

**JOINT STATEMENT****of the Ministers responsible for Tourism of the participating countries of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region****Sofia, 18 October 2018**

We, the Ministers responsible for Tourism of the participating countries of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (hereinafter referred to as „EUSDR“) met on 18 October 2018 at the occasion of the 7th Annual Forum of the EUSDR taking place in Sofia, and agreed on the following statement:

We recognise the added value of the EUSDR for the region bringing new dynamics into regional cooperation combining political, operational and administrative elements.

We acknowledge the work done and efforts made by the EUSDR stakeholders to promote Tourism and Culture in the countries of the region.

We underline the cross-cutting link between Tourism and Culture and the need for close cooperation on a Strategy level between all stakeholders in these two major areas.

We stress the importance of Culture and Tourism as a driving force for economic growth, creation of jobs and social cohesion in the Danube region. We call upon all national, regional, local authorities, private sector and non-governmental organisations to continue developing synergies between sustainable tourism strategies and cultural and creative sectors including innovative services and business models, in order to foster sustainable quality cultural tourism offers and contribute to the revitalisation of urban and rural areas.

We recognize Culture and Tourism as integrating factors for territorial cohesion and we underline the importance of EU instruments and mechanisms for the development of both sectors in the Danube region. We believe in the inextricable link between sustainable, inclusive and resilient development of Culture and Tourism and European, national, regional, local and private investments. Their combination and compatibility will lead to better use of all available financial sources. We call for the facilitation of public-private partnerships in the field of protection, revitalisation and sustainable use of Cultural heritage.

We believe that implementation of joint projects among the EUSDR participating countries will encourage economic growth, job creation, creativity and will stimulate innovations.

We confirm our political engagement towards the activities carried out on national, cross-border, macro-regional and regional level related to development and support of Tourism and protection of Cultural heritage in the Danube region. We call upon European institutions, the EUSDR participating countries and stakeholders to strengthen their commitment to implement successful strategic regional projects with political support and funding. By supporting and further encouraging joint cooperation between EUSDR participating countries and/or regions, as well as with partner instruments of international cooperation, all stakeholders will contribute to stronger and clearer strategic focus of the activities and efforts undertaken for further promoting and developing Culture and Tourism.

We recognise the significance of the cultural and historical identity of the Danube Region and the importance of cultural routes as a key driver for sustainable social and economic

development and cohesion of the Danube region. We call upon European institutions, the EUSDR participating countries and stakeholders to work towards the elaboration of a Blue Book on Danube Cultural Identity.

We welcome the cooperation with the Institute of Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe in view of strengthening and developing the macro-regional dimension of cultural routes. We call upon establishing innovative initiatives and projects tracing the history of people and sharing the common European values in the Danube Region. We affirm our support for developing new cultural routes illustrative of the Danube Region memory and the diversity of the region.

We are convinced of the essential role of green and sustainable tourism transport infrastructure for increasing the visibility and connectivity of the region. We acknowledge the growing importance of cycling, hiking and alternative forms of tourism mobility in the Danube Region, e.g. the Danube cycle trail and other long-distance cycle and hiking trails within the region and see the importance of the development of initiatives and projects supporting the existing itineraries and creating new routes focused on alternative mobility.

Natural Heritage, National Parks, Biosphere Reserves and other Danube Protected Areas, including Natura 2000 sites along the Danube River play an essential and indispensable role for biodiversity conservation in the region. We call upon EUSDR participating countries to continue their consistent efforts towards the preservation of the Danube natural environment as one of the key components in the investments in natural and cultural Tourism, considering the effects of climate change and the necessary adaptation measures.

We encourage the EUSDR participating countries, tourism professionals, tourism organizations, associations and tour operators to enhance the regional dimension of cooperation and the exchange of best practices in the field of Tourism. We believe that the successful cooperation on macro-regional level requires an active participation of national, regional and local public authorities and organisations.

We recommend the creation of joint tourist products and packages, including promotion of Cultural heritage, implemented in close cooperation with all relevant stakeholders. We encourage public authorities, national associations of travel and tourism agencies and their members to promote joint tourist products with a view of positioning the Danube region as a flagship tourist destination of the EU to the world tourism market and to strengthen its image as a unique and attractive destination, including long haul markets.

We call upon the continuation of the cooperation in the area of protection of the Danube Cultural heritage in line with the objectives of the European Year of Cultural Heritage 2018 in order to promote the rich and diverse Cultural heritage of the Danube region-

We encourage building networks of cooperation and developing joint projects in the field of contemporary culture and related creative industries (literature, theatre, dance, festivals, music, visual arts, design, fashion, architecture, etc.). We believe in the promotion of cultural and creative industries and enhancing the important role they play for a tighter socio-economic cooperation among the EUSDR participating countries and local communities in border regions.

We are convinced of the added value of digitalisation of the Cultural heritage of the Danube Region to the economic growth and job creation and to the achievement of the Digital Single Market. While recognising the ongoing efforts of the EUSDR participating countries in

digitalisation of the Cultural heritage, further steps are necessary to turn this heritage into a lasting asset. The long-term digital preservation is essential to enable access for all to culture and knowledge in the digital era and to promote the richness and diversity of the Cultural heritage of the region.

We firmly believe that qualified staff is a crucial element for the development of sustainable tourism and therefore call upon all stakeholders to further invest in human capital in the sector. In this context, the added value of the employment dimension of the Strategy should be particularly stressed, also by linking it with the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights, the compass for a renewed process of upward convergence towards better working and living conditions in the European Union.

We recognize the importance of the security element for the sustainable development of tourism destinations. We call upon collaboration and exchange of good practices for ensuring safety and security including in public spaces as a prerequisite for quality tourism.

The success of the EUSDR implementation requires a stronger political commitment/engagement for better embedding of the Strategy into EU policies and post-2020 framework in order to support projects and initiatives for joint strategic planning and combining resources for Cultural heritage protection and Tourism development.