On 12 June 2019, the current Trio Presidency of the Council of the EU (Romania, Finland and Croatia), together with the European Commission, represented by the European Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs, Skills and Labour Mobility met the partners from the Western Balkans within the first annual EU – Western Balkans Ministerial meeting on employment and social affairs.

Following the meeting, the Trio Presidency and the Commission, recall the 2018 Western Balkans strategy, where the European Commission calls for an enhanced engagement of the European Union with the Western Balkans. The Strategy spells out the priorities and areas of joint reinforced cooperation for addressing the specific challenges the Western Balkans face.

We are conscious of the needed engagement to support the political, economic and social transformation in the Western Balkans based on tangible progress in socio-economic reforms that benefit all people in the region and contribute to meeting EU requirements.

We note that the first EU-Western Balkans Ministerial meeting on social and employment affairs reflects the importance of a new reinforced social dimension in the Western Balkans, with an increased focus on employment and social reforms.

We recall that the European perspective of the Western Balkans and the Economic Reform Programmes are the established frameworks with the partners of the region for advancing labour market and social reforms. We welcome the continued commitment of our Western Balkan partners to this cooperation based on common European values, standards and practices aiming at prosperity and well-being.

We recall that the European Pillar of Social Rights proclaimed by the European Parliament, the Council of the European Union and the European Commission on 17 November 2017 expresses principles and rights essential for fair and well-functioning labour markets and welfare systems.

We therefore welcome the Western Balkans Ministerial Regional Initiative’s Declaration on improving social policy in the Western Balkans of November 2018. It contains fundamental commitments, in particular supporting employment, combating social exclusion and discrimination, promoting social justice and protection, increasing equality between women and men. We welcome as well the commitment of the region to jointly tackle social and labour market challenges by enhancing regional cooperation on these matters.

We recall that a regular economic and financial dialogue between the EU and the Western Balkans has been established in 2016 to support the advancement of broad structural reforms in the region. The Western Balkans have increasingly prioritised structural reforms, inter alia in the areas of labour market and employment, social protection and education and skills.

We note that the Western Balkan economies and the EU share many common challenges in the employment and social fields. Today's exchange of views focused on addressing challenges with regard to promoting inclusive labour markets and skills development.
We note that, while acknowledging recent progress in increasing employment and decreasing unemployment in the Western Balkans, significant gaps remain with regard to developing inclusive labour markets providing opportunities and incentives to paid work for everyone at working age. The region should be tapping into the potential of young people, women, and long-term unemployed, which is currently underutilised in stimulating further growth in the future. The important role of Public Employment Services in this respect has been underlined. Active Labour Market Measures supporting the participation of women and vulnerable groups such as minorities and people with disabilities should be enhanced.

We note that fostering skills development in line with labour market needs is a challenge for each and every country. The Western Balkans are progressing in managing a complex transition process against the background of global drivers of change, such as ageing, digitalisation, globalisation, emigration and climate change. A future-oriented skills development will require raising the quality of education and training at all levels, from early childhood education to lifelong learning opportunities.

We recall that reform efforts need to focus on improving the governance of skills anticipation and matching, increasing the completion rates and making the education and training systems more inclusive. The coordination of all actors involved in skills development (Ministries, education institutions, civil society organisations, private sector) should be reinforced.

We recall that social dialogue plays a central role in the design and implementation of economic, employment and social policies and encourage our Western Balkan partners to pursue an inclusive approach with Social Partners. Engagement with a broad spectrum of civil society will ensure that reform processes to the benefit of all citizens are advanced in an inclusive manner.

We recall that the EU is working on finding the best way to continue to support the Western Balkans region in the transformation process both politically and financially. With the closing of the current financial cycle of the Instrument for pre-accession assistance (IPA), and without prejudice to the negotiation of any possible new financial envelope, the Western Balkans and the Commission will strategically reflect on how to build on progress made and how to strengthen economic and social development over the next period.

We welcome the intention of Croatia to host the next annual EU-Western Balkans Ministerial meeting on employment and social affairs during its Presidency in 2020.