



Brussels, April 30, 2020

Mrs. Ursula von der Leyen
President of the European Commission
Rue de la Loi 200
1049- Brussels

Ref: Tourism for seniors

Madam President,

In an interview you gave to the German newspaper BILD on April 12, you raised the possibility that, because of the COVID-19 epidemic, the movement of the elderly will probably have to be restricted until at least the end of 2020, pending the possible development of a vaccine.

Considering your responsibilities and your authority over many European decision-makers, be they political, social or economic, we would like to share with you the likely and potential consequences of your position on European tourism stakeholders.

First of all, and given the fact that the European population is increasingly ageing and, fortunately, is living longer and longer, you will certainly agree that the concept of age has over time become an evolving and relative concept, since the individuals gradually falling into this "category" are so heterogeneous. Moreover, the good health of thousands of centenarians, whose number is increasing year after year, is nowadays regularly praised everywhere, each one boasting the good dispositions to achieve it, like the famous Cretan diet and many other solutions! But beyond these gerontological aspects, the population that would be concerned by your remarks, remains of a rather vast concept that does not qualify a satisfactory state of health and mobility of our seniors.

It turns out that our association, the International Social Tourism Organisation (ISTO), includes a large number of European members who have a great deal of experience in tourism for senior citizens. Several hundred thousand of them travel throughout Europe every year, in excellent conditions of mobility and hospitality. In this respect, we would like to share with you two main and complementary aspects that senior tourism in Europe brings to many countries, particularly those in southern Europe which are currently the most affected by COVID-19.

First aspect, the economic impact :

Like the specific programmes for senior citizens' holidays in several countries: IMSERSO¹ in Spain (Ministry of Social Affairs), INATEL in Portugal, or the Agence Nationale du Chèque Vacances (ANCV) in France, the development of senior citizens' tourism demonstrates its considerable economic contribution for all professionals in the sector, whether tour operators or accommodation providers, but also for all the stakeholders indirectly dependent on tourism, whether restaurants, cafés/bars, museums or exhibition venues, heritage sites and many others.

This is all the more striking since senior citizens travel mainly during the low tourist season to benefit from more advantageous rates and more serene and personalised reception conditions. Senior citizens' tourism therefore makes it possible to significantly lengthen tourist seasons, with the direct consequence of being able to perpetuate many permanent jobs and extend the periods of activity of seasonal jobs.

Senior citizens' tourism also helps to strengthen so-called "domestic" tourism as an intermediate step in the recovery of a sector that we know is in a state of crisis. It is thus a perfect response to promoting a transitional alternative that is effective in socio-economic terms and that will be in harmony with the measures that will limit, probably for some time to come, far-flung travel outside the European Union.

Giving up senior citizens' tourist activity during the low season would thus have disastrous economic consequences and could lead to tens of thousands of businesses ceasing their activities and the loss of millions of jobs.

Second aspect, the impact on health:

Here the results are even more conclusive. The mere fact of being able to go on holiday already makes it possible to project oneself into the future and dream of a great moment of happiness! In this respect, all the studies of the organisations mentioned above demonstrate the real contribution and benefit of a holiday stay on the health and autonomy of so-called elderly people. The conclusion of these studies is that holidays act as a form of therapy on health and well-being. But beyond the physiological benefits, a holiday stay also acts on the psychological aspects by maintaining a daily dynamic and by formulating future perspectives. I left, I was able to do it again, so tomorrow other things will be possible again!

We fully understand the danger of the spread of COVID-19, with its risks on elderly populations often presenting other aggravating pathologies. But it also turns out that these are responsible populations, more experienced, more attentive and generally more cautious than others. They will not expose themselves unnecessarily and will scrupulously respect the health recommendations of both sending and receiving countries.

This will be all the more convincing since all the players in the tourism chain - tour operators, accommodation providers, service providers, etc. - will also be particularly attentive to the reception and safety conditions for the delivery of their services. It is also their responsibility and their interest in the immediate and longer term to be exemplary in this respect.

¹ See « *Informe Anual IMSERSO 2018 – Programas de Turismo Social y Termalismo Social pp.101-125, Ministerio de Sanidad, Consumo y Bienestar Social.*

In conclusion, we believe that, for these two very complementary reasons, the solution envisaged of pursuing exclusive confinement for senior citizens, when the rest of the population could regain its mobility, would be, in addition to a discriminatory provision, a manifest economic and social error.

Furthermore, we have taken note of the recent declaration by Mr Thierry BRETON, European Commissioner in charge of the European market, that tourism deserves an urgent revival in the form of a "Marshall Plan", since it represents approximately 10% of European GDP and 25 million jobs. In this respect, our Organisation is willing to work with the Commission and other professionals in the sector on a global reflection and on the elaboration of such a plan, given the importance of our network and of the actors that make it up.

Finally, we would like to take this opportunity to send you a presentation of our organisation which, since its creation in 1963, has been working to promote responsible and sensible tourism with a humanistic and social vision. An ambitious project which today has 5 main priorities: to make holidays accessible to all; to show solidarity with local communities and cultures; to ensure quality of life and social cohesion; to promote fair business that reduces inequalities and to protect the environment from pollution and nuisance caused by tourism.

We remain at your disposal and that of your services to complete and further substantiate our remarks and to communicate to you the studies of our members to which we refer in this letter.

Thank you for your attention to our letter. Please accept, Madam President, the assurance of our highest consideration.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'PB' or similar initials, written in a cursive style.

Patrick Brault
Vice-President of ISTO