



Videoconference:

Impact of COVID 19 on the agricultural sector in the Western Balkans and possible joint actions

8 April 2020

VIDEOCONFERENCE SUMMARY

SWG, within its mission for regional cooperation in the Western Balkans, at the initiative of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy of North Macedonia, organized a videoconference in which Ministers and high level officials responsible for agriculture in the countries/territories of the Western Balkans discussed: current situation in agriculture in each country/territory; food self-sufficiency; surpluses and deficits of specific types of agri-food products (primary, processed and animal feed); open agricultural trade issues and possible actions for trade facilitation.

Conclusions

- **Main issues** caused by COVID-19 pandemic in the agricultural sector are: restrictions in movement of goods, changes in consumption patterns and in the operation of agri-food production systems, lack of workforce in certain countries as a result of border closures, social distance requirements, mandatory isolation or quarantine. Covid-19 pandemic is expected to have a direct impact on agriculture in terms of production, works in the fields, spring agricultural activities, mild increase in prices of imports, and might affect the supply of inputs;
- **Food security** is one of the most important issues for all population of the region Therefore, food security, availability and food production are the highest priorities for the ministries under these circumstances. Currently, food security in the Western Balkans is ensured and there is enough food in the region available for the population. Shortages of certain products are managed in a satisfactory manner;
- Variety of innovative support measures are taken on national level by the authorities of the Western Balkan countries/territories. In some of them green markets are closed, while others have introduced special regime of work for them (Croatian decision on the special way of work of the green markets during COVID-19 pandemic provided in [Annex-1](#)) and most of them introduce **online green markets** with organized delivery;
- **Free movement of the agricultural products** will be assured by all the governments in the region, while respecting all recommendations and precautions by the relevant health authorities. Especially this should be done through:
 - **Simplification of or derogation** from certain border procedures, for instance in relation to on-the-spot controls;



- **Increased efficiency and flow** through the established “**Green lanes**” and “**One-Stop-Shops**” on the border crossings, by avoiding unnecessary administrative and financial burdens (taxes, fees, duties) for the transporters, exporters and importers of food;
- **More efficient transit across the countries**, i.e. avoiding convoys of trucks which reduce the speed of food supply, within the limits of provided instructions and recommendations from the health authorities;
- **Uninterrupted transportation of workforce** for agriculture across borders in the Western Balkans region;
- **Continuous monitoring** of the levels of production and reserves, **exchanging information** on surpluses and deficits via SWG Secretariat and **organization of exchanges of necessary goods**;
- Continuous exchange of information on **measures taken on national level**, and the corresponding effects.
- Such measures are also requested in the trade with the EU countries. Due to the fact that the Western Balkans countries are in a process of integration with the EU and that the Western Balkan region is surrounded by the EU external borders, **EU should consider a more preferential trade treatment** of the Western Balkan countries;
- **EU programs** intended to support the agricultural sector in the Western Balkans (including IPARD) need **to be adjusted** to the current circumstances, providing necessary flexibility and adjusting deadlines considering the unpredictability of the situation;
- One of the main objectives of the **Croatian presidency** with the EU is **increased mobility**. In line with that, the expectations from the Western Balkans countries/territories are eased flow of agricultural products through Croatia and Slovenia;
- **Continuous communication, coordination and solidarity** among the ministries (on bilateral and multilateral level) is necessary in order to counteract the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on agriculture and rural development in the region. Therefore, regular meetings will be held. The next meeting is tentatively foreseen to take place on **22 April 2020** and also include EU Commission representatives.

Videoconference participants on behalf of the invited ministries:

- **Minister Trajan Dimkovski** - Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy, Republic of North Macedonia
- **Minister Bledi Cuci** - Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, Republic of Albania
- **Assistant Minister Dusan Neskovic** - Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Relations, Bosnia and Herzegovina
- **Minister Semsudin Dedic** - Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Water Management and Forestry, Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bosnia and Herzegovina
- **Minister Boris Pasalic/Assistant Minister Gordana Rokvic** - Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management, Republic of Srpska, Bosnia and Herzegovina
- **State Secretary Tugomir Majdak** – Ministry of Agriculture of Croatia



- **Minister Besian Mustafa/ Acting State Secretary Bekim Hoxha** - Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Rural Development, Kosovo*
- **Minister Milutin Simovic/Director Darko Konjevic** - Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, Montenegro
- **State Secretary Jože Podgoršek** – Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food, Slovenia
- **Chief of cabinet Marko Saranovac** - Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy, Republic of Serbia

* *This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence*