

Circular bioeconomy: a shift towards sustainable food production- High-level meeting of Agriculture Ministers of Eastern Partnership and European Union countries

High-level meeting for Agriculture Ministers of EaP and EU countries will take place on 13th of October 2022 in Tartu in conjunction with scientific bioeconomy conference and Estonian agriculture annual Expo.

The geopolitical landscape in the Eastern Partnership region changed dramatically with Russia's unprovoked and unjustified aggression against Ukraine. In the immediate aftermath, it paved the way for the historic decision to grant Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia EU membership perspectives. However, while the nature of the EU's engagement with partners may be changing, the overarching priority of boosting resilience in the region and finding regional solutions to regional challenges, is more important than ever.

Bioeconomy is defined as the production of renewable biomass and turning it mainly into food, feed, bio-based materials and bioenergy. Bioeconomy covers almost all industrial and economic sectors. Mostly, however, it uses biomass from agriculture, fisheries, forestry and conversion processes in related industries (for example food, feed, fibre, paper, energy, chemical, biotechnology industry). Important notions within bioeconomy are circularity and cascading use of biomass, both of which lead to environmentally friendly, socially acceptable and economically useful practices.

The main aim of the ministerial meeting is to exchange views about the role of circular bioeconomy in achieving climate-neutral economies and safeguarding sustainable food systems. Furthermore, discussion should involve opportunities that emerge when replacing fossil raw materials with renewable bioresources, combining the resilience of ecosystems and economic objectives.

Both the Eastern Partnership and the EU countries face many similar challenges related to the following aspects:

- Governance, institutional challenges and long-term policy development. Countries often lack long-term strategies with well-defined targets for the development of bioeconomy. As bioeconomy is a field with many actors, sectors and interests, there are difficulties in creating a suitable institutional setting for policy-making and coordination;
- Regulatory framework. A suitable legal space for bio-based solutions is missing or is not suitable for new innovative solutions;
- Investments and access to financing. Bioeconomy is a relatively new concept, where it is often a big challenge to secure financing for ideas that have high potential but are not yet tested in practice; the initial investments are large and the ability of the private sector to take risks is not sufficient to guarantee development.
- Enhancing research and development, knowledge transfer and new skills. Building the transition to carbon-neutral and bio-based economy with new technology and business sectors will very much depend on scientific advancements, research and innovation.

Thus, it is of utmost importance to bring together different partners from scientific communities and industry and implement common projects.

- Bioeconomy in service of economic development and resilience. It is very important to understand that bioeconomy contributes to the transition towards economy that is sustainable in the long term. In the European Union, the European Green Deal has been developed to encourage this, which not only helps to preserve nature, but also creates attractive jobs and new economic models, the implementation of which has very good prerequisites in the Eastern Partnership countries as well.
- Management of land and increasing biomass demands. Development of bioeconomy needs to address the multiple pressures on land and sea and avoid excessive use of bioresources, at the same time safeguarding food security and resilience of food systems.

In order to overcome the challenges mentioned above, many possibilities already exist for the EU and Eastern Partnership countries to cooperate, for instance, within EU programmes such as Horizon Europe or the LIFE programme, which some Eastern partner countries have joined or are in the process of joining. Tailor-made support can be provided through workshops, expert missions and study visits within the framework of the Technical Assistance and Information Exchange instrument of the European Commission (TAIEX). Country-specific support has also been provided for demonstrating the benefits of bio-economy. In terms of investment, the Economic and Investment Plan for the Eastern Partnership stresses the importance of investing in environmental and climate resilience. These investments should be implemented through the European Fund for Sustainable Development Plus (EFSD+). Within the framework of this Fund, the European Commission has set up a dedicated window on “Sustainable Agriculture, Biodiversity, Forests and Water”. This window will target agriculture, forestry, water, oceans, land use and fisheries sectors to promote conservation, restoration, and sustainable management of natural resources in order to strengthen climate and biodiversity actions, while contributing to sustainable development goals, including water and food security. The instrument will catalyse investment in carbon farming, nature-based solutions, ecosystem-based approaches, deforestation-free supply chains and other sustainable practices in agriculture, conservation, forestry, land use, water, oceans and fisheries, including throughout the whole value chain, and contribute to addressing the growing issue of poor natural resource management and water scarcity (Food-Water-Energy nexus).

For the ministerial roundtable, two main questions are put forward:

- 1. Considering the abovementioned challenges, what are the biggest challenges in your country for the successful development of bioeconomy both in the short as well as in the long run, and how does your country address these challenges currently?**
- 2. Where do you see opportunities for enhancing co-operation between the EU and Eastern Partnership countries in the sphere of bioeconomy? What could be the next steps?**