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## **THE DEVELOPMENT OF COOPERATION AMONG THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION (SCO) MEMBER STATES IN THE FIELD OF TOURISM**

Nigmatov Alisher Khayrullayevich,  
Chirchik State Pedagogical University  
E-mail: a.nigmatov@cspu.uz

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### **Abstract**

This article discusses the development of cooperation among the member states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in the field of tourism. Tourism is considered one of the promising directions of collaboration among SCO countries, and the article presents reflections and analyses on the initiatives and activities carried out within this framework.

**Keywords:** SCO, tourism, economy, development, UNWTO, Tashkent, cooperation.

### **Introduction**

Humanitarian and cultural exchange among the member states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has been ongoing in a multilateral dialogue format for over 10 years; however, tourism has not received significant attention. Tourism plays an important role in economic development and deepening cultural exchanges between peoples. Accordingly, at the 15th SCO Summit held in Tashkent in 2016, a joint program for the development of tourism relations was adopted for the first time in history. Developed by Rostourism, the main purpose of this document is to facilitate and promote equal and mutually beneficial cooperation in the field of tourism, based on the formation of a common tourism space grounded in cultural, historical, and economic ties. These measures aim to strengthen tourism exchange, increase revenue from this sector for all SCO



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member states, create new jobs, and improve the living standards and quality of life of citizens.

The authorized bodies of the member states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (hereinafter referred to as the SCO, and subsequently as the Parties) adhere to the goals and principles of the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), striving to further strengthen good-neighborliness, friendship, and cooperation, as well as to promote tourism collaboration. Based on Article 3 of the SCO Charter of June 7, 2002, and Article 19 of the Treaty on Long-Term Good-Neighborliness, Friendship and Cooperation of August 16, 2007, the SCO member states adopted a program on June 24, 2016, to develop cooperation in the field of tourism, with the aim of implementing the SCO Strategy until 2025. The program reflects the following:

### **Key Areas of Cooperation**

The Parties aim to expand and develop equal and mutually beneficial bilateral and multilateral cooperation in the field of tourism, accelerating tourism exchange, creating new jobs, and improving citizens' living standards and quality of life. A common tourism space is to be formed based on existing cultural, historical, and economic ties, with the aim of increasing revenue from this sector for all SCO member states.

The Parties undertake necessary measures to jointly improve the quality of tourism services, protect the legal rights and interests of tourists, and ensure tourism safety. They also assist in fostering cooperation between tourism industry enterprises and related sectors, attracting investment, and developing and improving tourism infrastructure in SCO member states. The Parties emphasize the important role and promising prospects of cross-border and regional cooperation in tourism among interested SCO member states.

### **Forms of Cooperation**

The main forms of tourism cooperation among SCO member states may include:

- Joint promotion of tourism products through participation in international tourism exhibitions, fairs, and other events organized with the support of national tourism administrations;



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- Development of cooperation between tourism authorities and companies;
  - Creation of favorable conditions for mutual tourist travel of citizens of SCO member states;
  - Exchange of information materials on tourism resources using electronic and print media, as well as specialized tourist information centers within the SCO, to form a convenient tourism information environment;
  - Organization of tourism forums, seminars, and roundtables for experience sharing, development of common approaches, and attracting investment in tourism infrastructure creation and improvement;
  - Support for initiatives by tourism industry enterprises to create and promote new tourist destinations;
  - Organization of research and development activities in tourism technologies;
  - Cooperation in ensuring tourism safety and improving the insurance system in the tourism sector.

### **Mechanism of Cooperation**

Coordination of cooperation for the implementation of this program is carried out by the SCO Expert Working Group on tourism cooperation, with meetings held annually either under the SCO Secretariat or in a member state of the organization. Within the framework of the Expert Working Group, proposals and recommendations for further development of tourism cooperation, developed by consensus, are considered at meetings of the heads of tourism administrations of SCO member states, held once every two years in one of the member states.

To further promote mutually beneficial cooperation in the field of tourism among SCO member states, the Parties may conclude relevant international agreements and other necessary documents.

This program was signed on June 24, 2016, in Tashkent in one copy each in Russian and Chinese, with both texts having equal legal force.

At the summit, Russian President Vladimir Putin stated in his speech: “The increasingly strong humanitarian cooperation within the Organization cannot be considered fully satisfactory. The program adopted for the development of tourism is aimed at creating a unified tourism space and enhancing the safety of tourists.”



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SCO Secretary-General Rashid Alimov emphasized: “Signing the program to develop cooperation in tourism within the framework of the Tashkent Summit, as well as implementing joint cultural and educational programs and projects, provides an additional incentive to promote the rich historical and cultural heritage of SCO member states and contributes to deepening cultural ties in the Eurasian space.”

Considering tourism development as one of the priority areas, the signing of the program on cooperation in the tourism sector among SCO member states can be regarded as a very positive step.

During the meeting, Kyrgyzstan’s President, Almazbek Atambayev, noted: “Cultural and humanitarian cooperation must remain an integral part of the spirit of Shanghai.”

The effective use of tourism potential was a key agenda item at the meeting of SCO tourism experts, held on April 25–26, 2017, at the Organization’s headquarters in Beijing under the chairmanship of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Participants shared experiences in implementing state policies in tourism, developing national legislation, and information about international tourism exhibitions and fairs organized with the support of national tourism administrations of SCO member states.

Experts drafted a joint action plan for 2017–2018 to implement the SCO program on cooperation in tourism. The plan focused on deepening cooperation between state governance bodies in the field of tourism, promoting tourism products, improving the quality of provided tourism services, protecting the legal rights and interests of tourists, and ensuring tourism safety.

Although the development of this sector is still relatively new, the number of tourists in SCO countries has been steadily increasing. According to the latest statistics from China’s state tourism authority, in the first half of 2016, the number of bookings by Chinese travel agencies to European countries decreased by one-fourth, while the number of Chinese tourists visiting SCO countries increased significantly.

The agreement on the implementation of the “Ten Thousand Li Tea Road” program, concluded in 2015 between China, Mongolia, and Russia, has begun to be actively implemented. The SCO believes that this program will contribute to



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regional development and attract more tourists. For SCO countries and Russian tourists, China remains one of the most attractive tourist destinations, including cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and the Hainan Islands.

This information reflects the bilateral tourism relations between Russia and China within the SCO, as well as the annual increase in tourist numbers in Central Asia. Globally, the region of Central Asia, which encompasses all SCO member countries, is attracting interest due to the major transcontinental routes passing through it. The popularity of these routes is based on the unique and extremely rich heritage, nature, and traditions of dozens of different peoples along the historic Silk Road.

However, challenges remain in developing tourism in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, as many foreign tourists are still not well-informed about the most attractive sights. A common issue for all SCO countries is the negligent attitude toward services, which often results in an inability to present information about sites in an appealing manner.

According to the program for cooperation in the field of tourism, all of the above-mentioned issues should be addressed and thoroughly considered.

The Partners should take the necessary measures to jointly improve the quality of tourism services, protect the legal rights and interests of tourists, and ensure tourism safety. They should also facilitate cooperation between tourism industry enterprises and related sectors, and attract investment to create and improve tourism infrastructure in SCO member states.

To resolve long-standing issues, a creative approach is needed, including the involvement of youth in cooperation. In 2013, the “Tourism Development” forum was held in Kyrgyzstan within the framework of the SCO Youth Council chaired by the National Section of Kyrgyzstan. The forum served as a platform for dialogue among experts, delegates from various countries, tourism operators, and representatives of specialized state authorities. The forum’s purpose, as emphasized by Taalaybek Dayirbekov, Chair of the SCO Youth Council, was “to gather all interested parties, discuss the current state of tourism, and present new ideas for the development of the sector.”

Russia signed a program on tourism development with SCO member states. On June 9, 2017, in Astana (Republic of Kazakhstan), during the official visit of



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Russian President Vladimir Putin to the SCO Heads of State Summit, the head of the Federal Tourism Agency, Oleg Safonov, participated in signing the joint action plan for implementing the program of cooperation in tourism among SCO member states for 2017–2018.

The document envisages the implementation of joint measures by SCO countries to promote tourism products, improve the quality of tourism services, protect tourists' legal rights and interests, ensure tourism safety, and develop research and tourism technologies.

As emphasized by Russian President Vladimir Putin in his speech at the SCO Heads of State Summit: “Efforts should be focused on coordinating national strategies, actions, and multilateral projects across the entire SCO space.”

The “SCO Development Strategy until 2025”, adopted in 2015, set the main objectives for SCO member states in the field of tourism: to increase mutual tourism flows and improve the quality of services provided in this sector.

A significant event at the SCO Heads of State Summit was the accession of India and Pakistan as member states, which opens new prospects for tourism cooperation. In particular, India's tourism market is highly attractive for increasing inbound tourist flows. Over the past seven years, tourism exchanges between Russia and India have nearly doubled, and the potential is far from exhausted. Each year, more than 30 million Indian citizens travel abroad, with a potential tourist population of 300 million within the country. The year 2018 was declared the Year of Tourism for Russia and India. Naturally, we expect Indian and Pakistani fans to attend the FIFA World Cup matches hosted in Russia next year, according to Oleg Safonov, head of the Federal Tourism Agency.

According to Kazakhstan Today, the potential for developing tourism among SCO countries is very high. This was highlighted to the SCO Secretariat during the International Conference on Tourism Development and Cooperation in the World Tourism Prosperity held on September 5, 2020, within the framework of the China International Fair for Trade in Services (CIFTIS-2020) in Beijing.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was established in 2001 by six founding states—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, China, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Following the accession of Pakistan and India in 2017, the SCO became the largest regional cooperation organization in terms of geographic



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coverage and population. It covers more than 60% of the Eurasian continent and 42% of the world's population. Approximately 800 million people aged 18–25 live in this region, accounting for nearly half of the global youth population.

SCO member states adhere to the provisions of the SCO Charter of June 7, 2002, which identifies cultural and humanitarian cooperation as one of the main priorities of multilateral collaboration. The main objectives in this area are to strengthen mutual trust, friendship, and good-neighborliness among member states, and to promote effective cooperation in cultural, educational, and other areas of common interest. Article 3 of the Charter (Areas of Cooperation) states: “The main areas of cooperation within the SCO include the expansion of cooperation in science and technology, education, health, culture, sports, and tourism.”

On May 22, 2020, a meeting of the heads of tourism administrations of SCO member states was held via videoconference, chaired by Z.V. Doguzova, head of the Federal Agency for Tourism of the Ministry of Economic Development of the Russian Federation (Rostourism). SCO Secretary-General Vladimir Norov also participated in the meeting.

The SCO Secretary-General expressed gratitude to the Russian side for organizing the event. He emphasized that, according to experts from the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and UNCTAD (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development), tourism—along with closely related sectors such as hospitality, restaurant services, leisure, and transportation—was among the most affected areas of the economy due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Undoubtedly, the restoration of the tourism industry will only be possible after quarantine measures, restrictions on movement, and other limitations on economic activity are lifted, strict safety measures are implemented, and the health of the populations in our countries is ensured.

Taking into account the economic situation and available opportunities, SCO member states have adopted and implemented various programs to support the economy and the most affected sectors, including tourism, transport, and the hospitality industry.

The SCO Secretary-General also noted that the Secretariat, together with the member states, is implementing the program “SCO—Our Common Home”,



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which includes cultural days, national holidays, symposiums, conferences, and roundtables of SCO member states.

According to V. Norov, the Secretariat has developed the concept of a cycle of events called “Eight Wonders of the SCO” to promote the tourism brands of SCO member states. These events are aimed at showcasing the cultural diversity and tourism potential of the organization and have been successfully held in various countries.

The Secretary-General emphasized that, despite the coronavirus pandemic, the SCO has genuine potential to become one of the world’s economic centers in the near future, which will positively impact the development of tourism.

He noted that the tourism sector can and should be a driving force for restoring the economy to its “pre-pandemic” level, its recovery, and subsequent growth. The pandemic has caused significant difficulties and challenges for many sectors across all countries. At the same time, new opportunities have emerged through the use of modern information and communication technologies.

As an example, China has successfully implemented public-private partnerships, including in the tourism sector. Companies such as the Alibaba Group have created platforms that enable the use of advanced technologies, including big data and artificial intelligence, to provide contactless services, virtual tours, cloud exhibitions, reduce operational costs, share tourism experiences, offer high-tech services, and respond flexibly to emergencies such as the current coronavirus outbreak. Information technology and innovation can help create a qualitatively new tourism environment in SCO countries.

Uzbekistan can make an effective contribution to the tourism sector. The opening of the “Silk Road” International Tourism University in Samarkand, in accordance with a decree by the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, provides a coordinated higher education institution to train tourism specialists for all SCO countries.

The agreement on cooperation in the tourism sector will contribute to regional economic and cultural development. At the same time, global experience shows that, to achieve high profitability in tourism, it is necessary to coordinate the efforts of all market participants. The SCO space holds significant prospects in this area as well.



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