

Dear participants of the public, social and business institutions in the Balkans,

We would like to thank you for your participation in the 3rd Balkan Forum on Promoting the Sustainable development in the Balkan area in the post covid era through Co-operation and Networking between public and business sector with research Institutions.

Our common goal is to enhance the transnational and crossborder cooperation in the fields of environment, culture, tourism and business in order for the Balkan people and institutions to create an equal win-win position for all stakeholders and make the best planning and use of the European Cooperation Programmes in the new programming period 2021-27.

In the 1st Balkan Forum in 2019 we opened the dialogue on planning complementary and joint transport, industrial, technological and energy infrastructures and networks in the Balkan area.

The 2nd Balkan Forum in 2020 that was organized by the Ministry of Interior (sector Macedonia and Thrace) in cooperation with the Managing Authority of the Interreg Programmes, focused its works in promoting the cooperation between the business sector and the research institutions in order to formulate policies for innovation, by:

- Evaluating the existing business and technology inventory as well as identifying specific needs and shortcomings.
- Bridging the gap between research and market.
- Exploring the possibilities of developing business and technological networking and synergies in order to make the best use of the existing potential in the broader Balkan and Southeast Europe area.

The two previous Balkan Forum contributed significantly in the promotion of sustainable development programmes, partnerships and networks in the Balkans for the best possible use of National and EU funds in the new programmatic period 2021 – 2027.

With this in mind, in the context of strengthening Transnational Cooperation, the Ministry of Interior (Sector Macedonia – Thrace), under the auspices of the Ministry of foreign Affairs in the framework of the Presidency of Greece in the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECF), took the initiative to organize the **3rd Balkan Forum 2021**.

The aim of the Forum is to capture the current level of economic, cultural, technological and environmental life in the Balkans with the aim of developing cooperation in the post-Covid era, by promoting synergies among stakeholders in Balkans area and good practices leading to sustainable development.

Also it can contribute in the transition and consolidation of a greener economy, since environmental protection is an essential condition for sustainable development.

In particular in the post-covid era we can exploit the opportunities we have to develop the digital technology and infrastructure in order to communicate more effectively.

It is also clear that the European Commission's target for the 2021-2027 Programming Period is designed to increase the EU Programmes and funds in Innovation and Green and Digital Transformation through the Policy Objectives 1,2,3.

In parallel since the Ministry of Interior (sector Macedonia and Thrace) has a significant experience of 10 years in evaluating, controlling and managing private investments we have launched via the Balkan Forum the Business to Government meetings in order to facilitate the potential investors in the Balkan area.

The fields for developing collaborative actions for sustainable development **in the Balkan area** are many:

**We are inter-connected by the rich environmental biodiversity** of the mountains, plains, lakes, rivers and seas of the Balkans, a large part of which is protected either by the European institutional framework of the Natura 2000 and by Directive 60/2000 on water management for the countries that are members of the EU and the Ramsar international treaty for all Balkan countries, or the Paris International Convention for the Prevention of Climate Change of 2015.

We are inter-connected by **the long-standing historical tradition of the Balkans in the production and marketing of products and foods of PDO/ PGI quality** that are based on the rich biodiversity and the traditional way of their production. These products, either consumed by the local population and tourists or exported through international trade, are not just commodities. They transfer the biodiversity, local customs, history, culture of their local societies, and should therefore be protected as public goods.

We are inter-connected by **the rich architectural and cultural heritage** of the hundreds of traditional and historic settlements and the thousands of traditional buildings of the historical centers of the Balkan cities, which are protected by international treaties (1972 Paris Convention, Amsterdam Declaration 1975, Granada Convention 1985 and UNESCO texts).

We can promote policies and sustainable development programmes in the Balkans, as long as **we create the necessary “social capital of trust”** of

the people and institutions through equal and mutually beneficial partnerships

The services of the Ministry for Macedonia-Thrace have set up a **Master Plan for the period 2019-2025**. Its main objectives are

- to strengthen transnational co-operation for sustainable co-development in the Balkans and SouthEast Europe,
- to exploit our regions' and countries' comparative advantages, and
- to transform them into competitive advantages, aiming at a Balkan, Mediterranean and South East Europe of fair, democratic and equitable cooperation through:

1) **The annual organization of the Balkan Programming Forum.** The successful event for three successive years proves that it is a necessity for the development of a meaningful public, programmatic and interdisciplinary dialogue on the conditions for co-development of the wider region of the balkans and South East Europe; We would be happy to strengthen the Institutional cooperation in the Balkans and see the next Balkan Forums to be transferred on rotational base in the capital cities of all Balkan countries.

2) **The creation and activation of a European Grouping for Territorial Cooperation** in which collective organizations from the fields of entrepreneurship and innovation sectors in the Balkans will participate.

The promotion of all the necessary actions for the modernization and further development of business, transport, industrial, technological and energy infrastructures and networks is a prerequisite both for the economic convergence of the regions and countries of the Balkans and for the promotion of transnational cooperation in the field of entrepreneurship and innovation. We therefore call on the European Commission to strengthen Interreg cross-border and -most importantly- transnational programmes, in order to incorporate projects that will promote actions of European Groupings for Territorial Cooperation.

3) **The European Structural Funds programmes of the current and new (2021-2027) programming periods** (Regional Development Fund, Agricultural Fund, Social Fund, Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance for candidate countries, Horizon and EU initiatives and the Recovery fund);

**The synergies between the transnational (BalkanMed, ADRION, MED, MED ENI, Black Sea) and the cross-border Interreg Programmes** among the 12 Balkan countries with close cooperation with Mediterranean countries;

**The Ministry of Interior** (Macedonia and Thrace sector) focuses its efforts to develop projects in the Balkan, Black Sea and Mediterranean

area in the sectors of productive investments, Business innovation and networking, promotion of the PDO local products and in the protection of cultural and architectural heritage and as well in environmental projects that promote the sustainable management of natural resources and renewable energy resources in our common and beyond borders: rivers, lakes, mountains and seas with our neighboring regions and countries. The establishment, the operation and the networking of decentralized regional Institutions in the wider Balkan area has been proved supportive to the sustainable development, since it goes along with the implementation of the EU principles of proximity and subsidiarity.

**The European Commission and all the EU Institutions** in order to deepen the transparency and democratic accountability of all the stakeholders must take into account the National, regional and the transnational networks' proposals when deciding and planning the EU and Interreg policies and programmes.

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