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Turkey is gifted with a unique geographical positioning. It is a bridge connecting not only East and West but also past and future

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Şekib Avdagiç, president of the Istanbul Chamber of Commerce and Istanbul Convention and Visitors Bureau (ICVB) provides an in-depth analysis of the ICVB's services, the main trends shaping the city's congress sector and the importance of the healthcare and life sciences industry to Istanbul's corporate tourism.

Could you introduce yourself and the ICVB to our readers?

The ICVB was established in 1997. It is a private, non-profit destination marketing organization established by the public and private sectors with a responsibility for profiling, promoting and marketing Istanbul as a congress and incentive travel destination.

The Istanbul Convention and Visitors Bureau was formed under the auspices of TUGEV (Tourism Development and Education Foundation). Participants, in exchange for contributions determined by fixed criteria, can take advantage of the Bureau's variety of services.

The Istanbul Convention and Visitors Bureau assists any association, company or corporate body throughout all stages of event planning. The ICVB is dedicated to building Istanbul's potential as a

destination and assisting companies and associations in getting the most out of their events in Istanbul. Working in close coordination with its members and other tourism industry associations, the ICVB designs and implements strategic marketing campaigns and special events designed to raise Istanbul's profile as a conference destination. For meeting planners, the ICVB, in addition to producing the Istanbul Meeting Planner's Guide, acts as a clearinghouse for information regarding conferences, corporate meetings and incentives in Istanbul. Furthermore, the ICVB is instrumental in helping Turkish associations arrange their bids to bring their international associations to Istanbul.

I became the President of the Istanbul Chamber of Commerce this past April. In May, I took the position of the President of ICVB. Although I am relatively new to this position, we have already had our first event, the third "Istanbul Congress Ambassador Program." With this event, we encouraged local academics to become ambassadors for the city of Istanbul when they participate in the various international associations to which they belong, with the aim of ultimately increasing the number of international congresses in our city.

The ICVB is currently working to position our city even further up the rankings as a leading meetings and conventions destination, and we strive to be among the world's top 10 in the near future. We have thus developed and started executing our strategic plan with this aim in mind. Our plan and vision will provide strategic direction for our organization and it outlines a roadmap to help the ICVB achieve its long-term objective of strengthening Istanbul's status as a top MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Congresses, and Events) destination.

How, specifically, is the ICVB working to bring more congresses to Istanbul?

Recently, Istanbul hosted 155 congresses with 100,000 delegates – we believe our city is capable of more, though, and we are thereby aiming exceed this total by 200. Moreover, we continue to make overtures to international bodies and attract new events. We recently signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement with ICCA (International Congress and Convention Association) to increase our networking with the top international associations. We have furthermore embarked on two digital branding campaigns, which can be found on howtoistanbul.com and oneistanbul.com. Lastly, we are also attending international congresses, incentives and tourism fairs.

What is Istanbul's competitive advantage when it comes to the congress sector?

Turkey is gifted with a unique geographical positioning. It is a bridge connecting not only East and West but also past and future. Not all cities in the world are blessed with the unique venue selection that is Istanbul; our city boasts sites from the fourth century as well as sanctuaries from all three Western religions. With its historic venues, Istanbul offers numerous creative and innovative ideas for event hosting.

Moreover, Istanbul has fantastic and well equipped modern facilities for the MICE industry, including transportation links and a wide variety of accommodation and meeting venues. Nevertheless, Istanbul is a city that continues to expand rapidly with new developments in its tourism infrastructure, ultimately helping to increase its capacity to host and accommodate ever higher numbers of visitors, both for business and leisure.

A city with a global outlook, Istanbul is a leading MICE destination. Istanbul is home to seven convention centres and three exhibition centres, all of which have the capacity to host any type of event, from incentives to meetings attended by up to 30,000 guests. Our city offers four separate, yet coordinated, meeting and exhibition clusters, found in the Airport District, the Congress Valley, the Golden Horn and Asian side.

Istanbul is accessible from all parts of the world. Moreover, visitors can access all parts of the city once they are here thanks to our sophisticated public transportation network. In general, we can say that Istanbul rivals large European cities such as London, Paris and Barcelona with its congress facilities. With its strong infrastructure, high capacity congress centres and more than 110,000 beds for accommodation, Istanbul is the rising star in the world of congress tourism.

How important is the congress sector to the economy of Istanbul?

With the help of the ICVB, Istanbul has managed to increase the number of congresses hosted in the past decade. Istanbul, alone, generates 70 percent of Turkey's congress revenues. Globally speaking, Istanbul is a top congress destination. Even though there has been a decrease in the number of congresses over the past few years due to the global economic turmoil and safety issues, Istanbul has continued to host big and prestigious congresses with high attendance.

Today, around 100 million people worldwide are travelling for business and congresses. These delegates have incredibly beneficial consumer tendencies, with a purchasing power four times higher than that of regular tourists. In that sense, the Congress sector in Istanbul contributes a great deal of income to the city's economy and has the potential to do so even more in the future.

Could you offer a description of the ICVB's members and their venue capacity?

The ICVB's members cover the full spectrum of the meeting industry, including leading hotels, conference and exhibition centres, DMCs (destination management companies), PCOs (professional congress organizers), airlines and other companies involved directly or indirectly in the conference and incentive tourism sector.

Nearly all of the ICVB's members are located in the city centre, making it very convenient for visitors to access anywhere they wish. All of our member organizations employ a top-notch, experienced staff. Our service providing members are capable of finding solutions and suggestions to any problem. Our location providers create unforgettable memories with their services. And, last but not least, our distinguished member, the world-famous Turkish Airlines, flies to more destination than any other airline on Earth, making Istanbul a global hub.

How important is the healthcare and life sciences sector to Istanbul's congress industry?

The healthcare and life sciences sector is not just important to the congress industry, but to the city of Istanbul, more broadly. We have state-of-the-art hospitals that are internationally certified. Our healthcare and life sciences sector is a rising star in the international arena, and in this sense, it is benefiting the economy at large – the congress sector particularly. As the quality of the city's healthcare infrastructure rises, it increases Istanbul's notoriety and popularity for international congresses. People want to come and see the facilities for themselves.

Out of all of the congresses hosted in Istanbul in 2016, 23 percent were related to the healthcare and life sciences industries. In 2017, Istanbul hosted an even higher number of healthcare-related congresses, and it remains the single largest industry represented in the convention and exposition industry. It is a sector that we prioritize, and we are experienced and well suited to host the world's top healthcare and pharma-related expositions.

Any final comments to our readers?

Istanbul is the only city in the world in which you can sit in a room, as we are doing now, and see another continent outside of your window. Our city is completely unique. We have the world's first

mall (the Grand Bazaar), incredible monuments like the Hagia Sophia and an unrivalled culture of hospitality. We look forward to welcoming future congresses to our great city.

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