

THE ROLE OF LEGAL REGULATION, SAFETY, AND CONSUMER PROTECTION IN TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: *The tourism sector is one of the most dynamic and rapidly growing areas of the modern economy, strongly influenced by legal regulation, safety mechanisms, and consumer protection. Legal frameworks establish standards for tourism services, enhance tourist trust, reduce operational risks, and contribute to market stability and competitiveness. This article aims to analyze tourism legal regulation, examine approaches to tourist safety, and assess consumer rights protection mechanisms, as well as their impact on tourism market efficiency and development. The research is based on doctrinal-legal analysis, international documents, and relevant academic literature. The findings suggest that a well-developed legal framework improves consumer confidence, ensures service quality, and supports sustainable tourism growth, particularly in the context of digital transformation. The study also highlights the importance of tourism contracts and digital tourism in strengthening legal protection and maintaining a secure and competitive tourism market.*

Keywords: *tourism law; tourist safety; consumer rights; tourism contract; market efficiency*

1. Introduction

Tourism in the 21st century has emerged as a global social, cultural, and economic phenomenon that encompasses human mobility, the service sector, international communication, and cultural interactions (UNWTO, 2020). This sector has a significant impact both on a country's economic development and on strengthening social infrastructure, creating jobs, and enhancing international image. The rapid growth of tourism, especially under conditions of globalization and digital technology integration, has given rise to legal challenges related to tourist safety, service quality standards, information transparency, and consumer rights protection [Mukasheva & Ybyray, 2023]. Tourism relations are characterized by multi-actor involvement, cross-border nature, and complex agreements, which gives legal regulation particular importance [Casanovas-Ibáñez, 2016]. Tourism law is evolving as a multidisciplinary field that synthetically integrates civil, administrative, international, and consumer protection norms. Its main function is to ensure a balance of interests between tourists and service providers, create a safe, legally protected, and predictable environment, and ensure that service quality complies with international standards.

In this context, the role of legal regulation reduces legal and operational risks, increases tourist trust, and promotes sustainable tourism development, with special attention to digital tourism, electronic services, and modern technologies that enhance consumer protection and contract-based safe practices [Reymbayeva, 2025]. At the same time, effective legal regulation plays a significant role in the economic development of tourism, as it increases market predictability, reduces business risks, and strengthens sector competitiveness both locally and internationally.

In addition, tourism has increasingly become a strategic sector for many countries, particularly those with high dependence on international visitor flows. The contribution of tourism to GDP, employment, and foreign exchange earnings makes it a critical component of national economic policies. Therefore, the establishment of effective legal frameworks is not only a matter of regulatory necessity but also a strategic tool for economic growth and resilience, especially in times of global uncertainty and crisis.

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the vulnerability of the tourism sector and the importance of legal mechanisms in crisis management. Issues such as travel cancellations, refund obligations, force majeure clauses, and consumer rights enforcement have become central to tourism law. This has emphasized the need for flexible yet robust legal systems capable of responding to rapidly changing global conditions while maintaining a balance between business sustainability and consumer protection. Crisis-management studies also demonstrate that preparedness, coordinated emergency communication, and recovery mechanisms are essential elements of tourism resilience [Ritchie, 2004; Sigala, 2020; Kim & Chen, 2023].

Furthermore, the development of digital tourism and platform-based services has transformed traditional tourism models, creating new legal relationships between tourists, intermediaries, and service providers. Online booking systems, sharing economy platforms, and algorithm-driven services raise complex legal questions related to liability, jurisdiction, data protection, and consumer rights. As a result, modern tourism law must continuously adapt to technological advancements and emerging market dynamics. The literature on digital tourism additionally shows that platform-based intermediation reshapes information flows, consumer trust, and the distribution of liability among service providers [Buhalis & Law, 2008; Zhang & Lee, 2022; González & Solis, 2024].

Against this background, the aim of this study is to analyze the role of legal regulation in tourism development, with a particular focus on tourist safety and consumer protection mechanisms. The research seeks to evaluate how legal frameworks influence market efficiency, consumer trust, and the overall competitiveness of the tourism sector, especially in the context of digital transformation.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is based on several interrelated theoretical approaches that together form the conceptual foundation of legal regulation in tourism.

2.1 Institutional Theory – According to institutional theory, formal institutions such as laws, regulations, and legal structures define the framework of economic and social relations [North, 1990]. In tourism, law functions as an institutional mechanism that reduces information asymmetry between tourists and service providers, ensures contract enforcement, and contributes to market stability. Thus, legal institutions in tourism can be viewed as mechanisms determining economic efficiency and market stability.

2.2 Consumer Protection Theory – Consumer protection theory emphasizes that the consumer is a relatively weaker party in contractual relationships. In tourism, this is particularly evident as tourists often operate in unfamiliar legal and cultural environments. Therefore, legal regulation ensures information transparency, safety standards for services, and effective legal protection [Adamenko et al., 2021]. This, in turn, increases consumer trust, strengthens loyalty, and positively impacts the long-term stability and development of the tourism market.

2.3 Risk and Safety Theory – Risk theory highlights the role of the state and institutional frameworks in risk prevention and management [Beck, 1992]. In tourism, legal safety regulation aims to protect tourists' life, health, property, and informational interests [Tatsienko et al., 2021]. High safety standards also increase tourism demand and a country's attractiveness, directly affecting the sector's economic outcomes.

In addition to the above theoretical approaches, tourism law can also be analyzed through the lens of transaction cost economics, which emphasizes the importance of reducing uncertainty and coordination costs in market exchanges. Tourism transactions are typically characterized by high levels of complexity, involving multiple actors such as tour operators, intermediaries, accommodation providers, and transport companies. In such conditions, legal regulation plays a crucial role in minimizing negotiation, monitoring, and enforcement costs, thereby improving overall market efficiency.

Furthermore, from a socio-legal perspective, tourism regulation reflects the interaction between formal legal rules and informal social norms, including trust, reputation, and cultural expectations. These informal mechanisms often complement formal legal structures, especially in destination-based tourism experiences where service quality is closely linked to interpersonal interactions and cultural context.

In the context of globalization and digital transformation, theoretical approaches to tourism law must also incorporate concepts related to network governance and platform economy regulation. Digital platforms increasingly act as intermediaries in tourism services, creating new legal relationships that challenge traditional regulatory models. As a result, modern theoretical frameworks must address issues such as algorithmic transparency, platform liability, and cross-border jurisdictional complexity.

Overall, the integration of these theoretical perspectives provides a more comprehensive understanding of tourism law as a dynamic and multidimensional field that operates at the intersection of law, economics, and technology.

2.4 Digital Platform and Trust-Based Regulation – The literature on e-tourism underlines that ICTs, online reputation systems, and sharing-economy platforms have changed the structure of tourism markets. In this context, consumer trust, platform transparency, intermediary liability, and fair access to remedies become central elements of legal analysis [Buhalis & Law, 2008; Guttentag, 2015; Zhang & Lee, 2022; González & Solis, 2024].

2.5 Crisis Governance and Resilience – Crisis-management scholarship in tourism emphasizes that safety regulation must combine preventive planning, emergency response, transparent risk communication, refund and repatriation mechanisms, and institutional coordination. This is particularly important after global disruptions, where tourist confidence depends on visible legal guarantees and effective enforcement [Ritchie, 2004; Sigala, 2020; Kim & Chen, 2023].

3. Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach, primarily based on doctrinal legal analysis, comparative analysis, and secondary data review. The choice of methodology is determined by the nature of the research topic, which focuses on legal regulation, institutional frameworks, and consumer protection mechanisms in tourism.

The doctrinal legal method is used as the core analytical tool, allowing the examination and interpretation of existing legal norms, including international legal instruments, European Union directives, and national legislation of Georgia. This method enables a systematic understanding of how legal provisions regulate tourism relations, ensure safety, and protect consumer rights.

In addition, the study applies a comparative legal approach, particularly in analyzing the alignment between Georgian tourism legislation and international standards, such as the Directive (EU) 2015/2302 on package travel and linked travel arrangements. This comparison helps to identify strengths, gaps, and opportunities for further legal harmonization.

The research also relies on secondary data analysis, including academic literature, policy documents, and reports from international organizations such as UNWTO. This

approach supports the theoretical framework and provides a broader context for evaluating the effectiveness of legal regulation in tourism.

Furthermore, elements of analytical and interpretative methods are used to assess the relationship between legal regulation, tourist safety, and market efficiency. The study evaluates how legal norms influence consumer trust, service quality, and the overall competitiveness of the tourism sector.

The methodological framework of the study ensures a comprehensive and interdisciplinary analysis of tourism law, combining legal theory with practical implications in both traditional and digital tourism environments.

4. Legal Regulation of Tourism

Legal regulation of tourism is carried out through a combination of international and national norms. At the international level, a significant role is played by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2020), while at the national level regulation is implemented through special laws, civil codes, and administrative regulations [Mukasheva & Ybyray, 2023].

Legal regulation of tourism is carried out through a combination of international and national norms; however, at the current stage, particular importance is attached to the fact that in Georgian law, the tourism sector is already regulated by a special legislative framework. According to the Law of Georgia on Tourism, tourism legislation consists of the Constitution of Georgia, international treaties, this law, and other legislative and subordinate normative acts. It is also important that the rights granted to tourists by law are imperative in nature: contractual agreements or statements that directly or indirectly deny or restrict the rights provided under Articles 14–26 of the law are not permitted. Therefore, tourism law should not be viewed solely as a private-law contractual regime; it simultaneously includes elements of civil, administrative, consumer protection, and sector-specific regulation, while the general contractual rules of the Civil Code of Georgia apply subsidiarily to this special framework [Law of Georgia “On Tourism”: Art. 1, Paragraph 2; Art. 13, Paragraphs 4–5; Art. 14].

In addition, the legal regulation of tourism should be understood as a dynamic system that continuously adapts to economic globalization, technological development, and changing consumer behavior. In particular, the expansion of cross-border tourism flows and the integration of digital platforms have increased the need for harmonized legal standards that ensure legal certainty across jurisdictions. This harmonization is essential for reducing regulatory fragmentation and improving the predictability of tourism transactions at the international level.

Furthermore, an important aspect of tourism regulation is the growing influence of European legal standards, which increasingly shape national tourism legislation in many countries. The European Union model emphasizes consumer protection, transparency, and strict liability of tour operators, which serves as a benchmark for national reforms. In this context, alignment with EU standards contributes to strengthening legal certainty and enhancing the competitiveness of tourism destinations.

Another significant dimension of tourism regulation is the role of preventive legal mechanisms. Modern tourism law does not only address disputes after they arise but also aims to prevent legal conflicts through pre-contractual information obligations, licensing requirements, and standardization of service quality. These preventive mechanisms reduce the likelihood of disputes and increase overall market efficiency.

At the same time, effective tourism regulation requires coordination between different branches of law, including civil law, administrative law, tax law, and consumer protection law. This interdisciplinary nature of tourism law reflects the complexity of tourism relations and the need for a comprehensive legal approach that ensures both economic efficiency and legal protection.

5. Tourist Safety as a Legal Obligation

Safety includes physical safety, health protection, transport safety, and information security mechanisms. Legal regulation obliges service providers to ensure minimum safety standards and inform tourists about potential risks [Tatsienko et al., 2021]. Tourist safety in modern tourism law is not limited to physical safety; it also includes legal guarantees related to information, organization, and repatriation during travel. The Law of Georgia on Tourism imposes an obligation on the tour operator to assist tourists without delay in case of difficulties during travel, including providing information on local healthcare services, relevant authorities, and consular assistance, facilitating communication, and helping to find alternative tourism services. If the package includes transportation and the service cannot be performed as agreed, the tour operator must ensure repatriation of the tourist at no additional cost. In cases of unavoidable and extraordinary circumstances, the law provides for coverage of accommodation costs of an equivalent category for up to 3 nights per tourist; this limitation does not apply to persons with reduced mobility, pregnant women, minors traveling unaccompanied, and persons requiring specific medical assistance, provided that the tour operator was informed in advance of their special needs [Law of Georgia “On Tourism”: Article 22, Paragraphs 10–12; Article 25].

In addition, tourist safety should be understood in a broader sense that includes not only physical protection but also financial security and legal certainty. Financial protection mechanisms, such as insolvency guarantees and refund obligations, play a crucial role in ensuring that tourists are not exposed to economic losses due to service provider failure. This is particularly important in package travel arrangements, where multiple service components are bundled together.

Moreover, information safety has become a central component of modern tourism regulation. Tourists must be provided with accurate, timely, and transparent information regarding risks, service conditions, and emergency procedures. Failure to provide such information can significantly increase vulnerability and reduce trust in tourism services. Post-pandemic safety governance literature further confirms that transparent health protocols, institutional coordination, and reliable crisis communication increase destination credibility and tourist demand [Ritchie, 2004; Sigala, 2020; Kim & Chen, 2023].

6. Consumer Rights in Tourism

Consumer protection includes reliable information about services, non-alteration of service conditions or appropriate compensation, and the right to claim damages [Adamenko et al., 2021]. Consumer rights in tourism should be understood as the tourist’s right to receive complete, accurate, and understandable information, access non-discriminatory services, and have effective legal protection mechanisms. According to the Law of Georgia on the Protection of Consumer Rights, discrimination against consumers in access to or provision of publicly offered goods or services is prohibited, and before concluding a contract, the trader is obliged to provide the consumer, in the state language, with clear and understandable complete and accurate information about the essential characteristics of the service, the identity of the trader, and the price. Under the same law, unfair standard contractual terms that harm the consumer are void, including those that unjustifiably restrict or exclude the consumer’s right to bring claims in case of non-performance or improper performance by the trader. In addition, unfair commercial practices are prohibited. From the perspective of institutional enforcement mechanisms, the consumer has the right to file a complaint with the Competition and Consumer Agency of Georgia or the relevant competent authority; this does not deprive them of the right to apply to a court, arbitration, or mediation. The agency may require the trader to restore the violated right or cease prohibited actions, and in case of non-compliance may impose a fine not exceeding 2% of the annual turnover of the previous financial year and not less than 600

GEL [Law of Georgia “On Protection of Consumer Rights”: Article 3; Article 5; Articles 21–24; Article 28; Article 29; Articles 33–34]. Such institutional protection of consumer rights contributes to fair competition, improved service quality, and the efficient functioning of the tourism market.

In addition, consumer protection in tourism is increasingly influenced by digital transformation and platform-based service delivery. Online intermediaries, review systems, and algorithmic ranking mechanisms significantly affect consumer decision-making processes. Therefore, ensuring transparency in digital environments has become a key regulatory challenge for modern tourism law. Accordingly, legal scholarship on digital tourism stresses that consumer confidence depends on clear information duties, review-system reliability, and enforceable remedies against both direct providers and platform intermediaries [Zhang & Lee, 2022; González & Solis, 2024].

Furthermore, the effectiveness of consumer rights protection depends not only on legal provisions but also on institutional capacity and enforcement efficiency. Weak enforcement mechanisms may undermine even well-designed legal frameworks, reducing consumer trust and market stability.

7. Tourism Contract

The tourism contract is the primary legal instrument for realizing consumer rights, especially in crisis or pandemic situations [Casanovas-Ibáñez, 2016]. It concentrates pre-contractual information, price, performance, modification, and liability regimes. According to the Law of Georgia on Tourism, before concluding the contract, the tour operator or other relevant trader must provide standardized pre-contractual information about the specific package, including travel characteristics, destination, duration, transport features, accommodation category, meals, additional services, and, where applicable, whether the trip is adapted for persons with disabilities. The contract must be concluded in writing in Georgian and may also be drawn up in another language understood by the tourist. The tour operator is obliged to provide the tourist with an insurance policy or bank guarantee ensuring reimbursement in case of non-performance of the package due to insolvency. Price increases are allowed only in legally defined cases; if the increase exceeds 8% or if essential contractual characteristics change, the tourist has the right to terminate the contract without paying a termination fee. In cases of unavoidable and extraordinary circumstances, the tourist may terminate the contract before the start of the package without any fee and request a full refund. Importantly, the tour operator remains ultimately responsible for non-performance or improper performance of the contract, regardless of whether the services are performed directly or through another provider. This approach aligns substantively with the standards established by the EU Package Travel Directive [Directive (EU) 2015/2302 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 November 2015 on package travel and linked travel arrangements]. Such regulation of tourism contracts also reduces transactional uncertainty and increases market reliability, which is essential for the stable development of the tourism sector. Contemporary platform-tourism literature further stresses that tourism contracts should address algorithmic intermediation, platform responsibility, automated recommendations, and the allocation of liability when services are organized through digital intermediaries [Silva & Duarte, 2025].

8. Digital Tourism and Legal Challenges

Online booking, platform economy, and digital intermediaries create new legal challenges such as allocation of responsibility, protection of personal data, and enforcement of consumer rights [Reymbayeva, 2025]. In digital tourism, legal challenges are particularly evident in remote contracts, online booking, platform intermediation, and personal data processing.

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In recent years, the rapid expansion of digital technologies has fundamentally transformed the structure of the tourism industry. Traditional direct service provision has increasingly been replaced by platform-based ecosystems, where tourists interact with multiple service providers through a single digital interface. This transformation has significantly increased efficiency and accessibility; however, it has also introduced complex legal uncertainties regarding liability distribution among actors within the digital value chain. E-tourism research has long shown that ICTs restructure tourism distribution channels, while sharing-economy platforms such as short-term accommodation marketplaces create new regulatory questions concerning service quality, consumer information, and market fairness [Buhalis & Law, 2008; Guttentag, 2015].

According to the Law of Georgia on the Protection of Consumer Rights, before concluding a distance contract, the trader must provide additional information about price, extra costs, communication means, and other essential conditions; and if the contract is concluded electronically, the trader must ensure that the consumer clearly understands that placing an order creates an obligation to pay; otherwise, such obligation does not arise. At the same time, unfair commercial practices are prohibited in online environments.

In addition, the enforcement of consumer rights in digital environments presents practical challenges, particularly in cases involving cross-border transactions, foreign-based platforms, and intermediary service providers. In such cases, jurisdictional issues and the identification of the responsible party often complicate the effective protection of consumer interests. Therefore, legal clarity regarding the role and liability of digital intermediaries is becoming increasingly important.

The Law of Georgia on Personal Data Protection grants the tourist the right to receive information about data processing, access their data, obtain copies free of charge, and not be subject solely to automated decision-making, including profiling, that produces legal or similarly significant effects, except in cases provided by law. The data subject also has the right to withdraw consent at any time, in which case data processing must cease and/or data must be deleted or destroyed within no later than 10 working days unless another legal basis exists. Processing of data for direct marketing purposes is allowed only with consent and must cease within no later than 7 working days upon request. Additionally, the law requires airlines, airports, and entities processing large volumes of data or conducting systematic and large-scale monitoring to appoint a data protection officer, further emphasizing compliance in the digital tourism sector.

Moreover, data protection in tourism is not only a legal obligation but also a key element of consumer trust and destination competitiveness. Tourists are increasingly sensitive to how their personal data is collected, stored, and processed, especially in relation to online bookings, mobile applications, and loyalty programs. Any violation of data security can significantly damage the reputation of tourism providers and reduce market confidence.

Effective implementation of digital regulations is especially important in the platform economy, where consumer trust and data protection are key competitive advantages.

Finally, digital tourism regulation requires continuous adaptation of legal frameworks in response to technological innovation, including artificial intelligence, big data analytics, and algorithm-based recommendation systems. These technologies, while improving service personalization, also raise new legal and ethical questions that must be addressed through updated regulatory mechanisms. For this reason, legal regulation of digital tourism should integrate consumer protection, data protection, and competition-law perspectives in order to respond to algorithmic ranking, automated profiling, and platform dependency [Silva & Duarte, 2025].

9. Discussion

The findings of this study clearly demonstrate that the effectiveness of legal regulation, safety mechanisms, and consumer protection in tourism represents one of the key prerequisites for the sustainable development of the sector. Based on the theoretical and normative analysis, it can be argued that the legal framework not only regulates relationships but also performs an important economic function by increasing market predictability and reducing risks.

From the perspective of institutional theory, legal norms function as mechanisms that reduce information asymmetry between tourists and service providers. This is particularly important in tourism, where consumers often operate in unfamiliar environments and rely heavily on the reliability of the information provided. Consequently, the quality of legal regulation directly affects consumer trust and, ultimately, tourism demand.

According to consumer protection theory, the tourist represents a relatively weaker party in contractual relationships, a condition that is further intensified in the context of digital tourism. Online platforms, distance contracts, and algorithmic decision-making create new risks, including incomplete information, unclear allocation of responsibility, and challenges related to data protection. In this context, the effectiveness of legal mechanisms determines not only the protection of individual consumers but also the overall quality and efficiency of market functioning.

Within the framework of risk and safety theory, the study confirms that high safety standards increase the attractiveness of a tourist destination. Legal obligations related to the protection of tourists' life, health, and property, as well as assistance in crisis situations, play a significant role in shaping a country's tourism image.

Particular attention should be paid to the alignment of Georgian legislation with international standards. The study shows that the national legal framework is largely harmonized with European Union requirements, especially in the regulation of package travel. However, the rapid development of digital tourism requires further regulatory improvements, particularly in areas such as platform responsibility, personal data protection, and consumer information transparency. In addition, comparative literature on platform tourism indicates that harmonization should increasingly include online intermediaries, digital contract transparency, and protection against opaque algorithmic practices [González & Solis, 2024; Silva & Duarte, 2025].

Thus, the discussion highlights that legal regulation in tourism should be viewed not only as a normative instrument but also as an economic and strategic factor that determines the competitiveness, sustainability, and long-term development of the sector.

10. Conclusion

Tourism and law are closely interconnected and complex fields, where the quality of legal regulation plays a crucial role in ensuring tourist safety and protecting consumer rights [Mukasheva & Ybyray, 2023; UNWTO, 2020]. At the same time, an effective legal framework creates the basis for the stable functioning and economic development of the tourism sector.

The research shows that practical measures such as clear regulation of tourism contracts, implementation of minimum safety standards, and ensuring information transparency significantly reduce legal and operational risks [Adamenko et al., 2021; Tatsienko et al., 2021]. These measures also increase market reliability, improve service quality, and contribute to strengthening the competitiveness of the tourism industry.

In addition, it should be noted that the real protection of tourists' rights is not limited to the existence of normative guarantees; effective enforcement mechanisms are also necessary. In this regard, it is important that tourists can send notifications, requests, and complaints related to package performance to the travel agency through which the package was purchased, and the agency is obliged to forward them to the tour operator without delay. At the same time, the consumer retains the right to apply to the Competition and Consumer Agency

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of Georgia, the relevant regulatory authority, a court, arbitration, or mediation, thereby establishing a multi-level legal protection system in tourism. Such multi-layered mechanisms increase consumer trust and ensure the efficient functioning of the market.

In the context of digital tourism, compliance with legislation increases consumer trust in online platforms and positively affects economic outcomes in tourism [Reymbayeva, 2025]. Accordingly, legal regulation can be considered not only as a normative instrument but also as a key factor in economic development, market stability, and sector competitiveness.

Moreover, the findings of this study suggest that tourism governance is increasingly shifting from traditional state-centered regulation toward more complex multi-level regulatory systems. These systems involve not only national authorities but also international organizations, private sector actors, and digital platform providers. Such a multi-actor governance structure requires continuous adaptation of legal frameworks in order to maintain coherence, accountability, and effectiveness in tourism regulation.

Furthermore, the increasing digitalization of tourism services highlights the need for stronger integration between consumer protection law, data protection law, and competition law. The convergence of these legal domains ensures a more comprehensive protection mechanism for tourists, particularly in relation to online bookings, platform intermediaries, and automated decision-making systems.

From a policy perspective, sustainable tourism development cannot be achieved without balancing economic growth with legal certainty and consumer protection. Therefore, future legal reforms should prioritize not only regulatory compliance but also accessibility, enforcement efficiency, and adaptability to technological innovation.

Finally, it can be concluded that tourism law is evolving into a dynamic and interdisciplinary field that plays a central role in shaping sustainable, safe, and competitive tourism markets in the globalized economy.

Recommendations:

- Regular updating of national legislation in accordance with the needs of digital tourism;
- Strengthening monitoring and control mechanisms for safety standards; Increasing consumer awareness through online platforms;
- Developing clear, fair, and universal forms of tourism contracts for crisis management situations;
- Enhancing inter-institutional cooperation between tourism authorities, consumer protection bodies, and digital platform regulators to ensure more effective enforcement of tourism law.

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