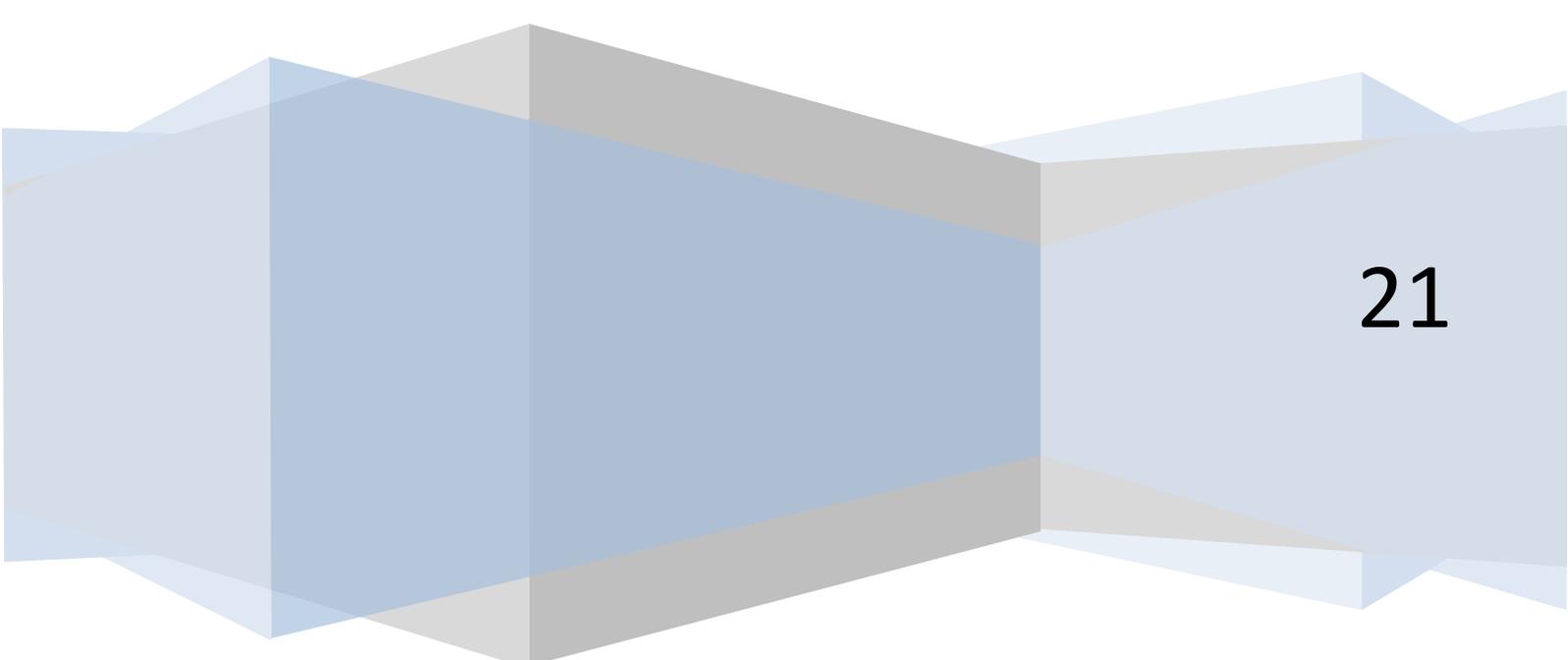


International Centre for Black Sea Studies

How to effectively promote regional cooperation in the Tourism sector in the Black Sea Area

Food-for-thought Paper

Edited by Georgia Chantzi



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The present publication includes the discussion results of the Simulation Session of the 4th Edition of the Workshop for Young Diplomats from the BSEC Member States, organised by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Turkey (KAS) in cooperation with the Permanent International Secretariat of the Organisation of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC PERMIS), on 6 -9 October 2021, in Tirana, Albania.



International Centre for Black Sea Studies (ICBSS)

19 – 21 Arachovis Str. & Ippokratous

10680 Athens

Greece

Tel: +30 210 324 2321

Fax: +30 210 324 2244

Email: icbss@icbss.org

Website: www.icbss.org

Director General: Georgios Mitrakos

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Food-for-Thought Paper

How to effectively promote regional cooperation in the Tourism sector in the Black Sea Area

Edited by Georgia Chantzi¹

Introduction

The Workshop for Young Diplomats from the BSEC Member States is a joint initiative by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Turkey (KAS) in cooperation with the Permanent International Secretariat of the Organisation of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC PERMIS). The Workshop aims to increase the awareness of participants on the importance of regional cooperation in the Black Sea area and contribute to the enhancement of mutual respect and confidence among the future foreign policy-makers of the BSEC Member States. Furthermore, through its interactive sessions, the Workshop aims to expand participants' knowledge on the potential of the BSEC Organisation to constructively identify and harmonize the shared economic interests of its Member States.

The **4th Edition of the Workshop for Young Diplomats from the BSEC Member States** focused on **"The Importance of Tourism for the Economies in the Black Sea Region"**. It was held in Tirana, Albania, on 6 - 9 October 2021.

The present **"Food-for-Thought Paper"** includes concrete ideas to boost effective regional cooperation in tourism in the Black Sea Area, as proposed by the Young Diplomats in an interactive simulation session during the Workshop.

Background information

The BSEC Member States² comprise an area of nearly 20 million km² and a population of 350 million. They account for 5% of the world's population and 37% of Europe's. With a combined GDP of USD 2.95 trillion (as of 2020), the BSEC Member States represent 4% of the global economy and generate 14% of Europe's GDP.

Tourism constitutes a valuable economic activity and major source of foreign revenues for the BSEC countries. In 2018, the BSEC region welcomed 143 million international tourist arrivals and earned EUR 62 billion in international tourism receipts (13% of Europe's tourism receipts). Overall, the region represents 10% of the world's arrivals³.

¹ Research and Policy Development Manager at the International Centre for Black Sea Studies (ICBSS)

² Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Republic of Moldova, Republic of North Macedonia, Romania, Russian Federation, Serbia, Turkey and Ukraine

³ UNWTO, "Tourism in the BSEC region", November 2019, <http://core.bsec-organization.org/UploadedFiles/OtherFiles/20191217-bsec-unwto-brochure-november-2019-1e23yd5m.pdf>

About the Workshop

The 4th Workshop for Young Diplomats from the BSEC Member States was developed in four sessions where renowned experts from policy, business and academia presented the latest data on tourism development at regional and international level, as well as lessons learnt and best practices since the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak.

On the last day of the Workshop, the Young Diplomats participated in a **Simulation Session** titled **“CSO Meeting on how to effectively promote regional cooperation in the Tourism sector in the Black Sea Area”** that was moderated by the International Centre for Black Sea Studies (ICBSS).

The abovementioned interactive Session envisaged a simulation scenario during which the Young Diplomats were invited to represent an assigned BSEC Member State other than their own, in a “CSO Meeting” aimed at promoting regional cooperation in Tourism. The overall objective was to discuss and propose concrete ideas to be taken by the BSEC Organization in fostering constructive ways of regional cooperation on tourism in the region, particularly in the post-pandemic era.

At the beginning of the simulation session, participants were invited to briefly present their assigned country’s views on the importance of tourism for national and regional socioeconomic development. In continuation, they were guided through a moderated exchange of views where they were invited to propose practical ways of enhancing cooperation in the tourism sector among the BSEC Member States, making full use of all instruments, policies and best practices presented, analyzed and discussed during the previous sessions by the keynote speakers.

The results of the simulation session are compiled in the present **“Food-for-Thought Paper”** that includes concrete ideas to boost effective regional cooperation in tourism in the Black Sea Area. The Paper will be presented to the participants of the next Meeting of the BSEC Working Group on Cooperation in Tourism. The paper could also be of interest to *inter alia* national policy making and policy delivery stakeholders, international organisations (EU, UNWTO, CoE), academia and business communities, civil society organisations.

Main Discussion Outcomes

The Young Diplomats identified a series of key priorities as well as a number of cross-cutting issues for the consideration of all involved stakeholders aiming to promote constructive cooperation in the tourism sector in the wider Black Sea region.

1. Coordination and cooperation

Coordination and productive cooperation among all involved stakeholders were identified as a main priority for the promotion of tourism both at national and regional levels.

Particular emphasis was placed on the development of ***private-public synergies*** and other ***networking activities*** among stakeholders, such as intraregional workshops or joint conferences for knowledge exchange and creation of synergies. On the same level, ***transnational cooperation among Chambers and Associations*** has been acknowledged as an important step forward for

investments on the sector. A good example of this could be the establishment of intraregional partnerships among Tourist Agencies Association and the creation of **joint tourist packages** specially targeting international tourists outside the BSEC Region (West Europe, China, the US, etc).

Existing practices and initiatives developed by **regional and international organizations**, like the UNWTO, CoE and the EU, were pointed out by the discussants for the targeted and result-oriented development of the tourism sector. For example, the CoE Cultural Routes and their potential for further development in the Black Sea countries, such as the mapping of wine routes in South Caucasus.

The **role of the BSEC Organisation** was stressed as paramount to enable and support transnational, cross-sectoral cooperation in the Region through its existing mechanisms, i.e. the BSEC WGs on Culture, Tourism and Transport. Young Diplomats proposed the revitalization of the **BSEC Business Council** to support tourism projects, as well as the development of an online **BSEC Observatory for Tourism** to include all relevant data, i.e. flows, national policies, opportunities for investments, national and regional tourism mechanisms, infrastructure capabilities, etc.

2. BSEC Label

Another important opportunity for the sustainable development of tourism in the BSEC Region through regional cooperation is the establishment of a **"BSEC Label"**, a regional brand to attract regional and international tourists.

The "BSEC Label" will entail an **inclusive regional strategy for tourism**, with tailor-made policy and communication activities, i.e. creation of a unique logo and slogan, to support the region's branding as an attractive tourism destination, thus increasing regional and international tourist flows.

In particular, the discussants pointed out the necessity of a targeted communication strategy, using **new media technologies**, i.e. social media, and the launch of a **regional website**, to be added in the BSEC website, to include all related information for the countries, like tourist attractions, cultural history, gastronomy, cultural routes.

Specifically, with regards to Cultural Routes, the discussants proposed a BSEC – CoE synergy to launch **Black Sea Cultural Routes** and a **BSEC Cultural Route Certificate** with the endorsement and logos of both organisations, in the context of the Council of Europe Cultural Routes programme.

Once more the important **role of the BSEC Organisation** and its dedicated Working Groups (WG on Cooperation in Tourism, WG on Culture) was stressed for the elaboration and later, the effective coordination and implementation of such regional action plan.

3. Environmental policies

The Young Diplomats stressed particularly the importance of environmental policies to mitigate the underlying environmental hazards that are interlinked to tourism development. Besides, the environmental risks caused by unregulated tourist activity vary and affect both the environment and the tourism industry.

The discussants underlined the significance of *engaging all involved stakeholders*, i.e. government, business, academia, NGOs and the public towards *greening tourism* and adopting environmental-friendly policies and practices.

A regional regulatory framework and the harmonisation of national policies for the protection of the environment against the uncontrolled tourist activity were proposed by the participants; while stressing the role of the *BSEC Organisation as a monitoring mechanism*. More specifically, Young Diplomats proposed the launch of the *“BSEC Green Label”* as a reward to tourism businesses that apply eco-friendly services.

More incentives and *rewards to tourism businesses* to adopt environmental-friendly practices should also be given by governments, such as lower taxation.

Additionally, the discussants pointed out the necessity to attract *investments for joint eco-tourism projects* at regional level; development of low-carbon infrastructure, and support of sustainable waste management practices.

Last but not least, the *role of NGOs in raising awareness* was highlighted, particularly through targeted activities, such as cleaning beaches campaigns, re-cycle and re-use household waste information days, etc.

4. Niche Tourism and Diversification of the tourism sector

Development of *niche market tourism* and supporting the diversification of tourism has been identified with great potential for the BSEC countries.

As mentioned, aside from its negative impact, the pandemic opened new opportunities for tourism activities and services that should be reinforced further. For example, as it was noted, the need to support an *urban-rural synergy* and reinforce the role of local communities for the sustainable development of tourism and the upgrade of services quality. *Community-based tourism* will create opportunities for year-round tourism; it will highlight less-visited regions/tourist sites, thus attracting diverse groups of regional and international tourists; it will generate new jobs in the sector and subsequently, support the economic growth of local communities.

Other forms of tourism with potential for further development were mentioned, such as cultural tourism; underwater cultural tourism; adventure tourism and health tourism.

With regards to *health tourism* particularly, the Young Diplomats pointed out the necessity of establishing a regional framework to safeguard the protection of tourists' rights and privacy, and ensure the quality of services. Additionally, and based on the lessons learnt from the COVID-19 pandemic, participants proposed the establishment of a *BSEC – WHO – UNWTO Task Force* to

particularly address the health protocols to be taken into consideration when developing health and medical tourism.

Besides, as mentioned, health tourism should also be supported by the private sector for investments and, to this end public-private partnerships should be facilitated.

5. Cross-cutting issues

Further to the abovementioned thematic priorities, a number of cross-cutting issues emerged while discussing practical ways to promote sustainable tourism in the Black Sea region.

- Increased Funding

New *investments*, public-private partnerships for increased funding and engagement of the private sector were highlighted as a main priority for policy stakeholders, in order to enable the sustainable development of the tourist sector in the Black Sea region. In addition, increasing the support to *youth entrepreneurship* in tourism will result in job creation, diversification of tourism products and services, as well as contribute to *local communities' development*.

- Digitalisation

Digitalisation and new technologies have come to facilitate services and their use and application should also be encouraged in the tourism sector. Online tools and applications are cost efficient and easily accessible by everyone regardless of time and geographic factors.

To this end, the Young Diplomats proposed the creation of an *online tool*, which will include BSEC destinations and tourist products, to allow travellers to combine routes, services and locations and prepare in advance a tailor-made itinerary based on personal needs and interests.

- Skills development and life-long learning

Closely linked with attracting new investments and job creation is *skills development*. Special emphasis was placed on skills development for the *youth and women*, as well as access to *life-long learning* particularly in the less developed and affected local communities or regions. Participants proposed for example, the organisation of *thematic training seminars*, such as use of new media and technologies, project development, branding of tourist products and services, etc.

- Enhanced connection with academia

Particular emphasis was also put on a more *active role of academia* and how it could further support an increased academia-industry-policy dialogue for a knowledge-based development of tourism.

Besides, the discussants proposed awareness raising activities for a more dynamic *engagement of the young people* that could become ambassadors of local tourist destinations through social media and other activities. More specifically, the Young Diplomats suggested the replication of an Erasmus-type *mobility programme* in the Black Sea region.

Furthermore, a **regional competition for high-school students on ways to boost tourism** could further enhance regional cooperation and increase the visibility of regional tourist products.

- **Connectivity**

Connectivity among the BSEC countries was mentioned by the Young Diplomats but also by many speakers as a crucial challenge hindering any efforts to promote successful tourism development both at national and regional level.

The discussants pointed out that the **lack of available connections** between the countries either by air, sea or land does not allow easy access, thus excluding regions, cities or even countries from the tourist map and ultimately, results in low tourist flows.

On top of that, **visa restrictions** add on the difficulties of travellers' mobility at intraregional or international levels.

To aim for an optimum regional cooperation in tourism and creating a regional brand with joint tourist packages, requires at least a smooth and flexible transportation among the BSEC countries.

- **Covid-19 protocols**

Health regulations and protocols have well entered daily life, and as the international community starts returning to some normality, these will be dominant in the tourism sector too. Besides, aside from national regulations, travellers demand themselves a secure and safe environment and the ability to enjoy their time off without any risk.

National policies should provide the regulatory framework and the monitoring mechanisms, especially for the tourism industry, to better apply health and safety regulations.

In Conclusion

Tourism is an important economic sector for the BSEC countries with significant, yet still untapped, potential. A great number of concrete ideas to boost tourism at national and regional level were proposed by the next generation of policy stakeholders during a three-day workshop in cooperation with renowned international experts.

The main outcome of the workshop however, was the need for cross-sectoral regional cooperation in the tourism sector in order to promote competitiveness at national and regional levels. Information sharing, private-public partnerships, capacity building should be included the agenda, as first steps to the further development of the sector.

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 its think-tank. Through all its activities, the ICBSS aims to foster multilateral cooperation among the BSEC member states as well as with their international partners.

As an independent research and training institution, the ICBSS exploits synergies with its institutional role and develops complementary activities. This includes the elaboration and publication of research papers and studies, the organisation of a variety of scientific events, the management of research projects, as well as networking activities.

The ICBSS series of publications include:

- ***Xenophon Papers**, launched to publish comprehensive policy-oriented studies;*
- ***Policy Briefs**, meant to explore a topic, distil lessons learned and provide policy advice;*
- ***ICBSS Research Papers**, a new series of shorter and informative analysis on contemporary issues.*

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Building a Sustainable Future for the Black Sea Area

International Centre for Black Sea Studies (ICBSS)
19-21 Arachovis Str. & Ippokratous, 10680 Athens, Greece
Tel: +30 210 324 2321 | Fax: +30 210 324 2244
E: icbss@icbss.org | W: www.icbss.org