European Special Report

Attracting societies back to normality after COVID

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A number of EU member states have already started lifting COVID-related restrictions but the psychological costs still needs to be addressed.

Several experts believe that the return to full normality after the shock caused to societies by the two years of the pandemic will be challenging and should be done gradually.

In this Special Report, EURACTIV and its network will examine what EU member states and local authorities are planning to do to help this transition, in part by making urban settlements more attractive through innovative concepts involving tourism and the hospitality sector.
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Mayor: Landmark investment to give Athens ‘green breath’, new tourists

By Sarantis Michalopoulos | euractiv.com

An €8 billion investment project touted as Europe’s largest coastal park is expected to create a “smart” city within Greece’s capital and offer a much-needed green push, the mayor of Ellinikon, the site of the project, told EURACTIV Greece in an interview.

“The Ellinikon Park alone is expected to almost double the amount of public green space available to every Athenian. It will thus provide a much-desired environmental benefit to the capital, which will be enjoyed by both residents and visitors from around the world,” mayor Ioannis Konstantatos said.

The idea of the project, which will be implemented in the old airport of Athens, was initiated during the time of economic crisis.

The ultimate objective, the mayor said, is to make the city a “centre of universal attraction” while simultaneously preserving and modernising the historical local element.

The Lamda Development, a Greek real estate holding company, which has undertaken the investment and has already launched work to gradually implement it, has presented some parts of the investment to the general public.

“These include the architectural plans of the Marina Tower, the first green skyscraper in Greece, the Commercial Hub, a new commercial complex that will upgrade our quality of life, the Ellinikon Park, a park open to all, which will spread over two million square meters of green,” Konstantatos said.

“The park will be fourteen times the size of Athens’ National Garden, and even larger than London’s Hyde Park,” he noted.

Konstantatos also singled out a building that will host four associations...
for disabled people and added that all buildings will be constructed in line with environmentally friendly standards.

“They will provide visitors and local residents a lifestyle with less concrete and greener elements contrary to the modern megacities trends,” he said.

Earlier this month, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) decided to invest €20 million in Lamda Development’s inaugural green bond totalling €230 million.

The total demand from investors reached a record level of €718.5 million while more than 14,000 applications from private investors were submitted.

The result was seen as a significant sign of trust in the future of the project.

“We are very pleased with the EBRD’s participation in Greece’s first ever green listed bond. This transaction further cements our relationship with the EBRD, which we consider a strong partner in our journey to make The Ellinikon a benchmark project for sustainability and smart living,” said the CEO of Lamda Development, Odisseas Athanasiou.

‘Multi-speed’ tourism

According to mayor Konstantatos, the project also aims to attract one million new tourists annually.

“With a significant number of new architectural ‘landmarks’ and thematic tourism infrastructure combined with the marina, park and commercial developments, it is expected to attract one million new tourists annually,” the mayor said.

The mayor explained that the objective is to encourage tourists to stay longer and spend more in Athens.

“The project eyes multi-speed tourism. It will certainly attract the wealthy but it will also be accessible to all those who want to go for a walk and take some fresh air,” he said.

A benefit for local communities

In the more than ten years since the decision to green-light the project, several cancellation applications have been filed to the Council of State, both by those rejected in the procurement process and those who opposed the investment for different reasons.

The project is expected to contribute 2.5% to the country’s GDP and create 75,000 jobs, with tax revenues estimated at over €14 billion.

“Our local community can only see this investment positively,” the mayor said.

A particularly important advantage, he stressed, is that “the management body of Ellinikon is based in our municipality”.

“The body is called upon to manage all remunerative fees for the spaces within the investment and will have income from the entire process for the benefit of our fellow citizens,” he said.
Kraków mayor vows growth investments despite budget derailed by inflation

By Mateusz Kucharczyk | EURACTIV.pl

Kraków will stick to pro-growth and sustainability-driven investments despite rising inflation, the Polish city’s Mayor and Professor Jacek Majchrowski told EURACTIV Poland in an interview.

Majchrowski explained that the costs of the pandemic, soaring inflation and some new state taxes had distorted the city’s budget.

“The increase in fuel, gas and electricity prices leads to rising costs of maintaining public transport, infrastructure, etc. It is also difficult to implement and plan investments, as the increase in prices for construction materials and services causes companies to start bidding for much more money than the city initially assumed,” he said.

Moreover, the tax reforms introduced by the government are depleting some categories of income earned by local governments. All this means that we have to implement the budget with limited revenues and increasing costs for the functioning of local government,” he added.

However, despite this unfavourable environment, Majchrowski said his local government would insist on investments.

“Our budget is focused on development, we do not give up on investments, which drive the economy, or on the activities that bring us closer to the model of a sustainable city,” he said.

Majchrowski, who has been Krakow’s mayor since 2002, said the pandemic showed that if we want to build cities that are resilient to economic, climate or health challenges, “we must think about their future in terms of sustainable development”.

“This is an approach that Kraków had already been pursuing before the pandemic. It includes economic diversification, the pursuit of climate neutrality, and the use of technology and intelligent solutions to improve people’s lives […] It is also about shaping of urban space in such a way that it allows the inhabitants to meet the most important needs in a short distance from home,” he noted.

Re-building foreign tourism

Tourism is considered a critical part of the city’s economy. According to data, before the pandemic, tourism was generating 10% of the GDP and employed about 40,000 people.

In 2019, 14 million visitors visited Kraków, while a year later, their number fell by 35%. The war in Ukraine decreased further the number of foreign visitors, and Majchrowski says foreign tourism should now be re-built in close coordination with the industry.

“Optimistic forecasts say that we will be able to do this by the end of 2023. More cautious ones point to 2025”, he said.

“Of course, the war in Ukraine does not help. The uncertain political and economic situation always harms the development of tourism. Despite the difficult circumstances, we continue to work for the reconstruction of this market, in accordance with the recently
adopted Policy of sustainable tourism in Krakow 2021-2028," he added.

The mayor explained that the objective is to develop an optimal tourism management model and simultaneously promote Kraków as a historical city that "cares about its unique cultural heritage and the natural environment".

Another field that Kraków will focus on is the development of cycling, as it was one of two Polish cities that set up additional bicycle lanes during the pandemic.

"Every year we create new bicycle paths, almost all one-way streets in the city centre allow bicycle traffic under the current, this whole area is a zone of Tempo 30 calm traffic [...] To promote pedestrian traffic, we have also turned off almost all traffic signals in the centre, so pedestrians do not waste time at intersections."

The mayor also said the city has advanced in community gardens considering that since 2017, it has been implementing a program to support urban gardening via consultations and workshops.

"Every year comes new gardens. Currently, there are fourteen, and more are under review. Kraków is also the only city in Poland and one of a few in Europe that has passed regulations on the establishment and maintenance of community gardens", he said.

**Smart solutions for a digital future**

Regarding the city’s digital future, Majchrowski said the preparation of the infrastructure needed to manage the city’s ICT services was finalised in 2021.

"Currently, we are finalising the work on key reference data sets for the city, including spatial data and data on people and businesses. On this foundation, applications and services are created," he said.

The mayor cited as an example the Mobile Services Platform, where one can check the schedule of waste collections and the location of sports facilities or automatic defibrillators, while in the future, one would also be able to pay for some municipal services online.

"Another project is the Portal of Electronic Services, integrated with the client's online account, which allows you to handle official business without leaving home," he said.

In 2022 and 2023, the city will also implement systems for processing large data sets based on machine learning and artificial intelligence.

"These systems will allow for advanced analysis of urban data, which will translate into very concrete conclusions. This will support the decision-making on the development of Krakow so that we can address the real needs of the city and residents. This includes, for example, the analysis of mobility in the city to reduce traffic jams and improve the comfort of travel", he concluded.
In light of the expected momentum in tourism and hospitality, securing supply chains for this service sector will play a particularly important role. [Shutterstock/DeymosHR]
Returning to complete normalcy after the pandemic shock will be challenging as inflation causes additional headaches. However, stakeholders insist that the situation in Croatia is improving quickly, and the government is decisive in taking advantage of the momentum.

“It is obvious that this year we will exceed 100,000 issued permits for residence and work of foreigners in Croatia,” Žarko Katić, State Secretary of the Ministry of the Interior (MUP), told EURACTIV’s partner Jutarnji list.

Katić said this was a clear signal in the recovery of tourism and hospitality because in these sectors, in addition to construction, most foreigners will be employed.

At the end of April, the interior ministry confirmed that the decision to restrict border crossings temporarily had not been extended, which should further encourage the recovery of tourism and hospitality.

One of the signals was the landing of the first plane on a direct flight from New York to Dubrovnik Airport. “During the season, about 70 flights were announced on the New York-Dubrovnik route, and more than 15,000 people are expected to arrive. The first flights are almost completely filled, and for later, there is a good booking, and good occupancy is expected,” said the commercial director of Dubrovnik Airport, Ivan Maslač.

The epidemiological picture in the country is entirely under control. According to Reuters, the country reports 329 new infections on average daily, representing 4% of the peak.

“My most important task was to prevent a social fracture,” said Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenković, referring to the past two years of the public health crisis.

“Now citizens can feel why the state exists in crisis and why the EU is good and benefits citizens when it needs it most,” the Croatian leader added.

The Croatian economy is successfully recovering, and in the first quarter, it grew by 7% compared to the same period last year. A significant share of growth is in tourism and services, with a special role played by hospitality which went through a challenging period during the crisis and relied heavily on government support measures.

The most visible segment, coffee bars, gained a strong impetus with the abolition of restrictions and by allowing work after midnight, positively impacting work during the tourism season.

The government is continuing in this direction, so a significant part of the economic incentives for this year related to tourism.

In criticism of the opposition that the program focuses too much on this branch, the government says that these are high value-added projects, such as increasing the categorisation of hotel accommodation and new investments.

State Secretary at the Ministry of Economy Nataša Mikuš Žigman stated that 14.6% of projects are registered in tourism, and their value is slightly more than 35% of incentives.

Tourism’s momentum

In light of the expected momentum in tourism and hospitality, securing supply chains for this service sector will play a particularly important role.

In this segment, a special step forward was made by the company METRO with solutions adapted to the specific needs of tourism and hospitality developed in digital packages.

For example, METRO and SMART have developed a B2B system that allows customers to receive all invoice items while the system updates prices and stocks in the customer’s program, reducing their administrative burden.

However, the key threat to the recovery of tourism and hospitality comes from outside, through rising energy and food prices translated into inflation. This could slow down the arrival of guests by their own transport, which accounts for the largest share of Croatia’s tourist visitors.

However, estimates say that after two pandemic years and the pressure of the war in Ukraine, people will still decide to seek rest and relaxation.
Bratislava readies 2030 city plan after dramatic tourism drop during pandemic

By Michal Hudec | EURACTIV.sk

Following massive losses in tourism due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Slovak capital Bratislava’s local authorities are now preparing the “2030 city plan” to re-attract personnel who left and help the sector stand on its own feet again in a new reality.

Bratislava experienced an 80% drop in tourism in the last two years compared to the years before the pandemic. Last summer, the tourism industry was ready for at least partial revival, but it did not happen.

“Last year, tourism in Bratislava took an extreme hit,” said Vladimír Grežo, head of Bratislava Tourist Board (BTB), an organisation established by the city hall to promote local tourism.

The total number of tourists visiting the city during this period is not yet known, as information for the fourth quarter is unavailable. Grežo believes the total number for 2021 will be significantly lower than 2020.

During the first three quarters of 2021, more than 265,000 people visited the city, while during the same time, in 2020, more than 358,000 thousand people arrived. In 2019, the city reported more than a million tourists.

Vallo agrees that a drop in the number of tourists is a problem, especially for hotel owners and enterprises living off tourism.
The mayor, however, noted that tourism is not the primary source of income for Bratislava, and the city also does not experience problems with empty apartments, which are usually used as short-term accommodation for tourists. This is very apparent in Prague or other western tourist destinations.

**Refocusing strategy**

The number of tourists in Bratislava had an upward trend for a long time before the pandemic. Every year, more tourists were pouring into the Slovak capital, and the number of nights spent was also increasing. According to Grežo, the pandemic forced Bratislava to refocus on domestic visitors, although the Slovak market is relatively small.

In 2021, domestic tourists overpassed foreign travellers for the first time in years. This trend should also continue next year, according to the Tourism Economics Oxford Company, which analysed the emerging trends in the tourism sector. The report says the world will only recover to pre-COVID numbers in 2025 at the earliest. Domestic travel should have recovered faster, however, as some experts point out, the situation may now be different.

President of the Association of Hotels and Restaurants Marek Harbulák points out that many households may reassess their leisure expenditures in the face of high inflation.

“Slovak customers, in particular, are currently reassessing their holiday and leisure spending, which may result in shorter holidays and fewer overnight stays,” Harbulák said.

Grežo explained that BTB tailored the marketing campaign and PR activities in 2021 primarily for domestic tourists. However, the tourism sector in Bratislava relies on foreign tourists, as 70% of visitors before the pandemic came from outside the country.

Abroad, BTB presents Bratislava as a modern and green European metropolis. Last year, Bratislava invited tens of foreign influencers from the United States, Canada, Dubai, Russia and Australia into the city. After the programme in the capital, they continued travelling elsewhere in Slovakia.

“This cooperation has been very fruitful. We were able to promote Slovakia to many people around the world in one week. I believe this is the way forward even in the future,” said the spokesman of BTB, Július Buday.

Grežo believes that to revive the interest of foreign tourists, the vaccination rate in the city needs to get higher.

The Tourism Economics Oxford Company study suggests that places with low vaccination rates can become so-called grey areas that tourists will avoid. This may not be as much case for Bratislava as for the rest of Slovakia. Bratislava currently has over 70% of the population vaccinated with two doses. Slovakia, as a whole, has only 50.8%.

**Vision for 2030: a 72-hour city**

A long-term tourism strategy will be formulated in the Bratislava 2030 plan, which aims to state a clear vision of where the city wants to be in 2030 in various areas.

The plan should be finalised in the first half of 2022, but the general framework is already known. In the tourism sector, the ultimate goal is to reach the average of three nights spent in the city.

With this in mind, BTB prepared a new campaign communicating Bratislava as a 72-hour city.

Bratislava wants to become an open, tolerant, vibrant and energetic city. The number of infrastructural projects should help Bratislava pull more tourists into the city – such as the recently proposed “rest plateau” over a busy Židovská street, which is now dividing the city centre into half or the revival of the Danube shoreline.

City hall assumes that in 2030, the number of visitors will reach 1.8 to 2 million. This will be close to the limit Bratislava can receive; therefore, the city will have to choose what kind of tourists it wants.

These are specialists, talented people, people who understand Central Europe, people looking for an alternative to big cities and demanding tourists, who pressure businesses to improve their services.

Many question marks are hanging above the tourism sector in Slovakia as a number of businesses pointed out that financial aid from the state is slow and poorly targeted. However, recently some organisations admitted that help from the help them survive the pandemic.

However, some of the losses the sector took cannot be recovered.

This includes the employees who left due to the long-term uncertainty caused by the pandemic. According to Profesia.sk, almost 8,000 people have simply left the sector since 2020.

“We continue to struggle with an acute shortage of workers, as evidenced by the more than ten thousand vacancies. The question remains not only how to restore the confidence of former employees to work in these sectors, but also where and how to effectively find qualified workers and new talent,” Harbulák added.
Although foreign tourists are beginning to visit France again, a return to normal is not expected before 2023, so restaurant owners in tourist cities like Lyon are counting on other levers to limit losses, such as French tourists and takeaway sales.

An accurate marker of France’s third-largest city is how restaurants and the culinary arts are among the preferred activities of both locals and tourists, French and foreign.

The consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic regarding travel restrictions have had a heavy impact on hotel and restaurant owners, who were forced to close for months on end.

According to INSEE, the French public statistics institute, “restaurant patronage fell by 35% over the year [2020]”. Over the opening period, between June and October 2020, restaurant owners’ turnover fell “by 28%”.

The OECD estimates that “75,000 restaurants and 40,000 cafés” have had to close temporarily and that “one million employees” have been laid off in 2020.

**Lyon’s restaurants suffer from the lack of tourists**

Christophe Marguin, president of the association Les Toques Blanches Lyonnaises, which is involved in promoting and defending the city’s culinary heritage, told EURACTIV that although business has picked up after the pandemic, particularly since the start of the school year in 2021, some areas continue to suffer from a lack of tourists.

The Old Lyon, which is very popular with visitors to the city, is “still suffering a lot”, according to Marguin, as foreign tourism has not returned to pre-crisis levels.

In other areas of the city, the national and Lyonnais clientele nevertheless helps to cushion the blow as domestic tourism activity has increased. In Lyon and France, this has enabled
restaurants to partly compensate for the lack of foreign visitors.

Post-Covid-19 developments

During the period of closure or curfew, restaurants also developed delivery and takeaway sales, but these “were insufficient to prevent the fall in activity”, according to the analysis of INSEE.

As a result, chefs in Lyon’s traditional restaurants who had considered keeping these activities as a complement to on-site service preferred to abandon delivery and takeaway services – or were forced to do so – explains Christophe Marguin.

He added that the prolonged closure of restaurants had convinced many employees in the sector to change jobs, thereby reducing the number of activities: “Today we are refocusing on our core business, the [on-site] restaurant”.

This labour shortage is a direct consequence of the health crisis: according to Pole Emploi, the French public employment agency, more than 250,000 jobs are currently vacant in the hotel and restaurant sector – nearly 300,000 according to trade unions and professional organisations.

Didier Chenet, president of the GNI-HCR (Groupement national des indépendants hôtellerie et restauration, an organisation of the sector’s independents), explains that there are about 100,000 more employees or seasonal workers missing than before the crisis.

The development of “dark kitchens” is undoubtedly also having an impact, even if the traditional restaurant sector is feeling the effects less, according to Marguin, since they are aimed at a different, younger clientele.

Diversity of addresses to boost business

The great diversity of restaurants makes gastronomy accessible to everyone,” says Marguin.

This makes it possible to attract a broader clientele to Lyon’s restaurants, as well as the Michelin-starred ones, the small neighbourhood restaurants and the Bouchons Lyonnais – typical restaurants serving the city’s specialities.

It is this variety that has been accentuated thanks to the “Institut Paul Bocuse” hotel school, named after the city’s emblematic chef, which has attracted talented young people from all over the world.

“It is a strength to have this diversity,” concludes Marguin.
While German cities are increasingly struggling to retain their diversity following the COVID-19 pandemic and the accelerated online shift, they have proven to be more resilient than previously expected.

The coronavirus pandemic has heavily affected the retail, gastronomy, and entertainment sector. With many retailers, local businesses and cultural facilities struggling to survive, the diversity of many inner cities in Germany was greatly diminished.

However, while many feared that the way of life in cities would change for good due to the pandemic, many of these worries turned out to be overstated.

“Some of the negative projections that arose at the beginning of the pandemic did not materialise in the form or to the extent that was partly expected,” Bernd Hallenberg, an expert at the German Federal Association for Housing and Urban Development (vhv), told EURACTIV.

“Some structures have turned out to be more resilient than seemed conceivable or even possible,” he added.

While there is no data on the number of businesses and local retailers that had to close down due to the pandemic, the shift from offline to online is less dramatic than initially expected.

According to a report by the Trade Association Germany (HDE) in May, online retail accounted for 14.7% of the whole retail sector in 2021 – up around four percentage points compared to the pre-pandemic levels in 2019.
“While the transformation of the city centres as locations for retail is in full swing, the overall size of the market share is still relatively small,” Hallenberg pointed out.

However, the increase in the share of online retailers is not directly linked to the decline of offline retail and is primarily driven by the strong growth rate of the online sector. Between 2019 and 2021, the revenue of the online sector has risen by 21%, while offline retails have largely stagnated and only witnessed minor declines in specific sectors.

**Challenges to diversity**

However, while the retail sector did not decline as much as expected, plenty of challenges to the diversity of inner cities remain.

While the revenue of the offline retail sector did not decline during the pandemic, there is nonetheless a change in consumer behaviour visible as more and more customers switch to online marketplaces.

According to a study by the Institute for Trade Research in Cologne (IFH), around 35% of consumers are ordering their products online instead of heading to the local stores.

The shift to online is also visible in other areas, most notably regarding home-office, which could also affect the diversity within cities. While many companies in Germany require their staff to work from the office again, many employees request to stick to home office solutions.

A study by the consultant firm PCW found that 78% of employees say they would wish to work from their home office, compared to 22% before the pandemic.

This trend could lead to a decline of people living in inner cities, as the proximity of the place of residence to the workspace is deemed less important.

“The option to work from home is likely leading to people looking for a more remote and perhaps more affordable place of residence as the proximity to the workplace is no longer a requirement,” Hallenberg said.

According to a study by the consulting company FTI Andersch, this is already a reality, as high rents and rising vacancy rates have led to a decline in the attractiveness of German inner cities.

“In the big inner cities like Munich and Stuttgart, we are already experiencing a decline of the population for several years because people are no longer able to afford housing despite good salaries. If this spreads to other cities in Germany, that would, of course, be a fatal development – also when it comes to city diversity,” Hallenberg emphasised.
Malaga eyes public-private synergies to revive from pandemic

By María Moya | euroefe.es

Public-private collaboration contributes to survival and the success of gastronomy, tourism, and culture in Malaga, local stakeholders told EURACTIV’s partner EFE.

As a result of this cooperation, for example, in the case of gastronomy, promotional campaigns are born to reinforce its brand, profile it as a commitment to quality and excellence, and put local products at centre stage.

But for the gears of the sector to work, true synergies are necessary between business people, producers, and the administration, which come together and feed each other to contribute to the quality of tourism in the city.

Proof of this is the Tourism Forum promoted by the Malaga City Council, a meeting point for agents involved in the sector (owners of premises, public administration, representatives of the port or airport, etc.) to coordinate and respond to tourist demand goals, and challenges.

Thus, another element of the equation is the quality of tourism on offer in a city where “you can walk through the centuries from 3,000 years ago to the 21st Century,” said Mercedes Espiner, a guide at the Association of Professional Guides Malaga Cultural, while describing the “number of impressive cultures” that have left their mark on the current city.

In Malaga, “gastronomy, the narrow streets, the bars and the taverns” are complemented by the Roman theatre, the Alcazaba, the cathedral, the port, the Picasso Museum, or the emblematic Calle Larios.

“If we all see ourselves as a team that works together, then we move ahead,” said Espiner.

The last piece that completes the gearbox is the businesses that have had to reinvent themselves to deal with the consequences of the crisis despite their fundamental role in the city.

Like practically all sectors, “it has not yet reached 100%,” the manager of the Malaga Historical Center merchants association, Open Shopping Center, Fuensanta Villalobos, told EFE.

She noted, however, that COVID-19 forced businesses to digitise, and now it is a trend that is already beginning to consolidate, thanks also to the aid received from the administrations.

Thanks to this synergy between actors, its recovery is also possible: “In the Historic Center, we all feed each other because we have many agreements signed with hoteliers, we meet with neighbours and tour guides,” Villalobos noted.

The result, Espiner explained, is a city that has “a lot of history in very few meters,” that evolves, along with its shops and catering establishments, to offer the best facet of a renewed Malaga, but with the essence of always.

2022: a ‘transition’ year

For his part, Javier Frutos, president of Mahos, the Malaga hoteliers’ association, said in an interview with EFE that 2022 could be considered a transition year for the Spanish Mediterranean city.

To reclaim its pre-pandemic status as a destination of national and international reference, he said the city should adjust to new trends derived from the pandemic that require changes in the consumption habits of visitors and locals and the city’s businesses and establishments.

“Right now, we are in transition. I think that 2022, psychologically for the client and economically for our sector, is going to be that year of transition,” Frutos said.

What the figures say, explained Frutos is that, regarding “the projection of the hospitality industry, the prospects are good.”

Although before the outbreak of the pandemic, 2020 was expected to be “a magnificent year for Malaga due to the number of events it was having.” And although all of Europe is almost back to some level of normality, “It will be difficult to match those...
One of the ways the pandemic has affected the tourism and gastronomy sector is the habits of consumers who, after two years of confinement and closures, are increasingly opting for “immediacy”: “Vacations are no longer planned so far in advance,” Frutos explains, which makes it difficult to make forecasts.

Another trend that the pandemic leaves in the Malaga hospitality industry, according to Frutos, is, however, the habit of making reservations, a custom made necessary due to pandemic capacity restrictions that now benefit the owners of the establishments and indicates “a transition in the client himself at the time of consumption.”

However, despite the evolution of the sector that has sought to survive the crisis in the last two years, “the essence of Malaga and Andalusian hospitality cannot be lost,” he said.

“We are people who need a lot of closeness because of our character. That was also provided by the bars, which ultimately were an example of the type of life we lead and our way of
Mayor: The pandemic gave birth to new ideas for Dubrovnik’s future

By Zeljko Trkanjec | EURACTIV.hr

Croatia’s famous coastal Dubrovnik city aims to push forward diversified forms of tourism and support local gastronomy through family farming to adjust to the post-pandemic reality, the city’s mayor told EURACTIV Croatia in an interview.

He said tourism, Dubrovnik’s core economic activity, will also adapt to the new reality by focusing on diversified forms, such as digital nomads and film tourism.

“The time of the COVID crisis for us was a period of restart, which gave us time to rearrange, to rethink,” Mato Franković said, adding that the new projects aim to stabilise economic recovery after two years of significant losses.

Especially during the pandemic, the city focused on digital nomads – people whose jobs allow them to work remotely and at the same time like to travel and stay longer in a destination.

“We saw the potential for Dubrovnik,”

“The time of the COVID crisis for us was a period of restart, which gave us time to rearrange, to rethink,” Mato Franković said, adding that the new projects aim to stabilise economic recovery after two years of significant losses. [Shutterstock/Benny Marty]
he said.

“Two years ago, we organised a conference for digital nomads, followed by several other events and launched initiatives to be included in the TOP 10 Savills Real Estate Executive Nomad List. In this sense, Dubrovnik has a lot to offer, especially in the months outside the main tourist season,” he noted.

Another type of tourism that proved to be good during the pandemic was film tourism. In the midst of the crisis, in September and October 2020, three film production companies were shooting in Dubrovnik.

“In 2021 alone, over 25 camera crews stayed here, most of them foreign, including the team of CNN Travel’s ‘Quest’s World of Wonder’ TV show.”

Also, the City of Dubrovnik has prepared the project framework “Television and film studio complex and game-development centre DUBROVNİK”.

“It is designed as an entrepreneurial incubator, highly-equipped and specialised in the development of video games and professionalisation of filming in which companies of this profile would operate and make Dubrovnik even more recognisable on the gaming and film world scene,” Franković said.

The project should establish a specialised business incubator that will contribute to the development of the creative industry in the Dubrovnik-Neretva County, focusing on the audiovisual and IT industry.

“This will contribute to strengthening the competitiveness of this sector of the economy and increase employment. The complex would allow for the rental of space, audiovisual equipment and teams,” he said.

**Supporting local food**

Gastronomy and the catering sector have always been an integral part of Dubrovnik’s tradition, and the mayor said this would continue by supporting locally produced food.

“Although today in Dubrovnik you can find a diverse offer of world cuisines [...] we are still best known for traditional Mediterranean cuisine, where food quality is the basis of the whole story and in this sense, we work to encourage local family farms and supply chains,” he said.

“We are lucky that in our environment, from Konavle, through the islands, Primorje, Pelješac peninsula and Neretva, we have quality farmers, producers, growers, whether we are talking about fruits and vegetables, excellent Peljesac and Konavle wines, Mali Ston oyster with protected designation of origin,” he added.

Also, rural tourism is developing more and more in these areas, which is “an additional value to the offer of tourist Dubrovnik”.

**Digitisation: Smart city solutions**

Another aspect of Dubrovnik’s future is digitisation and promoting. “Smart City” solutions to reduce congestion, protect the environment, and the city’s valuable monumental heritage.

The city has developed several applications in this regard.

“We have, for example, a web platform for predicting the number of visitors to the historic centre of Dubrovnik Visitors, which with the help of artificial intelligence, predicts crowds in the historic centre on a specific date and part of the day and directs visitors to the best time to visit”.

There is also smart parking, an application that covers every public parking space and gives an overview of free parking spaces so as not to circle the car looking for a free space unnecessarily.

“A total of 2,016 parking sensors were installed in parking spaces throughout the city, which is also the largest number of installed sensors of this technology in the world in one city. We have also installed webcams on city roads, and we are the first city in Croatia to offer a 100% electric car-sharing system service since October 2019,” he said.

“This functions as an upgrade of public transport and in an environmentally friendly way without noise and harmful emissions contributes to relieving the city’s transport infrastructure,” he concluded.
Hamburg is looking for solutions to reverse the trend of disproportional retail sector growth, while other sectors such as culture and leisure struggle, Dorothee Stapelfeldt, Senator for Urban Development and Environment in the Government of Hamburg, told EURACTIV.de in an interview.

The “dangerous” reduced diversity of uses in Hamburg’s city centre was already noticed before the pandemic, but the latter deteriorated the situation, Stapelfeldt admitted.

“Even before the pandemic began, we were already aware of the structural change in the inner city and the danger of mono-structures forming,” she said.

The problem mainly concerns the uneven focus on the retail sector’s growth, whereas restaurants and cultural institutions have been displaced.

“Most cinemas in the city centre have had to close in recent decades because of this,” Stapelfeldt said.

To counterbalance the negative trend, the city of Hamburg already made efforts to preserve diversity in the city centre before the outbreak of the pandemic.

“Back in 2014, we developed a mission statement for the inner city that addressed this problem, among other things. At the beginning of 2020, even before COVID became a global pandemic, we presented our inner-city action concept based on this,” Stapelfeldt emphasised.

In this action concept, a particular focus was placed on promoting various uses.

“We said: we need much greater diversity and mix of uses in the city centre. Emphasising this variety more strongly, with more housing, more cultural offerings, more services, and more gastronomy is particularly important to us.”

The pandemic made things worse

However, the pandemic accelerated the emergence of mono-structures in the city centre. Although the city of Hamburg does not yet have concrete figures on the number of closures in the last two years, the decline in diversity is apparent.

“This development reached its peak in connection with the pandemic, during which two large department stores were forced to close,” explained the senator for urban development.
“Even before the pandemic began, we were already aware of the structural change in the inner city and the danger of mono-structures forming,”

Dorothee Stapelfeldt
Senator for Urban Development and Environment in the Government of Hamburg
In response to the pandemic outbreak and the subsequent lockdowns, financial aid totalling €3 billion was provided to Hamburg's business community to ease the burden caused by COVID restrictions.

For example, the city of Hamburg provided about €1.6 million for the Restart Fund, which supports events and other activities by stakeholder groups.

“The inner city has received a larger share than the smaller districts with their respective centres. With the fund, we really offered help to restart after the lockdown,” Stapelfeldt said.

In addition, the city of Hamburg has initiated the project “Free_Space”, endowed with €9 million, which aims to revitalise the city centre by allowing vacant retail spaces to be used temporarily. The project supports creatives in temporarily using suitable vacant premises for production, presentation, and trade under favourable conditions.

However, the project, launched in July 2021, has attracted only limited attention so far.

“Of the €9 million we offered in funding, only half a million has been drawn down so far,” Stapelfeldt said.

**Future challenges and digitisation**

However, to counteract the development of mono-structures in the city centre, measures with a long-term perspective are needed that also affect beyond the COVID pandemic.

“Financial support for the retail sector may have briefly tackled the problem, but it has not solved it,” the senator noted.

“Because the retail sector must also change conceptually regardless of the pandemic – if it wants to maintain its standing[...] Because people nowadays expect to be reached differently.”

A decisive factor in this regard is digitisation, which will also have a massive impact on retail. The city of Hamburg is trying to address this by improving the framework conditions.

In particular, Hamburg wants to promote network expansion to further improve the digital infrastructure.

“Here, as a city, we are trying to set the general conditions. This is the first step. But of course, private initiatives and impulses are also needed,” said Stapelfeldt.

Overall, the aim is to make the inner city more resilient in terms of diversity of use. Hamburg remains a city “in which important cultural institutions, both large and small, have their place,” the senator for urban development concluded.
Mayor: Culture and technology will shape Malaga’s future post-COVID

By María Moya | EuroEFE.EURACTIV.es

Strengthening the cultural elements and a focus on innovation-driven projects are the driving forces for Malaga’s future after the pandemic, Mayor Francisco de la Torre told EFE in an interview.

De la Torre said he sees the Malaga of the future as “very bright” and “very powerful culturally and technologically”, a trend that, he assures, will help shape the city in the medium and long term.

“It will be a Malaga strong in culture [...] as well as a technologically advanced city that sees clearly that innovation is one of the keys to progress”, he said, adding that it will show itself to the world as an “urban laboratory” for innovative projects.

Accessibility completes the panorama of “a city without barriers” that is especially sensitive to social and solidarity aspects.

The city also shares, says the mayor, two of the main objectives of the European Union regarding post-pandemic recovery: the green transition and digital transformation, two issues that determine the distribution of Next Generation EU (NGEU) funds – the European Union’s social and economic COVID recovery package.

And so, in the coming years, Malaga “is going to take very important steps in sustainability”, he noted.

A city of ‘five minutes’

On the one hand, the pandemic has led to a labour scenario in which teleworking “provides a response to sustainability”, and many choose to work remotely in Malaga: “It is happening, it is a reality, and we will continue to support it”, said the mayor.

On the other hand, “the urban approach has a lot to do with sustainability” and, along these lines, Malaga could be a city “of five minutes”, in which “the time between the place of work, residence, shopping, and study is much shorter. That's the kind of model we're trying to promote”, he explained.

Among his projects is opening Malaga to the metropolitan area, facilitating public transport “with a BUS-HOV lane and with modal interchanges, where citizens can arrive without using their private car, collaborating in the control of CO2”.

“Malaga province will be, I am convinced, one of the great achievements from the point of view of a successful territorial policy of Spain and Europe,” said the mayor.

Progressing in digitisation

In terms of digitisation, the city is “progressing strongly”, but, he notes, there is still a long way to go in this area, both for the local administration and companies, where there is a lack of awareness when it comes to accessing training courses.

The mayor alludes to the importance of “a higher educational level because then, the projects will have more quality, more strength, more ambition, more international vision and more capacity for digital transformation.”

All these elements contribute to a Malaga “that tries to provide good service to its citizens”, a city with “a lot to offer the people of Malaga in transport, in green areas, in culture” or, in technology, “a comfortable city, pedestrian, which takes care of its heritage and with itineraries that make it welcoming [...] making it attractive for outsiders”, he added.
The role of tourism

Malaga’s tourism was hit hard by the pandemic. Still, according to the mayor, it has now recovered and returned to pre-pandemic levels, with a confident forecast for a full recovery and an eye on technology and culture.

“The forecasts show that there is confidence in the recovery”, the mayor said, pointing out that growth compared to 2019 of between 3% and 4% is expected”.

Moreover, although the restrictions imposed during the early stages of the pandemic led to a drop in international tourism in favour of domestic tourism, by 2021, the figures had returned to normal.

As a result, the capital faces a new summer campaign with high expectations in terms of occupancy and reservations.

Several factors converge and contribute to the city of Malaga’s qualities that make it a place to visit and live in. One is “tourism excellence”, thanks to the hotels, the food, and the cultural offerings, elements that have brought people back together, something that was missing during the pandemic.

Fine dining, one of the city’s hallmarks and part of tourism excellence, “has been further improved in recent years and is a local attraction”, in an effort “infused”, the Spanish politician says, with that “key concept: quality”.

In fact, Malaga stands out for its numerous quality certificates in “the entire tourism value chain, from the taxi driver who picks up tourists at the station or airport to hotels, restaurants, museums, and businesses”, De la Torre concluded.
Czech gastronomy upgrade critical to attract ‘demanding’ tourists

By Barbora Pištorová | EURACTIV.cz

Switching to quality gastronomy combined with greening measures in restaurants will be key factors in reviving the Czech hospitality industry in the post-pandemic era, as tourists have now become more demanding in several aspects, Czech restaurants owners have told EURACTIV.cz.

“It’s no longer mainly the sights or attractions, but it’s the holistic experience that tourists consider when deciding where to go. And gastronomy is fundamental in their decision making,” said Luboš Kastner, a co-owner of restaurants in the Pilsen region in western Czechia.

Kastner explained that as a result, tourists tend to favour those areas and sights where they can also find quality dining options.

“They [tourists] prefer to go to a less attractive tourist destination if they know that they will have a great meal there and get to know any local artisanal specifics related to food and drink,” he told EURACTIV.cz, noting that the current trend for restaurants is the “professionalisation” of gastronomy.

“The guest has become more demanding and more interested in gastro during COVID-19 pandemic, perhaps even more educated about it,” he said.

Analysts suggest that equally important is tourists’ environmental considerations and what restaurants particularly do about that.

As restaurateurs do not have enough budget to implement environmentally-friendly measures, they hope for investments coming from the EU-funded National Recovery Plan (RRF), from which Prague expects to receive €7 billion in grants.

Disposal of food waste is among the most promising areas. According to Ondřej Černý, sales director of biogas station in Rapotín, the company currently cooperates with 70 gastro establishments, while hundreds of restaurants in the Czech Republic are interested in these services.

“I hope that this number will increase in the future,” he concluded.

Race to reach pre-pandemic levels

Restaurants in the Czech Republic
were dealt a severe blow during the pandemic due to successive lockdowns.

Although Europe has to a large extent returned to normality and lifted safety measures, the sector has not returned to pre-pandemic levels. According to representatives of the local sector, the number of people going to restaurants has dropped by 20-30%.

Moreover, the number of foreign tourists remains low and Czech restaurateurs these days depend mainly on domestic clientele.

“Sales are very weak. Businesses partially reached pre-pandemic numbers in the summer of 2021, but since then, they have been well below,” Kastner said.

Michal Voldřich, president of the Czech-Moravian Association of Microbreweries, shares a similar view.

“Anyone who looks into a restaurant sees it either empty or half-empty,” he said.

Voldřich noted that foreign tourists rarely return to Czech restaurants while local gastronomy, which largely focuses on tourists, has failed to change its model and switch for instance to Czech clientele.

This resulted in many businesses deciding to temporarily close during the winter, expecting to re-open in the spring.

“Everyone hopes that tourism will recover at least partially this year, at least to the level of last summer,” Krastner said.

In the third quarter, growth was significantly high in tourism-related sectors, as the Czech Statistical Office’s overview shows but Voldřich remained cautious.

“There is no foreign tourism now and it will be slowly recovering in the next two years at least. It will probably have a different form,” he added.

**Local clients might be crucial**

Currently, the Czech gastronomy sector depends almost exclusively on local people and Czech tourists who are travelling within the country.

“Last summer was even a record for domestic tourism. Still, restaurants in towns focusing exclusively on tourists have mostly closed,” Kastner said.

Voldřich also estimates that people will have to appreciate “their innkeeper”.

“Only the strong ‘heroes’ will stay. Most restaurateurs are dependent on their savings, most loyal regulars, and their own skill in case they take the jobs their former employees held.”

From the perspective of local citizens, however, the role of pubs and restaurants is crucial.

“Pubs and breweries have an unwavering historical presence,” said Voldřich, who believes pubs and breweries bring a neighbourhood together and are irreplaceable elements of social life.

“It’s not an exaggeration to say it is our national intellectual asset.”
Paris arrondissement mayor: Pandemic ‘accelerated’ trends, challenges are here to stay

By Mathieu Pollet | EURACTIV France

“A major world metropolis does not have the same logic as a small town, but the challenge for Paris is to be both a major business hub that hosts the world's greatest museums and a city where people can continue to live, whether they are executives or cleaning ladies,” said the mayor of Paris’ 18th arrondissement. [Daboost/Shutterstock]

While not having profoundly changed Paris’ neighbourhoods, the pandemic has ‘accelerated’ trends and created challenges that are here to stay, the mayor of Paris’ 18th arrondissement, Eric Lejoindre, told EURACTIV France in an interview.

Eric Lejoindre is a member of the Socialist Party and mayor of Paris’ 18th arrondissement since 2014.

Would you say there was a pre-and post-health crisis period for urban policy?

I think that crises, like the COVID-19 crisis, are more revealing and
accelerating than transforming. We realised that when peoples’ homes were small, and it was necessary to distance outdoors, we had a real issue. The idea of freeing up surface parking spaces to create café terraces, enlarged pavements or bicycle paths is a policy that we’ve been pursuing for quite a long time, and COVID-19 was an important moment of acceleration.

In the same way, we saw a change in how Parisians or the inhabitants of the 18th arrondissement spent their time at home, on public transport or in the office. These are all things we knew about but have seen reappear. These are deep-seated movements that date from before COVID-19 which will last a long time.

Whether or not to maintain the terraces temporarily set up during the health crisis was also debated...

I’ll take the example of the 18th arrondissement, where around 800 terraces have been created in addition to the existing ones. If you count very widely, 20 or 30 caused us problems concerning public space or noise occupation. The central question posed by temporary terraces is what to do with the street when we have decided that it is not just a place for traffic. There is an element that makes it possible almost to know whether a terrace will be a problem or not.

It is not linked to the nature of the street in urban terms, nor the quality or lack of quality of the shopkeeper. It’s linked to the clientele, and you know that a space occupied by inhabitants never poses a problem, whereas an area occupied by people who are not inhabitants does. The question is, who benefits from this new space being taken over?

The pandemic has also prompted many city dwellers to turn to home delivery. What can you, as a mayor, do to encourage your constituents to return to restaurants?

The first question is whether delivery or takeaway services are cumulative with restaurant services or if they compete with each other. When I talk to restaurant owners in the 18th arrondissement, they are unsure about this. My feeling, in any case, is that the things are cumulative.

The people who order at home are also those who perhaps go to the restaurant most often. I don’t know for sure at the moment. I think there is a real need to look at temporalities. Take the issue of teleworking; it creates a clientele, especially for takeaways in residential areas. So it’s a highly complex movement to grasp, and I think we need a little more time. I am not sure that we need public action to change citizens’ demands.

However, there is also the question of the growth of delivery platforms, which has led to an increase in the number of delivery people using bicycles.

The problem now is how to organise these delivery flows. We see a considerable expansion in home delivery, which also raises the question of waste management, especially recyclable waste. We can see that many home delivery structures are making an effort to use recyclable containers and limit plastic.

The 18th arrondissement is also a place that attracts many tourists, mainly thanks to Montmartre hill. Aren’t restaurants a strong attraction?

There is a fundamental question about what restaurants offer today and how to “de-specialise” them? I would suggest restaurant owners in the 18th arrondissement focus first on a local clientele and then on a wider clientele. More and more tourists will want to have lunch with Parisians, rather than in significant touristy places.

Beyond restaurant owners, do you think it is important to support small shops?

One of the elements which make Parisian and street life is the relationship with small shops. We have had some experiences where we have demonstrated that when we take a very close interest in local shops, in commercial establishments, including the commercial structuring of the street, we gain enormously in quality of life.

In the 18th arrondissement, we recreated commercial areas of different sizes and worked on their use. Everything is linked to the attachment of Parisians to these shops. We also try to support local initiatives. We have a lot of young entrepreneurs in Paris who have great difficulty finding places to develop their activities. Our policy of allocating premises at the foot of buildings of the city’s social landlords can really help.

Finally, what sustainable changes can we imagine in this post-COVID-19 period that we are now experiencing? How do you see the city of tomorrow?

A significant world metropolis does not have the same logic as a small town. Still, the challenge for Paris is to be both a major business hub that hosts the world’s most excellent museums and a city where people can continue to live, whether they are executives or cleaners.

The question of travel and public space must also be central. We can see that Parisians are keen to reduce noise, traffic and costs. The Paris of tomorrow must be the city where you are at your own pace and, at the same time, an inhabitant of one of the world’s largest and most attractive metropolises.
After the pandemic, the revival of culture and hospitality in the Slovak capital will be harder than previously expected. But that has not stopped Bratislava from looking to the future with an aim to boost hospitality by becoming a centre for congress tourism.

According to the Bratislava city hall, the pandemic clearly showed how important it is to systematically support culture and community life not just in the city centre but also in the suburbs and other parts of the city.

“Our goal is to get the culture to as many citizens as possible and at the same time create an energetic and colourful city for its visitors,” says the draft of the Bratislava 2030 plan, a document that serves as a vision for various areas of city development.

However, the culture sector was hit hard by the pandemic and is currently in its worst state in years.

Theatres, cinemas, musical halls and other cultural institutions were only open 25% of the time without any restrictions during the last two years. For 40% of the time, they were closed completely. The earnings of Slovak National Theater (SND), for example, dropped from more than €9 million in 2019 to less than €2 million in 2021.

According to the Director of SND, Matej Drlička, theatres, orchestras and festivals around Slovakia face the same problem, which can have devastating effects for many.

Bratislava representatives believe that spreading the cultural sector around the city is a crucial part of high living standards.

However, hospitality sector representatives point out that bars, restaurants, and hotels are all in the same position and have suffered years of government neglect.

According to the Alliance of Slovak Gastronomy, the pandemic’s third wave at the end of last year has been the worst one so far. However, the government did not back businesses in any way.

Help was not enough

Asked by EURACTIV Slovakia how city authorities view the sector’s future, Dagmar Schmucková from Bratislava city hall replied: “The hospitality sector, unfortunately, still has to live in the present due to the unfavourable situation.”

To help them weather the storm, Bratislava offered restaurants, bars and cafés a discount of 50% from their rents. Then, higher vaccination rates
allowed businesses to remain open for longer and with a bigger capacity during the winter months.

But for many, this was not enough, and they closed their doors for good. Some owners of the closed businesses want to try again, while some left the sector for good.

“For the hospitality sector, guests are the cornerstone of survival. Many businesses will be recovering years from this pandemic. We must not forget dozens of restaurants and bars that have closed for goods, as well as the departure of skilled chefs and waiters to other sectors,” said Magdaléna Koreny, spokeswoman of the Help for Gastro initiative.

Filling the blank space on the map

However, Schmucková confirmed that the city has already lost many businesses, and others will follow. Unfortunately, the revival of the sector after the end of the restrictive measures will not be as quick as previously expected.

“The gastronomy sector is, for example, affected not only by the restrictions but also by the fact that many people are still working from home,” Schmucková added.

This is the problem for hotels with regards to the so-called congress tourism. Bratislava expects the revival of congresses, conferences, and in-person business meetings only after the Omicron wave is entirely gone and the government lifts all restrictions.

Congress tourism in Bratislava should be boosted in the following years with the National Culture and Congress Centre, which will be built just outside the city centre.

The ministry wants to have a new congressional centre in Bratislava finished by 2030 – a year during which Slovakia will have a presidency of the Council of the European Union.

Focus on domestic travel

Before the pandemic is over and foreign tourism return to pre-pandemic levels, Bratislava wants to focus on domestic tourists. Bratislava Tourist Board (BTB), a city organisation responsible for tourism and marketing activities, expects a complete revival of domestic tourism in 2022. For foreign tourists, the estimate is 2025.

Last summer, the number of domestic tourists was 20% higher than in 2020. “We are happy because we focused on domestic tourists in our communication and marketing campaign, and we also supported many local projects,” said Vladimír Grežo, head of BTB.

“We believe that focusing on domestic tourists makes sense in the long run,” Grežo said.

But solely focusing on domestic travel cannot save the whole hospitality sector.

Grežo added that Bratislava is very much dependent on foreign tourists as the overall numbers last year were even worse than for the first pandemic year 2020.

During the first three quarters of 2021, more than 265,000 people visited the city, while during the same time in 2020, more than 358,000 thousand people arrived. In 2019, the city reported more than a million tourists.
A
n increasing number of EU countries have started lifting COVID-related restrictions in a first sign of returning to normality. However, there are doubts as to how ready societies are for a full return to “old normal”, after two years of varying and often frustrating public measures.

Several stakeholders EURACTIV has spoken to named hospitality and tourism, accompanied by a transformation of city centres into innovative new concepts, as key in helping societies re-adjust after the pandemic.

“We are fighting the last war with COVID and should be pivoting back to normal life, but society isn’t quite ready for it yet,” an EU official told EURACTIV.com.

“But the psychological element is something that we will be closely monitoring in the years to come,” added the official.

Spain, Italy, and other EU countries have abolished masks outdoors while Belgium has recently decided to reopen nightlife.

However, experts warn that although measures are being phased out on a policy level, in practice, societies will be faced with multilevel challenges.

Heavy psychological burden

“Although scientists expect that mental health will recover in the long run in the vast majority of people, there are major challenges for societies to return to previous coexistence conditions,” psychiatrist and psychotherapist Dimitris Papadimitriadis told EURACTIV.

He said societies had gone through a period of great mental turmoil, for which they were unprepared and untrained, and the prevailing tendency turned out to be that of isolation and avoidance of human interaction.

According to the expert, significant mental fatigue and reactivity have been recorded, the trust of a part of the society towards institutions was damaged, with feelings of “great anger and frustration for the deprivation of acquired rights and freedoms”.

“Restoring the wound of trust both among people and toward institutions […] will be a long and difficult road,” Papadimitriadis added.

The role of hospitality

For the Greek expert, the tourism and hospitality sector could help re-establish understanding between different societies in the most meaningful way.

“Not only will it facilitate a return to the normal way of life, by serving the recovery from isolation and giving meaning to life itself with new experiences, but it will also serve the need to feel like partners on our planet again, with our borders open,” Papadimitriadis said.
Bars and restaurants across the bloc – the most common venues for socialising – have been dealt a severe blow during the pandemic.

According to the Brewers of Europe, in 2020, beer sold in bars dropped by 42% compared to 2019, from 126 to 73 million hectolitres, while jobs generated in the beer value chain lost an estimated one third in 2020, from 2.6 to 1.8 million people.

“Unfortunately, many bars and breweries will never reopen, even after all the restrictions are lifted,” said the association’s communications director, Simon Spillane.

Recovery, he added, would be slow and reopening would need to be done properly so that people can socialise safely.

**New concepts for cities**

For Steffen Greubel, CEO of German multinational METRO AG, innovative concepts including hospitality and cities’ transformation could be considered in the reopening phase.

“People are longing to go to their favourite restaurants, meet friends in the bar and get together,” he told EURACTIV.

“For inner cities, this is a chance to become again a place for enjoyment and togetherness. We need new concepts that combine gastronomy, local shops and culture to make towns better places to live and work. Hospitality is a strong partner to turn city centres into unique experiences,” he added.

Apostolos Tzitzikostas, president of the European Committee of the Regions, stressed that hospitality and tourism are part of the European way of life.

“The sector is crucial in contributing to our recovery from the pandemic and promoting European cohesion,” he told EURACTIV.

He said the EU’s Recovery and Resilience Facility has the potential to be a decisive tool in many countries to revitalise urban and rural communities over the next decade.

“It firstly needs cities and regions to play a key role in shaping and implementing investments. It is vital that their direct knowledge of their local communities is fostered in order to fund projects that respond to citizens’ needs and expectations,” he said.

He emphasised the close coordination with EU cohesion policy programmes in order to ensure the different investments – urban infrastructures, social cohesion and innovation, entrepreneurship, sustainability, cultural development – are integrated within “a consistent vision, shared by all local actors and not imposed top-down”.

“The Recovery and Resilience Facility was quickly launched during a time of emergency, without consulting, in most cases, to the voice of our territories,” he said, adding that this approach is slowly changing.

“We need real political willingness – from Brussels to national governments – to work together with every region, city and village, on shared priorities,” he concluded.

**Transforming cities together with citizens**

On post-COVID cities, psychiatrist Papadimitriadis said our current priorities need to be reconsidered if we want to get away from today’s “highly individualistic societies” which do not help people address issues such as a pandemic and climate change.

“Our ‘next’ cities must be developed with a more collective vision, where they will facilitate not only the functioning of the individual but the cooperation of people. Investment is needed to create joint ventures and greater involvement of people in decision making,” he said.

“The need for more open access parks, for more green, is absolutely imperative, as is the need to subsidise the volunteering and initiatives that citizens have and that can be developed locally, such as in their neighbourhood,” he said.
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