

Declaration of the Ministers of Agriculture and Heads of Delegations of South Eastern Europe

Regional Cooperation for Sustainable Growth and Economic Prosperity

Introduction

At the Annual Meeting of the Ministers held in Struga, Republic of Macedonia in November 2018, Ministers and Heads of Delegations adopted a set of agriculture and rural development objectives to be achieved in line with the European Union (EU) integration goals and benchmarks.

The Struga Declaration 2018 on “Regional Cooperation for Sustainable Growth and Economic Prosperity in South Eastern Europe” (SEE) sets a newly directed framework, outlining a more targeted approach to agriculture and rural development and streamlines the regional cooperation vision in respect to common growth and economic prosperity in SEE region.

The Annual Meeting of the Ministers reconfirmed that agriculture and rural development remain a priority to the EU integration agenda of the SEE countries, and a crucial policy initiative for SEE sustainable growth and economic prosperity.

STRUGA DECLARATION OF MINISTERS AND HEADS OF DELEGATIONS IN SOUTH EAST EUROPE 15th November 2018

We, the Ministers and Heads of Delegations from South East European countries, having met at the Twelfth Annual Meeting of the Ministers in Struga, Republic of Macedonia, from 14th – 16th November 2018, on the theme “**Regional Cooperation for Sustainable Growth and Economic Prosperity**”:

Discussed priority issues of a joint matter for agriculture and rural development in the SEE region.

Recall our previous Declaration for agriculture and rural development in South East Europe, convened in Kopaonik, Republic of Serbia on 15th November 2013 and appraised the regional cooperation objectives and common interests achieved under the Standing Working Group for Regional Rural Development (SWG RRD) umbrella during the preceding stage.

Acknowledge the persistent efforts made by SWG RRD at national and regional levels, and the positive performance results that our agricultural and rural development sectors have been registering in recent years. As a result of this performance, we highlight the progress made towards alignment, harmonization and coordination of initiatives and activities of stakeholders and partners and stress the significance of sustaining this momentum.

Reaffirm our dedication towards EU enlargement agenda, following up to the objectives of the criteria of Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union and the Copenhagen criteria, along with meeting the membership conditions for comprehensive and convincing reforms on competitiveness, regional cooperation and reconciliation.

Recognize the significance of the region's economic potential and continue to devote our efforts for aligning our policies towards Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) model and respective measures that contribute towards economic adjustments and increase of competitiveness of the SEE economies, particularly the Western Balkans (WB).

Retain committed to the reform framework and affiliation of national structures for proper implementation and management of Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA), particularly the IPA for rural development (IPARD), in order to prepare our countries for successful participation and implementation of CAP of the EU after accession.

Highlight the importance of balanced socio-economic development of rural areas via implementation of the Area Based Development Approach (ABDA) and strive towards its operational upkeep and financial support for ensuring competitiveness and local economic growth in the targeted border areas.

Appel to the European Commission on the prominence and necessity for continuous technical and financial support to SWG RRD within the ongoing regional cooperation in the field of Agriculture and Rural Development of Western Balkan Countries, as well as territorial cooperation and implementation of the ABDA in rural areas. The support will further upkeep the EU integration processes of the Western Balkan Countries, retaining regional rural agenda, ensuring participatory policy-development process and equivalent socio-economic growth cross all regions of Western Balkan Countries.

Welcome the Agricultural Policy Forum (APF) endorsements and the Jahorina Agenda 2018, held on 16th -18th October 2018 in Jahorina, Bosnia and Herzegovina under the theme: "Agricultural Policy: Determinant of the Regional Rural Development and EU Perspectives of the SEE".

We hereby reviewed and positively assessed the following recommendations:

1. Espousal of policy measures to **enhance competitiveness and socio-economic development of small farmers and rural businesses** to release the potential for income generation and job creation in rural areas as per the new Strategy for EU Regional and Territorial Policy and IPARD. Introduction of a mix of policy measures, including investment support, intensive and consistent knowledge transfer and support to establish and manage various types of cooperation. These elements need to be introduced as a new measure in the preparation of IPARD III;
2. **Agrobiodiversity** is an issue of great importance. National legislation needs to be harmonized with ratified international instruments, such as conventions, treaties and their protocols, as well as with the relevant EU legislation relevant for biodiversity and especially for the conservation and use of plant and animal genetic resources in agriculture and food production in Western Balkans;
3. **Agri-environmental policy (AEP)** serves as a support tool for rural development: for improvement of environmental impact of agricultural activities and decrease abandonment of agricultural land. As such, with improved sectoral cooperation and strategic development, proper AEP implementation will ensure effective framework designed to support environmentally friendly farming practices and approaches.

4. For improving the **agricultural land market** and increasing small farms' access to land, a well-defined land policy is needed. Introducing land tax on unutilized agricultural land, to stimulate land markets and reduce land abandonment. The restitution and denationalization process must be completed. Legislation should be created/implemented to prevent further fragmentation and loss of agricultural land. State Land Bank / Fund support for land consolidation and the development of land markets should be established.
5. Strengthening **regional cooperation** in the area of agriculture and rural economy is essential and would lead to improved competitiveness of the sector and facilitated trade among the SEE countries, increased cooperation among the private operators across the borders and more value added created in the region. The latter will contribute towards releasing the potential for economic growth, diversification of economic activities and job creation in rural areas, subsequently decreasing the rural depopulation in SEE region.

Emphasise that the well-established regional work on agriculture and rural development policy and socio-economic outlook in rural areas on behalf of SWG RRD should remain a high priority on the regional agenda of SEE and be complemented by further support and cooperation by its member states. Under the SWG RRD umbrella we commit to undertake greater ownership of regional cooperation, which is key for stability and sustainable development.

Congratulate the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Relations of Bosnia and Herzegovina for successfully holding the Presidency of the SWG RRD Assembly during the year 2018. The SWG RRD Presidency and the duties for the year of 2019 have been handed over from the current Presidency the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Relation of Bosnia and Herzegovina to the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy of Republic of Macedonia.

Appreciate the support provided by all participating Governments, members and observers of the SWG RRD. We value the positive contribution by partner organizations and institutions in their work to promote healthy, diverse and productive environment in SEE, in particularly: 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), and Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and Regional Cooperation Council (RCC).

Express our gratitude for the warm hospitality provided by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy of Republic of Macedonia. We reaffirm our commitment to the implementation of the set objectives in this Declaration and the dedication on defined key steps to enhance the impact of regional cooperation. The results will be reviewed on the next scheduled Annual working meeting of the Ministers of Agriculture in 2019.

Signed by:

<p>Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, Albania</p> <p>On behalf of H.E. Niko Peleshi Minister</p> <p>Mr. Ilir Halilaj Deputy Minister</p> 	<p>Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Relations, Bosnia and Herzegovina</p> <p>H.E. Mirko Šarović Minister</p> 
<p>Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management, Republic of Srpska, Bosnia and Herzegovina</p> <p>On behalf of H.E. Stevo Mirjanić Minister</p> <p>Ms. Gordana Rokvić Assistant Minister</p> 	<p>Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Rural Development, Kosovo*</p> <p>On behalf of H.E. Nenad Rikalo Minister</p> <p>Mr. Mevludin Krasniqi Deputy Minister</p> 
<p>Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy, Macedonia</p> <p>H.E. Ljupčo Nikolovski Minister</p> 	<p>Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, Montenegro</p> <p>H.E. Milutin Simović Minister</p> 



Kosovo* "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."