



Integrating Sustainable Tourism into EU Strategies for Economic Security through a Comparative Regulatory Analysis

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Abstract: Objectives: This paper examines how sustainable tourism is integrated into economic security strategies in four advanced EU economies—Germany, France, the Netherlands, and Sweden—highlighting its growing role in promoting resilience and regional development. **Prior Work:** While EU strategies such as the European Green Deal and Transition Pathway for Tourism emphasize sustainability, limited comparative research explores how national policies align with these goals in well-developed member states. **Approach:** A qualitative comparative analysis was conducted using case studies of national tourism strategies and recovery frameworks, focusing on policy integration, stakeholder collaboration, and alignment with EU directives. **Results:** All four countries embed sustainability into tourism policy, linking it to economic recovery, climate goals, and community development. Germany and Sweden emphasize local engagement and SME support; France and the Netherlands prioritize green investment and regional balance. Despite shared EU goals, implementation varies across contexts. **Implications:** The findings inform academic discourse on sustainable economic development and support policy harmonization across the EU by showcasing diverse models of tourism governance and innovation. **Value:** This study contributes original insights into how sustainable tourism functions as a tool for economic security in high-performing EU economies, offering replicable policy practices and governance models.

Keywords: Economic resilience; Sustainable development; Tourism policy; Comparative analysis

JEL Classification: L83; Q01; R58

1. Introduction

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As the EU navigates rising geopolitical risks and supply chain disruptions, economic security has become a central concern (Pisani-Ferry et al., 2024). In this context, sustainable tourism is emerging not only as a tool for environmental preservation but also as a contributor to regional resilience and economic diversification (Okano-Heijmans et al., 2023).

Tourism plays a vital role in the EU economy, particularly through its support for SMEs and rural development. EU-level strategies like the European Green Deal and the Transition Pathway for Tourism recognize tourism's potential to drive sustainable growth. However, implementation across member states varies, reflecting differing policy frameworks and economic priorities (Ignatov, 2019).

This paper explores how sustainable tourism is integrated into the economic security strategies of four advanced EU economies—Germany, France, the Netherlands, and Sweden. Through qualitative comparative analysis of national recovery plans and regulatory frameworks, we examine how each country aligns tourism policy with EU sustainability and resilience objectives.

Germany and Sweden prioritize local engagement and SME support, while France and the Netherlands emphasize green investment and regional equity. Despite shared EU goals, these differences underscore the need for better policy coordination and adaptive governance models (Institut Montaigne, 2024; CEPR & Bruegel, 2024). By highlighting national innovations and gaps, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how sustainable tourism can reinforce economic security in Europe.

2. Results and Discussions

2.1. Related Work

The intersection of sustainability and tourism governance has emerged as a focal point in recent European policy research, particularly in light of frameworks such as the European Green Deal and the Transition Pathway for Tourism. Within this context, sustainable tourism is increasingly conceptualized as both an economic driver and a regulatory instrument that reinforces environmental stewardship and spatial cohesion (Pisani-Ferry et al., 2024; Okano-Heijmans et al., 2023). While these EU-level ambitions are widely acknowledged, the degree to which national strategies reflect and implement them remains uneven and insufficiently examined.

Ignatov (2019) highlights the strategic vulnerability of the European Union amid a shifting global order, identifying structural economic risks that call for more diversified and adaptive policy responses. Complementary to this, reports by CEPR & Bruegel (2024) and Institut Montaigne (2024) propose expanded frameworks for economic resilience—ones that move beyond traditional growth metrics to

emphasize institutional cooperation, environmental innovation, and industrial sustainability. These perspectives imply that tourism, when governed with long-term ecological and economic objectives, can play a transformative role in strengthening Europe's systemic resilience.

However, much of the existing literature prioritizes areas such as trade security, supply chain autonomy, and digital capacity, with limited empirical attention to how tourism contributes to these broader transformations—particularly in the context of economically advanced EU member states. This study addresses that knowledge gap through a comparative analysis of national tourism governance in Germany, France, the Netherlands, and Sweden, focusing on how sustainability principles are integrated into economic recovery and regulatory design.

2.2. Problem Statement

Sustainable tourism is now a core concept in development policies and academic discussions, especially given the growing global environmental and social challenges. Unlike older tourism models that focused primarily on profits, sustainable tourism incorporates environmental protection, cultural heritage preservation, and community well-being as its main goals. This approach recognizes that for tourism to be a credible, long-term driver of development, it must be both environmentally sound and socially inclusive (UNWTO & UNDP, 2017).

The move toward sustainability in tourism is driven by an understanding of the industry's dual impact. While tourism significantly boosts GDP and employment, it can also strain local ecosystems, infrastructure, and cultural heritage. Current strategies aim to lessen these negative effects through responsible planning, regulations, and innovation. As Butler (1999) pointed out, sustainable tourism is about balancing resource conservation with meeting visitor expectations without compromising the ability of future generations to do the same.

A key characteristic of sustainable tourism is its shift from emphasizing quantity to prioritizing quality. Tourism decision-makers and managers are increasingly focusing on the value of experiences offered rather than simply the number of arrivals. This aligns with principles like carrying capacity, local involvement, and adaptive governance (Crouch, 2011). Destinations are encouraged to assess environmental limits and adjust tourist flows accordingly, often using digital monitoring tools and platforms that involve various stakeholders.

Another vital aspect of sustainable tourism is the active participation of local communities. They are no longer just beneficiaries but active partners in creating value. This participatory model ensures a fairer distribution of tourism benefits and allows local knowledge to inform sustainability practices. This is particularly important for preserving intangible heritage and maintaining social cohesion in host

regions (UNWTO, 2015). Ultimately, sustainable tourism is seen as a multi-faceted development strategy that combines economic performance with environmental responsibility and cultural preservation. This requires a proactive focus on environmental protection, community involvement, and innovation in tourism services and infrastructure (Bulat, 2024).

Digitalization also plays a transformative role in fostering sustainable tourism. Smart mobility systems, digital booking platforms, feedback mechanisms, and real-time congestion management applications all contribute to more efficient and transparent operations. These technologies help decision-makers align tourism demand with sustainability goals and educate tourists about responsible behavior (Okano-Heijmans et al., 2023).

Despite being recognized in EU strategic documents as a driver of green and inclusive growth, sustainable tourism's role in economic security strategies remains unclear and inconsistently applied at the national level. Developed economies like Germany, France, the Netherlands, and Sweden have adopted different regulatory and investment approaches, reflecting their unique governance structures, economic geographies, and political priorities.

The absence of unified standards and performance metrics limits the transferability of policies and the EU's ability to effectively coordinate responses to crises such as pandemics, geopolitical events, or environmental disasters. A deeper understanding is needed of how sustainable tourism is integrated into national recovery agendas and how it contributes—either directly or indirectly—to economic resilience.

2.3. Concept and Terms

This analysis is grounded in several key concepts:

Economic Security - defined as the capacity of a state to withstand external and internal economic disruptions while ensuring sustainable growth and welfare (Ignatov, 2019; CEPR & Bruegel, 2024).

Sustainable Tourism - a form of tourism development that balances environmental, social, and economic dimensions, ensuring long-term viability and positive local impact (European Commission, 2020).

Strategic Autonomy - the ability of EU institutions and member states to act independently in safeguarding their economic interests, including through diversification of economic activities and value chains (Okano-Heijmans et al., 2023).

Policy Integration - the extent to which sustainability objectives are embedded into sector-specific strategies, budgets, and legal frameworks.

These concepts are not merely theoretical; they inform the regulatory and governance choices that structure tourism's integration into national economic agendas.

2.4. Solution Approach

This study employs a qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) to examine how four EU countries integrate sustainable tourism into their economic security strategies. The approach includes:

Document Analysis: National tourism strategies, recovery and resilience plans (RRPs), and sectoral policies were reviewed for evidence of sustainability objectives, budgetary alignment, and institutional mechanisms.

Comparative Framework across three dimensions: Policy Integration (e.g., presence of sustainability clauses and KPIs); Stakeholder Collaboration (e.g., SME involvement, regional partnerships); EU Alignment (e.g., consistency with the European Green Deal and Transition Pathway for Tourism).

Case Selection Logic: Germany, France, the Netherlands, and Sweden were selected based on their advanced economies, high tourism competitiveness, and diverse governance systems. A qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) was conducted to assess how Germany, Sweden, France, and the Netherlands embed sustainable tourism in their national economic frameworks. Using national tourism strategies, recovery plans, and alignment with EU directives, the study examined policy integration, stakeholder collaboration, and sustainability mechanisms.

Through this approach, the study identifies both shared practices and divergent pathways, offering insights into how regulatory diversity affects the resilience and cohesion of EU economic security efforts.

3. Results and Discussions

3.1. Policy Integration and Strategic Alignment

All four countries have integrated sustainable tourism objectives into broader recovery and development strategies, often using the EU's Transition Pathway for Tourism as a blueprint (European Commission, 2023) (Table 1). Germany and Sweden exemplify high alignment, embedding environmental targets into tourism frameworks tied to SMEs and local actors (Ignatov, 2019; Genzbigelyte-Venturi, 2023). France and the Netherlands align through strong financial mechanisms, supporting green innovation and digital infrastructure (Institut Montaigne, 2024).

Table 1. Integration of sustainability in tourism strategy

Country	EU Alignment	Green Tourism KPI	Tourism in RRP	Sustainability Budget Tagging
Germany	High	Yes	Yes	Included
Sweden	High	Yes	Yes	Included
France	Moderate	Yes	Yes	Partial
Netherlands	Moderate	No	Yes	Included

Sources: Genzbelyte-Venturi (2023); Ignatov (2019); Sustainable Travel Index (2023)

Germany’s strategy explicitly references sustainability as a “core enabler of destination resilience,” incorporating EU taxonomy and green transition objectives. Similarly, Sweden’s decentralized model empowers regional authorities to link tourism funding with biodiversity, energy transition, and community-based monitoring.

By contrast, France’s recovery plan stresses green tourism investments through public-private partnerships, and the Netherlands employs a destination management model aimed at dispersing tourist flows to reduce regional inequality.

3.2. Stakeholder Engagement and Governance Models

Stakeholder engagement patterns vary across countries, reflecting different governance traditions. Sweden and Germany employ multi-level governance, where municipalities co-design local sustainability initiatives, leveraging national and EU funding (Figure 1). In Germany, this is evident in SME-focused innovation grants and climate adaptation training for tourism businesses (CEPR & Bruegel, 2024).

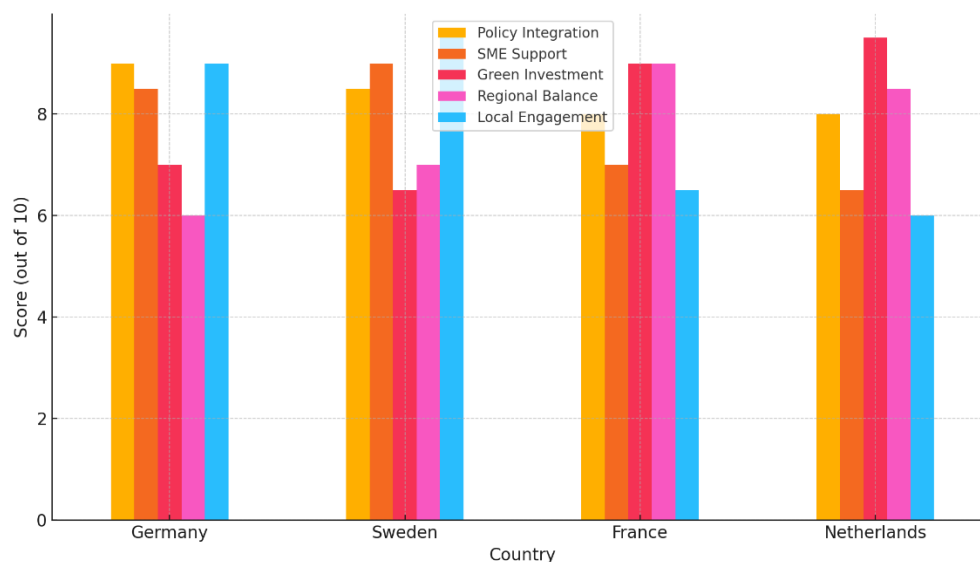


Figure 1. Sustainability policy emphasis in tourism by country

Source: Sustainable Travel Index (2023)

Sweden's model is particularly inclusive, involving NGOs, community associations, and indigenous Sami representatives in eco-tourism planning. Both countries benefit from active local networks that help scale bottom-up solutions.

In contrast, France and the Netherlands pursue centralized models emphasizing regulatory incentives and fiscal tools. France's Pays de la Loire initiative, for example, integrates cycling tourism into mobility strategies, aiming for 100% green access to destinations by 2030 (Genzbigelyte-Venturi, 2023). The Netherlands balances stakeholder involvement through regional councils, but its approach is more top-down in funding allocations and destination planning.

3.3. Green Investment and Financial Mechanisms

France and the Netherlands are notable for their highly effective, targeted green investments in the tourism sector. Both nations have strategically tied tourism funding to initiatives focused on carbon reduction, digital platforms, and smart mobility infrastructure. France, in particular, has made substantial commitments, allocating over €1.5 billion under the green tourism pillar of its National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR). This significant investment is further bolstered by green bonds issued at the regional level, demonstrating a comprehensive approach to sustainable tourism development (Table 2).

Table 2. Comparative summary of green investment focus

Investment Type	Germany	Sweden	France	Netherlands
Central Funds	Moderate	Low	High	High
SME Sustainability Aid	High	High	Moderate	Moderate
Climate Adaptation	Moderate	High	High	High
Smart Mobility	Moderate	Moderate	High	High

The Netherlands is prioritizing digital platforms for tourist destinations and investing in climate-resilient infrastructure. These efforts aim to effectively manage seasonal tourist pressure and spatial congestion. Their investments clearly reflect a “quality over quantity” approach to tourism growth, aligning perfectly with both the EU Climate Law and their own domestic climate targets. In contrast, Germany and Sweden allocate comparatively smaller centralized funds for tourism. However, they excel at stimulating private and community investment through various initiatives. These include microgrants, sustainable certification schemes, and comprehensive education programs, empowering local stakeholders to drive sustainable tourism development.

3.4. Regional Development and Tourism Equity

Sustainability in tourism is increasingly being viewed through the lens of spatial equity, not just ecological concerns. Both France and the Netherlands are actively addressing regional disparities in their tourism strategies. France, for example, is investing in soft mobility projects and improved intermodal access in underserved regions like Pays de la Loire. The goal here is to redistribute tourist flows away from highly concentrated areas, fostering a more balanced distribution of visitors. The Netherlands, similarly, is implementing zoning regulations and visitor quotas based on capacity to prevent overtourism in popular hotspots like Amsterdam.

Germany and Sweden are promoting regional equity by directly supporting rural and peripheral communities. Sweden’s efforts include initiatives focused on Sami tourism in its northern regions, recognizing and promoting indigenous cultural experiences. Germany, on the other hand, is funding nature-based tourism in its post-industrial areas, repurposing former industrial landscapes for recreational and economic benefit. These varied approaches highlight how sustainability is intertwined with each nation’s internal social contracts. While “regional resilience” is a widely recognized concept, its interpretation and implementation differ significantly across these national contexts.

3.5. Comparative Assessment and Findings

All four countries reflect EU-level aspirations by embedding sustainability into tourism governance. Yet, the pathways diverge:

- Germany and Sweden: Emphasize grassroots capacity, local governance, and SME empowerment.
- France and Netherlands: Prioritize capital-intensive innovation, destination redesign, and environmental infrastructure.

Despite a shared commitment to sustainability, EU policy harmonization remains limited. No common performance indicator framework exists, and diverse governance cultures shape how sustainability is prioritized. Harmonized monitoring (as proposed in the EU Tourism Dashboard) and funding coordination could enhance policy coherence. This comparative analysis illustrates that while sustainable tourism is a growing element in economic security strategies, its integration varies across national models. Germany and Sweden underscore local agency and grassroots resilience, whereas France and the Netherlands lead in investment-based green transformation. The findings offer a foundation for policy harmonization and benchmarking across the EU.

3.6. Contribution to Academic Discourse on Sustainable Economic Development

The evolving role of tourism within sustainable economic development frameworks is increasingly recognized in academic literature. Tourism is no longer treated as a standalone sector focused solely on consumer demand or economic output, but as a strategic vector intersecting environmental governance, regional equity, and innovation ecosystems (UNWTO & UNDP, 2017; Škrinjarić & Vlah Jerić, 2021). The present findings highlight this integrative function, particularly in high-performing EU economies, where tourism is harnessed as a tool to stabilize regions, stimulate green entrepreneurship, and build resilience against systemic risks.

Germany and Sweden's governance models underscore how sustainable tourism can empower local stakeholders and SMEs, enhancing social cohesion and decentralizing economic benefits (Ignatov, 2019; Genzbigelyte-Venturi, 2023). These models reflect the principle of "inclusive sustainability," linking ecological objectives with economic participation. This aligns with sustainable development literature that stresses the importance of bottom-up engagement and local ownership (Butler, 1999; Crouch, 2011).

Meanwhile, France and the Netherlands present a complementary paradigm rooted in innovation-driven growth and regional infrastructure transformation. Their focus on digital platforms, low-carbon transit, and green investment portfolios reinforces

the theoretical link between ecological modernization and economic competitiveness (Okano-Heijmans et al., 2023).

Together, these findings contribute to a more nuanced academic understanding of tourism's role as a policy accelerator—supporting both environmental goals and economic stabilization in line with post-pandemic recovery strategies (CEPR & Bruegel, 2024).

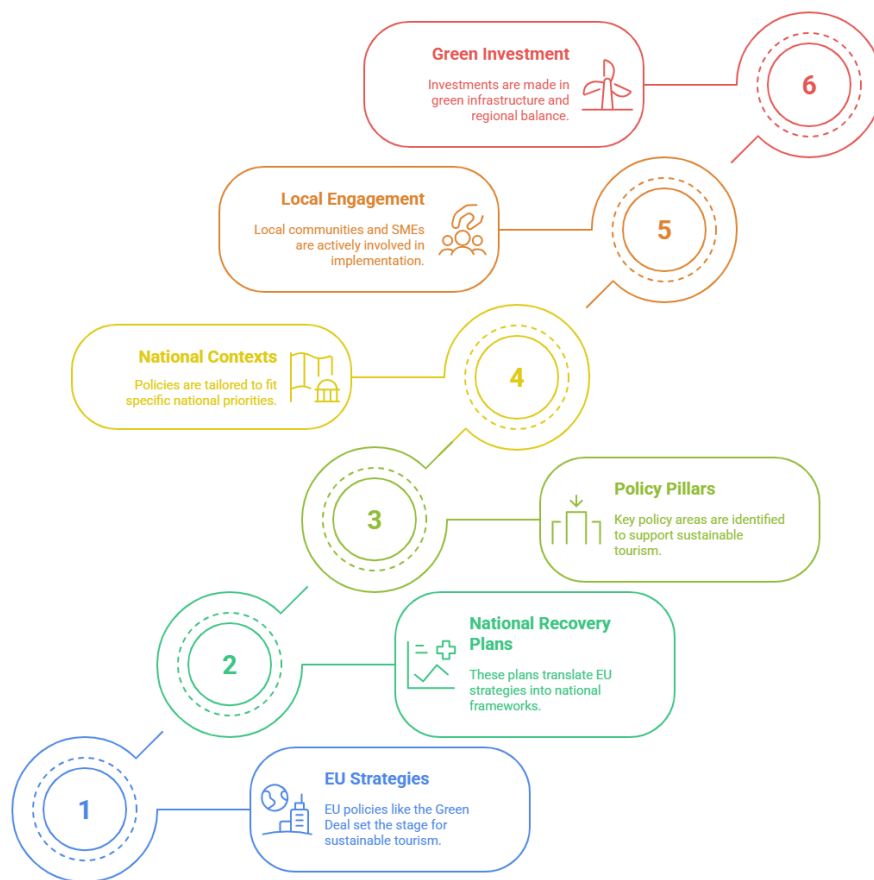


Figure 2. Achieving sustainable tourism

Source: Own interpretation

Despite shared sustainability commitments across EU states, implementation strategies remain diverse. The comparative analysis identifies a spectrum of tourism governance practices—ranging from decentralized, participatory models (Germany, Sweden) to centralized, innovation-focused frameworks (France, Netherlands). These differences stem from institutional legacies, administrative cultures, and socio-economic geography.

This heterogeneity presents both challenges and opportunities for EU policy harmonization. On one hand, it reveals the difficulty of enforcing one-size-fits-all directives; on the other, it highlights the richness of the policy landscape from which adaptable, evidence-based solutions can be drawn.

The European Commission has already recognized this need in its Transition Pathway for Tourism, emphasizing stakeholder alignment, resilience indicators, and green capacity-building (European Commission, 2023). However, without interoperable benchmarks and mechanisms for policy translation, the risk of fragmentation persists.

Thus, showcasing diverse national models has dual relevance: it informs intergovernmental learning and identifies convergent practices that could serve as best-in-class templates. For example:

Germany's climate-linked SME grant scheme can be adapted for rural regions across Central and Eastern Europe.

France's green mobility network could serve as a prototype for peri-urban areas struggling with tourist overflow and carbon emissions.

This speaks directly to the European Economic and Social Committee's call for "coordinated, yet context-sensitive approaches" to the Green Deal's implementation at sectoral and territorial levels (Institut Montaigne, 2024).

3.7. Governance Innovation and Replicability

A key implication of the study is the identification of governance innovation—that is, the use of novel institutional tools, partnerships, and metrics to deliver sustainability outcomes. These include:

- Multi-stakeholder regional tourism platforms (Sweden);
- Green budget tagging and spatial mobility plans (France);
- Smart tourism zoning and digital destination tools (Netherlands);
- Bottom-up certification and climate adaptation for local tourism actors (Germany).

Each of these models demonstrates how tourism policy can evolve beyond marketing or infrastructure development to encompass environmental stewardship, regional inclusion, and economic foresight.

From a replicability standpoint, academic discourse benefits by treating these models not just as case studies, but as strategic governance archetypes. They help populate a comparative typology of sustainability transitions within EU tourism, useful for both theorists and practitioners.

4. Conclusion

Sustainable tourism is increasingly central to national strategies for economic resilience within the EU, serving not only as a driver of green growth but also as a tool for regional balance and social cohesion. The comparative analysis demonstrates that integrating tourism with sustainability principles can support long-term economic stability and reduce vulnerability to global disruptions.

Diverse regulatory models across member states reflect the adaptability of sustainable tourism governance, with some countries prioritizing bottom-up engagement and SME empowerment, while others focus on investment-intensive infrastructure and innovation. These differences, while context-specific, provide valuable policy templates that can inform broader EU-level harmonization efforts.

Despite shared goals outlined in EU frameworks such as the European Green Deal and the Transition Pathway for Tourism, practical implementation remains fragmented. A lack of standardized indicators, limited intergovernmental coordination, and uneven policy uptake highlight the need for more coherent monitoring mechanisms and cross-national learning platforms.

Sustainable tourism offers a replicable governance model for aligning environmental, economic, and social policy objectives. By embedding sustainability into tourism regulation, EU member states can strengthen their strategic autonomy, support green transitions, and reinforce economic security in a way that is inclusive, resilient, and forward-looking.

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