

**WELCOME SPEECH**  
**at IV ECO Ministerial Meeting on Tourism**  
*(December 13, 2022)*

**Dear Secretary General**  
**Dear ministers,**  
**Your excellences,**

It is a great honor for me to welcome you to the 4<sup>th</sup> ECO Ministerial Meeting on Tourism which being held under the Chairmanship of the Republic of Uzbekistan.

Unfortunately, due to unexpected changes in epidemiological situation, we were forced to shift our meeting to an **online format**. At the same time, I would like to confirm that we will be glad to host you in Uzbekistan as the most distinguished guests at any time convenient for you.

Since the Chairmanship of the Republic of Uzbekistan in the Economic Cooperation Organization is carried out under the motto "**2022 - the year of strengthening mutual ties**", the Agenda of today's meeting includes important topics, initiatives and documents that should significantly expand cooperation in tourism within the organization.

We believe that tourism serves as one of the **main growth-catalysator**. It maintains the exchange of economic benefits, know-hows, knowledge and investment. Most importantly, **tourism is the strongest bridge** that unites our people through complementing our cultures, traditions and heritage.

In this regard, let me once again sincerely welcome all of you and wish us fruitful results that will contribute to the strengthening of multilateral cooperation within the ECO.

Thank you.

**MAIN THESES**  
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**Dear Secretary General,**  
**Dear colleagues,**

**The Chairmanship of the Republic of Uzbekistan** in the Economic Cooperation Organization aimed at further strengthening partnerships between Member States. We are successfully implementing all projects, events and initiatives included in the "Road Map" of Uzbekistan's Chairmanship.

Undoubtedly, during this year a great importance was attached to the development of cooperation in the field of tourism. We have hold many tourism events, exchanged delegations, initiated various joint projects.

I would like to assure that Uzbekistan intends to continue boosted affords to promote tourism cooperation within the ECO space.

**Dear participants,**

First, let me briefly inform you on what has been done in tourism industry of Uzbekistan recently.

The Government of Uzbekistan has continued measures to turn the tourism industry into a powerful tool for sustainable economic growth.

Instead of general approach, we are now focusing on improving the tourism infrastructure, service quality and its diversity in each region, city and district of Uzbekistan.

We are developing and implemented **region & district based master plans** of tourism destination development.

Moreover, **135** mahallas in **28** cities and districts with high tourism potential that have preserved ancient customs and unique crafts are transferring into "**tourist villages**".

We are glad to mention that **3** of them are participating in UNWTO "**Best Tourist Villages**" project ("**Konigil**", "**Omonkhona**" and "**Sentob**").

We have provided the tourism business with wide range of tax, financial and administrative benefits. For example, **social tax**

and **turnover tax** for tourism enterprises are set at **1** percent; **land tax** and **property tax** reduced by **90** percent.

Moreover, **\$150** million in soft loans were **directed** to tourism business projects this year only, while **\$ 1 billion 410** million of investment **were disbursed**.

Uzbekistan have launched "**Cashback Tourist**" platform thanks to which local tourists can now refund **15 to 50 percent** of their expenses spent on traveling around the country.

Of course, we did not forget about our esteemed foreign visitors: from **January 1**, foreign visitors can use "**Tax Free**" system to refund amounts of VAT paid while purchasing certain types of goods.

During the last years, the Government have paid great attention to boost **education and training** of tourism personnel.

We have the "**Silk Road**" International University of Tourism and Cultural Heritage in **Samarkand**, where students from **16 foreign countries** (from Japan to Italy) are receiving high-end professional education.

Also, a demand for educational programs of our (total **10**) colleges and technical schools of tourism and cultural heritage is growing. This year we have opened **Restoration schools** at **7** of them and **modern tourism laboratories** are being built in others.

Thus, we offer a unique education format- students can combine theoretical knowledge with practical work.

Because of these measures, we see quick **recovering flow of tourists** to Uzbekistan. If last year **1.88 million** tourists visited our country, then by the end of **2022** we are expecting **4,5 million** visitors.

Next year, we aim to increase the number of tourists: **7 million** of foreign and **12 million** of local tourists, and the export of tourist services up to **2 billion USD**.

**Dear participants,**

As you know, **Samarkand** is host city for the **25th session UNWTO General Assembly** (in **2023**).

This is a historic event for Uzbekistan and, in particular, for the entire region of Central Asia. At the same time, it is clear evidence

of recognition by the international community of efforts of Uzbekistan to develop the tourism sector and strengthen the positive image of our country.

In Samarkand, more than \$ **2 billion** has been invested to improve the city's tourism infrastructure, **40** new hotels were built. The city got a **new** terminal of Samarkand international airport.

A diamond of big transformations is a brand-new international tourist center "**Silk Road Samarkand**" which will host the **General Assembly** next year.

In this regard, it is a great honor for me to invite all ECO Member States to Samarkand and become our distinguished guests during next General Assembly.

**Dear colleagues,**

ECO region with a population of around **450 million** people is well-known for its natural beauties, as well as diversity and richness of its historical-cultural heritage.

Considering huge logistic capabilities, the ECO region has a significant potential to be one of the major tourism destinations in the world. In order to reach this goal we would like to focus on following:

**First**, we need to increase the number of direct flights between the regions of Member States in order to recover the tourist flow between our countries and boost domestic tourism of the ECO region. In addition, it will allow tour operators to expand combined routes among our tourist cities.

**Second**, increase formats and number of business meetings for tour operators and travel agencies, as the economic growth is largely created by the private sector. It is necessary to support their collaboration to create and promote new products and services.

**Third**, Uzbekistan is actively developing **mountain and winter tourism**, we propose to organize a visit of ECO business circles delegation to Uzbekistan to explore investment opportunities. We are ready to present the most promising projects;

**Forth**, we propose to expand **educational programs** in the field of tourism between Member States. It's my pleasure to inform that **25** students from ECO countries have received scholarships and are studying at "Silk Road" International University in Samarkand.

We are ready to double this number, also start joint programs on students and teachers exchange, and hold collaborative researches in tourism field.

**Firth**, during **2023** we have planned a large number of events dedicated to the **UNWTO General Assembly in Samarkand**. In this regard, I would like to invite you and tourism industry of Member States to take an active participation in these events, since General Assembly is our common victory.

Finally, dear colleagues, as you have already read from the Aagenda of today's meeting, we have nominated Shakhrisabz - a city with **2000** years of history and included in the UNESCO World Heritage List, as the **ECO Tourism Capital** in **2024**. We hope that you will support our initiative.

From our side, we are already developing a special **Action Plan** program dedicated to this occasion. It includes activities and projects aimed at developing various areas of tourism in the ECO region: ecotourism, ethno tourism, cultural exchange, youth activities, etc.

I believe that these proposals will significantly intensify our multilateral cooperation in tourism development in the ECO space.

**Thank you for attention!**