

Conclusions of the Ministerial Meeting of the Ministers/ Heads of Delegations responsible for agriculture and rural development in South Eastern Europe

Convened in Jahorina, Bosnia and Herzegovina

November 7th, 2023

The 17th Annual Working Meeting on November 7th 2023, brought together Ministers of Agriculture from South East Europe (SEE) and Delegation Heads at Jahorina, Bosnia and Herzegovina. This event was jointly hosted by the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Relations of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Regional Rural Development Standing Working Group (SWG) in South Eastern Europe.

The gathering adhered to the established practice of convening a regional platform for the annual Ministerial Meeting. Delegations representing various countries/territories engaged in open discussions about shared interests, assessed the national policy objectives and priorities, and found common ground on various meeting agenda items.

The main discussions summarized in the conclusions below, were about various aspects of regional cooperation in agriculture and rural development to accelerate the European Union integration process. Considering the meeting format and the progress made by each party regarding the reforms they have undertaken, the cooperation between the SEE Ministries of Agriculture maintains its focus on implementing regional initiatives and activities utilizing the SWG as an intergovernmental platform for collaboration and networking.

CONCLUSIONS OF THE 17th ANNUAL MEETING OF THE MINISTERS OF AGRICULTURE OF SOUTH EAST EUROPE

We, the Ministers, and Heads of Delegations of the Ministries of Agriculture from SEE, have gathered in Jahorina, Bosnia and Herzegovina, to discuss the future developments of agriculture and rural development sector in the SEE region and review the process of the regional cooperation in the given field. We reconfirm our commitment and willingness to strive towards the mutual cooperation agenda and shared vision for a better future for our region.

In particular, We:

1. **AFFIRM** our firm dedication to the EU integration process, which is essential in advancing agricultural and rural development reforms. This commitment aligns with our national political agenda as we aspire to become EU members.
2. **REASSERT** our determination to harmonize our agricultural and rural development policies effectively with the EU's guidelines, particularly by realigning our policies with the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). In parallel, we pledge to continue implementing available IPARD Programs with transparency, efficiency, and accountability, aiming to boost economic prosperity in the SEE region's rural areas.
3. **REMAIN COMMITTED** to the continuous work on the actions defined in the Green Agenda (GAWB) and Pillar 4 of the adopted Action Plan. All the actions enlisted are of equal importance and need to be addressed simultaneously. Given our deep concerns about the

impact of climate change on agriculture, we are actively engaged and endorsing the formulation and preparation of Strategic Road Maps and Action Plans for climate change adaptation in the agricultural sector.

4. **APPRECIATE** the launch of the Regional Climate Partnership, with the aim, among others, of promoting a forward-looking Strategic Climate Dialogue and building sustainable agriculture and food systems. We expect formulation of appropriate measures and effective coordination related to Climate Change Adaptation in Agriculture. We remain dedicated to incorporating climate adaptation measures and conditionality principles into the development and reform of our agricultural policies for future sector investments.
5. **EXTEND** a warm welcome to the conclusions of the Berlin Process Summit held in Tirana in October 2023, concerning inclusion of our countries in the EU Value Chain Partnership, and emphasized importance of the implementation of the Green Agenda. Our institutions are set to play an essential role in implementing these conclusions. We value recognizing the significance of enhanced cooperation in agriculture, food, rural development, and forestry to address sustainability and food security challenges effectively. In addition, we welcome the recognized reputation of our regional cooperation within the Standing Working Group for Regional Rural Development (SWG RRD), and we echo the call of the EU, EU Member States, and other International Development Organizations to support our endeavours in continuous policy reforms.
6. **ACKNOWLEDGED** and **APPRECIATE** the references outlined in the Podgorica Agenda 2023, which emerged from an extensive discussion during the Agricultural Policy Forum, specifically:
 - the need for a multidimensional and collaborative approach to address the adaptation of the agricultural sector in response to the negative effects of climate change and gradual transformation of the food systems by reducing the environmental and climate food print of food production and processing.
 - the necessity of improving food security in the region, given market disruptions caused by global and regional political instability.
 - urgency to legislate and implement the Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems (AKIS) Strategic Road Maps and action plans to accelerate green transition, digitalization, and application of new innovative solutions in agricultural production.
 - acceleration of the process of transposition and enforcement of regulation on organic production in labeling of organic products.
 - align national wine regulations with the regulations and quality systems of the EU and introduce fungus-resistant grapevine varieties for a sustainable approach to wine production in the region.
 - continuation of further institutional development of the Western Balkan Soil Partnership.
 - upgrade of existing and introduction of new policy measures that can empower and actively involve rural youth in the development processes of rural areas.
 - complete implementation of the EU LEADER policy into national agricultural and rural development policies.

- Inducement of the “Close to Nature Forest Management” (CNFM) concept in national forestry management policies as a cornerstone for increasing biodiversity value and strengthening forests’ resilience to climate change.
7. **ENDORSE** the Report of the Secretary General, highlighting the achievements of the SWG in the past year. We commend the dedication of the SWG Secretariat, SWG Assembly, and all the technical Regional Expert Advisory Working Groups (REAWG’s). We anticipate that the organization will continue to deliver results-oriented performance. We especially emphasize the principles of upholding regional ownership, transparency, accountability, flexibility, and cost-effectiveness within the organization. We reiterate our commitment to provide political, financial, and technical support to the initiatives and actions taken by SWG to ensure the sustainability of its operations.
 8. **WELCOME** the presence of delegations from countries with observer status within SWG along with guest countries and appreciate their encouragement and contributions to our EU integration efforts. The political support and insightful recommendations presented by the EU Representative (Commissioner for Agriculture) are highly valued. We remain committed to utilizing financial and technical assistance from the EU and other EU Member States efficiently and in a partnership manner.
 9. **EXPRESS** our gratitude for the bolstered partnership within our organization and we welcome the full-fledged membership of the Republic of Moldova represented by the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Industry, and the status of observer of the French Republic represented by the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Sovereignty. We expect other invited countries to join the SWG network.
 10. **SUPPORT** the conclusion of the overall extensive bottom-up consultation process wrapped-up in Sarajevo in May 2023 to incorporate a new pillar in the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR) for non-EU countries with an aim to promote rural development and sustainable agri-food systems. The additional pillar should consider supporting a resilient economic growth of rural areas, decrease brain-drain, improve local communities’ livelihood, and reinforce cooperation within and outside the region of the non-EU Adriatic Ionian Region (AIR) countries.
 11. **COMMEND** the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Water Management of Montenegro for their successful stewardship of the SWG Assembly Presidency in 2023. The duties of the SWG Presidency for 2024 have been formally transferred to the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Relations of Bosnia and Herzegovina. As a conclusion to their term, Bosnia and Herzegovina will host the 24th Agricultural Policy Forum in South East Europe in the autumn of 2024.
 12. **AFFIRM** our dedication to realizing the objectives outlined in this document and pledge to take concrete actions to ensure the fulfilment of these commitments. The achievements will be evaluated during the 18th Annual Meeting of Agriculture Ministers from South East Europe, which will be presided over by the Republic of North Macedonia in the autumn of 2024.
 13. **HIGHLIGHT** and **APPRECIATE** the warm hospitality provided by the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Relations of Bosnia and Herzegovina and excellent organization of the meeting. We believe that under Bosnia and Herzegovina's Presidency, the SWG will further enhance its role in advocating for policy dialogue with the unwavering commitment and support of our EU partners and supporters.

14. **EXPRESS DEEP GRATITUDE** for the valuable support extended by the supporting governments and institutions:

- The European Commission (DG AGRI)
- The German Federal Ministry of Cooperation and Economic Development (BMZ)
- The German Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Development (BMEL)
- Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) - Commissioned by BMZ
- GFA Consulting Group (GFA)
- The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)
- The International Centre for Advanced Mediterranean Agronomic Studies (CIHEAM)
- The Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)