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Promoting Tourism Education in MENA Countries: Geopolitical Implications

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ABSTRACT

Tourism development across the Middle East and North Africa is mostly based on low cost and mass beach leisure. This kind of tourism development generated, already in 1980s, a rapid conversion of the whole of the Mediterranean coast into a pleasure “periphery of Europe”. Despite this trend, a different scenario emerged already in the 1990s with the increasing of interests in the development of territorial resources and cultural heritage sites for tourism. This new development has been relevant in the process of Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, particularly for the social and cultural basket that includes the higher education policy of the European Union. But the current European *malaise* and the developments in the post-Arab Spring countries could transform Euro-Mediterranean relations. In order to open new windows of opportunity, a reshaping of the Erasmus Mundus program can be crucial.

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1. This paper will mainly focus on politics and identity in the globalization process and the way they interact with tourism studies. As we know, within this field, we can usually find an internal dichotomy between critical and cultural studies, on one hand, and business oriented management, on the other. But also between vocational or professional education and high education and research. I will consider these two opposite views as an integral part of tourism education and development, starting from the awareness that it is possible to understand something more about the above mentioned dichotomies by connecting globalization and heritage, thus following the study of tourism development through the lens of international cooperation. In other words, considering that only if we understand geopolitical implications of tourism development than we are able to connect critical and business approach, research and skill oriented studies.

2. It is commonly known that in the second half of Twentieth century tourism development became an integral part of the globalization process. In the mid-eighties many states across the middle East and North Africa sought to promote tourism development in the attempt to generate national wealth and state revenue. Some of them were pressured by the decline of their economies but other states looked at the promotion of tourism as a mean to foster national economies. The internationalization of tourism flows offered them (and in general to many developing countries) an opportunity to be involved in the globalization process. Tourism has been an instrument to integrate their economies in the global flows of capital and commerce. At the same time this kind of tourism development generated a rapid transformation of the Mediterranean coast, so that South Mediterranean basin became a so called "pleasure periphery of Europe". Despite this trend, a new scenario emerged later, showing increasing objectives and interests in the developing or territorial resources for the development of tourism; and, gradually, also symbolic representation of territoriality based on culture and identities were involved in the development of tourism.

A turning point of the history of tourism development in the Mediterranean basin is represented by the middle of the Nineties of the Twentieth century, when travel became more accessible and turned from being something extraordinary, experienced only once or twice within a lifetime to be an integral part of each year's time structure, and maybe twice in a year for someone. It was indeed in the Nineties that travel became an integral part of our experience. When that happened also the demand for cultural destinations increased and tourism literature became concerned with sustainability, especially with reference to Mediterranean islands and heritage sites.

3. Also international relations were involved in this process. With the launching of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership in Barcelona, in November 1995, a third basket for cooperation between the two shores of Mediterranean sea (namely the "social and cultural partnership") was added to economic partnership and security dialogue. In the following years there has been a little enthusiasm in general about progress in the

Barcelona process. However there were scholars who founded that some programs (for instance the EUROMED program launched in 1998 in Bologna) were actually put into force. With the adoption of the European Neighborhood Policy in 2003 and in the aftermath of the political enlargement of 2004, European Union began to consider the South and the Eastern Mediterranean states as a part of a broader region, a huge area including newly independent states of the former Soviet Union. Moreover the 2008 initiative of the EU for the Mediterranean sea (conducted by Nicholas Sarkozy) has refrained the Barcelona process expanding the partnership to other Mediterranean states, mostly Balkan states. However we cannot gloss over the fact that, despite this two further initiatives, the final balance of the political cooperation in Mediterranean basin still remain incomplete or in progress.

An example could be useful. Last year, meanwhile we had a meeting in Sousse for the Hercules project, a closing conference of the EUROMED heritage program was celebrated in Fez. In that context experts have achieved a final result which establishes future actions to be built in heritage policies. According to the official document, lessons learnt are the following: the safeguarding of heritage is achieved through the appropriation of the citizens; heritage is an interdisciplinary field which draws on archeology, architecture, art, economy, technology, law, politics, etc.; buildings, monuments, museums, but also music, narrative and cultural landscape form a strong element in improving people's quality of life. Hopefully this final document will set the priorities for future action. But, although the support mediation of the EU will be maintained within the framework of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership, every single partner (namely Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia) should take up the initiative and go further. The fact that each country, once have developed its own capacity, have to take charge of the future actions is convincing. But what is not clear is if and how the framework of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership will be really maintained.

It remains to see how heritage and identities could be integrated in development policies, becoming really a source of employment and a vector for citizenship in these countries. This concern is particularly true with regard to development in cultural tourism. Furthermore current European crisis and the developments in post-Arab spring countries could effectively transform the Euro-Mediterranean relations. This is the reason why we need to establish a stronger link between policy development and the program supported activities, especially since tourism industries could be transformed in a political target by religious extremism. International climate changed from optimism about globalization to pessimism about clashes of identities.

4. We can draw the conclusion with the recall of two articles of the Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU). Article 165 calls for action to be undertaken by the EU in order to contribute to the development of quality of education, while article 166 states that the EU and the member states shall foster cooperation with third countries in the spheres of education, sport and vocational training. In this juridical framework, promoting tourism education in Middle East and North-African countries

can be really significant as it focuses on the policy support and dialogue, two central issues that, however, go under the umbrella of a third action: institutional building. I would suggest that we have to concentrate our projects on actions related to capacity building partnership and cooperation for innovation, by sharing curricula and syllabi as well as supporting institution building in third countries, including enlargement countries (Libya and Egypt, for instance). Finally, we could focus on these neighbor countries disseminating our results that could be the instruments for Europe and countries of the Middle East and North Africa to cooperate peaceful through tourism development.