## Eighth Meeting of the Carpathian Convention Working Group on Sustainable Tourism (CC-WGST)

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**DRAFT**

**Proposal for a Detailed Description to the**

**Joint Action Plan**

**of the Strategy for Sustainable Tourism Development in the Carpathians**

Project “Support for the Implementation of the Strategy for Sustainable Tourism Development in the Carpathians”

**Implement. organisation**: Ökologischer Tourismus in Europa (Ö.T.E.) e.V. (Ecological Tourism in Europe, ETE)

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***Funding institution:***

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1. **Develop, maintain and keep up to date a common online Carpathian platform on sustainable tourism, including products and services database, trans-boundary products and mapping, as well as good practices, with continuous updated information, and including the preparation of a Carpathian touristic map**

As agreed at the 6th WGST Meeting in Belgrade in November 2014, the Carpathian Tourism Coordination Platform (CTCP) is an institution, which aims at coordinating the implementation of the “Strategy for Sustainable Tourism Development of the Carpathians. The operation of the CTCP is guided and monitored by the Carpathian Convention – Working Group for Sustainable Tourism.

Core tasks of the CTCP are to:

1. Give support to and coach the National Tourism Task Forces in each country on the effective implementation of the Country Action Plan
2. Establish a network of relevant stakeholders (e.g. clusters, local and regional governments, non-governmental organizations, science, business sector
3. Establish a structure for the implementation of the Joint Action Plan with regard to:
4. Sustainable Product Development
5. Training, Education and Capacity Building
6. Marketing and Promotion
7. Monitoring
8. Develop a financial overview and structure for the implementation of the strategy
9. Develop and implement a communication strategy, e.g. online exchange platform, database on initiatives and projects
10. Develop a reporting format and report on the achievements on a half-yearly basis to the CC-WGST

However, further Terms of Reference shall be adopted by the Parties.

The online platform will guarantee an online - information sharing on sustainable tourism in the Carpathians and among Carpathian stakeholders with the focus on three potential users: 1) sustainable tourism sector - companies, businesses and NGOs working in the field of sustainable tourism, 2) scientific and governmental organizations, 3) potential tourists searching for information on sustainable tourism in the Carpathians.

Currently, the database of Financial Instruments, Tourism Projects, Handbooks and Guidelines to Support (sustainable) Tourism Development in the Carpathian Regions is being created by designated country experts.

1. **Create a Carpathian identity and make use of a logo/slogan compulsory for all those service suppliers who joined and were labelled under the Carpathians product-line**

Although a tourism destination can be branded, considerable care should be taken in the transfer of branding principles to a tourism destination context because an approach that is too commercial might spoil place characteristics such as social relationships, history and geography which are used in the global context to construct identity and, in turn, contribute to distinguishing a place from its rivals. Raising awareness of the historical nature of the concept of culture in relation to the ‘extraordinary’, that tourists are in a search for, is relevant in the processes of identity formation at both global and local levels. Therefore, it is essential that the development of a tourism destination brand should adhere to a coherent theoretical framework and be jointly supported by its stakeholders. (Konecnik, M., Go, F. Tourism destination brand identity: The case of Slovenia. Journal of Brand Management, 2008, vol. 15, no. 3, pp. 177-189.)

Tourist destination is a complex entity based on a variety of different products, services and experiences; managed by different stakeholders (tourism industry sector, public sector, government, destination management organization, locals) with a variety of ownership forms and is rarely completely new ‘products’, its brand should build on historical, national and cultural relationships. Moreover, in order to create a strong brand identity, it is necessary to have a story behind it.

In order to present the brand identity, it is crucial to have a logo/slogan that reflects this identity and its characteristics. Once such logo/slogan is created, it becomes a great marketing tool for promoting the tourism destination.

1. **Initiate and possibly create a certification and/or labelling system for sustainable tourism for the Carpathian Brand, supported by a Carpathian-wide marketing strategy**

This point of the Action Plan already raised discussion during numerous WGST meeting. There are already existing labels all around Europe however the criteria is not applicable to the Carpathian Countries leading to only few providers being able to fulfill them all at once hence receiving the label.

There have been suggestions to create a certification/labelling system based on existing criteria, however split into different categories for the purpose of motivating the business providers in the Carpathian countries.

A decision needs to be reached on how to integrate these existing criteria, perhaps with connection the national quality system standards so they do not compete with the existing labels.

However, in order to achieve sustainability in this sector, it is necessary to create and umbrella organization setting a common standard.

Experts on this topic from each country would be needed in order to explore the possibilities and create relevant criteria for certification and labelling in the Carpathians.

1. **Develop a Carpathian-wide quality standard system for local products and local services (e.g. “Local food”, “Local accommodation”, “Local experience – how to guide tourists”, “Code of Conduct for Tourists in the Carpathians”)**

The goal of developing a quality standard system is to improve the overall quality of products and services within the tourism industry (all tourism-related accommodation, restaurants, tour guides, tour operators, and other tourism-related service providers); raise the levels of demand nationally, regionally and internationally; promote competitiveness within the industry; and, provide valuable and reliable information on quality standards for the tourist and the travel industry.

In order to achieve this, it is necessary to evaluate the current tourism quality standards situation through initial negotiations with government officials and other key stakeholders of the national and local tourism industry and identify customers’ needs and expectations (stakeholders, environment, direction, facilities, resources, overall objectives, challenges).

The criteria can be developed on the existing ones, either on international or Carpathian level. However, a close cooperation among the Parties and local stakeholders will be needed in order to reach effective quality standards on an all-Carpathian level.

As a first step, incentives and awareness raising can act as a motivating factor to strengthen the quality of the products and services. In addition, labelling and certification system shall be introduced.

1. **Develop common principles and guidelines on tourism infrastructure and undertake activities to make them sustainable**

Just like at the Action 4 of the Country Action Plan, also on Carpathian level it is necessary for the development of tourism infrastructure to take into account socio-economic impact, environmental impact and cultural impact on the destination whereas the development needs to be based on sustainable management.

In order to do so, set of criteria needs to be agreed by the Parties, based on their national and local experiences and exchange of good practices.

All in all, by developing the tourism infrastructure, the stakeholders need to take into account the natural and cultural assets of the destination and try to preserve them.

1. **Establish a tour operators’ cooperation platform**

The cooperation platform for the tour operators can be either a separate platform or an integral part of the Carpathian Coordination Platform which would help tour operators with easier access to their counterparts in other Carpathian countries.

The platform will strengthen the cross-border cooperation between the tour operators, helping to find partners, develop new tourism packages and give more power to the tour operators when trying to achieve a common goal towards the policy makers.

Terms of reference for the cooperation platform should be developed by WGST.

1. **Design, where applicable, a common system of marking trails throughout the Carpathians**

This action can be carried out very fast once a decision is taken by the Parties. Common system of marking trails is very important especially in the border regions as well as on the international trails. It will make the orientation easier to the visitors and add value to the Carpathian destination.

Once the agreement is reached, it will be difficult to motivate the responsible organizations to change their marking. However, this can be achieved by various incentives or restrictions posed on the relevant stakeholders.

Moreover, once thematic trails and tours are created, they will often connect existing trails which could lead to development of new marking if agreement not reached in advance. This will result into “oversigning” on the hiking/cycling trails thus often leading to confusion and inconsistency on the paths.

1. **Develop, maintain and keep up to date an online platform promoting labelled products, linking with the websites of NTOs**

As stated in the previous actions, labelling system helps improving the quality of tourism products. In order to achieve it though, it is necessary to show the service providers that the label has a positive economic and social impact also in reality.

In order to do so, countries should to promote the service providers investing into quality improvements and thus entering the labelling system.

An efficient way to do this is to create an online platform with the list of all labelled products from each of the Carpathian countries. This will be a good marketing campaign for the products and at the same time it will create positive image of the Carpathian tourism destination leading to a strong brand identity.

The products should be also promoted on the websites of the National Tourism Organizations and linked to the online platform and vice-versa. This will help increasing the number of visitors on the national as well as on the platform. Moreover, in case of good experience, the visitor will have an easy access to other products labelled by the same label and can easily choose another destination in the Carpathians.

1. **Initiate resource mobilization for the implementation of the strategy at national and international level involving all relevant stakeholders**

High involvement of all relevant stakeholders is crucial for the implementation of any adopted Strategy in the world. In order to successfully reach its objectives, financial and personal resource mobilization is necessary.

At current stage, the implementation of the Strategy is not funded by the Parties and it is high time to try and change this approach and to show the ownership of the Strategy at their end.

In order to motivate businesses to start developing tourism in a sustainable way, various incentives are needed and funding or at least personnel support is inevitable.

The governments should therefore start looking into their next developing strategies and funding schemes and put more focus on the sustainable tourism development in their countries.

Creating budget to support the development of the sustainable tourism will help creating new jobs, support regional development and in long term will lead to a bigger income also on the national level.

Moreover, as a joint effort, the Carpathian countries should call for European funding, either as a separate destination or try to join already existing schemes, e.g. Danube Strategy.

Funding possibilities are a strong motivating factor for local stakeholders to help carrying out all the steps necessary for successful implementation of the Strategy.

1. **Initiate the exchange of good practices and lessons learned from the operation of DMOs in terms of sustainable tourism in the Carpathians**

There are currently countries with already established DMOs that are working towards the sustainable development of a tourism destinations, however there are also countries in the Carpathian Convention that do not have the experience with DMOs in this sense.

The countries should initiate the exchange of good practices e.g. by personnel exchange, organizing workshops and meetings for the relevant actors, and/or by online platform.

The DMOs in all countries are/will be facing similar issues and therefore close communication can help resolving them more professionally in a timely manner.

1. **Develop a common communication paper on the Carpathian Brand**

In order to reach an agreement on the communication paper, it is necessary to define what a brand – communication is.

While brand marketing is shaping who you are, what will make your offering meaningfully different from your competition, and using this compass to guide not only what you say but what you do to deliver your distinctive value to your key constituents in a compelling way, communications is crafting the messages you would like to be received, and sending them out both to priority internal and external audiences.

In order to ensure the Carpathian Brand will be communicated the same way by all the Parties and relevant stakeholders, it is important to have a communication paper agreed before its usage.

The communication paper should include the guidelines on when and how to use the Carpathian brand. The brand has to have a defined target group, simple and understandable message and layout and the usage of slogan and logo should be clearly defined also with various alterations.

The questions to answer also include the e-communication and direct communications at events.

1. **Define the use of the Carpathian Brand and its management structure with relation to other sectoral or geographical brands**

The vision on having a Carpathian-wide branding was that it will be used for communication and promotion of the Carpathian destination, especially on the external tourism market.

From the business point of view, brand management is an art of creating and sustaining the brand. Branding makes customers committed to the business. A strong brand differentiates products from the competitors. It gives a quality image to the business. Brand management includes managing the tangible and intangible characteristics of brand. In case of product brands, the tangibles include the product itself, price, packaging, etc. While in case of service brands, the tangibles include the customer's experience. The intangibles include emotional connections with the product / service.

The same principles apply to the tourism sector and the Carpathian Parties need to define the use and the management of the brand in order to differentiate themselves from other tourism destinations.

1. **Analyze the touristic resources of the Parties based on research, to identify the key-areas and products to be involved, and undertake further detailed research**

As per UNWTO, tourism resources could be defined as those factors that make it possible to produce a tourism experience and are usually divided into 2 groups: tourism attractions and infrastructure/or support services. These are further divided into 4 subcategories:

* Tangible resources (facilities, attractions, infrastructure, accommodation etc.)
* Intangible resources (image, reputation, culture, etc.)
* Human resources (skills, motivations, service levels, etc.)
* Financial resources (investment capital etc.)

These all should be analyzed on the Carpathian level in order to see what is already created, what has a potential and what shall be developed further.

This will require a joint effort on the national level as well in order to collect as many data as possible.

1. **Develop guidelines for contributions by the tourism sector to the conservation of natural and cultural resources**

The Carpathian Countries should agree on joint guidelines that will be provided to the tourism sector in order to strengthen the cooperation in the area of conservation.

The guidelines should be easy-to-read and understandable and should become an integral part of tourism development in the future.

The definition of conservation adopted by IUCN is as follows: ‘The management of human use of the biosphere so that it may yield the greatest sustainable benefit to present generations whilst maintaining its potential to meet the needs and aspirations of future generations.’

The tourism sector has a great benefit from preserving the natural and cultural resources as it nowadays creates a unique destination, attracting tourists and bringing money to local economy.

1. **Develop a methodology for monitoring the impacts of existing and planned tourism development on biodiversity and landscapes, including the social, economic and cultural impact**

Monitoring is an essential component of any planning or management process, for without monitoring, managers know nothing about progress towards the objectives they have been set or have set themselves. Monitoring is the systematic and periodic measurement of key indicators of biophysical and social conditions.

While management experience is an important element of decision-making, the results of systematic monitoring provide a more defensible basis for management actions. Subjective impressions of conditions are not good enough: the public demands to see the data upon which decisions are taken, and to be assured that they were collected in a scientifically reliable manner. Without the data on conditions and trends that monitoring provides, managers cannot respond to many public concerns and criticisms, nor can they properly fulfil their responsibilities, nor judge the effectiveness of actions they take. Moreover, if managers do not undertake the monitoring, someone else will – and such monitoring may well be biased. However, monitoring requires ample funding, trained personnel, access to data and sufficient time to implement programs. In reality, the resources for monitoring are not always readily available and implementation often falls well short of what is desirable.

(<https://portals.iucn.org/library/efiles/html/BP8-sustainabletourism/11.%20Monitoring%20tourism%20in%20protected%20areas.html>)

1. **Initiate the establishment of an organizational unit (Carpathian Observatory on Sustainable Tourism), contributing to the implementation of the Sustainable Tourism Protocol and this Strategy by monitoring and evaluation of tourism activities in the Carpathians**

Each Carpathian Party should designate a person that would be in charge of implementation of the Sustainable Tourism Protocol and this Strategy. These persons would meet in an organizational unit - personally or via cooperation platform - and exchange their finding from the monitoring and evaluation activities in regards to tourism in the Carpathians.

This organization would report their findings to the designated body, e.g. WGST, the Secretariat or other organization in charge of implementation, which could then take necessary steps and measures to correct or enhance the current states of tourism development.

In order to do so, a set of criteria and methodology needs to be created in line with the standards of the UNWTO Network of Observatories (INSTO).

1. **Develop and implement a common set of indicators on the effects of implemented policies and strategies for developing sustainable tourism in the Carpathians**

As stated in the Action 15 of the Country Action Plan, Indicators are valuable tools that can help policy makers define their priorities for intervention, assess the progress made and inform the public on what has been financed and achieved.

As per UNWTO, sustainability indicators are the information sets which are formally selected for a regular use to measure changes in key assets and issues of tourism destinations and operations.

In 2004, UNWTO published a guide on Indicators of Sustainable Development for Tourism Destinations. Some of these could surely be transformed into the common set of indicators the measure the effect also on Carpathian level.

When creating indicators, one must firstly analyze and research what is the goal of the policy and who is going to carry out the changes. Once this is clear, the set of indicators can be created. For this, it needs to be clear what the priority of a policy is, definition of the indicators and then check if these will be measurable in praxis. Once the indicators are set, the implementation phase will start which encompasses the analysis and data collection in order to measure the progress.

1. **Develop methods for the protection of „brand-making“- elements of the Carpathians cultural heritage by implementing common projects on preservation of cultural heritage**

A “brand-making” element can be defined as an integral part of a product branding without which the brand would no longer represent the original product (in this case tourism destination).

The methods to protect these elements can vary and it can include all kinds of measures and activities - from financial incentives through awareness raising up to cultural experience exchange.

Common projects on the Carpathian or international level can pose as a good tool as well as they involve more people that spread the word, create a global feeling of responsibility and create partnerships that can help to preserve the heritage in many years to come.

Common projects can include a joint activity on specific days, volunteer and expert exchange.

1. **Support setting up of a common mechanism for the implementation of the strategy**

The Parties should agree on a common mechanism for the implementation of the strategy, set the targets to achieve, deadlines and set of indicators to measure the progress.

If the countries cooperate, exchange the experience and proactively find solutions for obstacles, the implementation can be carried out in efficient and timely manner.

The mechanism should however also include incentives for the Parties that follow the given deadlines or and carry out the work within the agreed deadline.

1. **Develop common guidelines for the support of sustainable local supply chains**

Just as in the Action 20 from the Country Action Plan, the common guidelines need to be developed on the Carpathian level and then implemented on the national level. This will lead to having the same guidelines thus creating equal opportunities for local suppliers in all of the Carpathians.

1. **Develop common guidelines for a monitoring system scheme on traffic to destinations and the flow of visitors within destinations**

If we want to see an impact of tourism on the destination, it is necessary to monitor the tourism traffic in the destination. It is important to not only know how many tourist arrived in the destination, but also what was their movement in the destination itself. This is necessary in order to avoid tourism overflow in some areas while others remain empty.

When it comes to monitoring on such a large scale as the Carpathians, we need to develop common guidelines so the results are comparable.

Based on the outcomes of the monitoring, relevant bodies can implement tools necessary for the carrying-capacity management.

As per European Commission, carrying capacity needs to be flexible and reflect the particularities of the area under study. Systems are dynamic, therefore are subjected to continuous changes. Visitors and local communities, for example, tend to alter their behavior over time and often adapt to worsening or different conditions, resulting to a different social response. There is a need for monitoring but also for credible data and information in order to assess and implement carrying capacity. In that sense significant resources will be required in the initial stage but also during implementation. Demand needs to be monitored as well.

1. **Create an online platform for education, training and sharing of best practices available to all stakeholders**

UNEP Vienna Office - SCC is a project partner of Innovation in Rural Tourism project, which is a live platform for education helping raise new professionals that as a result often create new tourism destinations. This could be a good baseline for starting a Carpathian platform where all relevant stakeholders could find and contact their colleagues from other countries and access the database of best practices.

The Parties together with local stakeholders will need to create a campaign to reach the relevant target group in order for the platform to work effectively. Ideally, the stakeholders should maintain data on the platform on their own without any further intervention by the Parties.

1. **Create a program of workshops & conferences and study visits in order to exchange innovative experience on sustainable tourism development**

The Carpathian countries should create a program for students as well as for professionals that would allow them to travel to various destinations along Carpathians and exchange good practices and innovative solutions.

The exchange of good practices help the local destinations to evolve faster therefore creating a competitive environment which leads to the Carpathians being a quality competitive destination in Europe.

Thematic series workshops and conferences on actual topics relevant for the Carpathians should be created and preferably carried out all around the Carpathians, allowing the participants experience the local culture.

Financial support or any other subsidies might be required especially at the beginning to ensure the participation of relevant actors.

Students and young professionals can use the Erasmus/Erasmus+ framework however the countries and local authorities need to raise awareness on why is it important to choose another Carpathian country in comparison to a more attractive western destination.

1. **Transfer know-how on the contribution of tourism to biodiversity and cultural heritage conservation with other destinations**

Exchange of good practices between tourism destinations has a positive impact on tourism development and conservation efforts. Many destinations go through similar issues, face the same challenges and learning from someone else's mistake or good example helps speeding up the process thus leading to innovative approaches faster.

In order to transfer the know-how effectively, there was a proposal for establishment of a platform for exchanging information on Carpathians as well as on international level. Currently, UNEP/GRID Warsaw has a platform in the process that can be a good baseline for further development.

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