Ministers voiced strong support for national and EU measures for the swift and effective recovery of tourism sector

The Croatian Presidency of the Council of the European Union held today an informal videoconference of EU ministers in charge of tourism. The objective was to exchange best practices and identify ways of enhancing the support to the EU's tourism sector, which has been badly hit by the COVID-19 crisis. The videoconference was chaired by Croatian Minister of tourism, Mr. Gari Cappelli and it was attended by ministers or high-level representatives from all EU member states, as well as by the European Commissioner for the Internal Market, Mr. Thierry Breton. Invited by the Croatian presidency, the Secretary General of the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), Mr. Zurab Pololikashvili presented the UNWTO's initiatives in support of tourism.

"The tourism sector has experienced an immense and unexpected decline in demand due to the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. Our mission is to be an advocate for the European Union and as part of the most successful tourist region in the world, a leader in the recovery of tourism, which as a horizontal activity directly affects the recovery of the entire economy. Tourism represents 10% of the EU’s GDP and provides jobs for almost 12% of employees in the European Union. In addition, tourism is the fourth export category of the Union, with consumption generating more than € 400 billion in revenue. For all these reasons, it is important to encourage the creation of joint solutions to the crisis of the tourism sector caused by the coronavirus pandemic, but also to create programmes and plans for combating similar threats in the future. That is why I am particularly pleased that at the meeting of the members of the European Council last week it was agreed upon to establish a Recovery Fund, which will target the hardest hit sectors and geographical parts of Europe. I believe that we are all aware that tourism definitively falls into the category of the most affected sectors in this crisis," stated Mr. Gari Cappelli, Minister of tourism of the Republic of Croatia.

Opening the discussions, Minister Cappelli recalled that in the pre-COVID era, more than three quarters of international trips made by EU citizens were made towards other EU countries. As much as 94% of total overnight stays were realised within EU countries. He then referred to the ideas of opening tourist corridors between EU member states, emphasizing that it will be extremely important to include epidemiologists in the overall process of opening up borders and facilitating the movement of tourists. Epidemiologists should be consulted in setting the criteria and defining the measures that would be needed to ensure the safety of tourists. There seems to be enough goodwill in the desire to find a way to re-connect countries. Minister Cappelli also pointed out that shortly before today's conference he received from a number of Member States, Declaration of a Common Position EU Tourism Ministers, calling to include strong support for tourism in the EU Recovery Plan and highlighting the importance of establishing homogeneous rules for both air and sea or land mobility.

Many participant highlighted the fact that in many EU countries, tourism not only contributes significantly to the gross national product by itself but also affects directly or indirectly numerous other economic sectors. It is a crucial source of much-needed revenue for local communities and individuals. In Croatia, for example, tourism generated almost 17 percent of the country's GDP, while in other Member States this percentage ranged from 2.6 percent in the Slovak Republic to 20.6 percent in the Hellenic Republic. Ministers described the measures taken so far by member states, but individually or jointly, in order to mitigate the negative impact of the pandemic on the tourism sector and other related sectors. There was broad support for additional measures and enhanced coordination at EU level. It was stressed that tourism should be amongst the main priorities of the EU’s recovery plan.

Ministers highlighted importance of a harmonized solution for refunding travel packages, including vouchers and making in an agreed manner of collecting information on tourism-related measures and promoting best practices through the EU.

As regards the legal framework for tour operators, the Commission was invited to work as a matter of priority towards a common EU approach which provides temporary flexibility and liquidity and ensures a fair balance of interests between tour operators and consumers. Commissioner Breton stressed that the emergency measures and funds the Commission has mobilised should support Member States’ efforts to keep the lifeline in the short and medium-term. He invited MS to use them to the fullest and ensure that they benefit a maximum of the workers affected.

"We will need unprecedented funds to overcome this crisis. There is a need for a "new Marshall Plan", with a powerful EU budget, to implement the path towards European recovery and a stronger and more resilient Union. We will need fast action, pragmatism and creativity to recover and build a resilient and sustainable tourism industry. But above all this crisis calls for solidarity. No country can overcome the crisis alone," stated Mr. Thierry Breton, European Commissioner for the Internal Market.

Mr. Zurab Pololikashvili made reference on UNWTO guidelines for crisis management for tourism in the context of COVID-19 and invited European Commission to prioritize tourism within the EU recovery plan. Finally, Ministers also voiced strong support for new and innovative measures, to be taken at both national and EU level, for the swift and effective recovery of the tourism sector.

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