



PRESS RELEASE

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Regional Stakeholders Webinar on “Cultural Tourism and Digital Transformation in the BSEC Region and Beyond: Lessons learned in the context of Covid-19 Pandemic”

The International Centre for Black Sea Studies ([ICBSS](#)) together with the [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia](#), successfully co-organized the Regional Stakeholders Webinar on “Cultural Tourism and Digital Transformation in the BSEC Region and Beyond: Lessons learned in the context of Covid-19 Pandemic”, on Wednesday 10 November 2021.

The webinar aimed to bring together regional and international stakeholders to exchange on good practices and lessons learned in the cultural tourism sector as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, placing special emphasis on digitalisation; as well as to explore new opportunities for regional partnerships to enhance recovery and build resilience for the future. It was addressed to policy stakeholders, representatives of business, academia and civil society, from the BSEC region and beyond.

Mr. Georgios MITRAKOS, ICBSS Director General, delivered the opening remarks, highlighting the fact that the ICBSS, over the past five years, dedicates November to Culture with the organization of the [BSEC Month of Culture \(MoC\)](#), an online month-long programme that aims to promote the rich cultural heritage of the 13 BSEC Member States. *“Today’s webinar comes as an additional reminder on how important economic sectors are culture and tourism for the countries of the BSEC region”* underlined Mr. Mitrakos.

Welcome speeches were delivered by **H.E. Amb. Lazar COMANESCU**, Secretary General, BSEC PERMIS, and **Mr. Arman KHACHATRYAN**, Head of Multilateral Policy and Development Cooperation Department, Secretary-General of the Armenian National Commission for UNESCO, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia. **H.E. Amb. COMANESCU** stressed the importance of the topic discussed both for the BSEC Organization and its Member States, and emphasized the changes that cultural tourism sector faces following the Covid-19 pandemic that foster the digital transformation. As he added *“The use of digital tools has a lasting effect in the way cultural heritage sites work and engage with their audiences in the future”*. From his side, **Mr. KHACHATRYAN** pointed out that *“Armenia is fully committed to collaborate in BSEC’s initiatives in elaborating creative strategies, in order to reinforce the resilience of Cultural Tourism in crisis, such as the Covid-19 pandemic”*.

The introductory session on the *Regional Perspective* was moderated by the ICBSS DG, **Mr. Georgios MITRAKOS**. The distinguished panellists, **Mr. Peter JANECH**, Deputy Director for Europe, Regional Department for Europe, UNWTO, **Ms. Mariachiara ESPOSITO**, Policy Officer, SNE–Culture / Cultural Heritage, Innovation, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), General Directorate for Education and Culture, European Commission, **Mr. Peter DEBRINE**, Senior Project Officer, Leader of Sustainable Tourism Program, UNESCO World Heritage Centre, and **Mr. Mario SANTANA QUINTERO**, Secretary-General of ICOMOS,

Former President of the International Scientific Committee on Heritage Documentation, elaborated on the challenges that tourism and culture sectors are facing following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as on the new opportunities that emerged enabling new partnerships, projects and policies at regional and international levels.

Under the moderation of **Ms. Sandra VUJINOVIC**, Executive Manager, BSEC PERMIS, the distinguished panelists of the Session I analyzed the transformation of the *Cultural Tourism in the Age of Digitalization*. More specifically, **Mr. Stefano DOMINIONI**, Executive Secretary, Enlarged Partial Agreement on Cultural Routes - Directorate of Democratic Participation (DGII), Council of Europe, Director, European Institute of Cultural Routes, **Mr. Stavros KALOGNOMOS**, Executive Secretary, CPMR Balkan and Black Sea Commission, **Ms. Sona BALOYAN**, Expert, International Relations Department, Matenadaran - Research Institute of Ancient Manuscripts of Armenia, **Ms. Irmak WÖBER**, Digital Platforms Supervisor, Suna and İnan Kıraç Foundation, Pera Museum & Istanbul Research Institute, and **Ms. Steliana COJOCARIU**, Phd., Counselor for International Relations and European Affairs, Ministry of Economy, Entrepreneurship and Tourism of Romania, talked about the importance of digitalization in the cultural tourism services and products and highlighted good cases of digital tools development as a means to mitigate the negative impact of the outbreak on the sector.

In continuation, Session II on *Cultural Tourism: Best Practices, Challenges and Opportunities from the Black Sea region*, was moderated by **Ms. Georgia CHANTZI**, Research & Policy Development Manager, ICBSS. Speakers at the second session **Ms. Nina KEKELIDZE**, Head of Educational Tourism Committee, Georgian Tourism Association (GTA), **Ms. Olha RABIICHUK**, Head, Project Management Dept., State Agency for Tourism Development of Ukraine, **Ms. Ani AREVSHATYAN**, Adviser, Marketing, Tourism Committee of the Ministry of Economy of the Republic of Armenia, along with **Mr. Arsen GASPARYAN**, Chief Executive Officer who presented AR trails mobile app and Mr. Albert POGHOSYAN, Chief Executive Officer, who presented 360 stories platform, **Mr. Vladimir BAKANOV**, CEO of Black Sea Cuisine International Transcoastal Executive Committee, and **Ms. Haikanush BAGRATUNYAN**, Project Management Specialist, USAID Armenia focused on national strategies and presented best practices of innovation and community-based tourism for the sustainable development of cultural tourism, with emphasis on the post-covid era.

Closing the online event, **Mr. Sahak SARGSYAN**, Permanent Representative of the Republic of Armenia to BSEC, identified the key points and priorities for cultural tourism as emerged during the webinar by the distinguished panelists and participants, that should constitute good examples for more regional synergies in the wider Black Sea Region.

The webinar built on the discussions on culture and tourism launched in the [Regional Stakeholders Conference “Black Sea Synergy: the way forward”](#) (Athens, 7 November 2019), organised by the ICBSS within the framework of the ENI East Instrument.

This was the twelfth of a [series of webinars](#) planned by the ICBSS on key issues targeting the wider Black Sea region.

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About the ICBSS: The International Centre for Black Sea Studies (ICBSS) was founded in 1998 as a non-profit organisation. It has since fulfilled a dual function. On the one hand, it is an independent research and training institution focusing on the wider Black Sea region. On the other hand, it is a related body of the Organisation of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) and serves as its acknowledged think-tank. Thus, the ICBSS pursues applied, policy-oriented research, promotes knowledge on the Black Sea region both within and outside its boundaries, and offers policy advice with the aim to foster multilateral cooperation among the BSEC member states as well as with their international partners.