

Conclusions of the Ministerial Meeting of the Western Balkans Platforms on Culture, Research and Innovation, Education and Training

The Western Balkans Agenda on Innovation, Research, Education, Culture, Youth and Sport has set the Western Balkans on a solid path towards closer cooperation in those policy areas.

In this context, the Ministerial Meeting of the Western Balkans Platforms on Culture, Research and Innovation, Education and Training was organised in Tirana on June 27-28, 2022 with participation of the respective Ministers of the Western Balkans. It represented a key moment in the joint effort to maintain the political momentum triggered by the Agenda, as well as to discuss the progress on its implementation and communicate broadly on its main initiatives and their specific impact.

The European Commission was represented by the Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth, Mariya Gabriel. It was co-chaired by the European Commission, the French Presidency of the Council of the European Union, and Albania represented by the Ministries of Culture, Education and Sport. The Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) hosted the Butterfly Innovation Awards Ceremony.

At the Ministerial meeting, Commissioner Mariya Gabriel launched the Western Balkans Ministerial Platform on Culture. The Commissioner also announced the launch of a new Enhanced Partnership with the Western Balkans under the Erasmus+ programme. This Partnership will give education organisations and institutions in the Western Balkans not associated to the programme the possibility to take part in important strategic actions starting with the European Universities initiative as of 2023, on equal footing with organisations from EU Member States and third countries associated to the programme. The Commissioner highlighted that extending the access to such flagship actions to all Western Balkan partners will strengthen further the cooperation with the region.

Ministerial Meeting on Culture

Commissioner Mariya Gabriel recalled that the Ministerial Meeting on Culture was the first one ever to be organised with the Western Balkans. The Commissioner underlined that the EU supports the culture and creative sectors in the Western Balkans through the Creative Europe programme, to which all Western Balkans partners have joined, as well as through actions funded by the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance. The Commissioner invited the Ministers to make full use of these opportunities and promote them to their cultural and creative sectors.

Further, the Commissioner recalled that cultural heritage is a cornerstone of our culture which plays an important role in our societies, our communities and in international relations. It is our responsibility to safeguard cultural heritage for the generations to come, and the Commissioner underlined the role of youth in promoting and protecting cultural heritage. The Commissioner also launched officially the Western Balkans Ministerial Platform on Culture and invited the Ministers to take full advantage of these meetings to work jointly together with a view to develop cooperation between the EU and the Western Balkans and to contribute to the integration of the Western Balkans in the EU.

Science for Policy Report “Status of Environment and Climate in the Western Balkans”

Commissioner Mariya Gabriel launched the JRC Science for Policy Report “Status of Environment and Climate in the Western Balkans”. The report summarises for the first time the status of air, climate, water and soil in the context of the EU acquis in order to benchmark the progress in the accession process and support the implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans with particular reference to depollution and decarbonisation priorities. The report is an opportunity for the Horizon Europe associated economies to take stock of the

situation in the Western Balkans and stimulate the research on innovation and digitalisation in topics connected to the environmental protection and the green economy (e.g. decarbonisation, smart mobility, energy efficiency of buildings, circular economy, farm to fork strategy).

Ministerial Meeting on Research and Innovation

During the Ministerial Meeting, Commissioner Gabriel highlighted the impact of the Western Balkans Agenda in the fields of Research and Innovation. She stressed how the Agenda has triggered the availability of substantial financial resources for Innovation – reaching some EUR 150 million over the next 4 years. She highlighted the importance of the forthcoming European Innovation Agenda, which will foster a supportive environment for start-ups.

Further, Commissioner Gabriel called for cooperation in the field of Horizon Europe Missions – underlining that three cities from the Western Balkans are part of the Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities efforts. The Commissioner called on other cities from the region to learn from these examples and to share best practice to joint work on a clean and green future for our youth.

All the Western Balkans research and innovation ministers gave updates on their policy efforts to promote research and innovation - above all through academia-business cooperation. They all agreed that the knowledge triangle is the engine that drives our economy, growth and jobs, and delivers a prosperous and green future. The Western Balkans research and innovation ministers reconfirmed the commitment made by the leaders at the Brdo EU-Western Balkans Summit in 2021 to promote scientific excellence, and help prevent brain drain. Further aspects of their discussions focused on the development and implementation of Smart Specialisation Strategies, on their impact on the economy, as well as the role of research and innovation to support this key process.

Ministerial Meeting on Education and Training

Commissioner Gabriel highlighted the driving role of education and training in achieving closer cooperation, as well as their key contribution to the successful delivery on the Western Balkans Agenda. She also referred to the commitment made by the leaders at the Brdo EU-Western Balkans Summit in 2021 to reform the region's education systems and create further opportunities for the youth, stressing the need for the Western Balkans partners to fully exploit the possibilities offered under the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps programmes.

Regarding learning for environmental sustainability, the Commissioner underlined that the debate with Western Balkans Ministers of Education showed the importance that is already being attached to integrating teaching and learning for environmental sustainability into education and training systems.

Discussions also brought to the fore that it might be challenging to embed learning for sustainability across the entire spectrum of policy, practice and operations in education and training. At the same time, it is encouraging that many good examples, practices and commitment exist already and this is a good basis to build on.

Efforts should be made to reach beyond formal education and embrace learning in non-formal and informal settings. Working with and supporting partners in non-formal education such as youth organisations, centres of environmental education and training, parks, farms, consumer organisations is vital for that.

The Commission will continue to cooperate with the Western Balkans to further advance on implementing sustainability across education and training systems. Collaborating with the region in EU working groups, in the Education for Climate Coalition and through the Erasmus+ programme will further strengthen actions on the ground.