



Conclusions Report

1st International Western Silk Road Workshop,

Alexandroupoli, Greece

26-27 April, 2017

OVERALL SUMMARY

The city of Alexandroupoli, Greece hosted the 1st International Western Silk Road Workshop. The event was jointly organized by UNWTO, the Ministry of Tourism of Greece and the region of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace, and constituted the first practical step of the *Western Silk Road Tourism Development Initiative*, a project developed by UNWTO in cooperation with the Directorate-General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs (DG GROW) of the European Commission (EC).

Three panels integrated the Workshop: (i) the challenges and opportunities of developing the Western Silk Road as a trans-national tourism route, (ii) the marketing potential of the route, and (iii) the practical steps that need to be taken in order to ensure the project's long-term success and viability. As part of the discussions, the creation of a Western Silk Road Working Group in charge of guaranteeing a coordinated approach was outlined and will be further specified during the 2nd Workshop in Sofia, Bulgaria (27-28 June 2017).

Attended by the Minister of Tourism of Greece, the Governor of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace, the Mayor of Alexandroupoli and the Secretary-General of the Greek National Tourism Organization, the workshop counted upon excellent feedback from a wide range of international stakeholders from the tourism sector and beyond, including tour operators, universities, cultural routes representatives and stakeholders from the creative arts. Important input was also contributed by TripAdvisor, the Fundación Turismo Valencia, the World Federation of Tourist Guides Association (WFTGA), the European Federation of Tourist Guide Associations (FEG), the Greek Guiding Association, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of Iraq, Destination Makers and Aegean Airlines, who shared its actions in promoting route development and connectivity across the Silk Road. The Chamber of Evros and the Tsiakiris Silkhouse supported the event. As part of the programme, a technical tour to Soufli, the silk city of Greece, was organized.

Overall, the organization and international presence was highly welcomed by the national, regional and local tourism stakeholders of Greece. The Region of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace highly welcomed the momentum – it was the first visit of the current Minister to the region - and the attention placed upon one of the less developed tourism regions of the country. On the local level, the workshop had a great and practical impact: a Task Force of up to 20 stakeholders, including representatives from the local and regional administration, local businesses, silk producers and three local museums, was set up in Soufli to advance in a specific tourism development plan based on available silk heritage. Measures agreed upon and currently being developed by the regional Task Force include: the establishment of a local tourism body, the development of a website that will promote Soufli (www.visitsoufli.com – currently underway), and the restoration of the Tzivre Silk Factory, a Silk Road industrial heritage site.

KEY RESULTS AND MEETING OUTPUT

All meeting information and presentations are available [online](#)

Workshop Session 1: The Challenges and Opportunities of the Developing the Western Silk Road

The first session of the workshop focused on outlining the challenges and opportunities of developing the Western Silk Road as a transnational tourism route. Mr. Nikolaos Gkolfinopoulos of the UNWTO Silk Road Programme provided an overview of the project, which included some results of the Western Silk Road online survey conducted during the 2016/2017 period.

The presentation was followed by a roundtable discussion that counted upon the participation of:

- Dr. Stella Kostopoulou, Associate Professor, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece
- Dr. Lusine Saribegian, Senior Manager and Lecturer of the Department of Management, Business and Tourism, Russian-Armenian University, Armenia
- Mr. Vasily Dikhtyar, Professor, Institute of Hospitality business and tourism, People's Friendship University of Russia
- Mr. Paolo Baraldi, Researcher, M.S. Tourism Economics and Management, University of Bologna

The roundtable discussants either led or contributed to national *Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats/ SWOT Analyses* determining the role to be played by their individual countries within the Western Silk Road project (their individual presentations are available [online](#)). A summary of the results obtained during the roundtable discussion and subsequent Q&A-session is provided below.

Challenges:

As to the **main challenges** in developing the Western Silk Road as a unified tourism route, following key points were mentioned:

1. Creating benefits and raising awareness among local Western Silk Road communities

Local ownership and participation are key issues that will ensure the route's uniqueness and vitality. Also, by engaging local communities, the correct management and promotion of available heritage, both natural and cultural, will be secured. To ensure participation of local stakeholders, following actions should take place:

- Bottom-up approach: secure local stakeholder participation in the Western Silk Road management structure/ Western Silk Road Working Group; and engage in Western Silk Road events, activities and information updates
- Develop the route component of the Western Silk Road: cross-border activities such as walking, cycling or horse-riding infrastructure will not only secure local participation but also support the economic development of localities involved

2. Ensure a strong framework for collaboration

The Western Silk Road Working Group should function as a strong collaborative platform in charge of

- Coordinate a common approach towards the development of the Western Silk Road, especially among the public sector
- Ensure a balanced approach between the public and private tourism sector, and among stakeholders active within the local, regional, national and transnational levels
- Coordinate joint activities in the areas of marketing and promotion, and product development

3. Development of research and data

By conducting a Western Silk Road research (currently underway), a first initial step has been made in terms of studying the Western Silk Road as a unified tourism concept. However, research is still scarce and scattered. Therefore,

- The creation of a Western Silk Road database or an inventory of available sites and monuments is proposed. A unified database or inventory would support the exchange of knowledge, support the development of partnerships – for example, among Silk Road museums located in different countries - and allow for the development of cross-border tourism products and marketing strategies
- Ongoing research, especially of a transnational character, is needed in order to support interested stakeholders in the development of joint tourism products
- Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, having the support of the Ministry of Tourism of the Hellenic Republic and UNWTO, will establish a research body that will address the tourism research needs of the Western Silk Road on European level.

Apart from the Western Silk Road research, a further step in this direction has been made with the creation of a [Western Silk Road events and heritage map](#). The online map, hosted on the UNWTO Silk Road Programme website, enables one to locate a vast range of tangible and intangible heritage throughout the ancient Silk Road routes, as well as Silk Road events hosted by participating Member States. The map is a continuously-updated, freely accessible and easy-to-use tool. We highly encourage Western Silk Road stakeholders to make full use of this map by registering heritage, events, festivities and other Silk Road attributes.

4. Preservation of available heritage

As many participants made clear, available heritage is disappearing due to decay and/or lack of funding. Also, traditional skills and techniques in the arts & crafts sector are being lost due to lack of support or market factors. As the attractiveness of the Western Silk Road depends on its cultural offer, following actions should be studied:

- Seek private sector funding and participation to restore damaged heritage. An example of successful public-private participation was implemented in Valencia with the restoration of the College of the Greater Art of Silk by the Fundación Hortensia Herrero
- Support local Silk Road business in their internationalization
- Provide trainings and organize workshops in the areas of sustainable tourism development, heritage management
- Support stakeholders, such as local guides, through the provision of trainings

5. Development of tourism products

Two main challenges impeding the development of specific Western Silk Road tourism products were identified:

- The fragmented tourism supply
- Inadequate branding and promotion: many tourism assets linked to the Silk Road are not branded as such

6. Security and travel facilitation concerns

In terms of travel and visa facilitation, a regulations and infrastructure gap between Schengen and non-Schengen states participating with the Western Silk Road project was identified. Additionally, the proximity to unstable regions could have an impact in terms of visitation and cross-border partnerships.

Unique Elements and Opportunities:

As to **unique elements** that would allow the Western Silk Road to compete within the globalized tourism market, following key points were mentioned:

1. The Western Silk Road is in-line with the new way people approach and relate to travel

The Silk Road is unique in that it connects many different countries, cultures, nationalities, religions and people under a common brand. In line with the so-called experience economy, travelers are increasingly seeking a different kind of value return, favouring enriching experiences and authenticity along with the traditional product purchase. Thus the Silk Road, a cross-border tourism initiative with a multifarious offer (nature, cultural heritage, eco- and adventure tourism, city tourism and maritime routes), has the components to prosper, adapt and grow in a competitive environment. Additional unique elements mentioned include:

- Untapped knowledge: as opposed to the classical conceptions, the Western Silk Road initiative can present the Silk Road under a new focus
- The interconnections between the East and the West in the spheres of arts and gastronomy are strong areas to build upon
- Historical connections and common elements among Western Silk Road destinations could support further integration among countries
- The Western Silk Road could revive rural industries, decayed monuments and sites, and reinvigorate traditional skills and techniques in the fields of gastronomy, clothing, jewelry, etc.

2. Diversity of the route

Due to its location and the countries involved, the Western Silk Road can potentially integrate several different tourism elements: urban, rural, adventure, eco, cultural, and gastronomy-tourism. Building on available data, Silk Road related sites should be identified and included into the route.

Workshop Session 2: Western Silk Road Marketing Strategies and Tools

The second session explored the potential of the Western Silk Road from a marketing and promotional perspective. Ensuring a coordinated approach, developing a common logo and brand identity, media and social media campaigns, the development of Western Silk Road events and festival, raising awareness and involving the private sector, the potential of arts & crafts and gastronomy, were identified as **main aspects that would need to be built upon** in order to establish the Western Silk Road as a recognizable tourism brand.

1. To share efforts and resources

Strategies to be jointly developed include:

- Joint promotion of the Western Silk Road countries at international tourism fairs by using, for example, a shared stand.
- Integrate the Western Silk Road into the strategic planning of the involved NTOs
- Seek synergies between the Western Silk Road and China's "Belt and Road" Initiative.
- Identifying cluster countries / regions willing to cooperate or advance jointly in defined areas
- Establishment of a network of silk museums.
- Organization of specialized workshops and capacity building sessions within participating countries

2. Western Silk Road Logo and brand identity

Following issues were considered important in order to advance with a shared logo and brand:

- To create and/ or identify an inspiring joint logo and brand name for the Western Silk Road
- Criteria to grant use of the logo and the brand should be established.
- The logo and brand name could be diverse in the sense of adapting it to each particular language and cultural particularities
- Production of Western Silk Road souvenirs

3. Media promotion and social media

- Production and use of short films and clips about the Western Silk Road should be studied
- Use of a unified hashtag, such as #SilkRoadTourism – to be used when stakeholders and travelers post photos and articles on social media. The use of a national hashtag per country could also be studied
- Digital campaigning, online and in printed media
- Bloggers and FAM trips.

4. Western Silk Road events and festivals

- Developing a rotating Western Silk Road festival across Europe.

5. Awareness raising and capacity building

A need to raise general awareness on the importance of the Silk Road was raised. Strategies proposed

included:

- To work towards including the Silk Road in the tourism curricula of universities
- Training new tour guides on practical skills and guiding techniques for countries, as well as Train-the-Trainer programmes.

6. Tourism and beyond

- Peace, culture and economy should be taken into consideration when establishing a recognizable brand
- Connecting the Western Silk Road with artisans and fashion, as well as with new designers who use silk in their production
- Gastronomy: as was done in Valencia, the creation of Silk Road recipes and cook books should be studied
- Bearing in mind the current influx of Syrian refugees, it was proposed to make use of the Western Silk Road as a tool for integration and support. Syrian artists, artisans and local entrepreneurs could be offered an opportunity by integrating their traditional skills within the local businesses structure (silk factories, museums, etc.)

7. Involvement of tour operators and private sector, B2B

A more practical approach is needed: especially tour operators capable of offering Western Silk Road tours could assist in raising awareness among potential travelers. However, for this to happen, initial financial and promotional resources, to be provided by NTO's and international organizations, would be needed. Additional measures could include:

- Integration of specialized B2B opportunities for Western and Chinese tour operators.
- Creation of a network of tour operators working on the Western Silk Road.
- Organization of an event in cooperation with investment stakeholders – to raise business and sponsorship opportunities
- Importance of creating a legal framework for the Western Silk Road in order to ensure common opportunities and practices
- Importance of bearing in mind traveler particularities and tailored tourism products - for example, needs and interests of the Chinese traveler
- A proposal to divide the Western Silk Road into two projects: trade – a caravan oriented historic route and a product-based (silk) route. The caravan route would need European funding as it could contribute to the well-being of low-income and war-torn economies in the Middle East. The two routes, by attracting a different type of traveler, could diversify the tourism offer of the countries involved

Following **best-practice examples in the area of marketing and promotion** were proposed:

- Establishment of a unified Western Silk Road souvenir passport approved by UNWTO: to offer specific benefits such as discounts at museums, heritage sites, etc.
- Western Silk Road twin cities (sister cities) partnership i.e. Soufli and Valencia and/or Venice. Transmitting know-how through cities partnerships, joint projects, etc
- A proposal from TripAdvisor to promote all initiatives of Western Silk Road on one dedicated Western Silk Road traveler page.
- Partnership with the Turkish city of Bursa famous for its focus on Islamic costumes made out of silk – specific promotion under the Western Silk Road brand
- Iraq: the development of the Marshes of Iraq in the south of the country and its potential connections to the Western Silk Road initiative should be studied

Workshop Session 3: Western Silk Road Governance Structures and Themed Approaches

The third session of the workshop discussed possible governance structures for the Western Silk Road; the participants assessed the advantages of establishing a Western Silk Road Working Group, and recognised the potential of public-private partnerships.

Following **best-practice examples in the field of trans-national collaboration** that could be applied to

the Western Silk Road were discussed:

- The development of walking and biking routes. The Camino de Santiago and the Via Francigena were mentioned as best-practice examples in the field of promotion, brand recognition and local community integration
- Mobile applications, containing information on specific routes (places to visit, etc.), was mentioned as a best-practice example
- The Via Dinarica, which works closely with tour operators, was mentioned as a best-practice example in the field of business development and integration
- The creation of an International Western Silk Road Day aimed at raising awareness was discussed
- A Western Student Exchange Programme and/or Summer School involving Western Silk Road universities was discussed
- Western Silk Road and Sports: the idea of a rotating Western Silk Road Marathon was put forward

As to potential partners to be thoroughly engaged in the Western Silk Road, following issues were mentioned:

- Network of associations between the countries to share projects, opinions and storytelling, should be developed
- The need for clear financial management and planning is considered vital if any of the future projects are to be long-lasting and self-sufficient

The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) would like to thank the Ministry of Tourism of Greece, the region of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace and all participants for their outstanding input and good work.