

Western Balkans Declaration on ensuring sustainable labour market integration of young people

Brdo pri Kranju, Slovenia, 8 July 2021

On the occasion of the second EU-Western Balkans Ministerial Meeting on Employment and Social Affairs, organised on 8 July 2021 by the Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the European Union together with the European Commission in the context of the informal Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council (EPSCO) meeting on 8-9 July 2021, the Ministers and Representatives of the Western Balkans responsible for employment hereby:

Recall the launch of the annual EU-Western Balkans Ministerial Meetings on Employment and Social Affairs on 12 June 2019 in Luxembourg;

Reaffirm their commitment to cooperate on employment and social policies at the highest level within the Western Balkans region and with the European Union;

Note that the COVID-19 pandemic brought further challenges to the labour markets and to social cohesion globally, in the European Union and in the Western Balkans region;

Welcome the timely opportunity to reconvene in order to strengthen cooperation between the European Union and the Western Balkans and to accelerate the implementation of reforms ensuring sustainable socio-economic development in the Western Balkans region, with the goal to achieve tangible benefits for their populations;

Recall the February 2018 European Commission Communication on *A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans* reiterating the European Union's support to the region on its European path;

Recall the November 2018 Western Balkans Meeting *Declaration on Improving Social Policy in the Western Balkans*, committing to jointly strengthen the social dimension in the enlargement process and to be guided by the European Pillar of Social Rights to further promote reforms in social sectors and thus align their labour markets and welfare systems with the European Union;

Welcome the October 2020 European Commission Communication on *An Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans* including the flagship initiative on Youth Guarantee, which aims to offer solutions and perspectives for young people and to contribute to tackling the brain drain;

Welcome the *European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan* of 4 March 2021, which encourages the Western Balkans to continue to align with EU social standards and policies, notably through the Economic Reform Programme process, on their European path and commits to include the Western Balkans, as appropriate, in relevant actions, platforms, working groups and meetings under the aforementioned Plan;

Align with the call of the *Porto Declaration*, adopted by EU leaders on 8 May 2021, to prioritise action to support young people, who have been very negatively affected by the COVID-19 crisis;

Recognise that the share of young people not in employment, education or training (NEETs) in the Western Balkans region is above the EU average and that young people in the region, in particular disadvantaged groups, face important challenges for labour market integration, entailing individual hardship and costs for society at large;

Highlight the efforts in the Western Balkans to tackle youth unemployment, including through reforms of delivery mechanisms in public employment services and dedicated active labour market measures and *acknowledge* the pioneering steps taken by North Macedonia to put in place a Youth Guarantee scheme;

Take inspiration from the Council Recommendation of 30 October 2020 on A Bridge to Jobs – Reinforcing the Youth Guarantee, which aims to tackle the issue of youth unemployment and inactivity;

Highlight the importance of developing service models and delivery mechanisms, in particular of public employment services, pursuing an evidence-based approach through data collection and monitoring, and establishing or upgrading systems for monitoring and forecasting of skills in demand on the labour market;

Emphasise the need to continue designing and implementing substantive reforms to develop effective youth employment policies through an approach based on partnerships across all relevant bodies and stakeholders, such as employers, education and training institutions, social partners, health and social services, youth work services, providers of solidarity and civic activities, youth organisations and other civil society organisations;

Draw attention to the importance of using the full range of available policy tools, including the mapping of target groups and services provided to them, tracking and early warning systems to prevent early leaving from education and training, as well as outreach to young people, in particular those belonging to vulnerable groups;

Stress the key role of preparatory actions for supporting sustainable labour market integration, such as profiling and screening tools to tailor individualised action plans; appropriate counselling, guidance and mentoring; validation and recognition of non-formally and informally acquired competences and skills; and preparation of young NEETs through upskilling and re-skilling where deemed appropriate, geared mainly towards digital, green, language, entrepreneurial and career management skills;

Reaffirm that the annual EU-Western Balkans Ministerial Meetings on Employment and Social Affairs provide an appropriate framework to establish political priorities for the region on these topics.

Considering the above, the Ministers and Representatives of the Western Balkans responsible for employment:

Reaffirm their commitment to be guided by the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights to achieve fair, inclusive societies, full of opportunity, and *emphasise* the importance of principle four on active support to employment, which states that young people have the right to continued education, apprenticeship, traineeship or a job offer of good standing within four months of becoming unemployed or leaving education;

Resolve to take concrete steps to gradually establish, implement and enhance, respectively, Youth Guarantee schemes in the Western Balkans, based on the Council Recommendation of 30 October 2020 on A Bridge to Jobs – Reinforcing the Youth Guarantee, and in accordance with regional and local circumstances;

Commit to provide strong support for the implementation of Youth Guarantee schemes, including by putting this initiative high on the political agenda and by allocating the necessary human and financial resources;

Resolve to set up inter-sectoral task forces involving relevant bodies, agencies and stakeholders, including the social partners, youth organisations and other non-governmental organisations, and to develop or update, respectively, Youth Guarantee Implementation Plans by June 2022;

Invite the European Commission to provide technical guidance on developing Youth Guarantee Implementation Plans and seek the experience of EU Member States in implementing the Youth Guarantee schemes;

Resolve to make strategic use of the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance during 2021-27 to contribute to the establishment, progressive deployment and further enhancement, respectively, of Youth Guarantee schemes;

Recognise the importance of involving and consulting a broad range of international partners and donors in the process of designing and implementing the Youth Guarantee Implementation Plans, in order to ensure effective coordination of cooperation efforts;

Commit to follow up on the progress made regarding the commitments in this Declaration, in particular relating to the Youth Guarantee Implementation Plans at the next EU-Western Balkans Ministerial Meeting on Employment and Social Affairs.

Endorsed by the Western Balkans Ministers and Representatives responsible for employment