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TOURISM IN EUROPE AND THE SOUTH EASTERN COUNTRIES

TOWARDS COMMON ACTIONS

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Recently **Bulgaria and Rumania** joined the **European Union** and now belong to the great family of 27 Nations and 480 million people.

Europe is the number one tourism destination in the world. Europe accounts about 55% of all international tourists arrivals 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)).

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.

South East European Countries, (the Balkan countries) have something unique and common to offer all travellers: history and culture, which differ from country to country, but at the same time have common moments and routes. This cultural life and the culture routes established by our long history of living together are of high importance for the tourism development of the regions concerned.

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, Bulgaria and Turkey, to continue to the Far East.

The **Danube Road** is a water cultural corridor along the big European Danube River. Springing from Schwarzwald (Germany), the river passes through Croatia, Serbia, 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.

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. The cultural corridor Sofia-Ohrid passes through Bulgaria connecting the monastery agglomerations around these two historic towns and the religious cultural area of Metohia. The Via Adriatica spreads all over the western seaside of the Ionian and Adriatic seas. It passes through Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Albania and Greece. 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 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.

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.

Via Egnatia is an ancient road, built around 146 BC, during the Roman Empire, to facilitate the communication between Rome and Constantinople (present Istanbul), between East and West. The corridor connects the Adriatic coast with the Black and the Aegean Sea, passing through Albania, FYR of Macedonia, Greece and Turkey.

Very important for the Mediterranean Countries is 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 the above, there exist a number of tourism activities and initiatives promoting common actions encouraging ecotourism and sustainable tourism development.

On 23th May 2003 in Athens, the South Eastern Countries signed an 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 to realise a multilevel cultural tourist product for all the regions concerned.