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## ASEAN TOURISM AGREEMENT: REGIONAL INTEGRATION, SOFT POWER, AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF INTERSTATE RELATIONS

### ТУРИСТИЧНА УГОДА АСЕАН: РЕГІОНАЛЬНА ІНТЕГРАЦІЯ, М'ЯКА СИЛА ТА ТРАНСФОРМАЦІЯ МІЖДЕРЖАВНИХ ВІДНОСИН

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**Abstract.** *This article analyzes the impact of the ASEAN Tourism Agreement on interstate relations and regional cooperation within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Over the past decades, the region has become one of the most dynamically developing tourist destinations in the world, leading to the growing importance of tourism not only economically but also politically. The ASEAN Tourism Agreement has become an important tool for stimulating the liberalization of tourist flows, strengthening the interdependence of ASEAN member countries, and shaping common tourism policies.*

*The article examines how this document facilitates the political and economic integration of ASEAN countries and how tourism is used as a soft power tool to strengthen interstate cooperation. The author analyzes the institutional, political, and economic factors that contributed to the adoption of the Agreement, as well as its impact on population mobility, cultural integration, and economic interdependence in the region.*

*Particular attention is paid to the role of the Agreement in diplomatic cooperation and changing power dynamics within ASEAN. The article concludes that the Tourism Agreement has a significant impact on the development of integration processes in ASEAN, stimulating not only economic ties but also creating new political mechanisms for sustainable regional interaction. The development of tourism within ASEAN is becoming an important factor in the transformation of interstate relations. For many years, the countries of the region have been striving to improve not only their economic performance, but also the level of trust and mutual understanding among themselves. The Tourism Cooperation Agreement plays an important role in this process.*

*Tourism cooperation also helps reduce tensions between states and strengthen diplomatic ties. Amid global competition for the tourism market, ASEAN countries recognize the importance of cooperation and integration in this area to ensure the competitiveness of the region as a whole. Moreover, tourism serves as an important tool for intercultural dialogue. Countries that actively develop their tourism industries achieve greater mutual understanding, which helps reduce the risk of interstate conflict and fosters peaceful coexistence.*

*One of the striking examples is the creation of joint tourism projects such as the ASEAN Heritage Parks, which includes natural and cultural monuments spanning several countries in the region. Such projects contribute not only to the conservation of natural and cultural resources, but also to the formation of a common tourism brand in the region.*

**Keywords:** *tourism agreement, interstate relations, regional integration, soft power, economic interdependence, cultural integration, population mobility*

**Анотація.** *У цій статті аналізується вплив Угоди АСЕАН про туризм на міждержавні відносини та регіональну співпрацю в рамках Асоціації держав Південно-Східної Азії (АСЕАН). Протягом останніх десятиліть регіон став одним з найбільш динамічно*

*розвиваючихся туристичних напрямків у світі, що призвело до зростання значення туризму не лише в економічному, а й у політичному плані. Угода АСЕАН про туризм стала важливим інструментом для стимулювання лібералізації туристичних потоків, зміцнення взаємозалежності країн-членів АСЕАН та формування спільної туристичної політики.*

*У статті розглядається, як цей документ сприяє політичній та економічній інтеграції країн АСЕАН та як туризм використовується як інструмент м'якої сили для зміцнення міждержавної співпраці. Автор аналізує інституційні, політичні та економічні фактори, що сприяли прийняттю Угоди, а також її вплив на мобільність населення, культурну інтеграцію та економічну взаємозалежність у регіоні.*

*Особлива увага приділяється ролі Угоди у дипломатичному співробітництві та зміні динаміки сил в АСЕАН. У статті робиться висновок, що Угода про туризм має значний вплив на розвиток інтеграційних процесів в АСЕАН, стимулюючи не лише економічні зв'язки, а й створюючи нові політичні механізми для сталої регіональної взаємодії. Розвиток туризму в рамках АСЕАН стає важливим фактором трансформації міждержавних відносин. Протягом багатьох років країни регіону прагнуть покращити не лише свої економічні показники, але й рівень довіри та взаєморозуміння між собою. Угода про співробітництво в галузі туризму відіграє важливу роль у цьому процесі.*

*Співпраця у сфері туризму також допомагає зменшити напруженість між державами та зміцнити дипломатичні зв'язки. В умовах глобальної конкуренції за туристичний ринок країни АСЕАН визнають важливість співпраці та інтеграції в цій сфері для забезпечення конкурентоспроможності регіону в цілому. Більше того, туризм слугує важливим інструментом міжкультурного діалогу. Країни, які активно розвивають свої туристичні галузі, досягають більшого взаєморозуміння, що допомагає зменшити ризик міждержавних конфліктів та сприяє мирному співіснуванню.*

*Одним із яскравих прикладів є створення спільних туристичних проектів, таких як Парки спадщини АСЕАН, що включають природні та культурні пам'ятки, що охоплюють кілька країн регіону. Такі проекти сприяють не лише збереженню природних та культурних ресурсів, але й формуванню спільного туристичного бренду в регіоні.*

***Ключові слова:** угода про туризм, міждержавні відносини, регіональна інтеграція, м'яка сила, економічна взаємозалежність, культурна інтеграція, мобільність населення*

**Introduction.** Over the last few decades, the ASEAN area has emerged as one of the tourist destinations with the fastest rate of growth in the world. It has also emerged as a major hub for the concentration of visitor flows that are crucial to the world's economy and society. However, the region's tourism collaboration extends beyond economic metrics; it is now one of the key instruments for bolstering ASEAN state integration, expanding political cooperation, and forming a sense of regional identity. In this sense, the ASEAN Tourism Agreement (*ATA, 2002*) is recognized as the first basic legal agreement enacted with the intention of liberalizing visitor flows, promoting regional interdependence, and regulating tourism based on a single policy within the organization.

However, the influence of the ATA on interstate relations has not yet been thoroughly examined at the academic level, especially with regard to its role in intra-regional political discourse, the use of soft power, mutual economic dependency, and institutional collaboration. Research questions such what drives the tourism industry's expanding integration in a diverse region like ASEAN, what the agreement's actual impact is, and how it affects member nations' political ties continue to be pertinent. This circumstance makes it necessary to look at the subject from both theoretical and practical angles.

The main question posed in this article is how the ASEAN Tourism Agreement influences interstate relations within the organization and to what extent it facilitates regional cooperation. In recent years, tourism has become an important part of the regional integration process within ASEAN, playing a significant role in creating a unified region with an open market and free movement of people. Regional tourism initiatives help strengthen economic ties between countries, paving the way for further cooperation in other economic sectors, such as trade, technology, and education.

In this context, several research questions arise aimed at better understanding the impact of the ASEAN Tourism Agreement on interstate relations in the region. First, it is important to understand the institutional, political, and economic factors that necessitated the adoption of this agreement. What

are the key elements of this agreement that facilitate integration among ASEAN countries? How does tourism cooperation help support soft power mechanisms in interstate relations? And how does the ASEAN Tourism Agreement influence population mobility, cultural integration, and economic interdependence in the region? Finally, it is necessary to understand the impact of this agreement on diplomatic cooperation and power dynamics within ASEAN.

In response to these questions, several hypotheses can be put forward. First, economic cooperation in the region is largely determined by the ASEAN Tourism Agreement, which compels member states to engage in political dialogue due to their growing dependence on the tourism industry. Second, interstate relations become more stable and beneficial by creating conditions for the development of soft power instruments and the formation of a common ASEAN brand. Third, long-term integration mechanisms are strengthened through regional activities carried out under the Tourism Agreement, such as marketing cooperation, visa facilitation, and the "ASEAN as One Destination" campaign. During crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism cooperation helps strengthen the impulse for collective action and improve coordination among ASEAN countries.

Therefore, the objectives of this article are to thoroughly explore the theoretical and empirical foundations of these hypotheses and to analyze the mechanisms underlying the Tourism Agreement's impact on interstate relations. The study's uniqueness lies in its analysis of the Agreement as a diplomatic and institutional instrument, rather than solely as an economic agreement, which will contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of tourism in shaping regional integration and strengthening ties among ASEAN member states.

The purpose of this article is to explore the impact of the ASEAN Tourism Agreement (*ATA, 2002*) on interstate relations and regional cooperation within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. The article aims to analyze how tourism as a tool of "soft power" contributes to strengthening the political, economic and cultural integration of ASEAN countries, as well as how it affects the dynamics of diplomatic relations and economic interdependence in the region.

The research methods in this article include several approaches aimed at a comprehensive analysis of the impact of the ASEAN Agreement on Tourism on interstate relations and regional cooperation.:

1. Document Analysis: The study is based on a thorough analysis of the text of the ASEAN Agreement on Tourism (*ATA, 2002*) and other official documents related to ASEAN tourism policy in order to identify the main provisions, objectives and mechanisms for its implementation.

2. Qualitative analysis: The qualitative analysis method is used to study the impact of the Agreement on the political, economic and cultural aspects of ASEAN member countries' interaction. This includes an analysis of interviews, reports, publications, and other materials that illustrate the impact of tourism on interstate relations and integration in the region.

3. Comparative Analysis: A comparison method is used to study how the ASEAN member countries are affected by the Tourism Agreement compared to other international agreements in the field of tourism and regional integration.

4. Soft Power Analysis: A conceptual approach is applied to assess the role of tourism as a tool of soft power in ASEAN interstate relations, including assessing its impact on cultural identity, diplomatic ties, and regional security.

5. Case method: Concrete examples of successful initiatives and projects implemented under the Tourism Agreement are considered in order to demonstrate the real impact of this document on economic and cultural integration, as well as on population mobility.

6. Economic and Political analysis: The method of economic and political analysis is used to study the impact of the Agreement on the economic interdependence of ASEAN member countries, as well as on changes in political dynamics and diplomatic relations within the organization.

These methods allow for a deeper understanding of the role of the Tourism Agreement in interstate relations, its impact on regional integration and the development of new forms of cooperation in ASEAN.

**Literature Review.** In recent decades, issues of regional integration and political cooperation in Southeast Asia have become increasingly pressing. In particular, ASEAN, as the region's primary organization, plays a central role in these processes, with a particular emphasis on developing the tourism industry as one of the integration mechanisms. Acharya (2014) emphasizes that ASEAN is

characterized by “soft institutionalism”, which entails maintaining a high level of sovereignty among member states while maintaining platforms for joint cooperation, which forms the basis for the development of numerous common initiatives, including in tourism.

The ASEAN Tourism Agreement, signed in 2002, as noted by the ASEAN Secretariat (2002), was an important step toward liberalizing tourism flows and strengthening economic interdependence among the region's countries. This agreement paved the way for the harmonization of visa procedures, improved infrastructure, and the creation of joint marketing campaigns, significantly contributing to the strengthening of ties and trust between member states. Additionally, the ASEAN Secretariat (2021) notes that tourism has become a critical element of the recovery strategy within the comprehensive COVID-19 recovery program, confirming its importance in the region's economic and social life.

Also of interest is the analysis of the economic and cultural aspects of tourism development in the region presented in Hall (2019). The author emphasizes that tourism development in Asia goes hand in hand with regional economic development, becoming an important tool for not only economic but also cultural integration, as evidenced by statistical data on the growth of tourist flows to ASEAN in recent decades. Meanwhile, a study by Gössling and Peeters (2015) addresses the global environmental impact of tourism and emphasizes the need for a sustainable approach to tourism development, which is also of great importance for ASEAN countries seeking to minimize environmental risks.

Cultural diplomacy, as a tool for enhancing the region's soft power, is also a key theme in the works of Caballero-Anthony (2016) and Kurlantzick (2010). Both authors emphasize that tourism in ASEAN is used not only for economic purposes but also to strengthen political and cultural ties between member states. This is evidenced by the implementation of initiatives such as cultural calendars, regional festivals, and other programs aimed at enhancing mutual understanding and strengthening the region's identity.

Furthermore, Narine (2008) highlights the significance of ASEAN in the context of its 40-year history, demonstrating how the organization has adapted to changes in global politics and economics while taking into account the region's internal dynamics. Within this approach, tourism, as part of a broader integration strategy, has become an important tool for the formation of a unified regional identity, which is now seen as a significant factor in political stability.

Tosun (2000) and Sharpley (2000) focus on the issues of local community participation in tourism and the sustainable development of this industry, which is relevant for ASEAN countries, where tourism is rapidly developing but sometimes faces problems of overexploitation of resources and insufficient involvement of local residents in decision-making processes. Importantly, similar issues are also discussed in the context of tourism sustainability in Asia, as confirmed by research by Rigg (2017), who examines social and environmental changes in rural areas directly related to rural tourism development.

Thus, although the ASEAN Tourism Agreement is primarily an economic document, it plays an important role in the broader context of political integration and cultural diplomacy. Chongkittavorn (2018) notes that the integration of the tourism industry within ASEAN has contributed to improved political relations and the creation of soft power mechanisms, which are key to stabilizing regional ties in the face of global challenges.

**Main Results of the Research.** Examining the organization's integration model and the foundations of regional institutionalism is key to understanding how the ASEAN Tourism Agreement influences interstate relations. The ASEAN integration model, developed after independence, utilizes the principle of “soft institutionalism”, as opposed to the traditional “deep institutionalization” characteristic of the European Union (*Acharya, 2014, p. 69*). Within this approach, the organization supports the idea of “decentralized coordination” in politically sensitive areas and creates adaptable platforms for cooperation, while granting member countries a significant degree of sovereignty (Caballero-Anthony, 2016, p. 88). This concept is also reflected in the ASEAN Tourism Agreement, which serves not only as an economic but also as a political instrument, creating the conditions for more flexible and balanced cooperation among regional states.

Tourism, as a strategic industry with “low political risk and high economic returns”, has become a priority for ASEAN. It unites member states and becomes part of key regional documents such as

the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (1992), ASEAN Vision 2020 (1997), and the Bali Agreement II (2003). Thus, the main factors that influenced the adoption of the ASEAN Tourism Agreement can be divided into three categories: economic motives, political integration, and cultural diplomacy. Economic motives include the significant growth in tourism revenues between the 1990s and 2000s, which significantly increased regional interdependence in this industry (*ASEAN Secretariat, 2002, p. 5*). Political integration became an important element of strategic interaction when ASEAN leaders recognized the need to strengthen regional unity in the face of global system uncertainty (*Narine, 2019, p. 414*). Cultural diplomacy and soft power gained significance in the context of creating a unified regional identity and strengthening the ASEAN brand in the context of a globalizing Asian region (*Kurlantzick, 2010, p. 107*).

Along with the liberalization of tourism flows, the ASEAN Tourism Agreement incorporates elements of political discourse and integration, exerting a multifaceted influence on interstate relations in the region. One notable effect is the stabilizing political impact, which is due to the expansion of economic interdependence between countries. Key provisions of the agreement include the harmonization of border controls, the simplification of visa requirements, the coordination of conditions for tourism investment, and the creation of the “ASEAN as a single destination” brand. These measures have contributed to an increase in domestic tourism, with the number of trips within the region increasing from 42 million to 105 million between 2002 and 2019 (*ASEAN Secretariat, 2020, p. 14*). Even amid political tensions, such as border and maritime clashes between Thailand and Cambodia, Singapore and Indonesia, and Malaysia and the Philippines, cooperation mechanisms have been maintained, which some scholars call the “ASEAN interdependence spillover effect” (*Rigg, 2017, p. 92*).

Developing regional identity and enhancing soft power have become some of the most powerful tools ASEAN uses in its interstate relations. Tourism, which promotes cultural integration, is an important element in the organization’s soft power strategy. Regional festival programs, cultural calendars, educational exchanges, and branding initiatives (Feel the Warmth of ASEAN, Visit ASEAN Year) have significantly strengthened the positive political climate and contributed to the creation of a favorable environment for cooperation. This, in turn, strengthens trust between countries in the region, and the cycle of “cultural integration, political trust, and economic cooperation” has become the foundation of ASEAN’s soft power strategy (*Chongkittavorn, 2018, p. 63*). This mechanism utilizes social capital to address problems arising from “weak institutionalization” in the region.

The ASEAN Tourism Agreement also serves as a tool for improving regional governance and diplomatic cooperation. It has facilitated more coordinated decision-making among member countries, engaging governments in in-depth discussions on issues related to border crossings, tourism safety standards, crisis management, and the exchange of statistical information. This cooperation was particularly evident in response to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, when ASEAN jointly developed recovery plans through the “ASEAN Tourism Crisis Communications Team” and the “Pandemic Recovery Framework” (*ASEAN Secretariat, 2021, p. 3*). This cooperation has strengthened the institutional foundations of regional diplomacy.

A significant outcome of the ASEAN Tourism Agreement has been a significant increase in human mobility within the region. Visa facilitation and harmonization of border procedures have facilitated a significant increase in inter-country travel, reducing the number of member countries requiring visas from ten to two since 2002 (*UNESCAP, 2019, p. 27*). Such mobility not only stimulates interactions between students, researchers, and the business community, but also fosters ties between diasporas, enhances cultural fusion, and creates international business networks. This, in turn, leads to the strengthening of so-called “social diplomacy”, where tourism serves as a channel for developing intercultural communication and deepening cooperation.

However, it should be noted that despite these achievements, the ASEAN Tourism Agreement has also led to increased “asymmetric interdependence” within ASEAN. Countries with more developed tourism infrastructure, such as Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia, have gained greater influence in regional decision-making than less developed countries in the region, which nevertheless also benefit from joint tourism initiatives (*Hall, 2019, p. 112*).

Overall, the ASEAN Tourism Agreement has produced significant diplomatic results in three

key areas: integrative, stabilizing, and normative. First, it improves coordination within the region, allowing countries to more easily align their actions across various areas. Second, it creates a stabilizing effect, ensuring open avenues for cooperation even in times of political tension. Third, the Agreement establishes common rules of conduct, shaping ASEAN as a normative space where tourism plays a vital role as an institution, fostering not only economic integration but also political and cultural harmony among the organization's member states.

**Conclusions.** The study shows that the ASEAN Tourism Agreement has a significant impact on interstate relations in the region not only in the economic realm but also in the political, social, institutional, and normative domains. The ATA has emerged as one of the key tools for integration within the ASEAN region, according to a thorough analysis of the research questions and hypotheses put forward at the beginning of the article.

The analysis's findings demonstrate that tourist collaboration is completely consistent with ASEAN's "soft institutionalism" model, and that the industry's "low political risk – high economic return" characteristics offer it more stable and long-term cooperation chances than other sectors.

In addition to increasing economic interconnectedness, the ATA framework's harmonization of border-crossing processes, collaborative marketing, creation of a regional brand, and simplification of visa regimes have also produced new forums for interstate political discourse.

The results of the study show that the ATA has significantly strengthened regional mutual reliance. Between 2002 and 2019, intraregional tourism flows more than doubled, creating long-lasting economic connections between states. In turn, these connections have made it possible for cooperation to continue even in the face of recurring maritime and border conflicts - a phenomenon known as "ASEAN interdependence spillover".

The article's conclusion regarding the ATA's role in the development of soft power is also significant. Initiatives like "ASEAN as One Destination", regional celebrations, cultural diplomacy, and the development of "ASEAN Identity" have heightened the organization's inclinations toward social cohesion and collective identity. In the institutionally deficient ASEAN model, these elements have served as crucial strategies for boosting social capital.

In terms of institutional results, the ATA has improved regional governance procedures and set the stage for standards harmonization and the development of a coordinating culture. Cooperation in recovery planning, information sharing, and tourism safety improved ASEAN countries' ability to take collective action, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Suggestions and Prospects for Further Research:**

- Intraregional travel and human mobility could be further enhanced by the establishment of a regional visa under the ATA framework (a model similar to Schengen).
- ASEAN's ability to act collectively in times of crisis might be improved by fully harmonizing its tourism safety regulations.

- Programs for cultural diplomacy ought to be increased in order to fortify the "ASEAN Identity."

- Deeper empirical models (panel data, difference-in-differences analysis) should be used to examine how tourism cooperation affects political stability. Separate research should be done on the indirect effects of the ATA on ASEAN's ties with its external partner states, including China, Japan, Australia, and the EU.

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