

**Conclusions of the Ministerial Meeting
of the Ministers/ Heads of Delegations responsible for agriculture and rural development in South
Eastern Europe
Convened in Tirana, Republic of Albania
November 12th 2015**

The Ministers of Agriculture from South Eastern Europe (SEE) and the Heads of Delegations, gathered on 12th of November 2015 in Tirana at the 9th Annual Working Meeting organized under the joint auspices of the Ministries of Agriculture, Rural Development and Water Administration of the Republic of Albania and the Regional Rural Development Standing Working Group (SWG) in South Eastern Europe, to proclaim that the main objectives set during the last meeting in November 2014 have been achieved and reaffirm their determination to continue developing the regional cooperation in the field of agriculture and rural development.

As an expressed commitment of the participating countries and based on the established institute of having an Annual Ministerial Meetings of the Ministers of Agriculture of the South Eastern Europe (SEE) Countries, the Ministers and Heads of Delegations had an open discussion about the common interests of the countries in the SEE region and to reconcile differing issues and views.

The cooperation of the Ministries of Agriculture from SEE continues to focus on regional activities and initiatives within the SWG, as a platform for networking and regional cooperation, striving at strengthening the regional partnership.

**CONCLUSIONS OF 9th ANNUAL MEETING OF THE MINISTERS OF AGRICULTURE OF SOUTH
EASTERN EUROPE**

We, the Ministers and Head of Delegations of the Ministries of Agriculture from SEE have gathered in Tirana, Republic of Albania to discuss the future developments for agriculture and rural development sectors in 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 better future in our region.

In particular:

1. We evoke the importance of the European Union (EU) integration process for the Western Balkan counties and recall the commitment towards coherent implementation of enlargement criteria and conditionality in becoming EU members. In this regard, the EU member countries from the SEE region reconfirm their assurance to strengthening regional cooperation and further support the efforts for the process of EU approximation of the agriculture and rural development of the WB countries.
2. We reconfirm our commitment and support to the EU integration process and to continue our efforts in streamlining our national agriculture and rural development policies with the Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) of the EU during the period 2014-2020. We strive for achieving successful enlargement policy, in particular under the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) 2014-2020 by integrating the reform and development of our agendas in the given sectors.
3. We express our appreciation for the EU support for rural development through the IPARD instrument in the pre-accession period, providing respected assistance for gaining experience in designing EU compatible rural development programs and in managing EU funds. Hereof, we, endorse our liability to cooperate and exchange our experiences in preparing for, and implementing the IPARD programs with a view to elevate the benefit of this instrument.

4. We welcome the recommendations outlined in the Agricultural Policy Forum (APF) - Pravets Agenda 2015. We especially underscore the importance of the topics discussed (streamlining of agriculture and rural development policies, area based development approach and rural development through natural resource management), in specific:
 - We welcome the establishment of the regional platform for cooperation among the academic institutions and the Ministries of Agriculture in order to increase the capacity to objectively analyze agricultural and rural development challenges and policy performance;
 - We applaud the achievements made under the Area Based Development (ABD) approach in the selected pilot regions and confirm our political support to the initiatives and activities taken to facilitate a sustainable socio-economic development in the cross-border rural areas of the SEE region. Furthermore, we remain committed to provide political, financial and technical support to the implementation of a multi-annual area based development program during the 2014-2020 period. In addition, we are ready to enlarge our cooperation in all other horizontal issues under the authority of our institutions and assist the SWG in attracting additional support to achieve the development goals of rural cross border regions;
 - We support the joint efforts of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and the SWG in addressing the measures of the South Eastern European Strategy 2020 regarding free trade area, competitiveness, environment and natural resources management of the rural areas;
 - We stress the importance on developing the policy compatible to EU in regard to delineation of Areas with Natural Constraints (ANC) in the Western Balkans to respond to regional and country level specific conditions;
 - We acknowledge the need for regional inter-sectoral cooperation and coordination at the interface among rural development, agriculture, forest and water, which will contribute to the regional strategy processes and strengthen the interlinkages among sectors concerning preservation and use of natural resources for the purpose of rural and economic development of the regions;
 - We welcome the recommendation on creating evidence based policymaking and to involve all stakeholders in policy formulation, particularly the importance of the monitoring and analytical work of the regional policy analysis platform and recommends that the work of the platform is strengthened in the future.
5. We endorse the report of the Secretary General on the achievements and results of the SWG work for the year of 2015 and the achievements in the past decade. We express our gratitude for the responsibilities and an equitable and appropriate contribution to the regional effort that SWG strives to tackle on agriculture and rural development issues in SEE region. We stress the importance of this organization in ensuring ownership in the regional cooperation and the regional integration efforts, based on common interests, in view of the association and accession of the Western Balkan countries into EU.
6. We call upon International Centre for Advanced Mediterranean Agronomic Studies (CIHEAM) to explore the possibilities to involve the countries participating in SWG work into the research network of CIHEAM and to determine their status within the organization.

7. We congratulate the Ministry of Agriculture and Food of Republic of Bulgaria for successfully holding the Presidency of the SWG Assembly during the year 2015.

The SWG Presidency and the duties for the year of 2016 have been handed over from the current Presidency – the Ministry of Agriculture and Food of Republic of Bulgaria to the Ministry of Agriculture, Rural Development and Water Administration of Republic of Albania.
The 16th Agricultural Policy Forum in South Eastern Europe will be held in Republic of Albania in autumn 2016.

8. We highly appreciate the support provided by the convening organizations and institutions: the European Commission (DG AGRI, DG NEAR, JRC/IPTS), Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), commissioned by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), International Centre for Advanced Mediterranean Agronomic Studies (CIHEAM) and Regional Cooperation Council (RCC).

We express our appreciation for the kind hospitality provided to us by the Ministry of Agriculture, Rural Development and Water Administration of Republic of Albania. At this meeting in Tirana, we have once again reviewed and defined the course for regional cooperation for the years ahead. In this context, the SWG will remain an essential tool for advocating policy dialogue and regional cooperation, with continues support to the agriculture and rural development sector of SEE countries during the EU integration process.

Present representatives of institutions during the meeting

SWG MEMBERS INSTITUTIONS

Ministry of Agriculture, Rural Development and Water Administration, Republic of Albania

Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Relations, Bosnia and Herzegovina

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

Ministry of Agriculture and Food, Republic of Bulgaria

Ministry of Agriculture Forestry and Rural Development, Kosovo*

Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, Montenegro

Ministry of Agriculture and Environmental Protection, Republic of Serbia

SWG OBSERVER INSTITUTIONS

Ministry of Agriculture, Hungary

Ministry of Agriculture, Republic of Croatia

Ministry of Agricultural Food and Forestry Policies, Republic of Italy

SWG NON-MEMBERS INSTITUTIONS

Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, Romania

Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Livestock, Republic of Turkey

INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

European Commission (EC)

Deutsche Gesellschaft fuer Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), commissioned by the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development of Germany (BMZ)

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (UN FAO)

Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)

International Centre for Advanced Mediterranean Agronomic Studies (CIHEAM)

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."*