Communication of the Chair

Esteemed Secretary-General,
Esteemed Vice-Chairs,
Dear colleagues,

It is a great pleasure to meet all of you in Armenia, a country with ancient history and rich culture, being one of the oldest countries in the world. And it is of particular importance that we meet in the very heart of Yerevan, this vibrant city, with a great and long history.

We meet at critical juncture. It has been a year since our last meeting in Athens in June 2021, where we made a common pledge: that tourism will overcome the biggest crisis in its history, and begin its recovery. And through our national and combined efforts, we can now confidently say that this pledge has been fulfilled. In 2021, despite all the obstacles, European tourism has dramatically recovered in comparison to 2020, setting the stage for an even better 2022.

Throughout this period, the Regional Commission for Europe of the UNWTO has consistently been at the forefront of the collective UNWTO effort to tackle the pandemic crisis and its consequent implications for tourism. In our last meeting, key issues regarding the optimal bounce back of the industry were addressed, and important steps were taken concerning the General Program of Work, the Budget of the Organisation and its contribution to advance our common goals for European tourism. Targeted efforts were also made to advance coordination among member states as well as partnerships with the private sector and major stakeholders to make tourism safer and more resilient, to promote green investments, to diversify products and services and generally ensure that the economic significance of the tourism sector is reflected at the political level.
As Chair of the UNWTO Regional Commission for Europe, let me cordially thank H.E. Secretary General, and all my Colleagues - Members of the Commission of Europe, for your close cooperation both at personal and institutional level, and for your efforts in tackling the consequences pandemic. Your constant support of our collective effort was crucial for its success.

On behalf of the Greek Government and the Ministry of Tourism, I would also like to express my sincere appreciation for the constructive collaboration during the work of the UNWTO Committee for the Development of the International Code for the Protection of Tourists, and the Technical Committee on Tourism Online Education. We appreciate the efforts of the Secretariat and UNWTO experts, especially in restoring traveler confidence and in promoting the upskilling of people working in tourism, under the effective leadership of the Secretary-General. His personal poise and guidance have proven invaluable, and I take this opportunity to once again congratulate him for his re-election at the 24th session of the UNWTO General Assembly. I also offer my sincere thanks to the Regional Director for Europe, Dr Alessandra Priante, for her constant efforts and commitment to the Commissions work.

As Commission for Europe, we have always stressed, from the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the necessity to establish common procedures and standards for the safe reopening of borders, as the way ahead for the fastest possible rebound of travel and tourism. To this end, we initiated a series of digital instruments that have considerably contributed to the gradual restoration of the tourism flows firstly within the EU and gradually with third countries. Following the initiative of the Greek Prime Minister, and concerted actions at the European level, the EU Digital Certificate was established to facilitate safe free movement and gradually remove restrictions and restore travel and tourism flows. Apart from the EU Member States, 40 more countries and territories have so far adopted the system of the EU Digital Certificate. This measure ensured safe travelling at the height of the pandemic, and now, as the covid-19 recedes, allows us to go one step further, as I am pleased to inform you that as of the 1st May, all restrictions regarding Covid-19 for domestic and inbound flights have been lifted in Greece.

As tourism is recovering, steadily overcoming the shock of the pandemic, new challenges emerge. The global energy and inflation crisis, exacerbated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, present new hurdles and uncertainties. Yet tourism, and particularly European tourism has by now proven its resilience, and is ready to face any adversity. In Greece in 2021, we achieved a 140% rise in tourism income compared to 2020, reaching 60% of our pre-pandemic revenues. Most importantly we had a 30% increase in per capita tourist spending.
compared to 2019, as more and more choices were offered to our visitors in special and alternative forms of tourism.

In 2022, we are realistically aiming to achieve even better results. Our main tourist season began earlier this year, with minimal sanitary restrictions. And in May, despite all the new challenges, scheduled arrivals in Greece are set to match those of May of 2019 and perhaps even surpass it in terms of revenues. And we are receiving similar encouraging feedback from our UNWTO European partners.

But in order to achieve our long-term goals in tourism development, we should never lose sight of our duty to our environment. Sustainability was rightly identified at the last meeting of the Commission as the main challenge for the future of tourism. The need to respond to increasing energy and commodity prices, cannot outweigh our environmental responsibilities. We need to make sure that public-private schemes and investment such as the NextGenerationEU prioritize sustainability criteria in the selection of tourism projects, and we need to establish research institutions to monitor and guide sustainable development. This is why initiatives such as the Sustainable Coastal and Maritime Tourism Research and Monitoring Center that we are developing in Greece in cooperation with UNWTO are so important, and we are glad to already have the commitment of 8 Mediterranean Countries in its creation. Furthermore, projects such as the UNWTO Best Tourism Villages are a prime example of networking between destinations for sustainable rural development. Its contribution to advancing the role of rural tourism and to reinforcing the three pillars of sustainability – economic, social and environmental –is invaluable.

Yet in order to ensure the proper and effective recovery of the sector and addressing the needs of the future, Tourism education and training is essential. As the tourism sector is becoming more and more diversified, tourism and hospitality companies are looking for more specialized professionals, which will allow them to offer more competitive services. Therefore, our priority must be to respond to the need for more and better training in tourism, in order to create a highly skilled personnel, with the ability to meet the requirements of the market. Acquiring and expanding skills is vital, in order to provide new forms of flexibility and security for jobseekers, employees and employers. In Greece, we are now taking the initiative to create a new educational body, the first Greek Academy of Tourism, bringing together all the tourism education Schools and functions of the Ministry, in a new, more efficient and flexible operating framework. And of course, the UNWTO Tourism Online Academy offers an excellent example on how to meet the constantly changing needs of the tourism industry, through tourism education.
Finally we need to address the major issue that has emerged since February the 24th. Tourism can never thrive if two vital preconditions are not met: freedom and peace. We all acutely felt how important freedom of travel is, when we were deprived of it during the pandemic. And now we are feeling how important the preservation of peace is. War can never be the answer – we know that especially well in Europe, a continent that has paid a huge price in blood particularly in the two World Wars. Hostilities need to cease immediately in Ukraine and peace restored in accordance with the principles of international law, territorial integrity, and national sovereignty. The UNWTO and the Commission of Europe have demonstrated their full commitment to these principles, being perfectly clear both in the measures taken and the messages sent. And we remain committed to begin the healing process that international tourism cooperation can offer, once these principles are adhered to, and peace prevails.

Dear Colleagues,

During the next years we will have the opportunity to further our close cooperation for the implementation of the Program of Work of the Organization in the Region of Europe, with the aim to put the consequences of the covid crisis behind us, and plan ahead for the coming decade. We will remain focused in facilitating domestic and international travel, which has been significantly affected by mobility restrictions. Innovation and digital transformation, better jobs in tourism, and promotion of the Sustainable Development Goals lie at the center of our work for the years to come.

Tourism, despite the hit it suffered during the pandemic, remains one of the most dynamic and promising sectors of the global economy. And it is our duty to guarantee, through our common efforts, that it shall remain a catalyst for prosperity at local, regional, national, and international level.

As UNWTO Commission for Europe, we jointly affirm that we are committed to the principles of the Organization, as well as always moving our agenda one step further, anticipating the developments of the future, working with all member states to advance our shared goals in innovation and digital transformation, in investments and entrepreneurship, in education and employment.

And the message we send from Yerevan, to Europe and the whole world, is loud and clear: European tourism is back, and despite all challenges, is ready to seize the new opportunities the future holds.