

Declaration

of the Ministers/ Heads of Delegations responsible for agriculture and rural development in the Western Balkans

Convened in Skopje, Republic of North Macedonia

September 24th, 2024

Ministers of Agriculture and Heads of Delegations from Western Balkans gathered in Skopje, Republic of North Macedonia on 24th of September in the occasion of the 18th Annual Working Meeting organized under joint auspices of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy of the Republic of North Macedonia and Regional Rural Development Standing Working Group in SEE (SWG RRD). The Annual Meeting of the Ministers adopted a set of agriculture and rural development objectives to be achieved in line with the determined political orientation of the Western Balkans and along with the main political goals related to integration of the Western Balkans in the European Union (EU). It used the opportunity to contribute toward the Berlin Process Summit to be held in October 2024 with the intention to include the agriculture and rural development as an integral part of the cooperation agenda of the Berlin Process and a key element of EU integration. The participating delegations and invitees of the meeting aside of Western Balkan Ministers/Heads of Delegations support this agenda.

The Annual Meeting of the Ministers of Agriculture based on the discussions convened

Joint Declaration on Food and Agriculture (Skopje Declaration)

We, the Ministers of Agriculture/Heads of Delegations from the Western Balkans are meeting in Skopje on 24th September 2024, in preparation for the Berlin Process Summit.

Considering that the topics of food, agriculture, rural development and forestry are of the highest priority for the Western Balkan region.

Considering that the multiple recent crises highlight the need to reduce dependencies and to diversify supply chains, while emphasizing the importance of stronger cooperation and solidarity through free trade within the region and with the EU.

Considering the importance of agriculture for our economies and its contribution to economic growth. Being committed to ensure a fair income and economic perspectives for farmers by strengthening their competitiveness on open markets through modernization and sustainable farming practices.

Recognizing the longstanding efforts of regional cooperation in the framework of SWG RRD, including - most recently - the results of the 18th Annual Meeting of the Ministers of Agriculture in Skopje, North Macedonia.

Considering that regional cooperation efforts must be intensified to achieve the commitments under the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans and its implementation Action Plan.

Set the following frame for regional and European collaboration in the period 2025 to 2030.

- We **STRONGLY COMMIT** to the EU integration process and **DECLARE OUR DETERMINATION to fully align by 2030** all legislation related to negotiation chapters 11 – Agriculture and rural development, 12 – Food safety, veterinary and phytosanitary policy and 13 – Fisheries and aquaculture.
- We **REAFFIRM** our determination to resolve all bilateral and/or multilateral conflicts related to the free movement of goods, services, people and capital related to food and agriculture. All related issues shall be handled in good faith and the spirit of solidarity and good neighbourly relations. We continue to pursue regional cooperation, mutual exchange of information and mutual assistance.
- We **WELCOME** and **ENDORSE** the results and recommendation of the Agriculture Policy Forum Agenda Jahorina 2024. We pledge ourselves individually and collectively to undertake actions to implement of the recommendations related to the impacts on climate change in the agriculture,

regional food security and strategic autonomy as well as demographic renewal of the rural areas. We especially:

- **STAY COMMITTED to progressively implement the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (GAWB)** in the Pillar IV Agriculture and sustainable food systems as per the Sofia Declaration 2020 and GAWB Action Plan Brdo Declaration 2021.
 - **DECLARE our strong determination to create policies and national action plans to achieve national and regional food security and safety, and strategic autonomy** in an open economy of assuring sustainable and competitive food production available for the population of the Western Balkans
 - **REAFFIRM our readiness to further design policies to address challenges of the climate change impacts on agriculture and forestry** and integrate the best available knowledge, along with a coordinated approach to prepare national Strategic Road Maps and Action Plans for climate change adaptation in agriculture and related fields.
 - **ARE DETERMINED to create and design agricultural policies in line with the principles of agroecology** as a dynamic concept for transforming the food systems by applying ecological principles to agriculture and ensuring regenerative use of natural resources and ecosystem services.
 - **DEDICATED to address the generational renewal of rural areas and the empowerment of rural women** with innovative policies and measures i.e. focusing on inheritance law, access to farmland, gender equality, early retirement, tax exemptions, investment incentives, and financial support instruments for young farmers and women.
 - **RECOGNIZE the need to prioritize the LEADER approach** in the EU IPARD Program to promote and strengthen the bottom-up approach and strengthen the role of rural communities, Local Action Groups and Civil society in the decision-making process.
 - **ARE DETERMINED to prepare National and regional Organic Action Plans** to achieve the EU targets in relation to agricultural land under organic production and to ensure continued access to the EU Common Market beyond 2025.
 - **Are WILLING to create the framework and assure the financial backup for implementation of the national Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems (AKIS)** plans along with the adoption of legislative solutions.
 - **REAFIRM our commitment to improve the forest policy framework and measures** in the Western Balkans **towards Close to Nature Forest Management.**
 - **REITERATE our dedication to support financially and technically, established Western Balkan Soil Partnership (WBSP)** as per the Memorandum of Understanding for establishment of the WBSP signed in November 2022.
 - **ARE READY to accelerate harmonization of wine legislation** including a legal definition of climatic zones that considers climate change, and to streamline efforts towards modernization of the wine sector with an emphasis on the production of high-quality wines, the valorisation of rural heritage and strengthening “eco & oeno-tourism”.
 - **STRESS the importance of research and innovation in the Agrifood-Sector and therefore WELCOME strategic partnership initiatives** which are able to mobilize excellence base science and knowledge transfer in the region.
- We express our intent to **deepen regional cooperation in the period 2025 to 2030** as well as **cooperation with the EU, its member states, other accession countries and other international organizations in the framework of SWG RRD.** To accelerate progress and increase commitment, **yearly work programmes** should be adopted. **Progress should be discussed regularly** among the stakeholders at the **ministerial meeting** and eventually the Berlin Process Summit. If necessary, the regional and thematic scope of SWG should be extended, i.e., by including non-constituent ministries, regional and international institutions.

Being aware of the importance of the Berlin Process and its proclaimed goals we kindly request the participating members and institutions to thoroughly consider this Declaration and include on the highest political level the importance of the agriculture and rural development related issues in the process of EU integration and to provide political and technical support to the ministries of agriculture of the Western Balkans in their efforts to complete the EU accession process.

End of declaration

We, the participating Ministers/Heads of delegations and invitees:

Acknowledge the report of the Secretary General on the results of the SWG work for the year of 2024 and the achievements made under its operational framework. We congratulate the fortitude of this regional body in upholding regional ownership and its efforts of introducing new paradigms for cooperation towards joint EU enlargement path. We reconfirm our dedication to regional cooperation under the SWG umbrella and continues exchange among members, observers and international organizations on innovative approaches and best practices to be executed using the SWG structures.

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 2024. The SWG RRD Presidency and the duties for the year of 2025 have been handed over from the current Presidency the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Relations of Bosnia and Herzegovina to the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy of Republic of North 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, Government of the Federal Republic of Germany (Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture, Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development and Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ)).

Express our gratitude for the warm hospitality provided by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy of Republic of North Macedonia. We reiterate our commitment to the implementation of the set objectives in this document and oblige on taking concrete steps for ensuring the above stated matters have been address in a proper manner. The results will be assessed on the next scheduled Annual working meeting of the Ministers of Agriculture in 2025.