Over the decades, tourism has experienced continued growth and deepening diversification to become one of the fastest growing economic sectors in the world; it has become one of the major players in international commerce and, at the same time, represents one of the main income sources for many developing countries. Today, the business volume of tourism equals or even surpasses that of oil exports, food products or automobiles. It is one of the world’s largest and most diverse industries, accounting for up to 5% of global GDP and providing more than 25% of the total global service trade. Many scholars and policymakers have unanimously acknowledged the significance of direct and indirect effects of the tourism industry on a country’s economic growth, GDP, and employment, all of which are crucial for its economic development.

These dynamics have turned tourism into a key driver for socio-economic progress. The tourism industry has been the largest provider of employment all over the world. Jobs generated by this industry are not limited to direct service sectors, but spread to wider areas as well, namely to infrastructure, farming, manufacturing, telecommunications, transportation and retail.

From an ecological point of view, tourism is also more acceptable and preferable than any other industrial activity, as it is environmentally friendlier than most other industries. Tourism industry is more likely to be committed to preserve the natural environment, local cultures and landscape, as they are all parts of its attractive virtue.

The Black Sea countries possess remarkable cultural and ethnic diversity, rich historical and architectural heritage and diverse natural resources, aspects which are blended over the millennia to shape unique communities, languages, religions and trades, a namely distinctive and attractive match to travellers. Realizing the aforementioned, tourism protrudes not only as a great chance for regional sustainable development, but also as a motivation for closer regional cooperation in every field, such as culture, environment, transport and youth.

It is apparent in the will of the Organisation of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) that tourism constitutes an important area for joint efforts to foster dialogue, good partnership and development for the people of the Black Sea. In particular, in the Summit Declaration of BSEC, in 1992, tourism is included in the key areas for further development; while the Declaration adopted by the Ministers of Tourism in November 2010, recognizes “the importance of tourism in promoting economic development, mutual understanding, goodwill and close relations among peoples”, and reaffirms the will of BSEC “…to stimulate as well as strengthen the image of our region as a unique and attractive destination […] and to ensure tourism promotion within a broadest strategy of sustainable development”.

Black Sea region tourism:

- 127 million international arrivals (22.5%), out of the 564 million international arrivals registered in European destinations in 2013.
- 74 billion of USD receipts (15%) out of the 489 billion for the whole European region.
- 12% of international arrivals as a whole (1,087 billion in 2013) and a mere 6% of world tourism receipts.
- By 2022, the GDP will exceed $450 billion, namely over 7% of the overall economy.

Within this framework, the ICBSS, a BSEC related body and its acknowledged think tank, dedicated its 7th International Black Sea Symposium on 'Perspectives on Tourism in the Black Sea area', in an effort to bring together experts, stakeholders and academia to explore and discuss the perspectives of sustainable tourism in relation to its social and economic impact on the Black Sea countries. Through the 7th IBSS, the ICBSS aimed at offering an assessment on the sector’s potential with respect to development and regional cooperation that could serve as working platform for the BSEC Member States and regional and international stakeholders. Special emphasis was put on cooperation for common sustainable tourism strategies, policies and practices, social and cultural linkages, youth and inclusive employment in tourism.

Through a fruitful and interactive dialogue, it became apparent that tourism provides the Black Sea countries with an excellent opportunity for social development and economic growth that should be further explored in order to reach its full potential in a sustainable manner. Undoubtedly, over the years the quality and quantity of tourism services in the Black Sea region have improved significantly, nonetheless, the sustainable development of the sector along with the regional cooperation allow room for improvement.

In this respect, in order to design and implement an advanced model of tourism in the area, based on sustainable development, we need to show great respect to the environmental protection and cultural preservation and enhancement, as well as to take into account the social structures of the region, in parallel with its future economic development.
The Black Sea region, with its diverse and unique landscape, cultural wealth, historic heritage and wide variety of opportunities for leisure, stands among world’s most beautiful tourist destinations, attracting millions of tourists from around the world.

It is therefore to our benefit to develop and implement a targeted strategy on tourism, one that incorporates all the special features of the region alongside its future potential. It is important to foster closer regional cooperation on the field in order to produce a mutually beneficial outcome that will promote competitiveness at a regional and international level. Information sharing, working groups and training sessions for the professionals and the entrepreneurs should be included in a short term plan of action, as a first step to further development of the sector.

“The Black Sea region, with its diverse and unique landscape, cultural wealth, historic heritage and wide variety of opportunities for leisure, stands among world’s most beautiful tourist destinations, attracting millions of tourists from around the world”

From our part, the ICBSS will work on this direction in order to foster the creation of a dynamic hub between the BSEC Organisation, regional and international stakeholders, with a view to multiplying the effects in the wider Black Sea area.