

**SPEAKING POINTS Ambassador FABRIZI**  
**6th Western Balkans Platform for Education and Training**  
**28 September 2017**

*Check against delivery*

Dear Commissioner Navracsics

Minister of Education, Science and Technological Development  
Mr. Šarčević

Dear Ministers and representatives of ministries of education and science from the region,

On behalf of the European Union and the EU Delegation to the Republic of Serbia, it is my pleasure to welcome you today in Belgrade at the 6<sup>th</sup> Western Balkans Platform for Education and Training.

For the 6<sup>th</sup> year in a row, the countries in the region are meeting to take stock of the progress made in their education reforms. The particular value of this platform is that this reflection is made from a regional perspective – by finding common grounds for cooperation and exchange of best practices in the field, which is crucial for further social and economic development of the region.

All the Western Balkan countries are undergoing dynamic changes in the education and training sector. There are a lot of lessons learned to harvest and synergies to create.

All the participating countries are unequivocally committed to achieving EU and international standards in education, however, understandably, the implementation of reforms is difficult – the countries are at different stages of reforms and face specific national and local challenges.

The EU supports the education reform efforts in the Western Balkan countries looking ahead to a longer-term perspective: the EU wants to see the Western Balkans achieve progress in accession processes and prepare its countries for EU membership rights and responsibilities.

The EU commitment to the Western Balkans is firm, and clear. As President Juncker said this month in his State of the Union address: "If we want more stability in our neighbourhood, then we must maintain a credible enlargement perspective for the Western Balkans." The President Juncker's speech presented main EU strategic priorities in the coming period.

And in there, it is made clear that we will further intensify our work with the Western Balkan region, for their successful EU accession. This is an investment in peace, prosperity, stability and security. It is a joint guarantee for the EU and Western Balkans' safe and prosperous future.

Building a positive agenda for the region was also reiterated in the Western Balkan summit in Trieste in July, reaching out to neighbours and adding the Regional Economic Area initiative to the core connectivity agenda. It is now up to the countries themselves to start implementing the Action Plan agreed in Trieste. I firmly believe that, if the commitments taken are delivered, the market of 20 million and more will benefit from strengthened growth and further investments. And let's not forget that mobility of students and researchers will be a fundamental pillar of this initiative.

Human capital remains one of the key resources for growth of a country. From this perspective, the reinforcement of education is a key factor for economic recovery and building of a common identity and promoting the fundamental values that the European Union is founded on, such as democracy, solidarity and respect for human rights.

Our ultimate goal is to help all countries of the region create better education which will respond to their social and economic growth challenges, and boost overall development and EU accession prospects. But investing in education reforms also contributes to reducing social exclusion by ensuring that benefits of economic recovery are more widely distributed, thereby making sure that the growth remains inclusive.

This is also what the EU has been striving to support in each of the countries concerned. EU funds have, and continue to be used to support the capacity of policy makers to improve the relevance, quality, inclusiveness and efficiency of education. In Serbia alone, we have invested 80 million EUR since 2003 to support the education reform. The EU also invested more than 100 million EUR in Serbia in the field of innovation, competitiveness, research and development.

In return for investments, we expect that the Western Balkans should translate their strategic objective of EU membership into concrete implementation of reforms. It is a strategic choice and an investment in the country's future, as citizens will profit from the accession process through the implementation of reforms.

Our focus on the Western Balkans sends a clear political message: the EU is committed to the enlargement process and we are working very closely on key areas for growth.

Building bridges and connecting territories will make a profound contribution to developing good neighbourly relations and further promoting peace and reconciliation, in addition to bringing economic benefits.

In commemoration of 30 years of one of the most effective EU programmes, the Erasmus programme, we have already heard from Commissioner Navracsics that the Western Balkans actively

participate in the programme, both regarding the quality of applications and the absorption of support.

*(If Commissioner has not mentioned it)* Serbia specifically is very successful in the new Erasmus+ programme. So far, Serbian higher education institutions have been granted nearly 27 million euros for projects within the programme, which is more than any other country in the Western Balkan region. In addition, over 5000 professors and students from higher education institutions in Serbia went to short term exchange programmes to universities all over Europe and beyond.

I would like to encourage the countries present today to keep being proactive in the programme, because investing into the mobility and capacity building of youth will contribute to fostering a common European identity, appreciative of cultural diversity.

Let me conclude by wishing all of you fruitful discussions and much success in your dialogue today and tomorrow.

## **BACKGROUND**

On the occasion of 30 years of Erasmus programme, Commissioner Tibor Navracsics, responsible for Education, Culture, Youth and Sport will visit Belgrade on Thursday 28 September where he will open a regional ministerial meeting on education, training, science and research, together with the Head of EU Delegation Mr. Sem Fabrizi and the Minister of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia Mladen Šarčević.

The Western Balkans Platform on Education and Training and the Western Balkans Platform on Research and Innovation are high-level meetings organised by the European Commission on an annual basis. This year, Western Balkan Ministers for Education and Science will meet in Belgrade on 28-29 September to celebrate 30 years of Erasmus and to discuss measures to further increase regional cooperation in the areas of education, science, research and innovation.

### **Western Balkans Platform on Education and Training (WB PET)**

The 6<sup>th</sup> WB Platform on Education and Training is taking place in Belgrade on 28-29 September 2017.

Launched in 2012, this is the EU's initiative for cooperation in education with Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro and Serbia.

The Director-General of EAC Chairs the annual Ministerial meetings which identify common priorities, discuss latest policy and reform measures and decide on topics for regional cooperation with EU assistance.

Although the countries in the region are committed to voluntarily converge with EU and international standards, the implementation of new policies and reforms is difficult. Each country is at a different stage and with limited resources they requested assistance.

The Platform encourages regional cooperation and communication, sharing of good practices in the region and the EU and pooling of resources. It also provides follow-up in terms of joint projects, studies and events.

The longer term perspective of the policy dialogue is to assist the Western Balkans with their reform efforts and prepare them for EU Membership responsibilities including full participation in the EU's education programmes.

Since its launch in 2012, the European Commission organises an annual high-level meeting of the Western Balkans Platform on Education and Training. All

Ministers of Education in the region are invited to review the state of educational reforms in their countries, learn about the latest strategies in the EU, identify priorities, agree on follow-up to be given to studies/reports as well as to cooperate on activities undertaken by the Platform.

This year it was decided to hold the meetings of the two Platforms together on 27 (R&I) and 28 - 29 September 2017 (WB PET) in Belgrade.

The Ministers will meet in the mornings of 28 and 29 September to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the Erasmus+ programme and to discuss the Education & Training part of the agenda, and in the afternoon of 28 September to discuss the Research & Innovation part.

### **Western Balkans Steering Platform on Research and Innovation**

This year, the two platforms are organized back to back – the WB Platform on Research and Innovation will take place on 27 September 2017, and will feed into the discussions during the WB PET.

The Western Balkans Steering Platform on Research and Innovation also meets annually since 2007 with the overall objective to advance on the integration of the Western Balkans into the European Research Area in a perspective of accession to the EU. The Platform discusses the research and innovation capacities in the Western Balkans, participation in the EU's framework programmes for research and innovation, monitors the progress of regional strategies and actions and helps in exchanging information and best practice.