centralised public database ([European Commission, 2025b](#)). For this to support tourism policy effectively, it should include thematic categorisation and show interlinkages between programmes. Despite these limitations, this study has successfully provided a detailed estimation and analysis of EU funding for tourism-related projects over the last two complete programming periods, based on the best available data, given the incomplete data sources.

This mapping and analysis study provides an evidence base to contribute to EU tourism policymaking and programme management,

reinforcing the notion that ‘one cannot manage what cannot be measured’, particularly in light of ongoing efforts to update the EU tourism strategy, where funding plays a critical role. Nevertheless, further research should aim to disaggregate data both by country and sub-national regions, and to analyse funding distribution at the level of individual project partners where possible. This would help better understand spatial participation dynamics and support more targeted evaluation of tourism-related interventions. Moving forward, the EU should consider mechanisms to foster policy continuity, such as multi-stage funding schemes, dedicated budget lines for tourism, and integrated monitoring frameworks that enable consistent tracking of tourism-related impacts across sectors.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Isabel Torres: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **María-Dolores Teruel-Serrano:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Conceptualization. **María José Viñals:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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