

# TRAVEL CHOICES WE MAKE

*Tourist waiting for their train*

Bizketz



INTERVIEW WITH  
NINA NESTEROVA

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Professor **Nina Nesterova** shares her journey to reshaping **mobility and tourism's future**. Tackling ethical dilemmas of tourism and business travel, she discusses the pressing need for sustainable tourism and systemic change, emphasising deeper, intentional travel experiences over carbon-heavy routines.

**POLIS:** We understand you have recently had your inaugural speech for your role of Professor of Sustainable Development of Tourism and Transport at Breda University of Applied Sciences (BUAs). What drew you to focus on this area?

**Nina Nesterova:** My journey greatly influenced my focus on tourism and mobility. Growing up in Sverdlovsk, now Ekaterinburg in Russia, I experienced a world with travel restrictions, where travelling abroad was rare and exceptional. Despite this, I had a happy childhood, but as I grew older, I developed a curiosity to discover the world, which led me to work in the transport sector.

In a way, it felt natural because transport is about moving from one place to another, and that was my way of 'travelling' early on.

Now, I look at how much tourism and mobility have changed, especially in Europe. Travel is no longer a rare event but a frequent, almost routine part of life for many people. And yet, this ease of travel has come with significant costs for society and the environment.

**POLIS:** You mentioned the environmental impact of tourism mobility, particularly air travel. Could you elaborate on this and your personal experience as a frequent traveller?

**Nesterova:** Yes, this is a critical issue. Travel and tourism accounted for 8% of global greenhouse gas emissions in 2019, and aviation alone represented about 74% of all tourism transport emissions. What is more alarming is that just 1% of the world's population causes more than 50% of air travel emissions. This is mainly driven by wealthier nations, while the Global South experiences the most severe climate impacts.

Since January 2024, I have taken 16 trips, including flights, trains, and car journeys. Although I have tried to reduce my travel compared to previous years, I still find myself as part of the frequent traveller problem—consider that, on average, a Dutch makes about 5.6 domestic and international overnight annual trips.

And it is not just me—many professionals and tourists in my circles fly often for business and leisure. I can rationalise each trip, but knowing the environmental toll, I feel conflicted. It raises a significant ethical dilemma for me and others like me who care about sustainability.

**POLIS:** That ethical dilemma seems crucial. How do you reconcile your need for travel, both personally and professionally, to reduce its environmental impact?

**Nesterova:** It is not easy. For example, visiting my family or attending important conferences sometimes requires long flights. And while I have tried alternatives, the demands of work and family life make it difficult to always choose the most sustainable option. I know this is a dilemma many frequent travellers face. We are encouraged to travel more—whether for work, family, or leisure—yet we know the consequences.

What is clear is that this is not just a matter of changing individual behaviour; it is about transforming the entire system. We need to rethink our values and our relationship with travel. Could we foster deep, meaningful experiences closer to home? Could businesses and academic networks place more value on quality engagement rather than the number of trips taken? This is something I am committed to working on through my new role at the Center for Sustainability in Tourism and Transport (CSTT), and by contributing to initiatives like the MONA project, which focuses on sustainable tourism and mobility solutions within natural areas.

**POLIS:** That brings us to the Center for Sustainability in Tourism and Transport (CSTT). Could you tell us more about its mission and your plans?

**Nesterova:** CSTT's mission is to drive the transition to sustainable tourism mobility by reducing the climate footprint of tourism. We are focusing on the entire tourism mobility system, from travel to and from destinations, to mobility within those destinations. Our vision is to create a just system, one that prioritises environmental and societal values over mere economic growth. We aim to foster inclusivity, well-being, and long-term sustainability for all stakeholders.



**Nina Nesterova**

Professor Sustainable Development of Tourism and Transport  
*Centre for Sustainability, Tourism and Transport (CSTT), Breda University of Applied Sciences (BUAS)*

Following the steps of my predecessor, Professor Paul Peeters, our work will centre on three key research lines: exploring alternative futures for tourism mobility, navigating the political and societal barriers to tourism sustainability, and developing practical interventions. We want to question the value of long-distance travel and explore concepts like 'immobility'—the idea that constant movement is not necessary for fulfilling experiences. We will also work with policymakers and industries to implement scalable solutions, such as carbon footprint analysis and best practices from early adopters of sustainable travel.

**POLIS:** Speaking of the MONA project, how does it align with your goals for CSTT?

**Nesterova:** The MONA (Modal shift, routing, and nudging solutions in Nature Areas) project is an excellent example of what we aim to achieve. Running from 2023 to 2027, MONA promotes sustainable tourism in nature reserves by encouraging visitors to use more sustainable modes of transport, such as cycling and walking, within protected areas.

### **Couple sightseeing**

Carlos Barquero



CSTT is closely involved in solution testing, and MONA plays a vital role here. The MONA project partners monitor and assess visitor impact and develop strategies for promoting sustainable transport and behaviour, which are then tested in real-world contexts across nature reserves in Germany, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands. We are excited to see how these solutions impact local communities and ecosystems, and the CSTT aims to integrate these insights to inspire other regions and sectors.

**POLIS:** You have outlined an ambitious agenda. How do you plan to address the challenges of political and societal resistance to this transition?

**Nesterova:** This is one of the most difficult aspects of our work. The transition to sustainable tourism mobility is delayed because it is not just a technical issue—it is deeply political and societal. Governments, businesses, and tourists all have different interests, which often creates conflicts. For instance, while car use is widely targeted for reduction, aviation often escapes similar scrutiny due to its international economic significance. There is also the paradox of airport expansion versus the growing awareness of aviation's climate impact.

At CSTT, we aim to address these contradictions by working closely with stakeholders and understanding their positions. We will use tools like the 'avoid-shift-improve' framework, which is commonly applied to reduce car travel and push for a similar approach in aviation.

**POLIS:** It is clear that systemic change is needed. What does the future of travel look like to you, and what role does CSTT play in shaping it?

**Nesterova:** The future of travel, as I see it, involves moving away from high-carbon modes like flying and driving long distances.

Instead, we need to embrace more localised, sustainable travel that not only reduces emissions but enhances our personal well-being. I envision a future where travel becomes more intentional, with each trip holding deeper meaning.

At CSTT, our role is to research, test, and help scale solutions that support this transition. We will work with early adopters, conduct pilot projects, and continue to provide tools like carbon footprint analysis to guide stakeholders. Ultimately, it is about shifting the tourism system to prioritise the well-being of individuals, society, and the planet.

Of course, we cannot make this transition alone. It will take collaboration across sectors and a fundamental rethinking of our relationship with travel.

*A train in the Dutch countryside*

*Marijs Jan*

