



**Opening Remarks by ECO Secretary General Amb. Khusrav Noziri
at the First Meeting of the Educational Institutions Specialized in Tourism
of ECO Member States
Baku, December 4, 2023**

**Excellency Mr. Fuad Naghiyev, Chairman of the State Tourism Agency of the
Republic of Azerbaijan,
Excelency Proff. Dr. Mehmet Akif Kireçci, President of ECO Educational
Institute,
Dear Academics,
Distinguished Participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

It is indeed a privilege to join you at the First Meeting of the Educational Institutions Specialized in Tourism of the ECO Member States.

I sincerely thank and congratulate the Government of Azerbaijan for organizing this important event which, I am quite sure, will add to our understanding and information on the subject.

Availing this opportunity, I would also like to convey my deep appreciation to Azerbaijan for their ongoing and successful Chairmanship of the Economic Cooperation Organization in 2023 under the brilliant theme of **“Year of Green Transition and Interconnectivity”**.

Furthermore, I appreciate and admire the invaluable contribution of Azerbaijan in supporting and developing ECO’s agenda of regional economic cooperation, especially the graceful hosting of the 27th Meeting of ECO Council of Ministers in Shusha on October 10, as well as various other important meetings during the year.

Distinguished Participants,

As you are well-versed, tourism is one of the main driving forces to shoulder and support the overall economic development in societies. The sector’s contribution is vital in employment and revenue generations, cross-cultural exchanges, establishing diverse social contacts, etc. The monetary cushion provided by tourism industry serves our multiple economic interests.

In our region, tourism sector witnessed considerable growth during the pre-pandemic period, hosting more than 87 million international tourists. Although the

impulsive impact of the pandemic in 2020 forced a notable decline in tourism activities, the sector started gradual recovery in 2021 and 2022.

The number of tourists welcomed by Azerbaijan before COVID-19 stood around at 2.6 million. Coming out of the pandemic's yoke, Azerbaijan appeared to have an accelerated upturn in its tourist arrivals given the scenic beauty, rich cultural and historical heritage of the country, as well as the smartly executed tourism policy of the Government under the astute leadership of Excellency President Ilham Aliyev.

Besides, in line with ECO's year-wise concept of declaring Tourism Capitals in the region, the Shusha city of Azerbaijan has been selected as the ECO Tourism Capital for 2026.

Based on Shusha's natural landscapes and historical attractions, prominently the Shusha Fortress, the Govhar Agha and Saatli Mosques, beautiful mountainous range and a lot of other captivating splendors augmented by Azerbaijan's speedy town development process, the City will soon draw enhanced global attention, standing amongst the most preferred tourism destinations in the region.

Distinguished Colleagues,

In the existing era of competitive trends, technological advancements and social progress, we are required to have well-trained and better-qualified workforce to meet the requirements of developing tendencies in tourism industry.

In our region, the main educational institutions which offer such skill development courses include high & vocational schools, universities and some private enlightening foundations.

As a whole, we consider them all essentially important to address our tourism-specific educational needs. However, the universities play more significant role in promoting tourism knowledge and awareness amongst the field students, through academic trainings and research-based programs, offered under expert and professional guidance.

Dear Academics,

In line with ECO's fundamental and visionary objectives, we are committed to transforming our region into a more peaceful and eco-friendly tourists' destination with diverse products and quality services. To ensure this target in letter and spirit, we are exploring all possible ways to build solid grounds for providing adequate training to our tourism workforce in order to improve their abilities and building their capacities with modern development techniques.

Our human resource development and capacity-building issues have been well-reflected in the Ardabil Declaration, adopted by Fifth ECO Ministerial Meeting on

Tourism hosted by Iran in the city of Ardabil which is the current ECO Tourism Capital. In this context, I would like to recall that, so far, the Organization has selected total 6 Tourism Capitals in the region, including Dushanbe, Sari, Shahrisabz, Erzurum as well as the earlier mentioned, Shusha and Ardabil.

Moreover, we are planning to formally propose the establishment of a Permanent Network of all ECO's previous, current and future Tourism Capitals. The forum is also envisaged to host eminent academics and renowned professionals from the member countries. We anticipate that the exchange of insights and ideas on tourism education, involving the business community, academia, public and private sectors can effectively contribute to our efforts for adopting modernized methods and techniques in promotion and development of regional tourism industry.

In addition, we believe the organization of in-person training courses and workshops as well as online skill development programs, covering topics such as sustainable tourism practices, digital marketing and customer services will be very effective in helping achieve our envisioned tasks. A part from this, we may think over some scholarship programs to be offered to less developed countries of the region, covering the cost of travel, accommodation and education of their tourism students, which will broaden the scope of industry at greater scale.

Dear Academics,

Multilateralism is the best resort to supporting our collective progress in any field or sector. Relevantly, the multiplied collaboration in tourism will fuel and facilitate our efforts to establishing a more consolidated and integrated tourism industry in the region.

I am confident that the outcomes of this thoughtful gathering will definitely enrich our experience and knowledge of the sector, as well as support us in developing and designing more concrete and comprehensive tourism policies, programs and strategies for the region.

Thank you with best wishes and regards.
