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## TEXTS ADOPTED

*Provisional edition*

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### **2018 Report on the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia**

### **European Parliament resolution of 29 November 2018 on the 2018 Commission Report on the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (2018/2145(INI))**

*The European Parliament,*

- having regard to the European Council’s decision of 16 December 2005 to grant the country the status of candidate for EU membership,
- having regard to the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) between the European Communities and their Member States, of the one part, and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, of the other part,
- having regard to the Final Agreement for the Settlement of the Differences as described in the United Nations Security Council Resolutions 817 (1993) and 845 (1993), the Termination of the Interim Accord of 1995 and the Establishment of a Strategic Partnership between Greece and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia of 17 June 2018, also known as the Prespa Agreement,
- having regard to the Framework Agreement concluded at Ohrid and signed at Skopje on 13 August 2001 (Ohrid Framework Agreement, ‘the OFA’),
- having regard to the Commission’s June 2015 Urgent Reform Priorities for the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia,
- having regard to the political agreement (the so-called ‘Pržino Agreement’) reached between the four main political parties in Skopje on 2 June and 15 July 2015, and the four-party agreement on its implementation of 20 July and 31 August 2016,
- having regard to the Recommendations of the Senior Experts’ Group on Systematic Rule of Law Issues of 14 September 2017,
- having regard to the Berlin Process launched on 28 August 2014,
- having regard to the final reports of the OSCE/ODIHR concerning the early parliamentary elections of 11 December 2016, which were also observed by the European Parliament, and the municipal elections of 15 October and 29 October 2017,
- having regard to the declaration of the EU-Western Balkans summit of 17 May 2018

and its Sofia Priority Agenda,

- having regard to the European Council conclusions of 28 June 2018, endorsing the conclusions on enlargement and the stabilisation and association process adopted by the Council on 26 June 2018,
  - having regard to the decision of the Heads of State and Government of the NATO meeting of 11-12 July 2018 to invite the country to begin accession talks to join the alliance,
  - having regard to the 14th meeting of the Stabilisation and Association Council between the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and the EU on 13 July 2018,
  - having regard to the Commission communication of 6 February 2018 entitled ‘A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans’ (COM(2018)0065),
  - having regard to the Commission communication of 17 April 2018 entitled ‘2018 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy’ (COM(2018)0450), accompanied by the Commission staff working document entitled ‘The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia 2018 Report’ (SWD(2018)0154), recommending opening accession negotiations in light of the progress achieved and in view of the sustained commitment to reforms,
  - having regard to the Commission staff working document on its assessment of the Economic Reform Programme of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (SWD(2018)0134) and the Joint Conclusions of the Economic and Financial Dialogue between the EU and the Western Balkans and Turkey of 25 May 2018,
  - having regard to the recommendations adopted at the 14th meeting of the EU-former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC), held in Strasbourg on 7-8 February 2018,
  - having regard to the ‘Jean Monnet Dialogue’ process with the parliamentary leadership and political parties in the Assembly (Sobranie), launched in Ohrid on 17-18 May 2018,
  - having regard to its previous resolutions on the country,
  - having regard to Rule 52 of its Rules of Procedure,
  - having regard to the report of the Committee on Foreign Affairs (A8-0341/2018),
- A. whereas by implementing robust and inclusive democratic reforms and actively improving neighbourly relations, the new government is demonstrating continuity in the commitment to the country’s European and Euro-Atlantic path; whereas reform efforts should be paired with continued EU support for implementation of the Urgent Reform Priorities and measurable deliverables; whereas the prospect of EU membership is the great spur to reforms in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, especially as regards the rule of law, the independence of the judiciary and the fight against corruption; whereas the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia is considered to be the candidate country which has made the most progress in aligning its legislation with the EU acquis;

- B. whereas the Prespa Agreement of 17 June 2018 on the settlement of differences and the establishment of a strategic partnership between the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Greece sends a much-needed positive signal for stability and reconciliation in the whole Western Balkans region, improves the spirit of good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation and paves the way for the country's European integration;
- C. whereas 11 Confidence-Building Measures were agreed between Greece and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, mainly in the fields of political and EU affairs, education and culture, trade and economic cooperation, connectivity, justice and home affairs, and health cooperation; whereas these Confidence-Building Measures have already produced tangible results;
- D. whereas all political parties and state institutions have a duty to contribute to a more inclusive and open political atmosphere, enabling further progress in the EU accession process;
- E. whereas the country must further strengthen, inter alia, parliamentary legislative and oversight capacity, the judiciary, respect for the rule of law, media freedom and the fight against organised crime and corruption; whereas sustained reform efforts are needed in the areas of public administration, the economy and employment, and a comprehensive review of the implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA) is also required;
- F. whereas the accession of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to NATO will contribute to the peace and stability of the entire region;
- G. whereas on 28 June 2018 the European Council endorsed the 26 June 2018 Council conclusions, setting out the path towards opening accession negotiations in June 2019;
- H. whereas on 18 July 2018 the Commission initialled a status agreement with the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to allow European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) teams to carry out joint operations with and within the country for the purpose of migration and borders management, as a core element of the Commission's strategy for the Western Balkans;
- I. whereas air pollution is a major problem in Macedonian cities and according to the latest study by the Finnish Meteorological Institute and the Macedonian Institute of Public Health, Skopje and Tetovo have the highest concentration of fine particles in the air (PM<sub>2.5</sub>) out of all European cities;
- J. whereas the Balkans region is strategically important;
- K. whereas each candidate country is judged individually on its own merits, and it is the speed and quality of reforms that determine the timetable for accession and the pace of negotiations;
- L. whereas, after a thorough and transparent legal process, Nikola Gruevski was convicted by the Macedonian courts for abuse of power and sentenced to two years in prison; whereas multiple courts upheld this conviction and the decision came into force after all the appeals had been exhausted; whereas he has also been indicted in four additional pending criminal cases and is involved in a further five ongoing criminal investigations;

### *Overall reforms and good neighbourly relations*

1. Welcomes the government's strong political commitment to fully implement the Pržino Agreement and the Urgent Reform Priorities, leading to intensified efforts on EU-related reforms, based on cross-party and inter-ethnic cooperation and consultations with civil society, and underlines the importance of pursuing these efforts for the European future of the country; encourages the new government to maintain the positive momentum and to secure progress in, accelerate and fully implement EU-related reforms, in a transparent and inclusive manner; calls for support for the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to join the Euro-Atlantic organisations so as to enhance regional security;
2. Highly commends the positive diplomacy and active trust-building efforts leading to compromise, the settlement of open bilateral issues and the promotion of good neighbourly relations; stresses that bilateral issues should not obstruct the accession process; warmly welcomes the entry into force on 14 February 2018 of the friendship treaty with Bulgaria, that should provide for long-lasting and conciliatory good-neighbourly relations between the two countries;
3. Welcomes the Prespa Agreement of 17 June 2018 between Greece and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and commends both sides for their significant efforts to reach a mutually satisfactory solution to the name issue; welcomes its ratification by the Parliament of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia on 20 June and 5 July 2018; considers that it is in the interests of the citizens of the country that all political actors and civil society act in a constructive manner and assume their historic responsibilities; urges the parties to prioritise the interests of their country over party-political interests, to duly inform their citizens of the contents and implications of the agreement and to diligently complete all internal procedures for the ratification and implementation of this strategically important agreement, bringing an end to a protracted geopolitical limbo and setting a good example for peace and stability in the region; underlines the importance of the 30 September 2018 referendum concerning the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia's integration into the EU and NATO;
4. Takes note of the result of the 30 September 2018 referendum; stresses the need for further support to the Euro-Atlantic future of the country and for the implementation of the Prespa Agreement of 17 June 2018; encourages the government in Skopje to undertake all necessary and possible steps in order to honour the provisions of the Prespa Agreement, which opens the door to EU and NATO accession negotiations;
5. Welcomes the vote of 19 October 2018 in the Sobranie to initiate the process of constitutional amendment in order to implement the provisions laid down in the Prespa Agreement; calls on all political parties to continue cooperating in a spirit of shared responsibility in the next steps of the amendment procedure; reiterates its strong support for the country's European and Euro-Atlantic future and urges the government and parliament to continue their work on reforms which will pave the way for EU accession; encourages the Special Public Prosecutor and the courts to carry out their independent investigations on all pending cases of political and criminal wrongdoing and bring those responsible to justice;
6. Welcomes the country's diplomatic efforts to foster bilateral and regional cooperation with Albania and establish new qualitative relations in fields such as trade, law

enforcement, the fight against fraud and the prevention of terrorism;

7. Recalls that the country has already achieved a high level of alignment with the acquis; regrets the fact, nevertheless, that some of this legislation has not yet been implemented; takes note of the improvement in alignment with EU declarations and Council decisions on the Common Foreign and Security Policy and stresses the importance of progressively reaching full alignment, which is a prerequisite for the Euro-Atlantic future of the country;
8. Acknowledges the progress made in the public sector with the adoption of the public administration reform strategy and the financial management reform programme; calls on the government to ensure full implementation of these reforms; encourages the country to further strengthen professionalism by improving transparency and equitable representation and ensuring full respect of merit-based recruitment for public service positions;
9. Condemns in the strongest possible terms the 27 April 2017 attack on the Parliament of the country, which constitutes an attack on democracy and during which several MPs and journalists sustained severe injuries, and calls for the organisers and perpetrators to be brought to justice; welcomes the ongoing investigation and trial on the case; stresses that the establishment of accountability for these acts of violence should continue to be conducted in line with the law and in a transparent, independent and proportionate manner; further condemns any form of obstruction and any abuse of procedures of the Parliament or of Presidential powers in violation of the constitution;
10. Fully endorses the Commission's recommendation and ensuing Council decision setting June 2019 as a date for opening accession negotiations in recognition of the encouraging reform efforts; considers that a swift opening of the screening process and accession talks will sustain and deepen the reform momentum; considers that the opening of negotiations would provide further incentives for democratisation and enhance scrutiny and accountability;
11. Welcomes the formal invitation of 11 July 2018 from NATO to the country to begin the membership negotiations to join the organisation;
12. Considers that the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia's membership of NATO could contribute to achieving greater security and political stability in south-east Europe; calls on all EU Member States which are NATO members to actively support the country's accession to NATO;
13. Welcomes the country's upcoming passage to the second stage of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement and its inclusion in the Adriatic-Ionian Initiative, and calls on the Council to include the country in the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region;

### ***Democratisation***

14. Welcomes the initial steps taken towards reinstating checks and balances and increasing inclusion through measures improving the environment in which independent oversight institutions, the media and civil society organisations (CSOs) operate; welcomes the constructive dialogue between the government and CSOs and the role the latter have

played in ensuring greater checks and balances; emphasises that the undergoing fundamental changes should be made in an inclusive and open political atmosphere;

15. Appreciates the government's efforts to prevent backsliding and eliminate the remaining elements of state capture and encourages it to step up these efforts; recalls that the country was a frontrunner in the accession process in the 2000s;
16. Welcomes improvements in electoral legislation, but stresses the need for a timely revision of the Electoral Code by comprehensively addressing the remaining OSCE/ODIHR, Venice Commission and GRECO recommendations on campaign financing and on political parties; stresses that further efforts are needed to prevent and investigate any form of intimidation of voters; urges political parties to democratise their internal decision-making processes;
17. Encourages the authorities to complete the interrupted census, which would provide accurate statistics on population data to serve as basis for government development programmes and adequate budget planning, along with organising elections and calculating election results;
18. Welcomes the resumption of the EU-former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Joint Parliamentary Committee meetings and encourages continued constructive work within this interparliamentary framework;
19. Welcomes the launch of the Jean Monnet Dialogue process in Ohrid on 17 and 18 May 2018 and the resulting adoption by unanimous cross-party support of the Code of Ethics; encourages the Working Group on Reforms and Functioning of the Sobranie to review the Rules of Procedure of the Parliament and put forward proposals for amendments and timelines for adoption in the priority areas outlined in the conclusions in Ohrid; encourages all stakeholders involved in the political process to continue strengthening the culture of compromise and constructive political dialogue, especially among the Members of Parliament, and to refrain from creating any obstruction that would hamper the effective functioning of the Parliament;
20. Recommends that the country's Parliament make full use of its oversight and legislative functions, while strictly limiting the use of urgency procedures which undermine parliamentary and public scrutiny; calls for a credible track record to be established in the oversight of intelligence services and in the monitoring of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the country;
21. Welcomes the significant steps the government has taken to gradually restore a culture of compromise by reaching out to all stakeholders, including the opposition, with a view to strengthening democracy and the rule of law and the genuine desire to reform in an inclusive and transparent manner;
22. Calls for effective implementation of the public administration reform strategy to begin and for clear lines of accountability to be established; underlines the importance of merit-based recruitment and open competition for all recruitment procedures, and calls for an increase in human resources management capacity; calls for enhanced measures to improve the sectoral and financial planning capabilities across the public administration;

23. Welcomes the strengthening of decentralisation processes by the government with the adoption of the Action Plan for decentralisation and development 2018-2020 as an important step in addressing the scarcity of funding and services in the municipalities;
24. Welcomes the ongoing efforts to promote good governance, accountability and a free media environment, and to increase transparency and improve access to public information, including through publication of the expenditure of state institutions; calls for further steps to guarantee citizens' rights to access public information; calls for sustained efforts in increasing the inclusiveness of the decision-making process and improving interinstitutional coordination;
25. Calls for further progress to be made in digitising public information with a view to making it more accessible, and encourages the authorities to find innovative e-solutions to further enhance transparency and easy access to public information and to reduce the related bureaucracy;

### ***Rule of law***

26. Recalls that proper functioning of the judicial system and effective measures to combat corruption are of paramount importance in the EU accession process;
27. Welcomes the judicial reform strategy aimed at restoring judicial independence, accountability and professionalism and ending political interference and selective justice, and calls on the country's government and other stakeholders to intensify efforts to properly implement the judicial reform strategy by putting in place sound monitoring and evaluation mechanisms; stresses the need to complete legislative alignment in line with the recommendations of the Venice Commission; calls for continuous adoption and implementation of measures envisaged in the judicial reform strategy; underlines that further efforts are needed to shield the judiciary from political interference;
28. Welcomes the establishment of the Council on Judicial Ethics in January 2018 and the organisation of training courses by the Academy of Judges and Public Prosecutors on ethical behaviours for judges to prevent conflicts of interest and establish anti-corruption measures;
29. Remains concerned by widespread corruption and welcomes initial achievements in the prevention and prosecution thereof; is concerned about limited final court rulings in high-level corruption cases, but notes the first court verdicts on cases of corruption and abuse of power, and on the events of 27 April 2017; calls for sustained efforts to establish a track record of investigations, prosecutions and final convictions in cases of high-level corruption and organised crime; commends the work carried out by the Special Prosecutor's Office (SPO) in difficult circumstances and remains concerned about attacks on and obstruction of its work and the lack of cooperation from other institutions;
30. Calls upon the authorities to intensify the fight against money laundering and conflicts of interest by establishing and strengthening the capacities of anti-corruption, counter-crime and financial investigation cells, and through freezing, confiscation, recovery and management of assets; urges the authorities to establish a track record of investigations and prosecutions and to increase the number of convictions in high-level money laundering and financial crime cases; welcomes the adoption of the law on the

protection of whistle-blowers, which ensures better protection for whistle-blowers and strengthens government policies against corruption; calls for an urgent review of laws on anti-corruption, financial control and public procurement; encourages a reform of the general legal framework so that the State Commission for Prevention of Corruption has clear powers and can work in full independence and so that the Public Prosecutor's Office against Organised Crime and Corruption can carry out regular investigations;

31. Points out that corruption and organised crime are widespread in the region and also represent an obstacle to the country's democratic, social and economic development; considers that a regional strategy and enhanced cooperation between all the countries in the region are essential to tackle these issues more effectively;
32. Calls for political and legal accountability for criminal offences to be strictly ensured, including for offences arising from the wiretap scandal; urges the Parliament to complete the reform of intelligence services, ensuring proper external oversight of security and intelligence agencies;
33. Urges the authorities to take decisive action to dismantle criminal networks engaged in human, arms and drug trafficking, and to increase the institutional capacity of and the interinstitutional cooperation between law enforcement agencies and improve the track record of investigations, prosecutions and final convictions;
34. Acknowledges the efforts made and the constructive role the country has played in addressing the challenges of the European migration and refugee crisis; notes the sustained effort and calls for further improvement of the asylum system and migration management; encourages the country to step up and further deepen the mutually beneficial regional cooperation and partnership with Frontex under a new status agreement with a view to dismantling human trafficking networks;
35. Emphasises the need to ensure that migrants and refugees, especially women and children, applying for asylum in the country or travelling through its territory are treated in accordance with international and EU law;
36. Deems it necessary for the authorities to continue and intensify their efforts to combat Islamic radicalisation and foreign terrorist fighters; calls for this to be implemented through increased cooperation between security agencies and CSOs, religious leaders, local communities and other state institutions in the education, health and social services sectors; calls for continued monitoring of returning foreign fighters by the security services, their proper reintegration into society and the constant exchange of information with the authorities of the EU and of neighbouring countries;
37. Calls for further improvement of the children's justice system; calls on the competent authorities to make sufficient budget allocations for implementation of the Justice for Children Law, and to improve support services for girls and boys who are victims of violence and abuse, and for children in conflict with the law;
38. Calls on the Hungarian authorities to provide all relevant information and the necessary explanations concerning the case of former Macedonian Prime Minister Gruevski who fled his country with the secret diplomatic assistance of Hungary to avoid a prison sentence; considers this an act of interference in the internal affairs of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and, in particular, an act of contempt towards the

judiciary of and the rule of law in this country; notes the extradition request issued by the Skopje authorities, and expects Hungary to act strictly in line with the relevant national and international laws by responding positively to this request;

### *Fundamental rights and civil society*

39. Welcomes measures to improve inter-ethnic trust and calls for an inclusive and transparent review of outstanding aspects of the implementation of the OFA; considers it essential to ensure a full affirmation of ethnic minorities in public life; calls for further measures to foster educational inclusion of minorities with a view to reinvigorating social cohesion and integration of communities;
40. Believes that the Macedonian legal proceedings have to continue according to the procedures in the country and that Nikola Gruevski has to be held accountable within the Macedonian justice system; invites Hungary to respect the independence of the Macedonian justice system and the rule of law in the country, re-evaluate the political asylum granted to Nikola Gruevski and proceed with his extradition to Skopje; expects all parties concerned to act strictly in line with the relevant national and international laws; stresses that these judicial procedures should not be politicised;
41. Welcomes the reforms and efforts made to gradually align the legal framework with EU standards, the country's decision to become an observer in the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights and the ratification of most international human rights instruments; encourages full implementation of human rights standards and policy documents such as the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), with particular attention being paid to the right of fair trial, freedom of assembly and association, the right to life, freedom of expression and respect for private and family life;
42. Notes that the adoption of the law on the use of languages constitutes an important achievement and regrets the disruptive tactics aimed at undermining its adoption in full compliance with standard procedures;
43. Welcomes the country's ratification on 23 March 2018 of the Istanbul Convention and urges it to complete legal reforms for tackling discrimination and violence against women, girls and all children and to continue eradicating domestic and gender-based violence, which are still widespread;
44. Underlines the need to ensure autonomy and adequate human and financial resources for independent oversight bodies; commends the role of the Ombudsman's Office in enforcing human rights and underlines the need to ensure a systemic follow-up of the Ombudsman's decisions;
45. Remains concerned about the dire situation of people with disabilities and the persistent discrimination against them; calls for effective implementation of the existing instruments and strategies;
46. Welcomes the initial steps taken in enhancing the prevention of discrimination and urges the authorities to include sexual orientation and gender identity as grounds for discrimination in the Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination; calls on the authorities to allocate an appropriate budget for the implementation of the National Strategy for Equality and Non-Discrimination 2016-2020; urges the authorities to

effectively address hate crime and hate speech against minorities, including vulnerable groups such as the Roma and the LGBTI community, and to punish homophobic and transphobic violence and incitement to violence; remains concerned that societal prejudice continues and that hate speech is prevalent against LGBTI persons in the media and on the internet and social media; calls upon the authorities to ensure effective protection and to put in place dissuasive and proportionate sanctions for hate speech and homophobic/transphobic actions and violence; stresses the need to grant access to healthcare for transgender persons; deplores persistent deficiencies in the work of the Commission for Protection from Discrimination; welcomes the setting-up of the Inter-party parliamentary group for the rights of the LGBTI community and also the Inter-party parliamentary group for the rights of the Roma;

47. Calls for strategies and legislation on the rights of persons belonging to minority groups and their protection to be fully implemented and supported by public funds; insists that measures be taken to further improve the education, employment rates, health, housing, access to goods and services, and living conditions for the Roma, condemning school segregation and other forms of discrimination;
48. Welcomes the substantial improvement in the operational environment for, and the consultations with, CSOs, including the establishment of the Council for cooperation with civil society; stresses the need to enhance the legal, financial, administrative and policy framework, including through laws on foundations and donations; highlights the importance of a structured involvement of CSOs through a more regular, comprehensive, non-discriminatory and predictable consultative process;
49. Reiterates its support for the initiative to establish the Regional Commission tasked with establishing the facts about all victims of war crimes and other serious human rights violations committed on the territory of the former Yugoslavia (RECOM); urges the government to take the lead in its establishment; underlines the importance of this process and of the active engagement of all regional political leaders in order for RECOM to start its work without further delay; draws attention to the Coalition for RECOM's Proposal of the Action Plan for RECOM, with clear dates and benchmarks;
50. Welcomes the increased efforts of the government to intensify the process of deinstitutionalisation and social sector reform; commends the commitment to ending the placement of children in large public institutions and to establishing family and community-based care services instead; calls on the authorities to take urgent measures to reverse the growing rate of perinatal mortality and to establish a system for analysis of the causes of this alarming trend;
51. Welcomes the partnership between the government and the country's National Youth Council in the implementation of the Youth Guarantee Scheme as a good mechanism of cooperation between young people and decision-makers in the formulation and implementation of youth policies; calls on the government to increase financial support to youth organisations and young people with a view to tackling the brain drain issue;

### *Media*

52. Underlines the crucial role of independent media for a democratic and enabling environment; notes modest improvements in the media environment and conditions for independent reporting; calls for initiatives to create a climate that is favourable to the

professional conduct of all media stakeholders, free from any internal and external influences, as well as to investigative journalism; welcomes the termination of state-sponsored advertising in the media based on political favouritism as an important measure to foster a level playing field in the sector and calls for further safeguards against politicisation of the media; stresses the need to strengthen the independence and capacity of the media regulator and the public service broadcaster; calls for measures to increase the protection of the labour and social rights of journalists and to ensure that there is no impunity in cases of violence, abuse or threats against journalists, which would also contribute to minimising the prevalent self-censorship in the media;

53. Welcomes improvements in ensuring access to information; stresses the need to update regulations on media services and access to public information; stresses the need to demonstrate zero tolerance for and to effectively follow up on threats, intimidation and attacks against journalists through adequate registration and thorough investigation of such incidents; condemns any form of hate speech and inflammatory language; calls for effective measures to counter this and to counter violations of the journalistic code of ethics taking place online; points, furthermore, to the need to reform the media sector without delay with a view to strengthening the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services and guaranteeing objective and professional reporting;

### ***Economy***

54. Stresses the need to improve the business environment by ensuring fiscal consolidation and regulatory transparency and reliability, while addressing remaining rule-of-law deficiencies, cumbersome regulatory procedures and arbitrary inspections;
55. Urges the authorities to address the large informal economy and the persistent problems of tax evasion and weak contract enforcement which continue to deter foreign direct investment; stresses the need to implement measures on public procurement and internal financial control; notes the need to improve transparency of data on public spending, procurement, State aid and the use of EU funds; calls for measures to improve the planning, programming and management capacities of the national Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) structures;
56. Calls on the government to make digitalisation one of its cross-cutting core priorities; urges the development, without further delay, of a long-term digital agenda, including, among other things, an e-governance strategy, an ICT strategy and a national cybersecurity strategy; underlines that a comprehensive digital agenda will enhance the economic environment and performance and increase the transparency and efficiency of the public administration and services;
57. Appreciates the government's efforts to improve conditions for young people and strengthen youth participation in politics, for instance through the National Youth Strategy (2016-2025); encourages the government to address the high youth unemployment rate by bridging the mismatch between the skills of young graduates and the needs of private companies;
58. Urges the government to tackle long-term unemployment, youth unemployment and the low rate of participation of women on the employment market in a comprehensive and innovative manner; calls for urgent reforms in education to ensure that skills acquired match the needs on the labour market, thus preventing a brain drain; encourages the

government to come up with a digital skills strategy and to increase digital literacy among the population;

59. Recalls that the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia completed its last population census in 2002; underlines the importance of conducting a new and long-overdue population census to obtain updated and realistic demographic statistics in line with EU standards;
60. Welcomes the adoption of the new Energy Law by the Macedonian Parliament, which transposes the EU Third Energy Package and is fully compatible with the Energy Community Treaty; calls upon the authorities to focus on energy market reforms, while ensuring security of supply and diversification of energy sources, especially through renewables;
61. Takes note of a number of planned infrastructure projects within protected areas that would be likely to have significant impacts on future Natura 2000 sites; calls, in this regard, for the recommendation of the Bern Convention Standing Committee (No. 184(2015)) to be respected by suspending the implementation of the projects within the territory of the Mavrovo National Park until a Strategic Environmental Assessment has been completed in full compliance with EU environmental legislation; further calls for UNESCO World Heritage Committee's Decision(40 COM 7B.68) concerning the Natural and Cultural Heritage of the Ohrid region to be respected and for an overall Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) and a Heritage Impact Assessment (HIA) to be carried out before any further work is undertaken; urges that a national hydropower strategy be developed in line with EU environmental legislation;
62. Encourages the country to develop competition in the gas and energy market with a view to the complete unbundling of utilities in line with the Third Energy Package; calls for substantial improvements as regards energy efficiency, the production of renewable energy and the fight against climate change;
63. Commends the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia for ratifying the Paris Agreement on 9 January 2018, as combating climate change will only be achieved through common efforts;
64. Welcomes the government's positive approach to regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations, and its active participation in regional initiatives such as the South-East European Cooperation Process, the Regional Cooperation Council, CEFTA, the Western Balkans Six, the Energy Community Treaty, the European Common Aviation Area Agreement, the Central European Initiative, the Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative (MARRI) and the Brdo-Brijuni Process;
65. Welcomes the country's commitment to connectivity projects carried out in the framework of the Berlin Process; notes the need to diversify from road transport through the implementation of rail reform measures, including by upgrading or constructing railway links from Skopje to the capitals of the neighbouring countries; calls for greater progress in the finalisation of the railway and road connections within Corridors VIII and X;
66. Calls for further trade and customs facilitation and diversification of exports, including by using the intra-regional trade potential; calls on the Commission to exempt the

country from the steel and aluminium safeguard measures;

67. Expresses its concern at the alarming level of air pollution in Skopje and other heavily polluted cities, and calls on the state and local authorities to take adequate measures as a matter of urgency to cope with this emergency situation, through effective targeted measures for air quality monitoring and improvement, including by enhancing public transport and effective mobility plans; urges the country to harmonise urgently its legislation with the acquis in the field of environmental, nature and climate protection; calls for waste management systems to be developed;

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68. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council, the Commission and the Government and Parliament of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.