



Tirana Declaration

8 April 2021

Tirana Declaration
on joint regional protocols
to support sustainable tourism recovery and growth
in the Western Balkans 6

Tirana, Albania
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We, the Ministers and representatives of tourism administrations of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, together with the representatives of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), gathered on the occasion of the Tourism High Level Meeting, held on 8 April 2021 at the Closing Conference of the Tourism Development & Promotion Project.

Recalling:

The South East Europe 2020 Strategy, aimed at boosting the region's competitiveness and development and which recognises tourism's contribution to job creation and growth, its potential for regional value chain creation and the region's comparative advantage;

The EU Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, which in its commitment to spurring the Western Balkans' (WB6) long-term economic recovery, identifies tourism as a strategic sector and emphasizes the significant scope for increased intra-regional economic cooperation and trade;

The Sofia Declaration on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, aligning with the EU Green Deal, aiming to support and accelerate changes and processes in the region with the overarching goal of addressing climate change;

The Common Regional Market Action Plan, 2021-2024, which aims at building a Common Regional Market for the WB6, based on EU rules, targeting tourism as one of the priority areas for action;

The Charter on Good Neighbourly Relations, Stability, Security and Cooperation in South-Eastern Europe, which shows the region's commitment to maintaining peaceful and cooperative relations, and identifies tourism as one of the sectors where cooperation could be strengthened;

The **"AIUIa Framework for Inclusive Community Development through Tourism"**, by UNWTO and G20 Tourism Working Group, which emphasizes the potential of tourism for inclusive community development thanks to its capacity to drive labour market inclusion of disadvantaged groups and to support environmental and cultural preservation;

The G20's 100 Million Job Recovery Plan, put together by the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) and the global private sector, under the leadership of Saudi Arabia and its Presidency of the G20, which aims to support the recovery of the sector and bring back 100 million jobs; and

The **OECD's Tourism Policy Response to the COVID19**, which reminds us that the crisis is also an opportunity to rethink tourism for the future and build a stronger, more sustainable and resilient tourism economy.

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

¹ The Tourism Development & Promotion Project (2018-2020) was implemented by the Regional Cooperation Council and funded by European Union.

Recognizing that:

Tourism is an engine for economic, sustainable and inclusive growth

- Tourism can significantly contribute to the overall economic development and competitiveness of the region, producing spill-over effects in trade and investment, human capital development, sustainable valorization of cultural heritage, and small and medium enterprise (SME) growth;
- The WB6 economies have experienced particularly severe socio-economic impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic, with travel and tourism sector being especially hard hit;
- The crisis nevertheless presents an opportunity to rethink how tourism interacts with our societies, other economic sectors and our natural and cultural resources and ecosystems, and therefore presents an opportunity to “build back better”;
- Tourism can support that advancement of regional economic integration and the Common Regional Market (CRM) agenda, in conjunction with policy components that support safe and seamless travel in the WB6;
- The tourism sector’s resilience and inclusiveness can be bolstered through stakeholder engagement and cooperation at the local, national, regional and international levels;

Multi-destination recovery and sustainable development of tourism requires an intra-regional, whole-of-government policy approach, in close collaboration with the private sector

- Consistent policies and protocols are urgently required across the region to align crisis management and recovery efforts, reshape tourism growth, and speed up recovery in the region;
- Consistent and open promotion and communication is fundamental to generating traveller and industry confidence and supporting multi-destination tourism, especially in an environment of great uncertainty due to the COVID-19 pandemic;
- Harmonised health and hygiene protocols are a vital tool for boosting traveller confidence and aligning recovery efforts, while ensuring the health of travellers and stakeholders involved in tourism such as employees and ancillary service providers;
- Agreed-upon standards and protocols are especially important for international tourism, to facilitate intra-regional travel and facilitate multi-destinations trips;
- International organisations have created travel standards and protocols which serve as guidance and provide alignment for the public and private sectors, such as the International Civil Aviation Organization’s “Takeoff: Guidance for Air Travel through the COVID-19 Public Health Crisis”, and WTTC’s Safe Travels protocols for eleven key travel and tourism industries.

Have agreed to:

1. Position tourism as a key strategic sector for regional economic recovery and sustainable development

- 1.1. Position tourism as a key strategic sector within local and regional socio-economic recovery plans, emphasizing its capacity to create jobs and transform societies with a strong multiplier effect on other sectors throughout its broad value chain;
- 1.2. Strengthen regional and vertical coordination and cooperation among tourism and other sectors, including health, transport, interior, foreign affairs, trade, culture and other services, through relevant regional platforms and a whole-of-government approach, in order to ensure a speedier recovery and more sustainable growth going forward;
- 1.3. Optimise tourism's potential to drive growth by boosting a sustainable regional value chain, in line with the Western Balkans' Green Agenda and its objective of climate neutrality;

2. Coordinate the reopening and continued operations of the travel and tourism supply chain

- 2.1. Ensure a coordinated, holistic approach to re-starting different travel and tourism segments to ensure that each part of the visitor journey can be guaranteed (e.g. seats on planes, rooms in hotels). Coordination is also required between and among governments to ensure wider management as markets open in phases;
- 2.2. Coordinate the alignment of all the existing adventure cross border/boundary products in the WB6 region, both on a strategic planning level, -including administrative procedures, standardization, management and promotion-, as well as on an operational level;
- 2.3. Coordinate the development of workforce skills and employment opportunities in tourism, and promote the recognition of academic and professional qualification across the WB6 region;
- 2.4. Facilitate trade in tourism services addressing licenses for travel agencies and tour operators modelled after EU acquis in 2021 within relevant CEFTA structures.

3. Facilitate a safe and seamless traveller journey to bolster WB6 recovery and growth

- 3.1. Review existing regulations, legal frameworks, standards and protocols to ensure that they are adapted to the changing needs of the sector to facilitate recovery and post-COVID-19 growth;
- 3.2. Identify and remove unnecessary and burdensome administrative barriers to free flow of tourists and enhance international coordination and cooperation on travel procedures to promote non-discriminatory, safe and seamless travel;
- 3.3. Collaborate to ease green border/boundary policies throughout the WB6 economies, introducing a shorter timeframe and removing the limits on the number of passengers for green border/boundary procedures;
- 3.4. Work to develop a harmonised, robust and comprehensive testing regime supported by technology and digital health passes.
- 3.5. Support communication and capacity-building between the WB6 border/common crossing points and tourism authorities in order to bolster a coordinated, regional approach to tourism sector development and better manage and coordinate issues such as green border/boundary policies;
- 3.6. Ensure that any travel restrictions remain proportionate to the public health threat and manage them accordingly;
- 3.7. Embrace and adopt new technologies, such as biometrics, to help address new and changing requirements and improve the traveller experience and remove friction to enable a safe and seamless traveller journey;

4. Implement harmonized health and hygiene protocols to align sector recovery efforts and boost traveller confidence

- 4.1. Develop and implement health and hygiene protocols for the various tourism industries to rebuild confidence among consumers so they are assured of safe travel once restrictions are lifted;
- 4.2. Ensure the protocols address: operational and staff preparedness; how to ensure a safe experience; how to rebuild trust; and the required enabling policies.
- 4.3. Ensure the protocols are consistent with reputable global advice, such as the current guidelines of the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).
- 4.4. Adopt a risk-based approach, in which the implementation and enforcement of the protocols evolves with the epidemiological situation;
- 4.5. Have realistic, simple health and safety protocols that businesses of all sizes can implement, and that are not unnecessarily costly;
- 4.6. Apply eco-friendly solutions where possible, including avoiding to the extent possible single-use products, and instead recommending appropriate cleaning/hygiene measures;
- 4.7. Ensure regional coordination by adhering to internationally agreed upon health and hygiene protocols such as WTTC's Safe Travels protocols;
- 4.8. Communicate the implementation of health and hygiene protocols to travellers to boost confidence, through local recognition schemes, as well as international schemes such as the WTTC Safe Travels stamp.

5. Coordinate promotion and communication to build trust in the WB6 as a responsible, trustworthy and sustainable destination

- 5.1. Kick-start tourism recovery and growth by implementing positive incentive measures for enhanced promotion and communication, such as attractions promotion and increasing direct investments in the sector, including in local and regional tourism agencies;
- 5.2. Support a coordinated, transparent and simple communication to travellers and citizens in order to build awareness, develop trust and facilitate risk assessments;
- 5.3. Ensure that local and regional tourism agencies, as well as private operators reinforce the messaging of public health authorities in consumer communication. Consider including creative content to engage consumers and inspire them to travel once the crisis has passed;
- 5.4. Collaborate to "build back better" through policy co-creation by generating a discussion among public and private sectors and communities, on how to better deliver on shared objectives of developing, promoting, and managing sustainable tourism experiences that deliver on market expectations and support the needs of host communities. Particular attention should be given to engage with youth, women and vulnerable groups.

We commit to continuing and enhancing our political and technical collaboration in these areas and invite the RCC to coordinate - in close cooperation with regional sectoral organisations and relevant WB6 authorities - the implementation of this Declaration, within the frame of the CRM.