

**Opening remarks**  
**6<sup>th</sup> Western Balkans Platform on Education and Training**  
**Belgrade**  
**28 September 2017**

*Check against delivery*

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour for me to be here with you and to open this Ministerial meeting. I would like to specially thank Minister Mladen Sarcevic for co-hosting this event, Ambassador Sem Fabrizi and all the Education and Science Ministers who are here with us today.

It is the first time this important meeting takes place in Serbia, and it gives me great pleasure to join you here in Belgrade, a city which has risen from difficult times to become a modern European capital.

Since its launch in 2012, the Ministerial Platform has become a valuable tradition. It represents a unique forum to exchange views on the education systems in the Western Balkans, their main priorities and their challenges.

The commitment shown by the Ministers responsible for education and science, present here today, demonstrates the importance given to education and to this regional policy dialogue.

This year's Platform will focus on two very important priority topics: research and mobility. Enhancing the research capacity in the Western Balkans is one of the best investments for the future of the region, not only to keep young talent here but to build stronger and adaptable economies.

And mobility is a beneficial investment too. The Trieste Youth Forum in July once again highlighted how important it is to enable more students and staff from the region to go to EU Member States – and for their counterparts to move in the other direction. We know what a positive impact mobility can have on cooperation, mutual understanding and employability.

This is all the more important today, as we witness new divisions and conflict in our societies. Young people have a vital role in building bridges and helping us create strong, cohesive communities. And they deserve the opportunity to expand their horizons, develop skills and make new friends. That is why I am glad to see that the Berlin process stresses the role of intra-regional mobility.

Let us thus explore together what we can do to boost mobility and cooperation. I am fully aware that we still have challenges to overcome in these two areas, but we can learn from each other. I call on everyone to contribute with their own experience and concerns today and tomorrow.

One important tool that has a big role to play in boosting mobility and cooperation is our Erasmus+ programme. Over the past 30 years, Erasmus+ and its predecessors have supported more than nine million people, helping to bring Europeans together and creating one of the EU's biggest success stories.

Erasmus+ offers numerous opportunities to the Western Balkans. Today, higher education institutions in the 33 Erasmus+ Programme Countries, which include the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, can exchange students and staff with institutions around the world.

Since 2014, over 12,000 students and staff from the Western Balkans have received scholarships to study or teach abroad – with 4,000 alone going from Bosnia and Herzegovina to universities across the globe.

During the same period, more than 7,000 students and staff have travelled from Erasmus+ Programme Countries to the Western Balkans.

Also since 2014, we have funded 91 capacity-building projects, 30% of them led by partners from the region. For example, 17 capacity building projects from Albania have been selected for funding. All in all, more than 100 institutions cooperated to help modernise and internationalise higher education systems, improving transparency, ensuring quality and high standards and contributing to making young people more employable.

Erasmus+ also awarded around 206 Master scholarships and 18 Doctoral fellowships for excellent Western Balkan students and researchers. The University of Montenegro is one of the few institutions in the region participating in the excellence action of Erasmus Mundus, with nearly 20 Master scholarships awarded.

At the same time, over 23,000 young people from the Western Balkans and EU Member States have worked together on projects funded from the "Youth strand" of Erasmus+.

And finally, this year, 11 Jean Monnet projects were selected in the region, as many as in the three previous years combined.

Also relevant for today's discussion is the performance of the Western Balkans in the Marie Skłodowska Curie Actions, part of the Horizon 2020 Programme. Institutions from the region have participated in 63 projects, including 41 from Serbia – an outstanding achievement.

Needless to say, we are expecting these figures to increase.

Finally, I am glad to see that Kosovo is ready to partially join Erasmus+. After the signature of the general Framework Agreement with the EU last November, Kosovo is expected to be part of the different networks which the Programme offers, such as Europass, Euroguidance, Eurydice, EPALE or eTwinning. I would like to see Kosovo make the most of these opportunities.

Ladies and gentlemen,

After a period abroad, students, volunteers, youth workers, athletes or researchers return to their home countries more independent and resilient, and much better qualified for the world of work. They have made a life experience – like the ones I am certain we will hear about later this morning.

Moreover, programmes like Erasmus+ and the Marie Skłodowska Curie Actions offer people the chance to get to know other points of view – and re-consider their own. A chance to meet others from different backgrounds, appreciate the great diversity that characterises Europe – and cherish what we have in common.

Giving young people more opportunities to go abroad and intensifying cooperation are vital in building a better future together. We have to do our utmost to open as many doors as we can. I am ready to keep working with you to ensure that we achieve this goal.

Thank you.