

ZABLJAK DECLARATION

Endorsed at the Third Ministerial Meeting on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans

Zabljak, Montenegro | 18 September 2026

WE, the participants from the Western Balkans Six (WB6), gathered in Zabljak on the occasion of the Third Annual Ministerial Meeting on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (GAWB), organised under the auspices of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), in collaboration with the Ministry of Ecology, Sustainable Development and Northern Region Development of Montenegro and the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development of Germany, under the Regional Climate Partnership, with the support of the European Commission, and convened under the Montenegro's Chairmanship of the 2026 Berlin Process;

Recalling the Dubrovnik Declaration adopted at the Second Ministerial Meeting in 2025, and building on the outcomes and commitments of the 2025 Berlin Process Summit held in London;

Recognising the Revised GAWB Action Plan (GAWB AP) 2025–2030 as an updated and streamlined regional framework with improved methodology, clearer implementation priorities, strengthened monitoring provisions, and enhanced alignment with the evolving European Union (EU) policy and legislative framework;

RECOGNISE the importance of strengthened regional cooperation in advancing the implementation of the GAWB, and commend the RCC for its leadership role in coordinating and steering regional GAWB processes, within established governance, coordination, and monitoring mechanisms;

FURTHER COMMEND the Regional Coordinators under the GAWB AP, the Energy Community Secretariat, Transport Community Permanent Secretariat, Standing Working Group on Regional Rural Development and International Union for Conservation of Nature, for their continued support and dedicated contribution to the implementation of regional and sectoral measures and priorities under the GAWB;

BEING AWARE of the persistent implementation challenges, including limited administrative, technical and financial capacities, **STRESS** the urgent need for enhanced regional coordination, stronger donor alignment, improved access to climate finance, and sustained support for the implementation of the Green Agenda;

RECOGNISE that implementation of the Green Agenda is an integral part of the EU accession process and **CALL** for strengthened technical and financial assistance to support the transposition, implementation and enforcement of the EU environmental and climate acquis, particularly under Chapters 11, 14, 15, 21

and 27, including through support for administrative capacity, environmental inspection, monitoring systems and investment preparation at both central and local levels;

ACKNOWLEDGE the need for continued progress in advancing the climate dimension of Chapters 11, 14, 15 and 27, including strengthening administrative capacities and developing Monitoring, Reporting, Verification and Accreditation (MRVA) systems to further advance in the implementation of carbon pricing systems, implementation of the Governance Regulation, as adapted and adopted under the Energy Community acquis, and climate reporting to the European Environment Agency;

REMAIN COMMITTED to advancing decarbonisation of the power sector and **HIGHLIGHT** the economic and climate-related benefits of the energy transition;

RECOGNISE the particular vulnerability of hydropower-dependent energy systems to climate variability, drought and changing precipitation patterns, and **COMMIT** to strengthening energy security through sustainable diversification of renewable energy sources, improved energy efficiency, electricity storage, resilient grids and enhanced regional interconnection, while ensuring full compliance with environmental and nature protection requirements; **EMPHASISE** the focus on sustainable solutions based on cooperation within the region and with our partners in the EU, favouring diversification of the energy sector based on locally available renewable energy sources for steady, lasting, reliable and affordable supply of clean energy, and **REMAIN COMMITTED** to the introduction and enhancement of carbon pricing instruments to be gradually aligned with the EU Emissions Trading System and the EU climate objectives;

At the same time, we **UNDERLINE** that the pace and success of this transition will depend on enhanced access to affordable financing, targeted investment, technology transfer and development, and measures that safeguard the competitiveness of our economies;

Also **UNDERScore** that, in order to ensure the level of climate ambition in the WB6 is aligned with that of the EU, there is a need for continued and additional mobilisation of climate finance for the region's just transition, coal regions in transition, industrial decarbonisation and clean energy investments, ensuring environmental integrity, transparency and sustainability;

EMPHASISE the importance of ensuring that infrastructure investments are aligned with the EU environmental and climate acquis, relevant nature conservation and water protection obligations, and principles of access to information and public participation, whilst ensuring compliance with the requirements on environmental impact assessments, public participation, transboundary consultations and access to justice in environmental matters, and ensuring that infrastructure investments contribute to long-term water resilience, and **REMAIN COMMITTED** to strengthening efforts in biodiversity conservation and ecosystem restoration, and to enhancing water resilience across sectors, territories and ecosystems, through water management based on improved data collection, enhanced coordination, river basin planning, wastewater treatment, flood and drought prevention, risk assessment, disaster preparedness and early warning, and transboundary water cooperation, including through the application of the water efficiency first principle, sustainable abstraction, leakage reduction and water reuse, and the protection and restoration of shared river basins, wetlands, coastal and marine ecosystems and the application of an integrated source-to-sea approach, with particular attention to pollution prevention, ecological flows, erosion prevention, sediment continuity and climate-resilient water allocation, including through nature-based solutions and natural water retention measures;

RECOGNISE the ecological and socio-economic importance of the Adriatic and Ionian Seas and **COMMIT** to enhanced regional cooperation for the protection and restoration of coastal and marine

ecosystems, including wetlands, lagoons, dunes and seagrass habitats, and for addressing marine litter, coastal erosion, pollution and the cumulative impacts of infrastructure and tourism development;

AFFIRM the importance of further improving waste management and tackling plastic litter, but also of establishing innovative and more efficient ways of producing and consuming, and introducing circularity in business models;

REAFFIRM our commitment to sustainable agriculture and rural development as a cornerstone of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, ensuring alignment with EU food safety, animal welfare, and environmental standards, while recognising the sector's critical role in economic stability, climate resilience, and biodiversity protection;

UNDERLINE the important contribution of sustainable transport and mobility measures to the GAWB objectives, particularly through reducing greenhouse gas emissions, improving the sustainability of the rail and road sectors and urban mobility through electrification, e-charging infrastructure and zero emission vehicles, and strengthening of transport infrastructure resilience;

SUPPORT further integration with the EU energy market through advancing the transposition and implementation of the Electricity Integration Package and promotion of a level playing field for clean energy development;

EMPHASISE the alarming trend that ongoing and new renewable energy projects in the Contracting Parties of the Energy Community Treaty are increasingly at risk of losing financial attractiveness due to the mode of application of the CBAM regulation since the beginning of the definitive period, and **WELCOME** the European Commission's proposal to amend the CBAM regulation to ensure a consistent solution for cross-border/boundary electricity markets and trade;

ENCOURAGE the accelerated deployment of renewable energy through market-based support schemes, robust spatial planning and the designation of Renewable Energy Acceleration Areas, ensuring an appropriate balance between the rapid deployment of renewables and the protection of biodiversity and local communities, alongside streamlined permitting procedures, and increased investment in grid flexibility, storage, and interconnections;

NOTE that such development should be informed by strategic environmental assessment, robust biodiversity data and sensitivity mapping, and should avoid, or where avoidance is not possible, minimise significant adverse impacts on protected areas, candidate Emerald Network sites, ecological corridors, free-flowing rivers and habitats and species of conservation importance; that any remaining significant impacts should be effectively mitigated and, where appropriate, compensated in accordance with the applicable environmental acquis and international obligations; and that cumulative and transboundary impacts should be duly assessed;

PROMOTE efforts to decarbonise the heating sector through the Renovation Wave, while addressing energy poverty and supporting the gradual replacement of inefficient heating systems through targeted measures;

EMPHASISE the importance of finalising and effectively implementing the domestic-level energy and climate plans (NECPs) in line with the Energy Community 2030 targets, alongside the development of just transition approaches that support affected communities and workers and contribute to long-term socio-economic resilience and stability while preparing for the development of NECPs covering the period 2030-2040;

WELCOME the participation of North Macedonia and Montenegro in the LIFE Programme as an important step towards deeper integration into the EU environmental and climate policies and instruments, and **ENCOURAGE** other WB6 to further explore participation in relevant EU programmes and instruments supporting the green transition;

REAFFIRME our strong regional commitment, ownership and responsibility for advancing the implementation of the GAWB as the regionally owned strategic framework aligned with the European Green Deal, and hereby **ENDORSE** the following strategic regional documents:

1.The WB6 Climate Adaptation Strategy (2026-2030) supporting the establishment of robust climate governance in the WB6 through an EU-aligned regional framework for smart and systemic action to build climate resilience, including the integration of climate-proofing and Nature-based Solutions, strengthened preparedness and early warning systems, integrated water–drought management, scientific advisory support and climate-resilient finance.

2.The WB6 Biodiversity Strategic Plan 2030, as the region's comprehensive framework for biodiversity conservation, ecosystem restoration, and nature mainstreaming, building on the Vision, Mission, and Strategic Goals endorsed in the Dubrovnik Declaration.

3.The WB6 Forest Landscape Restoration Plan as the region's first sectoral restoration instrument, which provides a framework for coordinated restoration of degraded forest landscapes across WB6.

We **COMMIT** to the joint implementation of both instruments on biodiversity and forest landscape restoration through coordinated domestic and regional action, guided by the Biodiversity Task Force of the Western Balkans; and **CALL** for strengthened and diversified financing, including through EU instruments, international climate and biodiversity finance, and innovative financial mechanisms to support the region's transition towards a nature-positive and climate-resilient pathway. We further **EMPHASISE** the importance of ensuring long-term sustainable financing for protected areas as a prerequisite for biodiversity conservation and achieving the objectives of the GAWB.

We also **RECOGNISE** that the effective management of protected and conserved areas requires adequate staffing, monitoring and enforcement, as well as the meaningful participation of local communities. We **SUPPORT** sustainable nature-based tourism models that respect ecological carrying capacity and ensure that local communities receive equitable and tangible socio-economic benefits from conservation.

We further **COMMIT** to strengthening regional cooperation on the prevention, early detection and coordinated response to forest and landscape fires, including through interoperable early warning systems, shared risk information, sustainable forest management and appropriate nature-based solutions for wildfire prevention, restoration with climate-resilient native species and enhanced capacities of central and local authorities and forest-dependent communities.

4.The Regional Pledge on Phasing Out the Five Most Littered Single-Use Plastic Products - We **COMMIT** to take coordinated regional action to phase out the five priority single-use plastic (SUPs) groups that recur most persistently across litter and waste streams in the WB6, namely plastic carrier bags, beverage containers, cups for beverages, food containers, and single-use cutlery, plates, straws and stirrers. To this end, we will pursue a harmonised regional pathway based on common definitions, aligned scope, indicative milestones, and a shared tracking approach. By 2028, WB6 will aim to introduce coordinated legal, economic and demand-reduction measures to achieve an 80% reduction in the market availability and consumption of these priority SUP products compared with the 2023 baseline, supported by a harmonised and validated baseline, and a shared monitoring and reporting methodology. Regulatory measures will be complemented, as appropriate and in accordance with domestic circumstances, by economic instruments

and market incentives such as green public procurement criteria, reuse and refill measures, restrictions on disposable formats, and targeted measures in priority sectors such as retail, HoReCa, public catering and events.

5.The Regional Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) Framework for Plastic Packaging: We **COMMIT** to establish harmonised, functional and regionally coordinated Extended Producer Responsibility systems for plastic packaging across the WB6, supporting the implementation of Action 19 of the Revised GAWB Action Plan and contributing to the implementation of Action 22. By 2028, WB6 will aim to put in place functional EPR requirements for plastic packaging, including official producer and packaging registries, harmonised reporting on tonnes placed on the market, fee collection mechanisms, audited reporting, and financing of collection, sorting and treatment systems. The regional framework will promote compatible and, where appropriate, interoperable registries and data systems, and support a clearly defined operational role for authorised Producer Responsibility Organisations and other relevant private-sector actors, in accordance with domestic legislation. It will support comparability of data, improve compliance and market surveillance, strengthen producer responsibility, and reduce plastic packaging leakage into protected areas and other ecologically sensitive zones.

6.The GAWB Action Plan Implementation Report 2025, assessing progress across all seven components of the Action Plan, identifying key implementation gaps and challenges, and proposing recommendations and corrective measures to accelerate implementation and ensure the achievement of GAWB objectives:

We **RECOGNISE** that, while maintaining common regional ambition, implementation pathways and timelines should take account of domestic circumstances, institutional readiness and socio-economic conditions, and should be accompanied by adequate technical assistance, transitional arrangements and predictable financial support, without lowering agreed environmental and climate objectives.

We **WELCOME** the continued support for the implementation of the GAWB Action Plan and **CALL UPON** bilateral and multilateral donors to continue and further expand their support. We **REITERATE** the importance of ensuring the participation of all relevant stakeholders, including local governments, civil society, academia, youth and underrepresented groups, in shaping and delivering the green transition.

We **AGREE** to reconvene in 2027 to review progress achieved and provide further strategic guidance for the implementation of the GAWB.