

EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Mr Olivér Várhelyi, European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement

Re: Urgent and concrete assistance to the Western Balkans to mitigate the negative effects of the Covid-19 preventing measures

23rd March, 2020

Dear Mr Várhelyi,

I hope this letter finds you and your team safe and healthy.

Almost four months have passed since the outbreak of coronavirus around the world. Europe has become the epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic and over the past few weeks the Western Balkans have witnessed the spread of the virus.

In addition to significant health concerns and impact on the health systems, the spread of the coronavirus has been impacting the Western Balkans economies severely. The uncertainty of both the length and the depth of the current stalemate of both everyday life and economies makes forecasting the impact on the global but also the Western Balkans economies extremely difficult.

All Western Balkan Chambers of Commerce, members of the Western Balkans 6 Chamber Investment Forum, are in close and constant dialogue with both national governments but also business communities to identify and analyze the impact and suggest the best measures to assist the businesses affected by the coronavirus.

There are a few pressing issues that we would like to draw your attention to and kindly but urgently ask for your action.

1. The recent restrictions on the export of protective medical equipment could have severe consequences for the Western Balkans. Health systems in these countries are generally weaker due to chronic lack of public funds and not so strong economies. Still, also there are not enough and authorized production capacities in the region to bridge the gap between the demand and the offer. Reflecting the Commission decision to exempt exports to Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, Switherland and United Kingdom from the EU export authorisation requirements, we urge you to extend that decision to Western Balkan countries. What is more, all Western Balkan countries should also be able to participate in the Joint Procurement of medical countermeasures.

That is important not only for assisting the health systems in our countries but even more importantly, to support our industries to keep working. They are struggling to purchase protective equipment for their employees, and if the problem continues, they would need

to halt the production. That would be devastating for both the companies and the economies in which they operate, but also the EU, as many companies in the region are proven parts of the EU value chains. We all agree that the supply chain is now more than ever essential to be maintained.

We appeal to the European Union to exclude all six Western Balkan economies from the EU export authorization requirements

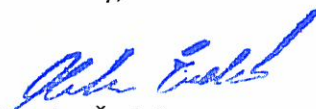
2. The EU external borders geographically encapsulate the Western Balkans, and thus we kindly but urgently ask you to review the possibility of granting access to the "green lanes" to the Western Balkans companies. The flow of goods – in particular goods of primary needs (human and animal food – medicines – medical equipment) must not be interrupted in this crisis time. Transport of goods of primary importance should have priority with respect to the other goods via "green lanes". The traffic flow must be guaranteed through 24/24 hours operations. Import of materials needed to produce goods of primary importance, which are obtained in the EU, is equally important in maintaining the production of our industries and should be included to the "green lane" priority system, as well.

Given that the EU is Western Balkans' leading trading partner, our businesses are faced with a lot of challenges when delivering much-needed goods to their EU partners. Our companies report problems in the timely delivery of the goods to the EU, the inability to deliver the required materials to their EU partners timely, the inability to timely deliver the necessary components to their parent companies based in the EU. The trucks drivers are facing additional challenges when delivering goods in the Single Market, due to different quarantine regimes at the EU internal and external borders. The access to the Western Balkans via "green lanes" will surely bring a positive impact to both the EU and the Western Balkans.

Therefore, WB6 CIF appeals to the European Union to extend the "green corridors" initiative to the Western Balkans economies for both the sake of the EU and the Western Balkans.

We are all facing a crisis of unprecedented proportions. Let us move together in solidarity, and let that solidarity be also felt in the Western Balkans.

Sincerely,



Marko Čadež

President of WB6 CIF Managing Board