

Madam Chairperson, dear Mrs. Angelkova, Minister for Tourism of Bulgaria, Esteemed Ministers and Heads of State Tourism Agencies, Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all, I wish to **sincerely thank and congratulate** the Ministry of Tourism of the Republic of Bulgaria, for **organizing and hosting** the Meeting of the Ministers in charge of Tourism of the BSEC Member States in the **beautiful city of Varna**. We are **grateful to you**, Madam Minister, for including this important BSEC Ministerial event in the very busy schedule of the **Bulgarian Presidency of the EU Council**. This has once again confirmed the **leading role Bulgaria** has been playing as **the Country-Coordinator on Tourism** within BSEC. I very well **remember** how **supportive and forthcoming** you were in Sochi in 2016, dear Minister, **to accept** our proposal for **assuming** the coordinatorship of the “**orphan**” - **until that day** - WG on Tourism. Today we can all look back to a **two-year’s period** full of achievements, because under **your** leadership the then **newly-formed** Bulgarian Ministry for Tourism has managed to implement a lot from the objectives you set out.

By the way, **thanks also** for selecting the important Museum of Varna as the venue of our event: in one of its rooms you will find out that the **ancestor** of the BSEC Organization was formed **200 years BC here**, when 6 city-states on what is today the Bulgarian and Romanian coastline on the Black Sea, formed the “Hexapolis” Union; among them was also Odessos, today’s Varna! They formed a joint Committee which was adopting measures mainly for the facilitation of trade among them, just as we aspire to achieve through the BSEC Organization!

Madame Chairperson, Distinguished Participants,

Tourism is, undoubtedly, among the greatest assets of our region, that should be utilized not only for the **sustainable development** of our national economies and for the promotion of regional cooperation, **but also** for shaping this area as an attractive tourism destination.

According to UNWTO data for 2017, **Tourism in our region is growing steadily**: 129 million of international tourist arrivals, which makes 10 per cent of worldwide tourist arrivals and 19% of arrivals to Europe; 66 billion USD in international tourism receipts, which makes 5 per cent of the worldwide tourism receipts. The growth rate for the Region as a whole for 2017, in comparison with 2016, was 11,9 per cent (while worldwide it was 6,8 per cent).

I will not tire you by enumerating all the important Documents setting the overall **framework** in which we are promoting our cooperation in the vital sector of Tourism, there is no need for that! Suffice to say that we have a **beautiful “collection”** of Decisions, Resolutions and Declarations, in fact, you are going to adopt another today, **“The Varna Declaration”**. Yet, as I usually said, we **perhaps** don't need more words, what we **need** is **concrete deeds** and **project-focused action!**

And **this** is exactly what we did yesterday, during the meeting of the Working Group. We promoted and prepared the ground for the implementation of **concrete** initiatives and projects, for which I wish to briefly inform you about; **because**, dear Ministers, **time and again** I note with disappointment that you **very rarely** mention our BSEC Organization as a useful vehicle for regional tourism cooperation in international meetings.

Yet, **kindly hear** what we achieved yesterday with the active contribution of all participants:

- **First of all** we agreed that the next candidate for the coordinator-ship of the WG will be the Republic of Turkey, so we **secured** the smooth continuation of the Group's performance.
- We agreed on how best to continue our extraordinary cooperation with the UNWTO on a number of projects that are **underway or in the pipeline**, such as the UNWTO **Silk Road Programme**. BSEC PERMIS is **actively present** in every relevant event, concerning among other, the Meeting of Silk Road Ministers from the 34 participant States and the UNWTO Task Force on the Silk Road;
- **For the first time**, UNWTO has published in cooperation with BSEC a brochure on “Tourism in the BSEC region”, containing valuable data and analyses on Tourism for our Member States, which is disseminated by the WTO to the whole world through its website and other media; this yearly publication is the **result** of the **trust and confidence** that characterizes our relationship to the UNWTO.
- We discussed and agreed that we will propose **concrete training programs** in the area of Tourism, to be implemented for the benefit of Member States in Istanbul, with the help of the Bogazici University and its UNWTO Affiliated Training Center in Istanbul.
- We discussed and agreed on the preparation of the ***International Conference on attracting Cruise Tourism in the Black Sea and in the Eastern Mediterranean***, which will be co-organized by BSEC PERMIS, the UNWTO and the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of Turkey, in Istanbul in early 2019.

- We discussed and agreed on **holding Seminars** for attracting more **Chinese and Indian** tourists to the BSEC region; these seminars will be implemented in early 2019 by UNWTO experts.
- We discussed and agreed to **merge two initiatives** which have been on our Agenda for several meetings, concerning the collection of data and the promotion of gastronomy and the establishment of the brand “**Black Sea Cuisine**”. We agreed that experts and professionals from interested Member States will formulate as soon as possible a relevant project proposal, which will be submitted to the **Steering Committee of the Black Sea Project Promotion Facility for adequate funding**.
- We agreed to follow the same path in what concerns the **film-induced Tourism**, an item **lingering for a long time** on our Agenda, by outsourcing to experts the **formulation** of a project proposal, to be submitted to the same Steering Committee for funding.
- The PERMIS informed participants on its plans to **respond**, together with other eligible partners, to a Call for Proposals for a project to develop **regional, small-scale cruising “routes” in the Black Sea**, by focusing on the mapping of local cultural assets and values across all coastal destinations, a project worth 400.000 Euros.

We discussed and agreed that convening a **joint meeting** of the WGs on Tourism and on Culture is necessary, in order to coordinate efforts for developing joint regional projects on cultural routes; such a meeting might even take place during the second semester of this year.

We discussed and agreed to continue supporting the project proposal on the establishment of the “**Cultural Port of the Black Sea**” institution, a project promoted by others (the European Centre for Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Monuments), **yet** in which, if implemented, BSEC will have a **decisive role** in the selection of the Port, the calendar of events, etc.

And, **of course**, we discussed and agreed on the text of the “**Varna Declaration**”, which you will hopefully adopt today!

Dear Ministers, ladies and gentlemen,

Perhaps the above achievements of our yesterday's "**pains**" may come to you as a **surprise**, a **pleasant** one I hope, yet these are only **some of the issues** we constantly work for their realization. I enumerated them because, in doing so, I wish to re-enforce your **sense of ownership** towards "**our**" Organization, which has accumulated during the 26 years of its life the **experience and know-how** to serve as a **valuable vehicle for regional coordination and cooperation**.

In conclusion, my appeal and message to you is **one**: let us take **advantage** of the possibilities we as BSEC Organization can offer to our Member States; **after all**, the **taxpayer** of our countries pays a lot to sustain this Organization; let us continue to work as we did yesterday - and **we do today – staying focused** on the **project-oriented** mission of our Organization and its WGs.

So, thanks again to you, Madame Minister, for a successful coordinator-ship of the WG on Tourism and our best wishes to the Turkish Republic, which will assume this mission from the 1st of July. Thanks to our Bulgarian hosts for their uniquely **warm and lavish** hospitality and thanks to the Armenian BSEC Chairmanship-in-Office for its efforts to make this semester a fruitful period of BSEC activity.