

# Tourism Politics Or Tourism Geopolitics? Demarcating Two Similar-Sounding Research Fields

Stogiannos Alexandros <sup>1</sup>, Botsis Miltiadis <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>(Post-Doc Researcher, Department Of Tourism, Ionian University, Corfu-Greece)

<sup>2</sup>(Assistant Professor, Department Of Tourism, Ionian University, Corfu-Greece)

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## **Abstract:**

*The exceptional growth of tourism has converted it to a significant economic sector, reflecting characteristics of antagonisms on various levels, such as economic dependence and power projection. The present paper is an attempt to approach the research differences between two research fields, which are not distinct enough yet. Moreover, the authors attempt a contribution to the delimitation of the research subject Geopolitics of Tourism, in the light of the classical geopolitical view. Firstly (Section I), the role of the state in tourism policy will be briefly reviewed, before presenting (Section II & III), comparatively the two research fields under discussion and (Section IV) the authors' approach. Finally (Section V) it will be shown how the methodological framework of Systemic Geopolitical Analysis can contribute to approach tourism as a geopolitical factor of power redistribution.*

**Background:** *The growth of tourism creates conditions for the redistribution of geopolitical power, on an economic, cultural and political level. In this context, the present publication attempts to define, terminologically and epistemologically, two research fields, the distinction of which should not be considered a priori given.*

**Method:** *The announcement uses the comparative method. The aim is to highlight the differences between the two research fields, after presenting the content of each one separately.*

**Conclusion:** *The term "tourism politics" mainly refers to the market tourism management conditions, while "tourism geopolitics" (grounding on the classical geopolitical perception) concentrates on how the economic growth of tourism, combined with cultural, social and environmental effects, affects state power and interstate relations in almost every sector.*

**Key Word:** *Geopolitics of Tourism; Tourism Politics; National Tourism Policy; Dependency Theory; Systemic Geopolitical Analysis.*

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## **I. The role of the state in tourism**

Already at the beginning of the 1980s Marie-Francoise Lanfant noted the difficulty of defining the role of the state in tourism, pointing out that tourism should not be regarded as a system of action that can operate autonomously, independently of the established political power, since states have the task of defining tourism policy in the light of national objectives, but also because they assume an increasingly important role in matters of promotion, coordination, planning and financial support. In this sense the tourism industry and the state should not be considered in opposition to each other, thus it would be difficult to draw a dividing line between the private and public sectors, since reciprocal interpenetration occurred.<sup>1</sup>

Even though the private sector, whose goal was profit, and public sector, whose goal was national wealth, have joint powers, she notes the difficulty in pinpointing the state's role in tourism, because of the harmonization of management, planning and promotion methods and tourism policies tend to disappear even between ideologically different countries.<sup>2</sup>

In the 1980's, the role of multinational tourism corporations became stronger, due to: a. their progressing international connection, b. their dual position, attuned to both demand and supply, thus being able to control and regulate decision-making parameters in both originating and receiving societies, c. their monopoly position, resulting from the implementation of concentration and integration strategies, and d. the altogether occupation of special places within a particular mode of production.<sup>3</sup>

According to C. M.Hall and J. Jenkins this autonomy process of tourism companies and the form of government intervention in tourism is not a constant but it is affected by changing political ideologies. The tendency to privatize and commercialize functions that were once performed by governments which has been almost universal in Western nations since the late 1970s has substantially affected the nature of many national

governments' involvement in the tourism industry. They identified three principal economic reasons for this trend: "governments are interested in reducing the dependency of public enterprises on public budgets, in reducing public debt by selling state assets, and in raising technical efficiencies by commercialization." In this context, the role of governments in tourism has undergone a dramatic shift from a traditional of public administration model which sought to implement government policy for a perceived public good, to a corporatist model (in the sense of a dominant ideology in Western society that claims rationality as its central attribute and which emphasizes the concept of individualism in terms of self-interest rather than the legitimacy of the individual citizen acting in the democratic interest of the public good), a model that emphasizes efficiency, investment returns, the role of the market and the relations with stakeholders, usually defined as industry. However, in many areas of politics, including tourism, the changing role of the state and the changing individual-state relationship have led to major policy dilemmas: On the one hand, the demand for less government intervention in the market, which would allow industries to develop and operate without government subsidy or assistance, while, on the other hand, industry interest groups sought to influence government policies in their favor, including maintaining government funding for promotion and development. This policy issue has generally been resolved through the restructuring of national and regional tourism organizations to (a) reduce their planning, policy and development roles and increase their marketing and promotion functions and (b) engage in a greater range of partnerships, networks, and collaborative relationships with stakeholders.<sup>4</sup>

Even within this very rapid process of internationalization of Tourism, Tsartas et al. include National Tourism Policies among the factors that have contributed to its rapid growth and its transformation into one of the main drivers of global development in the last twenty years: a. international organizations related to development, b. National tourism policies c. Private sector tourism companies (airline reservation systems, hotel businesses, tour operators), d. The social and professional interest groups in the tourist areas or countries, and e. Social and political interest groups especially in developing or geographically isolated areas.<sup>5</sup>

Regarding point b. Hall and Jenkins define public tourism policy as anything that governments choose to do or not do in relation to tourism. Despite growing skepticism about the effectiveness of central governments' tourism policies, they note that market failures indicate several areas in need of state regulatory intervention, including: a. improving economic competitiveness, b. amending property rights, c. enabling state decision-makers to take account of externalities, d. providing widely available public benefits, d. reducing risk and uncertainty, e. supporting projects with high capital costs and involving new technologies, and f. educating and providing information.<sup>6</sup>

An additional aspect, which justifies state intervention, is the observed cases of monopoly or oligopoly situations. Greek tourism for example, in addition to international competition from other tourist destinations, has been facing, since the beginning of the 2000s, oligopolistic and even monopolistic situations, which direct mass tourist flows. There is certainly also a trend of a small but expanding segment of the international market, which seeks independent transportation to selected destinations avoiding mass tourism and looking for alternative possibilities.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, the role of the bodies of local political power, such as municipalities and regions, in the developing process should be considered, strengthened especially in developed countries after the WWII, on the one hand due to the extremely complex effects of the tourism development on the local economic and social structure, and, on the other hand due to its increasingly international character. The factors that shape, on a long-term basis, the decision-making process on critical issues by the local authorities are the influence of the central political authority combined with the pressures to promote development processes at the local level.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the recorded elaboration of strategic tourism development plans at supra-state (e.g. state conglomerations), state and sub-state (e.g. regions and municipalities) scales, which apparently reflect their will to control or even co-shape the tourism process to their advantage, the continuous internationalization of tourism, but also the internationalization of tourism policy, combined with the decisive importance that private tourism companies acquire in the formation of the tourist product, are the factors that, intertwining, decisively influence the course of tourism development. In this context, Chartas et al. especially consider that the importance of national tourism policies is decreasing in favor of dynamic interest groups influencing tourism development, as well as that critical questions and dilemmas arise regarding the controllability and feasibility of choosing tourism as a development sector by countries or regions that have competitive tourism resources.

The need for a coordination among states and private sector is also being recognized also by the OECD, underlining a practical challenge, that is to ensure that developments in local tourism destinations align with the policies set in place at national level, while the leadership role that governments are playing is to optimize the potential benefits, and mitigate the associated costs.<sup>9</sup>

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## II. Tourism policy

Lagos defines *tourism policy* as a specialized branch, whose research object is the selection of the appropriate mix of means and measures to be implemented by the public administration bodies, which have the responsibility of the proper functioning of the tourist market.<sup>12</sup> In the same direction, Velasco defines *tourism policy* as a set of discourses, decisions, and practices driven by governments, sometimes in collaboration with private or social actors, with the intention to achieve diverse objectives related to tourism.<sup>13</sup> She also defines 5 tourism policy objectives: a. to pursue tourism growth or remain competitive, in the case of mature destinations, b. the idea of planning, a process to achieve a better spatial distribution of tourism activities, promoting the use of untapped resources, or improving local participation in decision-making process related to sustainable strategies, c. to provide a safe, satisfying, and fulfilling experience for visitors, d. the need for coordination appears to be a central need due to the transversal nature of the issue, and e. investment in research and production of knowledge and ideas and creation of tools that enable innovation and improvement spread.<sup>14</sup>

From the above, but also from the tourism literature, Velasco's approach can be considered as representative, namely that the analysis of tourism policy could be conducted from an economic perspective, even though other perspectives should be considered when governments face designing tourism policy: they must also consider culture, environment, and social dynamics. In this sense it may be helpful and necessary to consider the issue from the perspective of the dispute between interests which have different power, ideologies, and values.<sup>15</sup>

Adding to the above the OECD perspective, namely that governments have adopted a variety of approaches to ensure that the sector is successfully developed, promoted, and regulated,<sup>16</sup> all the above lead to the conclusion that the usual research perception of *tourism policy* is linked mainly to the operation of the tourist market and management, in terms of an economic process aiming at private economic profit and satisfaction of individual needs.

## III. Tourism Geopolitics

A What must be at this point emphasized, is that the above forementioned focused on economy approach ignores accompanying phenomena, such as:

- a. the connection of tourism with international trade<sup>17</sup>,
- b. the potential to exercise soft power through tourism<sup>18</sup>,
- c. the exercise of hard power by instrumentalizing tourism, through projection of economic power,
- d. the national protective policies, exercised either by state or private entities connected to the state or state policies or private companies, to serve national economic and political goals,
- e. the control of tourism supply and demand by powerful geopolitical players<sup>19</sup>,
- f. the role of tourism in maintaining peace<sup>20</sup>, but also peace and political stability as essential prerequisites for the development of the tourism sector.
- g. the security issues that arise for the protection of visitors<sup>21</sup>,
- and h. the research work on the role of tourism, generated by political scientists.

Regarding the last point, it is to say that the exaggeration of the tourist industry in the last decades has led the engagement of political science with tourism, offering some very stimulating approaches to the role of tourism in international relations, as well as to the political, economic, and social implications of tourism in host countries. Political scientists focused primarily on:

- a. the importance of tourism and tourism development as a kind of ideological political stake at local, national, and international level. Of particular importance is the role of tourism as an income source for the state or a region, but also the ideological and social importance attributed to its development or to the prohibitions that some countries have imposed on the free movement of tourists.

- b. the exploitation of tourism either as a means of strengthening national identity or as a means of projecting national sovereignty, or finally as a dynamic vehicle for political socialization at national level. Even though a large part of these analyses comes from developing countries, an interesting correlation between the political, social and economic levels of tourism development processes emerged.

- c. the question of the political and cultural dependence of developing countries on developed countries, which have political and economic power in international tourism and can thus play a key role in global tourism development. The continuous internationalization of tourism in recent years and the involvement in the processes of tourism development of many developing countries, have strengthened the importance of similar analyses in the field of tourism.<sup>22</sup>

Firstly, the term *geopolitics of tourism* must be related to the more general epistemological research object of Geopolitics, within which two dominant trends can be generally distinguished: a. Classical Geopolitics, which can be minimally defined as a geographical tool for analyzing (by considering anthropogeographical physical geographical elements) the redistribution of power<sup>23</sup>, and b. Critical Geopolitics, that emphasizes largely

on semiotics, discourse analysis, and geopolitical reasonings, noting that the understanding and constituting of our social world is through the socially structured use of language.<sup>24</sup>

In this background, David B. Weaver, adopting a geopolitical mode or mode of analysis, introduced 2003 by S. Cohen, focuses on the interrelationships between space, territory, territoriality, and power<sup>25</sup> and explores the relationship between tourism and geopolitics from a sustainability perspective. While suggesting for each level the accurate indicators, Weaver investigates the geopolitical dimension of tourism at 4 levels, as follows:

a. Super-state Focus: Global. At this dimension the research focuses on the potential role of tourism as a factor in maintaining and promoting global and regional peace; According to Weaver, a related global agenda should include among its topics the potential role of tourism in increasing or eliminating the gap between economically developed and less developed regions and states, as well as the geographically uneven economic development, arising from deliberate policies of colonialism and corporate neo-colonialism that create and perpetuate the distinction between privileged 'core' and dependent 'periphery' regions, exacerbates geopolitical conflict. b. Super-state Focus: Regional and Bilateral. This dimension focuses at regional, bilateral, and other more limited multilateral relationships, which are also implicated as geopolitical dimensions of sustainable tourism. c. State Focus. State-level deliberations include the role of domestic tourism as a unifying, nation-building or 'centripetal' force, and d, Sub-state Focus. The sub-state dimension, as considered earlier, is perhaps the most contentious from a sustainability perspective when it involves morally ambiguous attempts to secede from the parent state that are opposed by that state.<sup>26</sup>

Azcárate et al. distance themselves from the view of Critical Geopolitics, basing precisely on the argument, that tourism geopolitics, as a tripartite conceptual tool, integrates the imaginaries, affects and infrastructures of tourism and politics as they occur in place and across geographical scales. It builds on academic literature from the fields of anthropology and geographies on tourism and in critical tourism studies, which highlight the relationships between tourism, space and power. However, rather than looking at these relations from an isolated theoretical standpoint - dependency theory, world system theory, or postcolonial approaches - or from a single discipline, they embrace an interdisciplinary approach to tackle the approximation and interpretation of how tourism's imaginaries, affects, and infrastructures are mutually implicated in questions of geopolitical significance. They examine these relationships interdisciplinary in order to approach and interpret how tourism's imaginary constructions, impacts and infrastructures are mutually implicated in issues of geopolitical significance.<sup>27</sup>

Due to their point of view, tourism geopolitics adds to existing literature and research on both tourism and geopolitics and contributes to current efforts to bridge these two often divorced fields of study. Consequently, they outline five areas of research that offer promising frameworks from which to rethink tourism through geopolitics:

- a. Feminist and Everyday Geopolitics,
- b. Popular Geopolitics,
- c. Mobility Geopolitics,
- d. Environmental Geopolitics, and
- e. Security Geopolitics.<sup>28</sup>

#### **IV. Tourism Geopolitics of Tourism: The authors approach**

Within this generally described framework, the authors, propose a research approach basing on 3 main theoretical and methodological axes:

- a. The general understanding of geopolitics as a geographical tool of analysis (using both physical geographical and human geographical data in interaction with each other) for the analysis of power redistribution<sup>29</sup>
- b. The interdisciplinary and state-centric framework of Systemic Geopolitical Analysis, the geographical method which studies, describes and predicts the behaviors and effects of the relations of opposed and distinct international political actions of redistribution of power and the ideological metaphysics that cover them, in the context of the geographical zones where these policies are applied.<sup>30</sup>
- c. the Dependency Theory" or "Theory of Underdevelopment" or "World Systems Theory", which was formulated in 1980 and argues that developing countries have political, institutional and economic structures that keep them in a state of dependence on developed countries.<sup>31</sup>

On the above theoretical axes, the touristic geopolitical research is focused on following 3 main directions:

A. **The effects of geopolitical developments on tourism.** Such effects become for example evident in the case of Arab Spring in Egypt (Chart 1)<sup>32</sup>, or in the case of the Greek islands (Chart 2)<sup>33</sup>, that faced illegal immigration, which peaked in 2015, when 911.471 illegal immigrants entered the country, crossing mainly (890.628) the borders with Turkey.<sup>34</sup>

Chart no 1: Change (%) in tourism by continent (2009 – 2013)

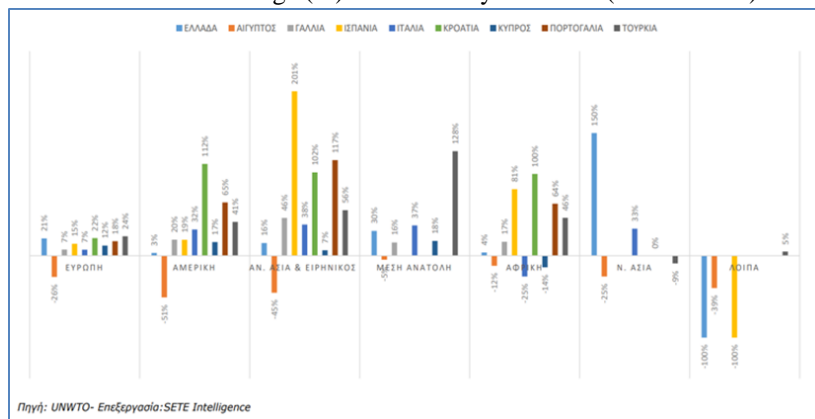
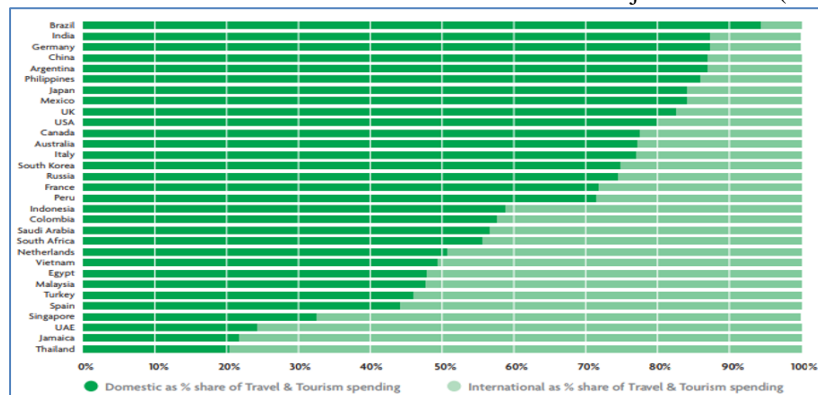


Chart no 2: Change (%) of international flights in Greece (2016)



**B. The acquisition of economic advantages through the exercise of protectionist or expansionist national tourism policies.** Protectionist or expansionist national tourism policies may be for instance expressed by promoting domestic tourism (Chart 3<sup>35</sup>) or in terms of controlling the money flow for benefit of the origin countries (Table 1<sup>36</sup>).

Chart no 3 : Reliance on Domestic Tourism Across the Major Countries (2017)



**C. The exercise of economic and political power projection, through the external control of the tourism economy or the infrastructure of the host country.** This observation becomes for instance evident by processing passengers' data of the Greek airports, revealing an oligopolistic situation, since almost 85% of the domestic and international passengers is being transported through airports controlled by private foreign enterprises. (Table 2 & Table 3)

**Table no 1 : Tourist payment by Main country of origin, Greece (2005)**

Country of origin	Average stay (days)	Payment at place of origin	Payment in Greece	Total cost of trip
G. Britain	11.2	699	472	1.171
Germany	13.7	738	343	1.081
Italy	11.7	760	420	1.180
France	10.7	791	420	1.211
USA	17.8	1.658	977	2.635
<b>Total</b>	<b>12.3</b>	<b>813</b>	<b>464</b>	<b>1.277</b>

**Table no 2 : Domestic passengers transported, Greece**

	2021 <sup>38</sup>	2022 <sup>38</sup>
by ELEFThERIOS VENIZELOS & FRAPORT %	83,24	83,78
by NATIONAL AIRPORTS %	16,76	16,22

**Table no 3 : International passengers transported, Greece**

	2021	2022
by ELEFThERIOS VENIZELOS & FRAPORT %	81,68	83,97
by NATIONAL AIRPORTS %	18,32	16,03

It is to note, that in case A, tourism is considered as a receptor undergoing geopolitical developments, therefore the research question is “Which kinds of geopolitical changes and events affect tourist flows?”. In cases B and C, tourism constitutes a *geopolitical factor*<sup>39</sup> of shaping geopolitical power, in other words the research goal is to enlighten how tourism is instrumentalized aiming power redistribution.

### V. Tourism Geopolitics and Systemic Geopolitical Analysis

Finally, it should be remarked that the interdisciplinary theoretical framework of Systemic Geopolitical Analysis (defining power as a resultant of four, ontologically distinct pillars: (1) Defense, (2) Economy, (3) Politics and (4) Culture / Information ) is highly favorable for the geopolitical analysis of tourism, a phenomenon of enormous complexity and significant economic, social, environmental, and cultural impacts, as shown briefly in table 2:

**Table no 4 : Contribution of the tourist phenomenon to the redistribution of power (10)**

Geopolitical Pillar	Type of Power	Effect of Tourism
Defense	Hard Power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Control of critical national infrastructures (e.g., airports, ports) by foreign states</li> <li>• Security conditions for tourists (terrorism, organized crime)</li> </ul>
Economy	Hard Power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Excessive dependence of the economy on foreign tourism</li> <li>• Control of tourist information</li> </ul>
Politics	Soft Power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tourism as a means of rendering political identity (e.g., Spain)</li> <li>• Influence of large enterprises in decision-making, at all levels</li> </ul>
Culture	Soft Power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hegemonic cultural influence</li> </ul>

### VI. Conclusion and further Discussion

In the context of a comparative epistemological approach of the research fields *tourism politics* and *tourism geopolitics*, an attempt was made to highlight their different functionality within the framework of tourist studies, leading to the conclusion that *tourism politics* mainly refers to the market tourism management conditions, while *tourism geopolitics* (grounding on the classical geopolitical perception) concentrates on how the economic growth of tourism, combined with cultural, social and environmental effects, affects state power and interstate relations in almost every sector. The paper highlights the need for a terminological, thus epistemological, distinction between the two research fields, since the growing economic importance of tourism can lead to significant geopolitical power redistribution, scientifically approached by means of geopolitical analysis.

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