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A renewed EU Tourism Policy: Towards a stronger Partnership for European Tourism

*Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

4th European Tourism Forum

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It is a real pleasure to be in Malta and discuss tourism. Not only because Malta is an exceptional tourist destination but also because I personally have unforgettable memories from this beautiful island. As Commissioner responsible for enlargement, in the previous Commission, I visited Malta, got to know and appreciate its people and their efforts to join the European Union. Organising this Forum in Hungary, last year and now in Malta is an excellent way to celebrate enlargement.

The organisation of this Forum is the fruit of the close collaboration of many stakeholders; the hosts, the Presidency, the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee the Commission, the candidate and accession countries, the industry, the social partners and numerous destinations. This collaboration is an excellent example of partnership. Partnership, which is necessary in Europe in order to advance successfully in the 21st century.

Growth and Jobs

Five years ago the European Union set itself a number of ambitious goals at Lisbon. The review of the Lisbon Strategy achievements and perspectives showed that we need to focus our attention-and the Strategy- to two main priorities : Growth and Employment.

We have set as main goals to:

- Make Europe a more attractive place to invest and work;
- Raise our capacity to grow through knowledge and innovation and;
- Create more and better jobs.

I believe that to be successful we need to work in partnership between the Community, the member states, the private sector and the employees.

While the Growth and Jobs Strategy continues to be a project of European cooperation and coordination, it will certainly require much stronger input and ownership at national level.

Tourism: Importance-challenges

Tourism can play a major role in our efforts to create growth and jobs and promote regional development. Together with its related activities, it is one of the biggest and fast expanding European economic sectors. Along with health care, education and information technologies it is also a sector with promising future.

The demographic evolution in Europe promises an even bigger growth of tourism. Pensioners today travel more, forms of social tourism emerge all over and infrastructures are gradually adapting to the needs of people with disabilities. That makes tourism a 'right for all' in Europe and opens up new market segments.

This dynamism of tourism goes along with a lot of challenges. Europe must become more competitive and create more jobs. We must safeguard our social achievements and promote sustainability. We are also faced with challenges such as demography, climate change, and globalisation.

The recent enlargement and the perspective of welcoming more countries to our Union offer us opportunities as well as new challenges.

A renewed EU policy

As you know, the European Union has no direct competence in tourism. While in most cases tourism is a local issue, there is no doubt that a better partnership at European level between public authorities, private sector and employees will offer clear advantages to the European tourism. Your presence here confirms this.

I believe that a cohesive European policy is necessary if we want to boost the competitiveness of our industry and create more growth and jobs.

The tools available to do this are co-ordination, co-operation and specific supporting actions. For this purpose I am setting up a renewed European tourism policy which will be implemented in partnership with the Member States and the tourism stakeholders.

The main aim of this policy will be to improve the competitiveness of the European Tourism industry and create more jobs through the sustainable growth of tourism in Europe and globally.

I believe that these key objectives are commonly shared by all stakeholders.

To translate this policy into practice in the coming period we will concentrate our actions in a number of areas favouring partnerships and optimal use of resources. Our policy will focus on three main sets of actions:

- Better regulation and policy co-ordination
- Improved use of the available European financial instruments and
- Actions addressing specific tourism-related issues

Better regulation and policy co-ordination

Better Regulation is an area in which we must all work in partnership. The Commission has launched an ambitious initiative to cut red tape, simplify rules and improve impact assessments.

In 2005 we are monitoring 169 new Community policy initiatives in order to make sure that they do not hinder the competitiveness of tourism.

I want to make one thing clear: We will not propose any new regulation unless it is absolutely necessary.

We will be looking also to review regulation, such as the Special VAT regime for travel agents, if necessary.

At EU level, a stronger co-ordination mechanism within the Commission will improve the efficiency of this renewed Better Regulation initiative. In this process, we count on the contribution of all interested stakeholders. Such exercises should be extended also at national level to avoid cumulative administrative burden for the tourism industry.

While our mainstream activities are carried out through Enterprise policy, tourism is affected by numerous factors and can profit from various policy areas for its development. While for example terrorism is a threat to tourism, European security policies and security research can help minimise negative effects without hampering the attractiveness of the European destinations.

We will spare no efforts to guarantee the safety of our citizens and visitors.

Other examples are innovation and e-businesses, which the Commission supports through the Enterprise, Research and ICT development policies. In fact, our most recent e-Business W@tch results show that "e-tourism" has truly taken off and online sales in tourism appear twice as high as in other sectors of the EU economy.

Health and Consumer protection, Research, Information Society, Justice, Trade, Internal Market, Environment protection, Development, External Relations, Regional, Employment, Education and Training, Agriculture, Competition, Culture, Taxation, Energy and of course Transport, are all policies which affect in some way tourism. Quite often tourism is or should be integral part of these policies.

Our work will concentrate in integrating tourism in those Community policies and making sure that there is adequate co-ordination of the various policy initiatives that may impact on tourism.

I would like to single out another policy to which we will pay particular attention in the coming years, the maritime policy. I am sure that my colleague Commissioner Borg will elaborate on this tomorrow. We are currently exploring the need for a comprehensive European Maritime Policy. Water and coastal tourism are 'flagships' in this area. We are therefore paying particular attention to the employment and sustainability issues of these forms of tourism.

Improved use of the available European financial instruments

The coming period is important for the shaping of the future European cohesion policy. A policy which is of crucial importance for the development of tourism since it supports it directly and indirectly through the creation of infrastructure.

In the period 2000 to 2006 the Structural Funds should invest in purely tourism projects more than seven billion Euros. If we add to that the investments for infrastructures and the other sectors interlinked with tourism you can understand the importance the cohesion policy gives to this industry.

The Structural Funds are supporting and will continue to support the development of the new Member States. Their tourism and related infrastructures are supported financially by the various Community funds.

The sustainable development of the tourist sector in these countries will have to play an integral part in accomplishing the requisite structural change: whether in the conversion of rural areas or in the creation of new attractive tourist destinations in regions which most Western Europeans have never visited before but which are now open to them. Visitors will also have the opportunity to encounter other cultures and overcome ancient fears and stereotypes.

You probably know that tourism features clearly within the new Strategic guidelines for cohesion growth and jobs and in the new regulation on rural support development. For the period 2007 to 2013 the Commission proposal for a reformed cohesion policy amounts to 336,1 billion Euros.

As you see we DO 'put our money where our mouth is' on what concerns the sustainable development of European tourism. We must all make sure that this money will be used efficiently, by exploiting all possible synergies amongst actors, projects and resources.

Actions addressing specific tourism-related issues

If tourism does not develop in a sustainable way, it endangers the natural and cultural environment. We actively support the economic, environmental and social sustainability of the European tourism.

For this reason we set up the Tourism Sustainability Group, composed of representatives of all actors and aiming to make proposals to the Commission for the preparation, by 2007, of an Agenda 21 for the European Tourism. This should assure an adequate integration of the relevant EU policies and instruments to the goal of sustainability.

In parallel we are working to promote professional training and exchanges of apprentices, to improve the accessibility of tourism infrastructures to persons with reduced mobility and support corporate social responsibility initiatives.

Ethics and responsibility are important components of the attractiveness and competitiveness of European tourism. We must therefore make sure that child sex tourism is not associated with Europe's tourism.

Another important area in which we can work in partnership is the promotion of Europe as a tourist destination. At the beginning of next year the European Tourist Destinations Portal will be launched on the Internet. It will give access to the web sites of all European National Tourism Organisations. This unique access point to European tourism information should improve greatly the promotion of the attractive and diverse set of European destinations to the third countries. It can give a real boost to our tourism. Every European destination will benefit from this new generation of information and knowledge tools.

The cultural wealth and diversity of Europe is one of the major advantages of our tourism and our own life. We must continue investing in the preservation of our heritage and the promotion of arts and culture across Europe.

In the coming years important sport events will attract additional tourists to Europe. Next year we will host the football Mundial in Germany (I hope the best European team wins) and in 2012 the Olympic Games will be held in London. To profit even more from such events we are actually studying the impact of cultural and sport events on tourism-oriented SMEs.

In parallel we cannot afford to ignore the development of various forms of tourism. We will be focussing our attention to emerging markets like the seniors, the youth and the persons with reduced mobility. After all, our life expectancy increases, our health improves and senior or disabled people become more mobile. Who would want to stay home after pension when it is possible to go around and see the world? This reality opens up exciting new business opportunities.

It is worth exploring the possibility to establish a 'European destinations of excellence award'. This award would reward destinations chosen by the Member States as good examples.

The Commission will agree, in partnership with the Member States, the contest criteria and the features, which should be presented as main elements of each good practice. Then the Member States will organise the National selection process and present one destination as good practice. Finally, the Commission should undertake the dissemination of those good practices through an Award procedure.

This idea would serve several goals. It should recognise and reward worthwhile efforts to promote sustainable tourism by all the stakeholders of the various destinations. It would promote the exchange of good practice and enhance the image of European destinations, without affecting the normal competition between the various destinations.

Finally we will continue our efforts in partnership with the member states and the industry to raise the visibility of European tourism. Events like this Forum and future initiatives of the Presidency together with hard facts and figures coming from the Tourism Satellite Accounts will play an important role in this endeavour.

Conclusion

As you see the renewed policy framework is cohesive and covers all possible areas of Community intervention. To sum up, I want to assure you that:

- We will not propose un-necessary regulation;
- We will not create new specific financial instruments but will take advantage of all the possibilities offered by the existing ones;
- We will not seek to impose standards when those can be elaborated through voluntary self-regulation;
- We will work to cut red tape and modernise existing regulation;
- We will co-ordinate the Community actions affecting tourism;
- We will promote actively the competitiveness and sustainable development of European tourism;
- We will continue to support actions promoting Europe as a tourist destination;
- We will explore ways to promote emerging forms of tourism
- We will continue collaborating and consulting with all the relevant stakeholders and;
- We will strengthen the visibility of the importance of the European tourism industry.

I plan to put this policy framework forward within the Commission in the coming months and present it, through a Communication, to the Council and to the European Parliament, which showed recently its clear support to our work.

I would also appreciate receiving in the forthcoming weeks your feedback and suggestions on these main guidelines.

This policy is designed to exploit as much as possible, under the current Treaty, our competences and resources. The draft EU Constitution includes a specific reference to tourism. This, once ratified, would allow us to support even more the development of this important European industry.