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Speech on **E-paths connect Europe and people**, 20 May 10:40 – 11:10

Dear all

Thank you very much for the invitation to this conference, which says that trails are good for many things among others for hikers, for communities and for economy.

Trails are many things and can be used for many things. There are trails close to the homes, where people use the trail to get fresh air or to go with the dog. There are trails in the nature, where people may walk for some hours or a day for exercise and mental charging. Then there are the longer routes, which are typically used for weekend or holiday trips, where you want to experience nature and culture along the route. And now we are approaching the E-paths, which are the very long routes of thousands of kilometers.

The European paths – the E-paths – are the backbone of Europe’s walking trails. They are long distance trails that connect national and regional walking trails and provide intercultural experiences across the borders. In other words: E-paths connect people and are the paths for peace, understanding and unity.

E-Paths are the European long distance trails which link the countries from North Cape to Crete and from the Atlantic Ocean to the Carpathians and the Black Sea and also to the Baltic Sea.

There are 12 E-Paths, bearing the name of E1 to E12. These E-Paths are waymarked and maintained by the members of the European Ramblers Association.

The E-Paths run on existing national or regional trails with the trails’ own marking. However, it has been agreed to identify the E-paths also here and there with a uniform marking: a blue shield with the yellow stars of Europe, in the middle of which is the letter E and the corresponding number of the E-path.

Over the last years ERAs E-paths Working Group has worked hard to improve the knowledge of the E-paths. Furthermore, we have created the so-called Verified E-paths, which are E-paths, where the data are confirmed by our member organisations. The data include the track and a lot of good information about the E-path in the specific country. Today nearly 50% of all E-paths in Europe are Verified E-paths. ERA recommends to use the Verified E-paths. The two E-paths in the Baltic states are Verified E-paths.

In 1972, when the E-paths were created, the vision was mentioned by ERA president Dr. Fahrback. He said: “The European long-distance hiking trails are intended to connect the most important low mountain ranges and hiking areas in Central Europe, and they are intended to bring the mountain and hiking clubs and their members working in these areas closer together. We want to use these paths to bring people from different countries together. We want hikers to be able to cross national borders with their feet, with strength and speed, if possible, without passport and customs controls, and for them to feel at home everywhere. These hiking trails should bring the people closer together, but they should also become great exclamation points for the cultivation of hiking, because there is no better recreation for people than hiking and the hiking trails are the best connections from people to people”.

The vision back then has largely become reality in the meantime. Today, the network of routes planned and coordinated by the ERA comprises 12 long-distance hiking trails totaling over 65,000 km in length, which are maintained and improved by many hundreds of volunteer hikers.

After the fall of the iron-curtain the E-paths were extended to the former WAPA-countries in the eastern part of Europe. So, with these extensions, Europe is really united in one Europe.

Tomorrow morning I will travel to Detmold in Germany, where the project “12 E-paths 1 Europe” will start. The project is also called “Europe on foot”.

The vision of the project says: “Hiking means freedom. Long-distance hiking on the European long-distance hiking trails even means “unlimited” freedom. Seeing and getting to know Europe with your own eyes – that is the declared aim of the initiative. Laid out over several years, we want to tell the myths of the E-paths”.

2022 will be the year of the revival of the trails managed by ERA and, in times of war in the heart of Europe, also the year of European unity. To this end, the German hiking magazine, together with its Austrian partner, has launched “12 Ways – 1 Europe” (or 12 E-paths 1 Europe). This is an initiative to focus on unlimited freedom in Europe, as a strong commitment to more sustainability through gentle tourism, supported by the fascination of long-distance hiking.

Every year, a team of hikers made up of editors, influencers and celebrities will walk one of the twelve E-paths in sections and discover the limitless diversity of rural areas in Europe.

The year 2022 for the start of the initiative could hardly be more appropriate: Not only will the E1, the first of the twelve E-paths, turn 50 in 2022, the Maastricht Treaties (on which the current version of the EU is based) will also be celebrating their 30th birthday-year anniversary. The European idea is the indisputable core of the “12 Ways – 1 Europe” initiative. We hike through Europe’s enchanting regions, meet interesting people, and discover the most exciting myths and stories in the heart of Europe on foot.

I hope that you will support the ideas of “12 E-paths 1 Europe”, especially when E9 and E11 will be in focus.

I am very happy that both E9 and E11 have been extended to the Baltic States. It has been a huge job to establish these two routes. And with them, and especially with E11, the Baltic countries are connected to and united with the rest of Europe. E11 passes 6 countries from the Baltic Sea to the English Channel and E9 passes 10 countries along the coastlines from the Baltic Sea to Tarifa in Spain. So, the two E-paths are in every way fantastic opportunities to experience Europe and experience unlimited freedom. And I sincerely hope that the two E-paths will bring many hikers from other parts of Europe to your beautiful countries to have great experiences here.

Thank you very much.