



21 April 2021

**Joint declaration of the Ministers of Agriculture of the Visegrad Group
(Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) and Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania,
on the opportunities and challenges of agricultural holdings in light of the Farm to Fork
Strategy**

The Ministers of Agriculture of the Visegrad Group (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) and Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania:

APPRECIATE the European Commission's (EC) initiative to create a fair, healthy, environmentally-friendly and resilient food system, and consider the Farm to Fork Strategy (F2F) adopted by the EC to be an important step in this direction;

ARE AWARE that food systems affect the climate and biodiversity and are also strongly influenced by it. Extreme climate events, such as floods, droughts, fires, frost and strong winds, as well as soil erosion or the spread of plant and animal diseases associated with climate change already have a significant impact on food production and this impact may increase in the future;

NOTE that the key assumptions of the strategy are already reflected in the nine specific objectives of the new Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and are to be implemented by the countries in the national CAP strategic plans;

STRESS that the recommendations of the EC to the Member States (MS) on the implementation of the strategy's objectives in their national CAP strategic plans¹ should be treated as guidelines as they are not legally binding. MS should have flexibility in programming mechanisms that facilitate the transformation of the food system into a more people-, climate- and environmental-friendly one;

¹In line with Article 106 (2) of the draft CAP Strategic Plans regulation (Council General Approach of 21/10/2020)

EMPHASIZE that the submitted strategy sets ambitious objectives and poses challenges for the MS to be met within a very short period of time, however, MS have not been involved in the discussion on setting these objectives and also no impact assessment has been carried out on the possible effects of the strategy at EU and MS level;

STRESS that the implementation of the strategy objectives by MS will lead to substantially changing the structure of farms, the volume of production and the organisation of agricultural markets, as well as the EU share in the global market of agricultural and food products. Such significant changes require appropriate allocations of funds not only within the framework of the CAP, but also of other EU policies and funds, including, inter alia, the Resilience and Recovery Fund (RRF);

STRESS that the strategy was published without an assessment of the possible environmental, social and economic effects of its implementation; MS also have not been provided with an analysis of the long-term impact of the strategy on their macroeconomic and sectoral situation. Therefore, ministers INVITE the EC to submit appropriate impact analysis of the Strategy before any implementation phase will begin;

EXPECT that, before legislative proposals following from the strategy are drawn up, a thorough impact assessment will be made, including impact on the entire agri-food chain, in particular farmers, as well as on the European Union's food security, competitiveness and sustainable development of the sector, including food prices. This is particularly important in the case of restrictions on the use of plant protection products, the sale of antimicrobials and the use of fertilisers, as well as increased animal welfare requirements;

STRESS that a priority objective for agriculture, fishery and aquaculture is to ensure food security and food safety, which has a direct impact on public health in the EU. The solutions proposed in the strategy should address the currently identified problems and challenges, so that the food supply chain is more resilient to disruptions related to emerging crises. The current situation in relation to COVID-19 has shown that the EU cannot afford actions with a real potential to jeopardise its own food production and to destabilize agricultural and food markets;

POINT OUT the fact that the ambitious goal of the strategy - namely the significant increase in organic aquaculture - must respect the different approaches to fish farming in different MS across the EU. If the EC is to ensure long-term sustainable and regulated fishing in the seas, it is necessary to ensure fish production from sustainable aquaculture systems, and not just in organic aquaculture. Freshwater aquaculture systems should be supported by the Union in order to ensure high-quality, healthy and environment-friendly fish protein;

STRESS that the implementation of ambitious objectives must not place an undue, unilateral burden on EU agriculture and the food industry, which may undermine their competitive position in the international market. If the EU wants to achieve more sustainable development, it must, first and

foremost, ensure adequate income for small and medium-scale farms, which are the most vulnerable in the food supply chain, contribute to biodiversity, which is the basis of agricultural production, while their multifunctional character and provision of public goods is not rewarded by the market;

RECOGNIZE that only economically stable and competitive agricultural holdings are able to meet the expectations of higher sustainability requirements. Achievement of the ambitious objectives will not be possible without adequate financial support for EU farmers to facilitate the transition towards more sustainable production systems;

HIGHLIGHT in this respect the need to continue EU-wide efforts to strengthen the position of farmers' in the food supply chain with the aim of achieving a balanced and well-functioning supply chain, which would be not only fairer but also more resilient to potential future crises.

WELCOME the creation of short supply chains as they can significantly contribute to strengthening the resilience of regional and local food systems. Shortening the supply chain strengthens the farmer's position as a producer by eliminating unnecessary intermediary costs. The shorter the supply chain, the greater the chance of ensuring adequate margins for farmers from the sale of their products;

SUPPORT the idea of taking action at the Community level aimed at reducing dependence on plant protection products, antimicrobials and limiting excessive mineral fertilisation, in order to reduce air, soil and water pollution and reverse biodiversity loss;

STRESS that, when assessing the specific target values set by the MS, the EC should take into account the specificities of each MS, the different baseline levels, the efforts made and the successes already achieved in areas related to the strategy's objectives;

SUPPORT the optimisation of the use of plant protection products and efforts to develop scientifically-sound alternative methods. STRESS that in order to maintain adequate yields and quality, the phase-out of active substances may only be introduced when an alternative substance which is safe for humans, animals and the environment is available on the market. REALIZE that the currently available alternatives are often not effective enough;

AGREE with the need to limit the use of antimicrobials; NOTE that the objective should not be a simple 50% reduction in the amount of antimicrobials sold in each MS, but the attainment of this objective in 2030 should be for the global consumption of antimicrobials in the EU as a whole with each MS contributing;

BELIEVE that development plans for organic farming can lead to the creation of new jobs and attract young farmers, while contributing to biodiversity conservation, provided that there is adequate financial allocation for this purpose;

STRESS that the high standard of European agricultural products must be promoted to become more visible to consumers within and outside the EU.

POINT OUT that European food is already synonymous with safety and high quality; AGREE that the transition can make the EU sustainable development a global trademark, providing an opportunity for further development for all actors in the food supply chain; The EU labelling system must function in such a way as to support consumers in their informed choice of sustainable products, so that quality, not just price, constitutes a determining factor underlying their choice;

STRESS the importance of promotion of global transition ensuring an appropriate supportive international environment; primarily, agricultural products imported to the EU must fully comply with high standards of consumer, environmental, climate and animal protection and the transition to sustainable food systems must not compromise the competitiveness of the EU agri-food sector. The EU trade policy should seek to obtain ambitious trade and sustainable development and sustainable food systems commitments from third countries while ensuring their effective implementation in compliance with international rules;

AGREE that the transition to a healthy and environmentally-friendly food system is also driven by consumer expectations and new dietary and consumption models observed not only in EU countries. In the context of growing consumer awareness, the transition to sustainable production methods, the reduction of the environmental footprint and the improvement of animal welfare may be an opportunity for small and medium-sized agricultural holdings to obtain a fairer income;

AGREE that the transformation of the food system with the use of new technologies, innovative solutions, digitalisation, new methods of food production and distribution, as well as quality management can boost the development and competitiveness of the agri-food sector in the long-run.