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From the national point of view

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The challenge of methodology, the distraction of words

Tourism has come to be of crucial importance to the regions. Yet measuring tourism and measuring its impact – is extremely difficult. So we talk about the subject endlessly but are we talking about the right indicators?

Let us first take a look at the problem of national territories, meaning France compared with other countries: traditionally, we assess the scale of tourism in a country by counting the number of times tourists enter that country. This, together with the receipts generated by tourists, is the main indicator collected and published each year by the World Tourism Organization (WTO), whose members include most countries in the world with an interest in tourism. In the rankings drawn up each year by the WTO, France is the world's No 1 tourist destination, ahead of Spain, the USA and Italy, with 77 million arrivals by foreign tourists on its territory in 2002. However, France is ranked only third in terms of receipts from tourism, behind the USA and Spain but ahead of Italy. Classification by numbers of arrivals puts us at the top of the world pile and we are cock-a-hoop. Classification by tourism receipts puts us in third place and we are outraged: what are the public authorities doing, what do they intend to do, to boost this paltry income from tourism in France, No 1 in terms of arrivals but only No 3 in terms of receipts? We hear this question regularly from our honourable Members of Parliament. Rather than adding to this dispute – exacerbated by the fact that the figures are reduced to classifications – this paper seeks to show that these indicators may not be the best means of achieving a valid comparison of the volumes of tourism in different countries.

Let us remember that the WTO does not conduct surveys, nor does it collect a single statistic directly. It merely asks member countries to produce figures: it is up to each country to do its own counting by whatever means it deems fit, while meeting international standards to the best of its ability, of course. Let us assume that these figures, compiled by the respected public tourism statistics departments in each country, are correct and comparable.

The definition of a "tourist", according to the international standards drawn up by the United Nations Statistical Commission, covers any person travelling away from her or his usual place of residence for at least one night and a maximum of one year. The reason for the journey is of little consequence: a business tourist, a leisure tourist, a health tourist etc. are all tourists. Let us not fall into the first trap of confusing tourists with holidaymakers.

We will see that this definition of a "tourist" is a combination of a spatial condition being away from home and a temporal condition: for more than a day (including the night) and for less than a year.

The duration is counted in nights: our reasoning is thus based on what we see as "normal" people who are active during the day and asleep at night. To avoid complicating matters, let us rule out sleepwalkers and nighttime travellers and avoid examining the time limit of a year in too much detail: in all French statistics we have reduced this time limit to three months; otherwise we would have to include most students.

The lower time limit – one night – is of prime importance, however: below this threshold the traveller is no longer classed as a "tourist", but as a "same-day visitor". Faster modes of transport – high-speed trains, planes, even private cars – combined with lifestyle changes have made this time barrier highly permeable. Many journeys which would have taken two or three days in the past can now be completed in a day. Similarly, many activities can now be conducted on a daily basis, thanks to easier travel. This permeability or acceleration in time has opened up a widening gap between the definition of a "tourist" (with an overnight stay) and that of tourism activity, and hence consumption and hence receipts. Apart from accommodation, usually synonymous with overnight stays, receipts are counted whether they come from "tourists" or from "same-day visitors". Travellers do not need to stay the night in order to spend money in a restaurant, shops, a leisure complex or a ski resort. There is also an interesting conceptual distortion in international definitions: for arrivals, only "tourists" are counted, i.e. only those travellers spending at least one night in the country; for receipts, however, all travellers are counted, regardless of whether they are tourists or same-day visitors.

The spatial condition which constitutes the "tourist" – being away from home – is in theory dependent only on the traveller concerned. The "tourist" concept becomes more complicated if we look at a given territory: an "international tourist" in France, whatever her or his nationality, is anyone usually resident in another country and spending at least one night in France. The celebrated figure that puts France at the top of the world list (77 million) is, in fact, the number of arrivals in France of tourists who do not usually live in France. As we have mentioned, this and receipts are the two main indicators collected by the WTO from all countries. The WTO justifies the choice of this indicator by the fact that the number of arrivals in a country is a statistic easily collected by any country even by one that does not have a sophisticated statistical office. This choice doubtless rests on the notion that border controls are still carried out everywhere and that exact figures are kept on arrivals. This may well have been true in the days when countries had heavily-guarded frontiers. It is still the case in the USA – and still more so since 11 September 2001. It is no longer the case in Europe, where travellers within the Schengen area enter and leave countries with few controls and no head counts. Yet this is still the figure used to compare countries, since it is the one collected by the WTO. And here, by some miracle, it is France that ends up as No 1: hooray, we're the best! It is easy to imagine why no-one with responsibility for the tourism sector can resist highlighting this figure: this is both the purpose and the drawback of any classification.

My purpose here is to show – assuming that the figures provided remain within reasonable margins of error – that the use made of them is inappropriate: the number of arrivals by foreign tourists is not the most representative indicator for comparing the

attractiveness of countries to tourists, since it leads to confusion between same-day visits and stays.

Curiously, it was the WTO Secretary-General himself, with prime responsibility for the collection of this statistic and its use in comparisons between countries, who stirred up controversy in France by telling *Le Figaro* (8 July 2002) that of course France was No 1 in terms of tourist arrivals, but that these arrivals were not all real stays and therefore this figure gave an "optically inflated" impression of the real situation.

Let me digress a little here by explaining a few key concepts of territorial statistics: for most variables, the quantity measured in a territory is proportionate to the size of the territory. This means that valid comparisons of values can be made only between territories of similar size (otherwise the value must be related to the size of the territory to arrive at a density). No-one would dream of comparing France and Luxembourg, even though they are two independent states. Why, then, do we try to compare France with the USA in the same classification? It would be more legitimate to compare the United States with Europe, but unfortunately such a comparison would be invalid using the current indicators.

Certain variables measured in an elementary territory can be added together to give insight into a larger territory: a person whose main residence is in France will not have his or her main residence in Italy. A tourist spending the night in Belgium will not spend it in the United Kingdom. The money spent by that person in Belgium will not be spent anywhere else. If we know how many nights tourists spend in Belgium, how many in Luxembourg and how many in the Netherlands, we can calculate the number of nights spent in Benelux as a whole. The same is true of expenditure. For this type of variable the territory amounts to an addition of points (or micro-territories, since a point has no area). If, to simplify matters, we assume that tourists do not travel at night, the number of nights spent in France is the sum of the nights spent – whether in hotels, in camp sites or in any other type of accommodation – in each locality on French territory.

The picture gets more complicated if the object of measurement moves from one territory to another, which is by definition what a tourist does. First, flows are not exclusive to a territory: in other words, a visitor to Paris may also visit Rome, and may return to visit Paris a second time. According to international definitions this person may or may not be classed as a "tourist", depending on whether (s)he spent a night in the country concerned. Yet the number of tourists entering Europe cannot be arrived at by adding the numbers of tourists counted in each country. A Japanese tourist visiting Europe for eight days is counted as an arrival in every country (s)he visits. If, for example, (s)he visits Paris, London, Rome, Madrid, Berlin, Prague and Krakow, spending one night in each city, (s)he will count as seven arrivals in seven different countries. If that person spends another night in Paris at the end of the trip before flying back to Tokyo, (s)he will be counted once again on entering France, making a total of eight arrivals in European countries. If we really wanted to count arrivals in Europe, this Japanese tourist should count as one arrival only. Yet with the chosen indicator, which consists of counting

arrivals by country, all we can do is add the arrivals counted in each European country. Our example would yield either six or eight arrivals, depending on whether we defined Europe as the EU or as the whole continent. And yet the reality is a single Japanese person making a single visit to Europe. It is difficult in these circumstances to compare comparable territories such as the USA and Europe. Simple addition without precaution – which does happen, alas – of the figures collected by the WTO would suggest that Europe is the destination of most world tourism. This is simply an optical illusion due to the division of Europe into several independent states.

There is also the question of the place of departure of the trip: a tourist leaving his or her home in France to travel 1000 kilometres, but without leaving France, is not a "foreign" tourist. The same applies if (s)he visits Réunion or the French Antilles. If, however, that person usually lives in Belgium but spends the night in France, (s)he is counted as a "foreign" tourist. If once again we wished to count arrivals of foreign tourists in Europe, we would have to count all arrivals from another European country before adding the foreign arrivals figures counted by each country – and for that we would need an exhaustive table of all exchanges between countries. In the above example of a circuit of European cities, we saw that a Japanese tourist on this circuit would count as eight arrivals. For exactly the same circuit, a Lorraine resident living in Thionville (i.e. in France) would count as six arrivals (stays in Paris would not count in this case); a Luxembourger living 20 km distant would count as eight arrivals, and a German from Trier – a few kilometres further down the road – would count as seven arrivals (here, Berlin would be excluded).

The geographical features of the territory also have a strong influence on the results. We have already referred to the size of the territory: a US resident crossing the USA from north to south and from east to west is not an international tourist. This will not, however, have prevented him or her, like any good tourist, from bringing "tourism" income to the regions (s)he visits. Despite the total political independence of the Grand-Duchy, a Luxembourger will have greater difficulty in being a tourist in his or her own "country", since (s)he will become an "international visitor" only a few kilometres from home and an "international tourist" if (s)he spends the night away from Luxembourg.

The geographical situation is also crucial. If, like France, you occupy a central position between densely-populated countries and sunny countries attracting many tourists, and if you also have a territory which is slightly too large to be driven across easily in a day, you will of course see all foreign tourists who stay overnight in France on the way from Germany to Spain or from England to Italy. If we adhere strictly to international definitions, these travellers, resident in another country but spending at least one night in France, are counted on both the outward and the return journey as so many arrivals of foreign tourists.

I will therefore say that the stated figure of 77 million arrivals of foreign tourists is correct (to the degree of precision of the measurement, of course), but not significant. Since it places France at the top of the heap, it is unfortunately but understandably widely used by those wishing to promote French tourism. It is hotly disputed for the same reason.

These disputes – internal to France or coming from abroad – tend to be political in nature and seek primarily to weaken the position of those who derive kudos from being No 1: let us not waste any time on this. A more "scientific" debate would centre on the figure itself, which we are sometimes accused of overestimating. One frequently-used argument is that, if we add together overnight stays in France declared by nationals of other countries during surveys conducted in the countries of residence of tourists who have been to France, we get far smaller numbers. Let us imagine for a moment that we all have good survey systems, and that – unlikely as it may sound – the methodologies used in the various countries and also the mentalities and lifestyles of those surveyed (a very important point which is all too often ignored) enable us to compare the various results.

Before making any further attempt to reconcile national figures, let us specify a few concepts. A tourist, as we have explained, is someone travelling away from home for a certain length of time. We therefore determine a point of departure: the usual residence. The final destination of the trip is also the usual residence. Between the two, the trip may take a variety of forms, depending on whether the tourist stays in one place or in several successive places. A ten-day trip, for example, may be made up of ten stays if the tourist stays in a different place every night, or may consist of a single stay if the tourist travels to a place, stays there for ten days and returns home directly. Collecting all of the information on a trip made up of several stays is difficult: it vastly complicates the questionnaire, and it also demands a considerable memory feat of the person surveyed, particularly if the survey does not take place immediately after (s)he has returned home or is conducted by telephone.

An "average tourist", easy to interview, is one who travels straight from home to the destination and stays there until (s)he returns home. Those with several different destinations complicate matters for us – not to mention the itinerant tourist in a camper van. If we want to measure the impact of tourism on territories, it is absolutely essential to know every place in which a tourist has stayed, how long (s)he stayed there, what (s)he did and how much (s)he spent. If we are more interested in the population being surveyed, we will be content to interview individuals about the number of days spent away from home, the main destination of the trip, the activities carried out and the amount spent on the entire trip. Depending on what we are researching, we restrict ourselves to part of the population – e.g. those aged 15 or over – or to certain motives for trips, such as holidays or leisure. These different types of survey do not therefore have the same purpose. Nor, let it be said, do they involve the same costs.

Let us take as an example an "average tourist", a German in this case, who goes to spend 15 days on the Costa Brava with his wife and two children. He drives there, and he therefore spends one night in France on the way there and one on the way back. A couple of months after his return home he is telephoned or receives a postal questionnaire asking him to describe his holiday. He will say that he spent 15 days in Spain in a rental apartment and will not even mention the two nights spent in hotels while driving across France, which are peripheral to the trip and are neither remembered nor, usually, included in a questionnaire with limited scope. However, meeting international standards obliges a French statistician providing the data required by the WTO to count this family as four arrivals of foreign tourists in France on the way there and another four on the way back:

eight arrivals in all. There are also, of course – a more ambiguous case when it comes to international standards – those who spend the night in France without realising it: they board a coach in Germany or the Netherlands on a Friday night and, if all goes well, are in Spain the next day, having slept all the way across France.

Let us not forget that here we are counting "arrivals" of foreign tourists, not the tourists themselves. Since we have not recorded the identity of Herr X as he arrives from Germany, we cannot know – and will not be asked – whether it is the same Herr X who enters France a second time on the way back from Spain. A single individual who often travels abroad will generate numerous "arrivals" of a foreign tourist.

Obviously, when we add up the responses obtained from surveys of German households, we will not get the same arrival figures for German tourists announced by France, and this – as we have seen – is entirely predictable, since we are not measuring the same thing. Comparisons are not totally impossible, however. To arrive at orders of magnitude, French tourism statistics estimate the length of stay in France of "international arrivals". The ensuing table shows that the number of foreign tourists spending more than three nights in France is no more than half of the total "arrivals" figure, and looks more like the figure obtained from household surveys in the countries sending us tourists. This suggests that the measurements made by different statistical offices are not as incompatible as we imagine – provided we know exactly what we are talking about.

I suggested that we assume that the surveys conducted in different countries permit reasonable comparisons: this is, of course, untrue. To return to our German family: household surveys of tourism in Germany do not count children aged under 15 (which excludes four arrivals in our example). They also exclude business trips, which makes no difference in the case of our family, but causes wide discrepancies in the total figures. After all, these surveys apply only to the final destination of the trip: the stay in Spain will of course appear, but the two one-night stays in France will not. This difference between the concepts of the German survey and the French count according to international standards means a discrepancy of eight arrivals of international tourists in France. The difference is not so much between surveys in different countries as between different types of survey pursuing different goals. For example, we conduct the same type of survey in France as we have just described for Germany. No survey can yield more information than it was designed to provide, and before attempting to compare figures we should pay close attention to the scope of the information received (see also a Franco-Belgian comparison in the annex: "Towards a better understanding of tourism figures").

The minimum suggestion we could make to international organisations and the WTO would be to replace this indicator of the "number of arrivals of foreign tourists" by that of "overnight stays by foreign tourists". The number of overnight stays has the advantage of giving each tourist a weight proportionate to his or her length of stay. This indicator is, however, no more addable than that of arrivals if we do not know the origins of the tourists: to arrive at the number of "foreign" overnight stays in Europe, we would have to be able to count, for each country in Europe, the number of tourists coming from other European countries. Another, more radical, proposal for measuring the tourism activity of a territory would be to count all tourists visiting that area, whether their origin is national or international. This could be refined and brought into line with the international standard for long-distance journeys of 100 km as the crow flies: anyone having

undertaken a long-distance journey would be classed as a tourist, regardless of duration or nationality.

Measuring the tourist: a daunting methodological challenge

So far I have assumed that all figures are correct, the aim being to emphasise that the conceptual differences are so great that they dwarf the uncertainties arising from measurements themselves. Some things are, however, worth saying about survey techniques and their difficulties. The tourist is one of the most difficult statistical objects to survey that I have ever encountered in my career as a statistician. First, a tourist is, by definition, a moving target. Statistics agree best with statics; counting something that moves is never an easy matter.

We can interview the tourist at home, using a traditional household survey. There is one small problem, however: tourists visiting France live all over the world. No-one is able to conduct – or pay for – a worldwide household survey. I have already mentioned the difficulties of comparing surveys conducted in different countries. Some organisations try to do this, but the scientific quality of the results is dubious.

We can interview the tourist at the places visited. One problem is that an individual may visit many places in quick succession, and new methodologies are needed to trace such movements: this path has been explored, but here, too, the results remain unproven. One could restrict the survey to places of accommodation, which are exclusive since people stay at only one at a time each night. Yet types of accommodation are many and varied, ranging from hotels to camp sites via bed-and-breakfast establishments, farm stays, apartment hotels, second homes, rented accommodation, main residences of family and friends, etc. ... not to mention camper vans, and are so difficult to survey in practice that we in France have to be content with surveying hotels and camp sites.

We can also survey the tourist as (s)he crosses the border into the territory: this is the principle behind border surveys in France and cordon surveys for smaller areas. Those who keep up with developments in statistics know that this type of survey is no longer possible in France: border posts have been abolished, the forces of law and order feel that they have more important jobs than helping with traffic surveys, and the CNIS (National Statistics Council) now opposes using the police for official surveys (cf. 2003 CNIS report on "Roadside Surveys"). We can only envy our Spanish colleagues, who not only have the Pyrenees, which reduce to a minimum the number of tourist crossing points to be surveyed, but also have the statistical, financial and police resources to conduct exhaustive surveys of tourists entering and leaving their country.

To make matters worse, anything resembling an obligation to declare has been abolished in France: hotel registration forms were abandoned long ago, and border controls more recently. There are innumerable border crossing points: some airports, many sea ports, but above all large numbers of roads.

And to cap it all, the advent of the single currency, the euro, in many European countries is now hampering the measurement of receipts from foreign tourists. The "travel" heading in the balance of payments, drawn up by the Banque de France, used to be based

mainly on currency exchanges by tourists. The methodology now obviously has to change completely: a daunting challenge.

ANNEX:

1. *MIEUX COMPRENDRE LES CHIFFRES DU TOURISME* ("TOWARDS A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF TOURISM FIGURES")

Following the publication by the Belgian National Institute for Statistics of the results of a "Travel Survey" conducted amongst a sample of the Belgian population, some suspected inconsistency with the figures published by the French statistical office on Belgians staying in France. There is no such inconsistency. If we take account of the differences in the concepts used, there is no point in disputing these figures.

Information sources:

Belgium:

http://statbel.fgov.be/press/pr074_fr.asp

France:

http://www.tourism.gouv.fr/STAT-CONJ/pdf/Bilan2002_prov.pdf

Figures and their differences:

The "Travel Survey" by the Belgian National Institute for Statistics concludes that France is the No 1 foreign destination for Belgian holidaymakers, with 0.8 million short-term stays (1-3 nights) and 1.83 million long-term stays (4 or more nights): 2.6 million in total.

Over the same period (2002), estimates published by the French *Direction du Tourisme* indicate 8.47 million arrivals in France of tourists resident in Belgium or Luxembourg, generating 64 million Belgian or Luxembourgish nights in France.

Concepts and their differences:

In both cases, "stays" (of at least one night) or "tourist arrivals" (for a stay of at least one night) – amounting to the same thing – are counted: we refer to "tourists" for convenience only. Over a year, ten million tourists may undertake 20 million trips, 60 million stays and 300 million overnight stays as tourists: it is enough for each person to travel twice and for each trip to include 3 stays averaging 5 days each. Only an individual follow-up would show that the same individual X took several trips: this is not the target of the two sets of statistics examined here.

The Belgian survey concerns Belgians only. In the French figures, Belgians are lumped together with Luxembourgers.

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The figures given here from the "Survey of Belgian Travel" concern only holidays. "Holidays" mean all stays away from home and lasting at least one night, undertaken for leisure purposes or as visits to family or friends. All other travel purposes (business etc.) are excluded. The survey refers only to persons aged 15 or over. The questions ask only about the final destination of the trip and ignore any stop-overs.

The figures given in the "tourist year balance sheet for France" refer to arrivals in France of foreign tourists. This is a statistic requested from member countries each year by the WTO (World Tourism Organization). It is based on the United Nations Statistical Commission definition of a tourist: "a tourist is any person travelling away from her or his usual place of residence for at least one night, for whatever reason (leisure, business etc.). An international tourist arrival in a given country is any visit of a person not resident in that country and spending at least one night there".

Let us take as an example a Belgian family taking a fifteen-day holiday in Spain by car with two children aged under 15. They spend one night in France on the way there and one on the way back. In the enumeration of "tourist arrivals" asked for by the WTO, they have to be counted, under international definitions, once on the outward journey (one night in France) and once on the return journey (another night in France). there are four people, and hence eight tourist arrivals in France: the "travel survey" would cover only the stay in Spain of the two adults.

Let us assume (very roughly) that, for holidays, there are two children for every two adults and that every journey between Belgium and Spain means one night in France.

To convert from the "travel survey" figure to the "tourist arrivals" figure, the stays in France have to be multiplied by two (to count the two children) and the stays in Spain by four (two for the children x two for the stays in France on the outward and return journeys). The figures are more or less the same.

It is easy to see that the official French statistics cannot be compared with the official Belgian statistics. It is, of course, possible to refine the parameters, include other countries (Portugal, Italy, Morocco etc.) and reasons for travel other than holidays (business, etc.). The usefulness of some of these statistics for certain purposes is also debatable. Data-collection methods and their precision give even more scope for debate.