



JOINT PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEE

17TH MEETING

MINUTES

18 - 19 December 2019

European Parliament

Strasbourg

Room WIC 200

The meeting began on 18 December at 15:00, with the introductory remarks by Mr Andreas SCHIEDER, Co-Chair of the EU-North Macedonia Joint Parliamentary Committee.

1. Adoption of the draft agenda

The draft agenda was adopted without amendments.

2. Opening of the 17th meeting of the EU-North Macedonia Joint Parliamentary Committee

Mr Andreas SCHIEDER and Ms Sonja MIRAKOVSKA, Co-Chairs of the EU-North Macedonia Joint Parliamentary Committee

In his opening address, **Co-Chair Mr SCHIEDER** reminded the importance of the meeting given the updated political framework, in particular the disappointing result of the EU Council, which decided not to give the green light on starting accession negotiations with North Macedonia. He added that the meeting serves also as a contribution to show support and recognize important reforms that has been achieved so far. He also highlighted the visit of the European President Mr David Sassoli who chose Skopje as his first destination outside the

European Union. In this way, the President delivered a political message, striving for a future with North Macedonia and Albania within the EU family.

Ms Sonia MIRAKOVSKA Co-Chair of the Joint Parliamentary Committee (EU-MK JPC) in her opening remarks greeted both delegations and expressed her satisfaction in having the meeting before the parliamentary elections to take place in 2020. Concerning the current mandate, she spoke about the challenges politicians had to face with and the thorough reform processes related to the start of the accession negotiations. She concluded by calling on the EU institutions to maintain their credibility and keep their given promises to the aspiring countries.

3. Exchange of views with representatives of the government of the Republic of North Macedonia, of the European Commission and the European External Action Service on the relations between the European Union and Republic of North Macedonia

Mr Andrej ZERNOVSKI (Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of North Macedonia) thanked the EP for its constant support to the accession process of North Macedonia. As regards the reform of the enlargement methodology, he called for a credible, certain and merit-based procedure. He agreed with some elements of the [previously outlined] French proposal, in particular the gradual integration, but he warned against further delays triggered by the revision of the methodology. He underlined the progress made by North Macedonia as regards the new law on the Public Prosecutor's Office, the reform of the intelligence services or the implementation of measures on fighting organised crime. North Macedonia is a success story, a multi-ethnic diverse country that encapsulates the EU motto '*United in Diversity*'. He affirmed that he strongly believes that integration of the Western Balkans in the EU is the only credible future for both sides.

Mr Gabriele VISENTIN (Head of Division for Parliamentary Affairs, EEAS) pointed out that the organisation of the EU-North Macedonia JPC was a signal of a strong commitment of the EU with North Macedonia. He reiterated that the EU envisages full membership of North Macedonia, when conditions allow. The meeting between Foreign Affairs Minister Nikola Dimitrov and High Representative Josep Borrell in Bratislava on 5 December 2019 is seen as confirmation of further engagement. He called on North Macedonia to continue to bring forward the reform agenda in the areas set out by the Council in June 2018 - namely: strengthening the independence of the judiciary, ensuring legal accountability for all crimes

including high-level corruption, security services and public administration reforms. He cited the bilateral agreements signed with Greece and Bulgaria as successful legacy of country's achievements in terms of solving historical disputes. In his view, this would allow North Macedonia to progress further on its EU path. He also underlined the support of North Macedonia to the EU CFSP/CSDP support, anticipating 100% alignment, including sanctions on Russia.

Mr David CULLEN (Head of Unit for North Macedonia and Kosovo, DG NEAR) reiterated the European Commission's commitment in the Western Balkans, which are a strategic political priority. In terms of COM priorities, it is imperative to sustain and accelerate progress in the region for the next five years. He expected that, in early 2020, the COM would submit proposals to drive the enlargement process forward thus making it credible, predictable and dynamic. Concerning the reform areas of particular importance such as rule of law, the COM acknowledged and appreciated the decisive legislative steps taken with the support of the opposition, and the strengthening of judiciary. He underlined particular importance to the re-establishment of accountability for crimes and the adoption of the law on the Public Prosecutor's Office. As regards the reform of judiciary and the idea of vetting process, he repeated that there are already systems for disciplinary procedures for judges and the declaration of assets in place. In his opinion, those should be exploited and strengthened. When it comes to the fight against organised crime and corruption, COM expects its continuation (he cited the investigations of so-called Racket case). Mr Cullen concluded that COM welcomes the engagement of the European Parliament and *Sobranie* to strengthen the democratic processes including through the Jean Monnet Dialogue.

Mr Ilhan KYUCHYUK (Renew, BG), (EP Standing Rapporteur for North Macedonia), called for a new transparent enlargement methodology, which needs to be supported by the Western Balkan countries as well. He affirmed that it is vital to reanimate the accession spirit in the region and in EU MS. In his view, the EU accession process needs improvements to provide more clarity in realistic perspectives for the aspiring members, not to focus on technicalities and rather addressing the 'big picture' of democratic backslidings. He underlined the importance of closer engagement of the enlargement countries on the future evolutions of the accession process, given their underrepresentation in a day-to-day debate on EU enlargement. With this regard, he urged the COM to formulate concrete proposals for improving the accession process referring to the Western Balkans [Berlin Process] Summit in May 2020.

Finally, Mr Kyuchyuk encouraged Skopje to further consolidate reforms of essential importance (i.e. Public Prosecutor's Office law).

4. Rule of law, judiciary reforms and fight against organized crime and corruption

Four Members of the Assembly of North Macedonia - *Sobranie* were first speakers in the debate. They briefed MEPs on the country's reform progress to date:

Ms Ivana TUFEGZDIKJ (Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia) highlighted the adoption of the anti-discrimination law and *Sobranie* was the first Parliament in the Western Balkans to create a parliamentary group to support LGBTIQ+ rights. Also, similar inter-party groups were established to advance the rights of children, women and Roma. When it comes to hate speech, legislation was adopted by the parliament, but she regretted that hate crimes, although reported, are not prosecuted and do not lead to a final court outcome. In terms of social protection, the government has very ambitious strategy for the de-institutionalisation. The Parliament has also ratified the Istanbul Convention. Lastly, she remarked that brain drain is a serious issue that needs a proper strategy on a national and regional level.

Regarding the media environment, **Ms Shpresa HADRI** (Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia) stressed that progress has been made since 2018 as legislation improving transparency, independence and accountability had been adopted or amended. According to her, the state influence on private media has been reduced and North Macedonia is committed to increasing professionalism of journalism and providing stable financing for public broadcast services.

Mr Betian KITEV (Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia) offered a brief review of key developments in the judiciary reform. By drafting and implementing the judiciary reform, he stated that the government has always been guided by the Priebe report findings. Venice commission and GRECO recommendations have also been taken into account. He highlighted the successful re-establishment of the State Commission for Prevention of Corruption after months of negotiations among political groups that reached a consensus. The support of opposition was obtained on other several important occasions, e.g., the law adopted in May 2019 on the Judicial Council and the Law on Public Prosecutor's Office. He reminded that two members of the Judicial Council had also been successfully elected according to the rules of procedure.

Concerning the fight against organised crime and corruption, **Ms Meral UZEIRI-FERATI** (Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia) stated that North Macedonia is in line with EU Standards. She informed that a new law on corruption was adopted in 2019, following GRECO recommendations. She also remarked that the 5th National Strategy on the Fight against Corruption is being drafted with the assistance of numerous stakeholders and the EU. Furthermore, a new code of ethics for MPs, civil servants and the executive passed in line with GRECO recommendations; Cybercrime Strategy was adopted with the help of the EU and NATO. However, she voiced that corruption is still present, especially on high-levels and it poses serious concerns in the region.

Ms Irena JOVEVA (Renew, SI) voiced hopes that accession negotiations will start before the next JPC. She stated that overall, the progress is considerable, but as all transition states, also North Macedonia struggles to fulfil conditions in the rule of law area. In this respect, the so-called Racket case proves that North Macedonia has still a long way of reforms that it needs to implement. She affirmed that the high-level corruption in the Special Prosecutor's Office had been disappointing and that North Macedonia needs to strengthen the fight against corruption. She called for a stronger regional cooperation since it is the key for tackling the organised crime. Lastly, she stressed that the independence of judiciary is essential.

In the following debate, Members generally commented that progress had been achieved, although acknowledging that work needs to continue.

Ms Z. LAZAREVSKA (Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia) started her intervention stressing the hard work of the Parliament in terms of human rights protection and gender equality, in particular women's and children's rights. With this regard, the Parliament took many measures to address poverty, including legislative changes, amendments, and education benefit amendments. She also affirmed that thanks to the new human rights legislation inclusion of children with disabilities in the mainstream education system is provided. She further underlined that the Parliament is taking important measures to improve economic and social standing of women, especially in rural areas.

In his second intervention, **Mr David CULLEN** commented very positively the idea of youth guarantee, assuring that COM will redouble its support on youth through a budget support

programme in the close future. He also wished to give a higher profile to the brain drain issue in the policy dialogue.

Mr Nikola POPOSKI, (Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia) raised another real issue on the implementation of reforms. In this respect, he said that often, legislation passed through urgent procedure, without quality and debate, which led to poor implementation. Henceforth, more EU funding should focus on the [quality of] implementation.

5. Readiness of the electoral system and proposed reforms

Regarding electoral system reform, **Mr Ivan STOILKOVIC** (Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia) indicated that none of the proposed models has taken into account OSCE/ODIHR recommendations. He also added that it is rather challenging to ensure timely implementation before the elections in 2020. Furthermore, more than 9000 amendments were received to date.

During the discussion, **Mr Aleksandar YORDANOV** (EPP, BG) pointed out that as long as political parties in North Macedonia are ethnicity-oriented, issues will persist. Furthermore, he inquired when the next national census will take place.

Members agreed that the electoral model needs to be changed, but finding a political consensus proved difficult. **Ms Shpresa HADRI** shared that Albanian parties are not in favour of proposed changes and, in her opinion, the tabled propositions should not be implemented shortly before the elections.

6. Adoption of the recommendations

15 AMs and 4 oral AMs were presented. During the vote 1AM was withdrawn, 2 AMs failed and 2 AMs were not adopted. The recommendations were adopted as amended.

7. Any other business

No other issues were raised.

8. Date and place of the next JPC meeting

The proposal was to hold the next Joint Parliamentary Committee meeting in Skopje, on dates that determined in due course.

The meeting ended at 11:42.