

REGIONAL TOURISM

Tourism in Europe and the South Eastern Countries: Towards common actions

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour and a pleasure for me to participate once more in the Sixth International Conference on Tourism taking place in Sofia. And, as you probably don't know, I have participated in all the previous five meetings. So, I have followed all your steps forward and efforts from the very beginning. Today is a special day as Bulgaria has now joined the European Union and belongs to the great family of 27 Nations and 450 million people. I congratulate you from my deepest heart for this success. For us, Greece, today is also very important because we at least now have a common frontier with one European country – Bulgaria (before you joined the European Union we had none).

Europe is the number one tourism destination in the world. Europe (27) accounts appr. 230 million international tourist arrivals (2004) or 55% and about 237 billion euros in tourism receipts corresponding to 52% of all international tourism receipts. Tourism activity is spread in Europe with a clear concentration in the traditional destinations in Western and Southern /Mediterranean.

Europe is the main generating destination in the world, but the percentage of the population going on holiday varies greatly from country to country (76,9% of Germans, 31,2% of Portuguese (Eurostat 2006)). European citizens made more than 417 million trips of four nights; Europe is the preferred destination for most trips (88% of all arrivals are in Europe). According to the UNWTO Vision 2020, Europe is forecasted to reach 717 million arrivals in 2020; this is approximately a doubling of European tourism from 2000-2020. Growth rates will be different within Europe, as both the northern and the eastern parts are expected to have higher growth rates than the traditional destinations. New tourist destination countries in Asia, for example, India and China, will influence tourism flows to the area and vice versa.

With a few exceptions, European Countries have their main peak season in the summer – August and September; Greece has the highest seasonal dependency. Nowadays, there is a trend in Europe towards a better distribution of tourism outside the peak season – shorter but more frequent trips - and increased interest in city breaks, travel for specific events and culture.

All the countries which are represented in this panel by their distinguished delegates, (South East Europe, the Balkan countries) have something unique and common to offer all travellers: our history and culture, which differ from country to country, but at the same time have common moments and routes. Let me focus on this cultural life and especially on the culture routes established by our long history of living together, which are of high importance for the tourism development of the regions concerned.

These routes, roads, the result of deep studies¹ by experts, are very briefly the following:

1. The **Diagonal Road** passes through **South East Europe**, connecting **Europe to Asia**. This cultural corridor is one of the most ancient arteries, of trans-continental, even world importance. Entering into **Slovenia** from Central Europe, it passes successively through **Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro, Bulgaria** and **Turkey**, to continue to the **Far East**. Bearing various names — the Diagonal Road since the time of the Roman Empire – it is nowadays the most important axis between the East and the West.
2. The **Danube Road** is a water cultural corridor along the big European Danube River. Springing from **Schwarzwald (Germany)**, the river passes through **Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro, Bulgaria** and **Romania** to flow into the **Black Sea**. It is the only big navigable river in Europe, flowing in an *east-west direction* - a fact which for ages determined its exceptional significance as an important connection between Western Europe and the Black Sea.
3. The **Eastern Trans-Balkan Road** crosses **South East Europe** in a *north-south direction*. This corridor passes through **Romania, Bulgaria** and **Greece** and connects the **Baltic Sea** with the **Aegean** and **Mediterranean** seas. Along its way to the north, the Eastern Trans- Balkan road connects with the great European route **Via Regia (the Royal Road)** in **L'viv (Ukraine)** – crossing Europe from **Kiev** to **Santiago de Compostela (Spain)**.
4. The cultural corridor **Sofia-Ohrid** passes through **Bulgaria** and **FYROM** connecting the monastery agglomerations around these two historic towns and the religious cultural area of **Metohia** in **Serbia and Montenegro**.
5. The **Via Adriatica** spreads all over the western seaside of the **Ionian** and **Adriatic** seas. It passes through **Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro, Albania** and **Greece**.
6. The **Via Anatolia** is another cultural corridor, spreading along three seas – the **Sea of Marmara**, the **Aegean** and **Mediterranean** seas. Starting from the historical town of Istanbul (Turkey), the direction follows the coast of Asia Minor (Anadol, Anatolia) in Western Asia. The Via Anatolia exhibits the meeting and unique dialogue among the **Greek** and **Latin** sea cultures and the local continental cultures of **Asia Minor**.
7. The **Via Pontica** is the cultural road spreading over the west and south coasts of the **Black sea**. It winds along the waters of a water basin, beginning with the picturesque delta

¹ The *Cultural Corridors of South East Europe* is a practical implementation of the Varna Declaration, adopted at the Regional Forum *Cultural Corridors of South East Europe* (Varna, May 2005). There, the Heads of State of the region made a commitment to *contribute to the promotion of cultural heritage and cultural corridors within the region using modern dissemination technologies, in cooperation with the European Institute of Cultural Routes, Luxembourg, and other specialist institutions.*

of the **Danube** reaching the foothills of the **Caucasus**, crossing **Romania, Bulgaria** and **Turkey**. The **Via Pontica** tells us about the meeting among sea cultures – **Greeks, Vikings, Venetians, Genoese**, with the land cultures of the **Skits, Thracians, Daces, Goths, Bulgarians, Slavs** and **Romans**.

8. The **Western Trans-Balkan Road** crosses **South East Europe** in a *north-south direction*. For ages, this corridor has united the territories on both sides of the Balkans – the Balkan range, passing through **Romania, Bulgaria** and **Greece**. Thus, the Trans-Balkan Road connects **Western** and **Central Europe** with the **Aegean** and the **Mediterranean** seas, consecutively crossing the Danube Road, the Diagonal Road, the Sofia-Ohrid Road and the Via Egnatia.

On this occasion, I would also like to mention another route for the Mediterranean Countries: the **Route of the Olive Tree**. Following an initiative of the Greek Tourism Organization in 2003 and the Messinia House of Commerce, it was adopted by Unesco in 2003 and, on 13 May in Delphi, the Council of Europe gave it the certification of a Major Cultural Route of Europe. Through its geographic and historic extent, the olive tree has not only marked the landscape, but also the daily life of Mediterranean civilisations; it is associated with their rites and religious traditions, and has influenced their habits and techniques. A mythical and sacred tree for the three monotheist religions (through its product, olive oil), a material and spiritual reference for the whole of the Mediterranean, a universal symbol of peace and reconciliation, the olive tree represents a wide variety of living natural and cultural landscapes.

Apart from all these European routes, other local or bilateral initiatives to establish a common tourist product are very important for the collaboration of the regions concerned in tourism development. Such, for example, are the initiative of the Golden Triangle - Greece Turkey Bulgaria, or the Rhodopes Project - Greece Bulgaria to develop a joint tourist product under the title Rhodopes-Homeland of Orpheus, or the Balkan Cuisine Project and festivals in Komotini and so on.

In addition to all the above, there exist a number of tourism activities and initiatives that can be taken for the development of tourism, for example, in promoting the area, or initiatives for common actions toward ecotourism, sustainable tourism development etc.

On 23th May in Athens, the South Eastern Countries signed an agreement, a Memorandum of Understanding in the field of tourism with particular emphasis on the study of all the possibilities of establishing common tourist products based on common history and other cultural resources, and established a Forum, which will discuss and elaborate proposals for the development of the cooperation of South Eastern European Countries in the field of tourism.

Bulgaria and Romania's joining the European Union will facilitate all these efforts and initiatives to work together, to exchange experiences, and realize, among other things, a multilevel cultural tourist product for all the regions concerned.

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