



International Conference:

“Inclusive and Smart Tourism Destinations: Strategies for Innovation”,
Genoa, Italy

Organised by:

ENAT – European Network for Accessible Tourism, AccessibleEU Resource Centre
and AISM – Italian Multiple Sclerosis Association.

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Opening Speech by EU Commissioner, Mr. Apostolas Tzitzikostas (by video).

Thank you for inviting me to open today's conference.

Earlier in May, in Athens, I had the privilege of meeting 20 young people from all across Europe. Among them was Dimitra Papadopoulou, a Greek Paralympic athlete. Her passionate advocacy for accessible and inclusive tourism, public policy and mobility left a really strong impression on me. When it comes to accessible travelling, everybody has specific needs, and it can be more challenging to cater for them when travelling away from home. However, everybody should have the possibility to travel to other locations without discrimination or hindrance.

Accessible Tourism is a matter of basic rights that also provides many opportunities for social and economic development. And from a social perspective, it makes sure that the visitor experience is inclusive for people with disabilities, the elderly and people with reduced mobility.

On the economic side, accessibility represents a strategic competitive advantage. By adapting services and infrastructure, the tourism sector opens up to a larger and more diverse consumer audience. For example, work is ongoing to create an improved version of the European Parking Card for people with disabilities, with a common EU format. And we are working to improve speed management and enforce road safety rules and protect vulnerable road users. Last month, the Commission presented the passenger package to address multi-modal bookings, rail ticketing, and passenger rights protection through single ticketing. It covers travel and transport of required equipment for passengers with disabilities.

However, there is still some way to go. In Europe, travellers with accessibility needs face, a range of barriers, such as inconsistent information, a lack of inclusive services across destinations, obstacles to spontaneous travel for people requiring assistance. And sustainability in tourism cannot be achieved without inclusiveness.

A truly sustainable tourist model must address social, economic, and environmental dimensions equally. This is not just about infrastructure. Affordable access for everyone, to tourism facilities, products, and services should be a central part of a sustainable tourism policy.

In the European Union today, around 87 million people live with some form of disability. That's nearly one in 5 Europeans. And as the population gets older, that share is set to grow. Almost half of people, aged over 60, are affected. They must be able to travel. And destinations must find ways to welcome them.

“Accessible by Design” needs to become a guiding principle for public services, including mobility. Accessible infrastructure and equipment benefit everyone, locals, as well as visitors. Destinations that champion accessibility will be key for increasing the social acceptance of tourism. And in addition, accessibility and inclusiveness should be thoroughly integrated into tourist management.

To do that, we need to collect data regularly, including about the potential returns of investing in accessible skills and solutions. The integrated data-based approach is the smart and sustainable tourism model that we intend for supporting destination development across the EU.

And I know that the 2026 “European Capital of Smart Tourism”, Tampere, and European Green Pioneer of Smart Tourism, Dubrovnik, along with multiple finalists, [including] Genoa, are represented at this conference. They can certainly drive discussions forward with their own achievements. They are an inspiration for our policy work in preparing the EU's first ever strategy for sustainable tourism. which I aim to present this autumn.

And as the strategy will show, accessibility and inclusivity will be at the core of EU tourism policy, planning, and delivery. Not a secondary consideration. They will inform every aspect from supporting destinations to skills, data, and connectivity.

Seamless mobility, accessibility and connectivity are key to the visitor experience. And in turn, for Europe's capacity to build long-term sustainability and stability.

So thank you again for your invitation, and I wish you a successful conference.