



CONCLUSIONS FROM THE ANNUAL WORKING MEETING OF MINISTERS AND HEADS OF DELEGATIONS RESPONSIBLE FOR AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH EAST EUROPE

17th November 2021

Tirana, Albania

We, the Ministers and Heads of Delegations from South East European countries

GATHERED in Tirana, Albania on 17th of November 2021 at the 15th Annual Meeting of the Ministers of Agriculture organized under the joint auspices of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of Albania and the Regional Rural Development Standing Working Group (SWG) in South Eastern Europe, to discuss the challenges of the regional cooperation in the years ahead and progress of EU integration and approximation of the sector of agriculture and rural development.

WELCOME the Brdo Declaration of October 6th, and unequivocally expressed support for the European perspective of the Western Balkans. Yet, the prospects towards the future of the WB countries on the EU integration process are perceived with hesitance. Therefore, we appeal once again to the EU member states and European institutions to undertake encouraging steps and accelerate EU integration process for the Western Balkans.

DECLARED our strong determination on the path of the EU approximation in the area of agriculture and rural development. Our political agenda remains focused on the full membership in the European Union, and we are undertaking all of the necessary steps to reach that goal.

STRESS the need for more political and economic support in this process from our EU partners, and concrete actions are needed to reassure, stabilize and accelerate our EU accession path.

REITERATE our determination to enhance regional cooperation in all fields under our authority in order to enable our agricultural sector to grow and enlarge regional trade and exchange of goods. In addition, we proclaim our dedication to initiate constructive and innovative ways to jointly advance bilateral and regional solutions for the challenges which our agricultural sector is facing.

CONFIRM our commitment to implement provisions of the adopted Declaration on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans in Sofia 2020, within the authority of the Ministries of agriculture from SEE. Along with the provisions of the adopted Sofia Declaration, we also endorse the implementation of the Action Plan as stipulated in the Brdo Declaration, October 2021.

RECONFIRM the role of SWG as an implementing regional coordinator of the actions foreseen in the Green Agenda Action Plan as well as other cross-cutting topics under the responsibilities of Ministries of Agriculture in SEE. We invite European Commission and international partner organizations (GIZ, UN FAO, USAID and other) and Governments of the EU member states, to cooperate more widely with SWG, in order to implement their regional agenda and to create synergies for sustainable agriculture and rural development in SEE countries in line with the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans.

TASK SWG to undertake the necessary actions to facilitate the work of the specific Regional Expert Advisory Working Groups enlisted in the Action Plan for implementation of the Sofia Declaration on the Green Agenda (GA) for the Western Balkans (Action Plan).

PROCLAIM our readiness to provide necessary resources (technical, intellectual and financial) for the implementation of the activities stipulated in the GA Action Plan and foreseen to be realized in the upcoming years.

REMAIN devoted to the efforts in aligning our agricultural and rural development policies with the new EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). We reiterate our commitment reform and develop agendas in the agriculture and rural development sector under the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) 2021-2027.

SUPPORT the transition to sustainable food systems, that should have a neutral or positive environmental impact, help to mitigate climate change and adapt to its impacts, reverse the loss of biodiversity, making sure that everyone has access to sufficient, safe, nutritious, sustainable food.

APPRECIATE the continuation of the IPARD support for the agriculture and rural development sector and encourage EU to consider the implementation of IPARD in all of the Western Balkans.

ACKNOWLEDGE that implementation of IPARD III programmes is a new challenge, and welcome further simplification of rules and procedures in order to use all funds so needed for the development of agriculture and rural areas in the Western Balkans.

HIGHLIGHT the overall work done by the SWG and especially in the period of COVID -19 crisis, where the facilitation of the regional cooperation was essential in overcoming sudden problems in the food supply chain.

EMPHASIZE a need to evaluate the overall resilience of the value chains to better protect citizens from any possible disruptions in the future.

ACKNOWLEDGE and commit to the recommendations outlined in the Agricultural Policy Forum (APF) – Vrnjačka Banja Agenda 2021. We especially underscore the importance of the matters deliberated, specifically in:

- Emphasizing **the importance of fully establishing Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems** by using opportunities provided by IPARD III in the Western Balkans based on national action plans, incorporated and integrated into the national strategies for agriculture and rural development and coordinated at the regional level;
- Recognizing the **need for creating favorable conditions** for young and women entrepreneurs in agriculture and rural areas, including investment incentives, access to low-cost credit for start-ups and policy measures related to easing access to land;
- Confirming that the wine sector is very important and **contribute to achieving general economic and environmental goals** and that improving competitiveness and reduction of the environmental impact of the wineries should be of the highest priority for the WB.
- Enabling cross border cooperation, Area-Based Development (ABD), trade facilitation and easing border crossing to result in **regional tourism products** of the Western Balkans;
- Ensuring that Leader measures under the IPARD III programmes **contribute to the improvement** of the socio-economic life of the local community, the improvement of



public spaces, environmental standards in LAG's areas and promotion of renewable energy use by the local community.

ENDORSE the report of the Secretary General on the results of the SWG work for the year of 2021 and the achievements made in the frame of its operations. We reconfirm our commitment to regional cooperation under the SWG umbrella with improved technical and financial care for achieving the set operational measures of the organization.

CONGRATULATE the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management of Serbia for successfully holding the Presidency of the SWG Assembly during the year 2021. The SWG Presidency and the duties for the year of 2022 have been handed over from the current Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management of Serbia to the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of Albania. The 22nd Agricultural Policy Forum in South Eastern Europe will be held in Albania in the autumn of 2022.

APPRECIATE the support provided by all participating Governments, members and observers of SWG. We value the positive contribution by partner organizations and institutions in their work to promote healthy, diverse and productive environment in SEE, in particular: the line Ministries of Agriculture and Rural Development, the European Commission (DG AGRI, DG NEAR, DG JRC), the German Federal Government (BMZ and BMEL), Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), United States Agency of International Development (USAID) and Regional Cooperation Council (RCC).

EXPRESS our gratitude for the warm hospitality provided by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of Albania. Recurrently, we have defined key steps to enhance the impact of regional cooperation. SWG remains an essential structure contributing to implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, as one of the means to create opportunities for the necessary inclusive growth and job creation.



Present representatives of institutions during the meeting

SWG MEMBERS INSTITUTIONS

Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, Albania

Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management, Republic of Srpska, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Ministry of Agriculture Forestry and Rural Development, Kosovo*

Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management, Montenegro

Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy, North Macedonia

Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management, Serbia

SWG OBSERVER INSTITUTIONS

Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Regions and Tourism, Austria

Ministry of Agriculture, Croatia

Ministry of Agriculture, Hungary

Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture, Federal Republic of Germany

Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food, Slovenia

Ministry of Agriculture and Food Industry, Moldova

INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS AND ORGANIZATIONS

European Commission (EC)

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)

* 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.