

Dear Mr. President, Dear Secretary General, Dear Partners and Representatives of National and Local Authorities

It is my honour and pleasure to be with you today participating in this Annual Conference. It is more than obvious that the organisation of the whole event is excellent and the level of representatives really high as well. I am also very happy because of the “heritage” that is left behind from the previous collaboration team of “Neebor”, a very capable team indeed which is now gathered under another interesting, innovative and competitive initiative.

A year and a half ago I was asked by the experts of our Region to respond on a potential participation in a new Interreg IVC proposal under the Neebor Network which was connected with the “Senior Tourism” in Europe. Having in mind the results of the previous cooperation under Neebor network as well as the forthcoming - at that time - European “Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations” for 2012 in the European Union, it was not a hard decision for me to give my positive respond on that.

Region of Eastern Macedonia & Thrace is of great interest for this specific topic since there are significant prospects for the development of competitive and demanding forms of tourism in our area. Our Region includes a lot of protected (under various treaties) areas, mountainous virgin forests, rich fauna and flora, wetlands, river deltas, beautiful coasts and other areas of special interest, traditional hamlets, monuments, museums, etc. and generally speaking it is more than clear to everybody that is very rich in terms of the number and variety of such resources and that the natural resources of the region remain virtually unexploited, preserving their original and authentic identity.

The important question at that point is whether we have the capacity to respond in every different touristic demand and to serve special target groups like tourists with disabilities, or senior tourists for instance.

As it is quite difficult for us to compete with many world-famous touristic destinations in Greece in terms of massive tourism, we are convinced that a totally

new process of tourism development should begin for the region - beyond the typical sea-and-sun motif that dominates the entire country. The central and main objective of this new tourism development policy must be the quality of tourism and the so called 'updated' individualized provided services rather than its quantity scale. And that is the critical point where our project is mainly focused; on developing improved models and practises and approaches towards a development of a new policy for the senior tourists. The challenge is our project also to serve as a platform for new ideas and credible sets of potentially offered services.

Before I pass to the specific practices of ours, please let me present my personal point of view about the objectives of the practices on tourism for the specific target group. What we must have in mind is:

- To raise the level of awareness on the importance and significance of making travel accessible to everyone and more specifically to senior tourists.
- To promote greater accessibility for all tourism services for senior travellers.
- To facilitate – after all -the exchange of know-how and knowledge among Tourage Partners.
- To enable regional and local authorities and other stakeholders to improve their policies, methods and capacities in the area of senior tourism. For example, the administrative center of our Region - city of Komotini – is mainly focused the last two years in another tourism target group. Those with disabilities.

We must bear always in mind – Dear Participants – that senior tourists are travellers with habits, preferences and goals similar to those of the general population. While these individuals do have specific needs and demands in some respects, only a small portion of these travelers requires sophisticated services or equipment.

From my experience I know that Spain is amongst the first countries to deal with the senior tourism and provides the most competitive practices and success stories all over EU. And this has happened because of the fact that the main issues and obstacles of a target group like that are addressed by the Spanish Institutions and Businesses:

Please let me now share with you some good practises of our region concerning senior tourism services: It would be quite unfair in my personal opinion to choose and present only one.

So, except from the natural beauty of Rhodope Mountains, the **Regional Unit of Drama** may well be proud of the ski resort in Falakro Mountain. Its highest summit – “Profitis Ilias”, stands at 2.232 meters above the sea level. The specific resort attracts hundreds of thousands of ski fans, it is an excellent practice for senior tourism since provides a variety of actions for elder travellers like for e.g. walking tours on mapped trails and paths, soft climbing, horse riding, farm visiting e.t.c.

In **Kavala Regional Unit**, the senior tourist should definitely experience the **mud baths of Krinides**. The whole idea is connected to health-care services by taking advantage of thermal clay mud which act as “nature’s sustainable laboratory”, for tens of thousands of years, producing with admirable accuracy this substance, so valuable for human’s health, especially for the older ones who face various health issues. The global fame of the thermal mud baths at Krinides is based to confessions by hundreds of people, in Greece and abroad, who were cured of chronic ailments and aches. Another famous thermal spring resource close to mud baths is the **spring baths in Eleftheres** which is now renovated under the supervision of Region East Macedonia and Thrace in order to provide excellent services in modern facilities.

Xanthi’s “Old Town Festival” (Regional Unit of Xanthi) which takes place constantly since 1991 during the beginning of autumn every year attracts visitors from all over Europe. The most significant part of these events is realized in the traditional settlement of Xanthi, (so-called “Old Town”), like concerts with famous singers and groups, animations taking place in alleys, traditional products expositions and several other events. Old town’s festival is connected with the annual carnival fest which gathers more than half a million people in the beginning of spring. The reason why the festival attracts thousands of senior tourists is not other than the idea of visiting another era with considerable architectural interest and feel the authentic and unique atmosphere of past centuries.

The unique beaches in Rodopi Regional Unit also attract many senior tourists because of the blue flag labels which ensures water quality and beach safety. Except that the beaches are not crowded but peaceful, ideal for quality and relaxing vacations. As already mentioned, last two years a serious effort is taking place in order beaches to be accessible for everyone including travellers with disabilities, with special facilities designed for people with restricted physical ability.

Finally, River Evros' Delta in **Evros Regional Unit** constitutes one of the most important wetlands, not only in Greece but also in Europe. In Evros' Delta hundreds of thousands of birds find shelter and food all year round, while it constitutes a very important natural resource for the local community, because of its value for fishing, stock breeding, agriculture, climate, flood protection, education, recreation, science. Protected by International Ramsar Convention and Natura 2000 the area offers to elderly tourists a unique opportunity for fishing, stock breeding, agriculture, climate, flood protection, education, recreation and science in a calm and protected environment. In connection with the thermal baths of Traianoupolis - famous in the Roman period - which are located on a small river between low hills, on the edge of the coastal plains of the Aegean Sea is an ideal destination for senior tourists.

Closing my presentation, I would like to point out two more issues: First to underline the importance of this project for our Institution, a fact which is proved by the level of our delegation team, since an expert from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is attending our works - and I would like especially to thank her for accepting our invitation. Secondly to assure you that in my capacity as the President of the Commission of Balkan and Black Sea Regions, I look forward to disseminating the final results and outputs of the Project to the Regions of Balkan and Black Sea area, which are definitely sharing common challenges and obstacles with us.

I would like once again to congratulate you for the excellent event. I am sure that our works for the next three days will be crowned with success.

Thank you very much for your attention!