

**Communique of Jerzy Kwieciński,
Minister of Investment and Economic Development**
*on the outcomes of the Forum of Cities and Regions, 4-6.06.2019 in Rzeszow
as part of the Polish presidency in the Berlin Process*

- The Western Balkans are an important region for Poland and the European Union. Our partners from the Western Balkans face many challenges, carry out economic and social reforms to adapt to the criteria for EU membership. That is why our commitment and support is so important.
- Cooperation with the Western Balkans is an investment in ensuring the stability of the EU and its neighbourhood. Changes in the Western Balkans, and in particular the economic reforms, may have a positive effect not only for the inhabitants of this region, but also for the entire Europe, strengthening its development potential and harmonious development.
- Bearing in mind how important challenges are faced by the Western Balkans, and desiring to make the most positive contribution to this process, the Ministry of Investment and Development, on 4-6 June 2019, in Rzeszów, organised the Forum of Cities and Regions. The event was included in the *Programme of Polish Activities as part of the Western Balkans Summit – Poznań 2019* and the Polish Presidency in the Berlin Process.
- The Forum participants confirmed their support for the European perspective of the Western Balkans and noted the role of the EC strategy of February 2018 and flagship initiatives in upholding the dynamics of reforms in the Western Balkans. The role of the Berlin Process in developing regional cooperation and economic integration in the Western Balkans was also welcomed, while expressing the expectation that the upcoming Western Balkans Summit in Poznań will contribute to further development of the mutual economic, infrastructural and interpersonal connections between the Western Balkans and the European Union.
- During the high-level meeting, with the participation of partners from the Western Balkans, EU Member States, as well as the European Commission, the European Committee of the Regions, the European Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the most effective methods of support for the Western Balkans in the process of European integration and economic transformation were discussed. Attention was given to the special role of smart specialisations that can be used to support competitiveness and innovation and which are successfully used in the development policy. The importance of involving private capital in the transformation process and creating pro-innovation solutions based on partnership between private and public capital was emphasised.
- It has been noted that the level of innovativeness of the economies from the Western Balkans region has increased significantly over the last 10 years. However, in order to accelerate the process of catching up with the development level of other European regions, it is even more important to focus on supporting innovation. The European Commission and Member States support and are ready to continue to support partners from the Western Balkans in this process through advice and exchange of experiences and best practices.

- Participants also pointed out to the need to better use the opportunities arising from the potential of macroregional strategies. Strategies as an integrated cooperation instrument allow to face challenges extending beyond the territories of individual countries.
- During the Forum there were also 4 thematic sessions devoted to international territorial cooperation, improvement of the quality of public services, transformation of mining regions, and the Via Carpatia project as the main international road corridor connecting the basins of the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea, the Aegean Sea and the Adriatic Sea:
 - Representatives of local governments from the Western Balkans and Poland pointed out that a closer cooperation would help to increase the competences of local governments and regions, as well as it would enable the transfer of experience in the area of improvement of the quality of public services, the use of EU funds for implementation of EU programmes and instruments relating to social and economic projects, including the cross-border projects. One such initiative is the Covenant of Mayors, promoting local contribution to the achievement of climate change targets. In addition, in the opinion of panel participants, of particular importance for the implementation of local governments tasks is to ensure stable sources of financing.
 - The participants of the session on international territorial cooperation shared their experiences relating to partner cooperation in implementing the Interreg projects, the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance and the European Neighbourhood Instrument. The outcome of the session were conclusions and recommendations from the implementation of cross-border projects submitted by the beneficiaries, which could be used on the Balkan borders. They focused on getting to know neighbours better, bringing the communities closer to each other, improving trust among nations, discussing about common history and intercultural relations. An important part of this session was a discussion on territorial cooperation after 2020. Its participants underlined the role that territorial cooperation plays in the process of building positive neighbourly relations on the internal and external borders of the EU.
 - During the session devoted to mining regions in the EU and the Western Balkans, it was pointed out that they face serious challenges related to energy transformation, such as reclamation and revitalisation of brownfield sites. It was underlined that this process is a great challenge for regional authorities and government administration, but at the same time it is a significant opportunity for the economic growth of the region. Transformation takes place, among others, through implementation of investments in the area of innovative energy technologies and employment growth. During the session it was stressed how important it is to conduct the process, while guaranteeing a fair social transformation, i.e. creating new jobs, raising qualifications and retraining employees currently employed in the mining sector and creating new development opportunities for them. The Forum presented the assumptions of the Initiative implemented by the European Commission "*Coal Region in Transition*" which offers comprehensive support in carrying out the process of socio-economic transformation by coal regions.

- The last thematic session of the Forum concerned the initiative originated by the late President of the Republic of Poland, Lech Kaczyński, namely, the Via Carpatia transport corridor. Via Carpatia is currently a key corridor constituting an effective connection between Northern and Southern Europe. The panelists discussed prospective profits for the existing members of the Via Carpatia project and potential partners from the Western Balkans in the future.
- The Forum of Cities and Regions, marked by extensive participation of representatives of cities and regions of the EU Member States and the Western Balkans, was a unique event in the framework of the Berlin Process. The contribution of Poland to this initiative is supplementing the Berlin Process with the regional dimension. We hope that the next Presidencies will continue this tradition.