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*Delegation to the EU-North Macedonia Joint Parliamentary Committee*

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26.1.2024

## MISSION REPORT

following the mission of the Delegation to the 21st EU-North Macedonia Joint Parliamentary Committee to Skopje, North Macedonia, on 16 and 17 May 2023

Delegation to the EU-North Macedonia Joint Parliamentary Committee

Members of the mission:

Andreas Schieder	(Chair; S&D, Austria)
Marion Walsmann	(Vice-Chair; EPP, Germany)
Alexander Alexandrov Yordanov	(EPP, Bulgaria)
Thijs Reuten	(S&D, Netherlands)
Bogdan Rzonca	(ECR, Poland)

## ***Introduction***

Five EU-North Macedonia Delegation (D-MK) members took part in the delegation to Skopje to participate in the 21st EU-North Macedonia Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) meeting. A mission of the Committee on Constitutional Affairs (AFCO) took place simultaneously, with some joint meetings. D-MK Members met the EU Ambassador, representatives of the Macedonian legislative and executive branches, and civil society organisations (CSOs), to exchange views on the progress achieved in the country's reforms, as well as on the ongoing screening exercise.

Meetings took place at a politically sensitive moment for North Macedonia, both internally and with regard to the EU accession process. Domestically, the country is politically divided over the pending constitutional change that would include the Bulgarian (as well as several other) ethnic minority in the Preamble. Without this taking place, it is likely Bulgaria would veto North Macedonia's accession talks later this year. The opposition parties, and the majority of citizens, however, see the constitutional change as imposed on the country, which also leads to diminishing support for the EU accession.

### **Tuesday, 16 May 2023**

The first part of the day was dedicated to a series of meetings with the EU Ambassador, CSOs, Government officials and Assembly Members, and was followed by the first half of the JPC meeting in the afternoon.

The programme began with an informative briefing by H.E. Mr David GEER, Head of Delegation, EU Delegation to North Macedonia. He in particular focused on the internal political dynamics of North Macedonia in the light of the expected constitutional change debate. The meeting was followed by one with the representatives of seven civil society organisations who, *inter alia*, referred to their activities in the fields of human rights, civic education and media literacy, notably the fight against online disinformation, research on social and economic trends, and representing the interest of the Bulgarian minority.

At the beginning of a series of meetings in the Assembly of North Macedonia, Delegation members met Speaker Talat XHAFFERI, with whom they discussed the ongoing legislative activities and the opportunities for cooperation between the parliamentary majority and the opposition on EU-related matters. Members in particular focused on the ongoing Jean Monnet Dialogue (with two of the three EP co-facilitators - Andres SCHIEDER and Marion WALSMANN taking part in the JPC meeting) and the activities expected to take place in the coming months. Members also held separate meetings with the representatives of four Parliamentary groups - the ruling majority Social-Democrats (SDSM), Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), and Alliance for Albanians (AA) as well as the largest opposition party, Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE), to discuss various aspects of their involvement in parliamentary activities.

In the second half of the afternoon, members of both delegations participated in the 21st meeting of the EU-North Macedonia JPC. The Chair of the Macedonian delegation hosted a dinner in the evening.

The 21st meeting of the EU-North Macedonia JPC took place under the co-chairmanship of Ms Sonja MIRAKOVSKA, Chair of the Assembly of North Macedonia Delegation to the EU-North Macedonia JPC, and Mr Andreas SCHIEDER, Chair of the EP Delegation to the EU-North Macedonia JPC. The following attendees gave opening statements:

- Ms Drita ABDIU HALILI, State Secretary in the Secretariat for European Affairs, on behalf of the Government of North Macedonia
- H.E. Ms Ami LARSSON-JAIN, Ambassador to North Macedonia on behalf of the Swedish Presidency-in-Office of the Council
- H.E. Mr David GEER, Ambassador of the European Union in North Macedonia, on behalf of the European Commission and the European External Action Service

Co-Chair Sonja MIRAKOVSKA welcomed the continuous support of the EP and reiterated the importance of the active role of the Assembly. She referred to North Macedonia's legislative work, strategic reforms and the signing of several international agreements, in particular with Frontex.

Co-Chair Andreas SCHIEDER, highlighted the good relations between the EP and the Assembly of North Macedonia, and underlined the importance of dialogue at all levels - between political parties or ethnic components in the country; with civil society; with neighbours and European partners - especially on topics of shared interest and on those that define the joint European future.

State Secretary Drita ABDIU HALILI provided a detailed overview of the recent accession-reform initiatives and referred to the progress of the screening process.

Ambassador David GEER stressed the fact that good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation form the backbone of the EU project. He referred to the key reform steps that are yet to be finalised, regretting there was still no common agenda for the necessary reforms and that the political gap was deepening and the necessary reforms are backsliding. Those reforms, he underlined, would fundamentally change the country and provide it with the resilience to compete with other Member States once it joins the EU. He pointed out that while he would not go into the discussion related to the constitutional amendments, noting that it is a sovereign decision of the country, all stakeholders should be open, politically responsible and consider the long-term goals and interests of the country and its future within the EU.

Ambassador Ami LARSSON-JAIN, speaking on behalf of the Swedish Presidency, stressed the importance of the country's commitment to reforms, especially countering corruption and other aspects related to the rule of law, pointing out that the transformation process should precede accession, through reforms that benefit the citizens of North Macedonia. The Ambassador concluded that the goal of completing accession talks by 2030 is attainable, and depends on Macedonians, urging cross-party consensus on EU accession-related matters.

During the ensuing debates, members of the two component delegations addressed a number of topics, notably the implementation of EU accession related reforms, rule of law and the fight against corruption, freedom of the media, civil society, economy and social welfare, energy, relations with neighbours and regional cooperation, and the Jean Monnet Dialogue. Members reached a high level of agreement on North Macedonia's commitment to the EU accession reforms and confirmed that the accession represents the country's strategic goal.

They went on to highlight the importance of advancing North Macedonia's credible EU accession perspective as a key factor to preserve both the support of the public and the country's dedication to the ongoing implementation of comprehensive and transformative reforms.

The meeting took place with the active and, at times, vigorous participation of both majority and opposition Members of the Assembly of North Macedonia.

### **Wednesday, 17 May 2023**

Members of the two delegations continued the meeting by negotiating and successfully adopting the Joint JPC [Recommendations](#) by large majorities. The Recommendations, inter alia, welcomed the country's commitment to EU accession and its alignment with EU's foreign and security policy, including in terms of sanctions against the Russian Federation, following Russian war of aggression against Ukraine.

#### ***Possible follow-up***

The mission's findings will feed into AFET's work on the country report on North Macedonia. AFET and D-MK members will need to continue monitoring the events surrounding the constitutional change and the accession-related reforms closely, as well as to focus on the ongoing screening process.

## **Annex I - FINAL PROGRAMME**

### ***21st EU-NORTH MACEDONIA JPC MEETING Skopje, 16-17 May 2023***

#### **Tuesday, 16 May 2023**

- 08:40- 09:20      Briefing with **Ambassador David GEER**, Head of the EU Delegation in North Macedonia
- 09:20-10:45      Meeting with civil society representatives
- 11:00-11:45      Meeting with **Mr. Fatmir Bytyqi**, Deputy of the Prime Minister
- 13:00-13:30      Meeting with **Mr. Talat XHAFERI**, Speaker of the Assembly of North Macedonia
- 13:30-14:50      Meetings with the representatives of parliamentary political groups
- 13:30 – 13:50      Meeting with **Mr. Jovan MITREVSKI**, SDSM Parliamentary Group Coordinator
- 13:50 – 14:10      Meeting with **Mr. Nikola MICEVSKI**, VMRO-DPMNE Parliamentary Group Coordinator
- 14:10 – 14:30      Meeting with **Ms Vjollca ADEMI**, DUI Parliamentary Group Deputy Coordinator
- 14:30 – 14:50      Meeting with **Mr. Atnan NEZIRI**, Alliance for Albanians Parliamentary Group Coordinator
- 15.00 – 19.00      **1<sup>st</sup> working session of the 21<sup>st</sup> EU-North Macedonia Joint Parliamentary Committee**  
***Venue:*** *Sobranie (Boris Trajkovski Hall)*  
Opening by **Ms Sonja MIRAKOVSKA** and **Mr Andreas SCHIEDER**, Co-Chairs of the EU-North Macedonia Joint Parliamentary Committee  
***Exchange of views with:***

- **Ms. Drita Abdiu HALILI**, State Secretary in the Secretariat for European Affairs, on behalf of the Government of North Macedonia
- **H.E. Ms Ami LARSSON-JAIN**, Ambassador to North Macedonia on behalf of the Swedish Presidency-in-Office of the Council
- **H.E. Mr David GEER**, Ambassador of the European Union in North Macedonia, on behalf of the European Commission and the European External Action Service

20:00 - 22:00 Dinner, hosted by **Mr Talat XHAFERI**, Speaker of the Assembly of North Macedonia

### **Wednesday, 17 May 2023**

09.00-12.00 **2nd working session of the 21st EU-North Macedonia JPC meeting**

12.00 End of programme