

SOFIA DECLARATION ON THE GREEN AGENDA FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS

We, the Leaders from Western Balkans, gathered in Sofia on 10th November 2020, at the WB Summit under the framework of the Berlin Process initiative:

ACKNOWLEDGING the European Green Deal as the European Union (EU) new growth strategy towards a modern, climate neutral, resource-efficient and competitive economy;

ACKNOWLEDGING the need to set the basis for a major transformation of our region to turn sustainability and resilience challenges into opportunities and transpose elements of the European Green Deal in all interrelated priority sectors;

WELCOMING the Economic and Investment Plan, designed to support the longer-term green socio-economic recovery of our region and its economic convergence with the EU and the Commission Staff Working Document on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, laying down the key initiatives aimed at a green transition for the region;

RECALLING the Joint Statement on Clean Energy Transition adopted in February 2019 in Podgorica in which ministers of energy and of environment confirmed their will to align as swiftly as possible with the EU's energy, climate and environmental policies and the long term objectives of the Paris Agreement, by this contributing to the well-being of citizens and the sustainable development of the region;

RECALLING the conclusions of the Berlin Process Summit in Poznań in July 2019, in which we expressed our common willingness and readiness to meaningfully contribute to an ambitious Green Agenda, to concur to the leading efforts of the EU in fighting climate change, protecting the environment and to unlock the economic potential of the green, low carbon and circular economy in the region;

BEARING IN MIND the Ministerial Declarations endorsed at Podgorica (2016), Bonn (2017) and Skopje (2018) meetings convened by Regional Cooperation Council as well as the Zagreb Declaration of 6 May 2020 in which together with the Leaders of the EU and its Member States, we agreed on a prominent role of the association of the region to the EU's climate-related ambitions, in line with the Paris Agreement, to promoting the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans;

RECONFIRMING our determination to further pursue and accelerate the efforts in the EU accession process, our commitments for a major transformation of our region and readiness to properly and timely address the growing environmental and climate challenges in the Western Balkans and turn them into opportunities;

HONOURING the support provided by the European Union, Regional Cooperation Council and other international organisations to coordinating the development of a joint regional vision for a greener and prosperous Western Balkans and economic recovery in the post-pandemic period;

HAVE TODAY AGREED TO FULLY ENDORSE THE GREEN AGENDA FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS AND EXPRESS OUR COMMITMENT TO IMPLEMENT ACTIONS IN THE FOLLOWING FIVE PILLARS:

I. Climate, energy, mobility

We commit to work towards the 2050 target of a carbon-neutral continent together with the EU through mainstreaming a strict climate policy and reforming energy and transport sectors, and in particular through the following actions:

- Align with the **EU Climate Law** once it is adopted with a vision of achieving climate neutrality by 2050;
- Set forward-looking **2030 energy and climate targets** in line with the Energy Community framework and EU *acquis*, as well as develop and implement **integrated Energy and Climate Plans** with clear measures designed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the Western Balkans economies by integrating climate action into all relevant sectoral policies;
- Prepare and implement **climate adaptation** strategies to increase resilience through climate-proofing of investments and to ensure greater integration of climate change adaptation with disaster risk reduction;
- Continue alignment with the **EU Emissions Trading Scheme**, as well as work towards introducing other carbon pricing instruments to promote decarbonisation in the region;
- Increase opportunities for the **deployment of nature-based solutions to mitigate and adapt to climate change**;
- In view of the launch of the **European Climate Pact** consider development of a similar mechanism in the region or possibilities for the region to participate in this initiative;
- **Review and revise, where necessary, all relevant legislation** to support progressive decarbonisation of the energy sector and secure full enforcement, notably through the Energy Community;
- Cooperate in the preparation of an assessment of the **socio-economic impact of decarbonisation** at individual economy and regional level with a view to a just transition;
- Prioritise **energy efficiency** and improve it in all sectors;
- Support private and public **buildings renovation schemes**, secure appropriate financing and full enforcement of the Energy Performance of Building Directive (adapted under the Energy Community framework);
- **Increase the share of renewable energy sources** and provide the necessary investment conditions, in line with the EU and Energy Community *acquis* and target;
- Strive to **decrease and gradually phase-out of coal** subsidies, strictly respecting state aid rules;
- Actively participate in the **Coal Region in Transition initiative for the Western Balkans**;
- Develop programmes for addressing **energy poverty and financing schemes for household renovation** and providing basic standards of living;

- Support the development of **smart infrastructure**, promote fostering of **innovative technologies** and strengthening intra-regional **cooperation** as demonstrated by the Green Lanes/Corridors initiative;
- Implement the **regional action plan for rail reforms** endorsed by the regional partners in 2020;
- Define rail freight and inland waterway transport corridors and an overall strategy to **shift traffic from road to more environmentally friendly modes**;
- Ensure implementation of the EU **technical standards and digitalisation of all transport modes**;
- Actively support the implementation of the regional action plan for transport facilitation, including crossing points that connect Western Balkans economies, aiming at resource-efficient transport operations that will contribute to the reduction of CO₂ emissions;
- Implement the **road safety action plan**, as well as **the road action plan** including road maintenance and resilience and **intelligent transport systems**;
- Develop and implement **climate resilience plans** for Western Balkans economies' transport networks, and promote preparation and implementation of **Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans** for urban areas in Western Balkans;
- Define and implement **sustainable mobility solutions** at the regional level including plans for the deployment of alternative fuels and building recharging and refuelling stations. Increase **regional cooperation in the area of alternative fuels infrastructure development**;

II. Circular economy

We commit to the process of transition from linear to a circular economy being fully aware of the necessity for research and innovation system to support this transition. With the aim to further contribute in this way to the environmental protection and minimization of the amount of waste generated in the region we envision the following actions:

- **Integrate the Western Balkans into the EU industrial supply chains by:**
 - Taking decisive action to improve the **sustainability of primary production of raw materials**;
 - Applying an **industrial ecosystem approach** to attain an environmentally sustainable, balanced economic recovery across the region, in particular for key future-proof industrial ecosystems such as renewable energy, digital, mobility; and resource-intensive industrial sectors such as tourism, textile, transport-automotive and energy-intensive industries;
- Develop **circular economy strategies** looking at the entire lifecycle of products, waste prevention, modern waste management and recycling, re-use, repair and re-manufacturing;
- Make further progress in constructing and maintenance of **waste management infrastructure** for cities and regions;
- Design and implement **consumer-targeted initiatives** raising awareness of citizens on waste, separate collection and sustainable consumption;
- Conclude and implement a **regional agreement on prevention of plastic pollution**, including specifically addressing the priority issue of marine litter;

- Further implement **Smart Specialisation Strategies**, place-based, innovation-led transformation agendas for sustainability.

III. Depollution

Depollution of air, water and soil in the Western Balkans is our joint interest stemming from our primary concern for the health of our citizens. Therefore we commit to the following actions:

- Finalise the process of **ratification of Convention on Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution** and its protocols (including amendments) in each of Western Balkan economies;
- Develop and implement **Air Quality Strategies** and increase the uptake of Best Available Techniques in accordance with the Industrial Emissions Directive;
- Establish adequate **air quality monitoring system**, including through accreditation of air quality monitoring networks;
- **Implement relevant EU water-related *acquis*** (EU Water Framework Directive, Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive and Nitrates Directive);
- Modernise **water monitoring infrastructure** and reach good status for all water bodies;
- Build the necessary infrastructure for **wastewater treatment**;
- Integrate soil protection in other policy areas and establish a **regional soil partnership** in order to improve knowledge exchange and identify examples of best practice for soil protection from pollution and degradation;
- Prepare and sign **regional agreements on transboundary air and water pollution**.

IV. Sustainable agriculture and food production

We commit to work towards ensuring transformation of the agriculture sector, minimizing its negative environmental and climate impact and safeguarding affordable and healthy food for WB citizens and export markets, in particular through the following actions:

- Align the **agri-food and primary production sector with EU standards** on food safety, plant and animal health and welfare and environment, and address effluent, manure and waste management;
- Strengthen the **official sanitary controls** along the entire food chain and improve the **traceability and labelling of food products** to ensure food safety, improve consumer information and promote sustainable food;
- **Promote environmentally friendly and organic farming** and reduction of synthetic chemical products used in food production: pesticides, veterinary medicines and fertilisers;
- Cooperate with scientific, education, business and agricultural holdings to facilitate **transfer to innovative and environmentally friendly technologies** and farming methods;
- Devise actions to **reduce waste in rural and coastal areas** (along roads, in rural rivers);
- Step up efforts for **sustainable development of rural areas** with implementation of LEADER, modernisation of farm physical assets, economic diversification and rural infrastructure measures under IPARD;
- Support investments in renewable energy production and technologies as well as emissions reductions and adaptation to climate change measures in agriculture.

V. Biodiversity

We commit to work on defining post-2020 biodiversity framework and developing a long-term strategy for halting biodiversity loss, protection and restoration of ecosystems and abundant biological diversity, in particular through the following actions:

- Develop and implement a **Western Balkans 2030 Biodiversity Strategic Plan**, including the means for joint implementation, monitoring and reporting;
- Prepare nature **protection and restoration plans** including for marine areas;
- Develop and implement a **Western Balkans Forest Landscape Restoration Plan**;
- Analyse **biodiversity benefits of Nature-based Solutions** and opportunities for their integration into the development of climate and other plans;
- Strengthen the mechanisms for **regional cooperation and strategic planning** on biodiversity conservation and implementation of the commitments under the Convention on Biological Diversity, such as the SEE Biodiversity Task Force. Reinforce the engagement with the **United Nations Rio Conventions** and join efforts in preparing a regional position on a global post-2020 biodiversity agenda in line with EU strategic goals;
- Improve **knowledge exchange**, including collection, management and availability of information on biodiversity and nature conservation, enhance partnership among the WB and EU research centres and existing platforms, and explore options to set up the **Western Balkans Biodiversity Information Hub**.

IN ORDER TO ACHIEVE THESE OBJECTIVES IN A COORDINATED, SUSTAINABLE AND EFFICIENT MANNER, WE AGREE TO:

- Improve cross-sector governance and support mainstreaming of green and low carbon transition, including through public administration reform, public financial management, economic reform program and mobilisation of own resources;
- Develop programmes and undertake necessary actions to **increase administrative capacities** for implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans to monitor, promote and enforce compliance with environmental obligations and ensure effective mechanisms for public participation, access to information, access to justice in environmental matters and environmental reporting;
- Actively participate in current pan-European networks, Horizon 2020, regional organisations, macro-regional strategies and other relevant initiatives such as the Covenant of Mayors;
- Develop a plan for economy-specific and regional awareness-raising activities in all five pillars, including reflecting the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans in the reforms of the education systems;
- Invite the Regional Cooperation Council to coordinate, in close cooperation with regional sectoral organisations and relevant authorities of the WB economies in charge of policy areas covered by the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, the preparation of an action plan with roadmaps for implementation of this Declaration and to establish an effective and efficient monitoring system.