

18th MEETING

EU-NORTH MACEDONIA JOINT PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEE

Thursday, 25 March 2021

SPINELLI 1G3 via Interactio

MINUTES

1. Adoption of the draft agenda

The draft agenda was adopted without amendments.

2. Opening of the 18th meeting of the EU-North Macedonia Joint Parliamentary Committee

Mr Andreas SCHIEDER and Mr Bilal KASAMI, Co-Chairs of the EU-North Macedonia Joint Parliamentary Committee

JPC Co-Chair Andreas Schieder opened up the meeting by presenting the agenda and welcoming Co-Chair Kasami and Sobranie's delegation. He reiterated the EP's stance to continuously call on the EU member states to exhibit political will and commitment towards North Macedonia's EU path, and expressed hope that the Council will be able to approve the Commission's draft negotiation framework. He welcomed the adoption of the AFET report on North Macedonia and called for a constructive approach towards the April 2021 Housing and Population Census. He was also pleased to see a high representation of women in Sobranie, and encouraged North Macedonia and the EU Member States' parliaments to follow this trend in all decision-making positions. Furthermore, he expressed hope that the organization of the

first Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) will be able to confirm credibility, objectivity and reliability of the EU accession process.

He commended North Macedonia for its continued implementation of accession related reforms and for its work in resolving issues with neighbouring countries, but stressed the importance of maintaining the pace and the completion of implementation in key areas (judicial, security and intelligence services; environment and energy; gender equality and non-discrimination or electoral review). Emphasis was placed on the establishment of a mechanism for effective parliamentary and CSO oversight, and on the implementation of the outstanding recommendations to conduct the electoral legislation review, with special attention to voters' list accuracy. Mr Schieder concluded by highlighting areas which deserve more political engagement and budgetary allocations such as: environmental protection, sustainable development, regulation of hydropower plants development in protected areas; preservation of biodiversity; and just energy transition.

JPC Co-Chair Bilal Kasami commended the EP's strong commitment to the accession talks opening with North Macedonia, and stressed the importance of the inter-parliamentary dialogue for the domestic reforms and the achievements of European standards. He described the EP as an ally whose reports have great weight in the reform process and constitute guidelines and recommendations for the future progress of the country. He reiterated North Macedonia's dedication to the EU agenda and its progress in the adoption of reforms in key areas, such as: the rule of law, fight against corruption and organized crime, reform of public administration and the intelligence sector; and the functioning of democratic institutions.

He emphasized that North Macedonia is a positive regional example in addressing disputes and pointed out to the failure to find a common response to the bilateral issue with Bulgaria. Mr Kasami underlined that it should not be part of the EU acquis and of the accession negotiations. The accession process is, in his view, an important driver of reforms in the region, thus the inability to overcome the bilateral issue and re-start the negotiation process may jeopardise the EU's credibility and influence in the Western Balkans. He pointed out that this may lead to a reduction in public confidence and optimism for the EU, and consequently develop into Euroscepticism - which may harm both the country and the region.

He expressed hope to re-start an open debate after the Bulgarian general elections on 4 April, intensification of contacts and greater confidence re-building between the two countries under a rational approach to the EU accession process. He informed that North Macedonia is willing to accept modifications to the accession negotiations, in order to accommodate the situation of both countries and make the process more efficient. Furthermore, he commended the Good Neighbourly Relations Agreement from 2017, which constitutes a groundwork for overcoming differences. He emphasized that the Assembly of North Macedonia is fully committed to the Berlin process, which he sees as complementary to the EU integration rather than a substitution. Through the Berlin process, he believes that countries in the region can cooperate and achieve faster reforms and swifter integration with the EU.

Furthermore, he appealed for a clear timeline and methodology and for concrete prospects for opening the accession negotiations for Skopje and holding the IGC. He informed about *Sobranie*'s new set-up regarding working methods under the *Jean Monnet Dialogue*, and expressed satisfaction with the JPC meeting format, which enables the parliamentarians to share opinions and strengthen their partnership. He concluded by applauding the EU for providing financial and micro-economic support to mitigate the consequences of the pandemic, but regretted the lack of European/global solidarity on COVID-19 vaccination distribution.

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

Deputy Prime-Minister for European Affairs Nikola Dimitrov appreciated the support of EP through the *Jean Monnet Dialogue*, which resulted in amendments to the Law on the Assembly [of the Republic of North Macedonia] and enabled *Sobranie* to continue working on its Rules of Procedure. He welcomed the adoption of the EP Resolution, including the compromise reached on the wording on accession and bilateral issues, which, in his views, should not be used to block the process. However, he expressed regret over final adoption of the amendments supporting the position of Bulgaria.

He repeated the commitment to find a way either around or through the bilateral issue with Bulgaria as well as supporting the efforts of PT Council PRES. He recounted the various

obstacles North Macedonia has managed to overcome on its EU path over the years, and referred to the multiple Commission's reports suggesting the start of accession talks. He appealed to the appreciation and protection of language and cultural diversity under the EU's umbrella, and argued that the start of the accession process would be a triple victory and a signal to the region; suggesting that the opposite would put the EU's credibility in the region at stake.

In order not to focus on the bilateral challenge only, he informed that North Macedonia decided to introduce a new reforms' agenda called *Europe@Home*, which should help streamline the government's efforts and mainly deliver upon the 1st 'Fundamentals' Cluster of the enlargement methodology defined by the European Commission. This includes the areas of public, administrative, judicial, and electoral reforms; fundamental rights and media; fighting against organized crime and corruption; economic governance; statistics; public procurement; and environmental issues. He mentioned that North Macedonia is also close to updating its national program for the adoption of the *acquis*, which will be a strategic umbrella document for the accession process, and will serve as a basis for the bilateral screening and preparation of the negotiating positions.

Mr Dimitrov pointed to the progress in judicial reforms in the country: dismissals of incompetent judges; digitalization of courtrooms; adoption of judiciary legislative framework; adoption of strategies for judiciary and prosecution offices, and Human Resources management including recruitment of staff. He referred to important judgements related to the former cases of the special prosecutor's office; and improved cooperation between the State Commission against Corruption and all national institutions regarding follow-up and implementation of recommendations. He also listed other significant reforms: the adoption of the law on prevention and protection against discrimination; securing of premises for the new Commission against Discrimination; improvements in public finance management - namely the law on the system of internal financial control in the public sector and through parliamentary procedure; and the adoption of the economic reform programme for 2021-2023.

He acknowledged Transparency International's recent report and its findings indicating a negative trend in North Macedonia, and stressed the importance of increasing efforts in this regard. However, he also highlighted that according to the annual country report of the Freedom House; North Macedonia marked the highest [rate of] progress among all European

countries regarding the state of democracy improvement. Furthermore, he stressed that efforts to implement IPA II are ongoing, with a contraction rate close to 60% and a payment rate close to 50%. Regarding IPA III, the country's preparations are well underway, and proposals for maturity assessment have been submitted to the European Commission. Furthermore, he mentioned that the single project pipeline processes have gained much attention following the introduction of the Economic and Investment Plan launched by the Commission. The government has endorsed the revised single project pipeline for the energy, environment, transport, social and digital sectors, based on the approval of the National Investment Committee.

Director for Western Balkans, DG NEAR/European Commission Genoveva Ruiz Calavera appreciated the engagement of the EP, particularly through the *Jean Monnet Dialogue*, in supporting the democratic processes in North Macedonia. Furthermore, she stressed the importance of regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations, and of the continued implementation of all bilateral agreements by all parties - including the Prespa Agreement and the Treaty on Good Neighbourly Relations. She encouraged both Skopje and Sofia to double their efforts to find a mutually accepting solution, and expressed her hope for the first IGC. Regarding the pandemic, she reiterated that the EU has and will continue to provide substantive support to the region, and mentioned the European Economic and Investment plan, which has been designed to support the long-term recovery of the economy.

Furthermore, Ms Ruiz Calavera applauded North Macedonia for having maintained a steady pace in the implementation of EU related reforms, particularly in key areas (the rule of law and fight against corruption and organized crime). She urged the government and the opposition to keep up the momentum and to continue delivering on the reforms, and welcomed the government's adoption of two reform plans (i.e. *Europe@Home* and Action Plan on the Fight against Corruption), which she argued, display commitment to streamline the reforms agenda and to focus on the fundamentals. She highlighted the key role of the Parliament in consensus building in EU reforms, and urged all parties in Sobranie to work together constructively to overcome the blockage, advance on EU reforms, and continue functioning despite the pandemic. She wished to see a limited use of the fast track procedures in order to allow for proper consultation and debate among the key stakeholders, as the Parliament is and should remain the main forum for democratic and inclusive discussions.

EEAS Deputy Managing Director for Western Europe, Western Balkans, Turkey and the UK Marko Makovec reminded that the bilateral issue with Bulgaria is just a parenthesis to North Macedonia's EU path, and referred to the Council's debates regarding the draft negotiating framework. He argued that the bilateral issue should not overshadow all the remarkable efforts that North Macedonia has made lately, which he assured have been acknowledged and reflected in the 2020 Commission's Country Report from 2020 and in the European Parliament's latest Resolution. He appreciated Sofia's and Skopje's successful co-chairmanship of the Berlin Process, and saw it as a sign of regional ownership and as their commitment to building enhanced regional economic cooperation. Furthermore, he welcomed the adoption of the Common Regional Market Action Plan, which confirms the commitment to unlock regional and economic potential, which, in his view, in turn confirms the willingness to advance on the EU path by adjusting and making the region economically fit to meet the EU requirements and standards of the single market.

Furthermore, Mr Makovec welcomed the enhanced alignment in the CFSP (which has increased from 82% to 93%), and argued that the Western Balkans remain a strategic priority for the EU and that the launching of the accession negotiations is a top priority. He encouraged the country to continue delivering on the reforms agenda (particularly on the fundamentals: the rule of law and fight against organized crime and corruption), which have experienced negative impacts lately due to the current stalemate in Sobranie. The blockage is also delaying the country's EU advancement and the necessary response to the pandemic. Thus, he urged the Sobranie to continue its work in a consensual spirit and to advance on the EU reforms.

1st Co-Vice-Chair Timco Mucunski thanked the EP for its continued engagement and reiterated the commitment of VMRO-DPMNE to the EU agenda, proven by the party's continuous support for relevant EU legislation. He agreed on the importance of cohesion in Sobranie, and announced that almost all parties had voted in favour for COVID-19 economic recovery measures [on 25 March], which is a sign of success. He argued that the primary focus of the parliament should be to focus on the rule of law and the fight against corruption, and to foster enabling environment for media and civil society, as well as battling the health and economic repercussions of the pandemic. Furthermore, he voiced his hope that the executive and the judiciary will match the legislators' commitment to deliver on the EU reforms. He concluded by expressing his support for a swift IGC and accession negotiations based on the

fundamental principles of the EU. In his view, those will send a strong European message to pro-European forces both within the country and the region.

1st Co-Vice-Chair Irena Joveva focused on the bilateral issue with Bulgaria, condemned the veto and the high jacking of the accession negotiations, appealed on non-relevance of the bilateral obstacles in the accession process and urged for a parallel dispute resolution. She commented on the EP report, and expressed regret over the adoption of amendments supporting the final position of Bulgaria. Furthermore, she commanded that the EU reforms should serve the primary purpose of improving people's lives, and reminded that human rights, regional cooperation, and environmental and media freedoms protection should be on the top of the agenda at all times. She also enquired about the vaccination process in the country.

2nd Co-Vice-Chair Fisnike Bekteshi appreciated the EU's catalyst role as a peace and stability maker in Europe and similarly North Macedonia's role in the region, as a promoter of good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation. She stressed that the integration of the Western Balkans is a strategic investment in long-term peace, stability, prosperity and safety. She repeated that the country continues its EU reforms' path and named several milestones on this path, including the measures taken to improve the rule of law, judiciary reforms, fight against corruption, protection of basic rights, and the democratic enhancement. She concluded that North Macedonia is committed to a political dialogue based on evidence and proof of state of law.

2nd Co-Vice-Chair Marion Walsmann reassured that the EP is ready to work with Skopje, proven by the EP report which sends a clear signal and an important message to the citizens to not lose hope in Europe. She commended the country's stable progress and commitment to fulfil EU [enlargement] criteria, and to deliver on reforms in the areas of rule of law and fight against corruption, but she equally stressed that more needs to be done. She voiced her dissatisfaction with the paralysis of democratic deliberation in Sobranie and underlined the need to build a political culture based on consensus and discussions. She concluded by regretting that the *Jean Monnet Dialogue* could not take place in person, and by highlighting the importance of the Dialogue as the right instrument for the EP to be able to make a contribution to bring everyone to the table, and foster a democratic culture.

MEP Alexander Yordanov welcomed the EP Resolution on North Macedonia, including the non-adoption of the amendments submitted by the S&D and the Greens, which he argued had an anti-Bulgarian and provocative character. He spoke about the discrimination of Bulgarians in North Macedonia and the need to support the concept of common pre-1945 history shared by Sofia and Skopje as defined by the 2017 Friendship Treaty. He urged the country to acknowledge that the population of today's North Macedonia has historically defined itself as Bulgarians/Macedonian Bulgarians.

Member Sonja Mirakovska shared her regrets about the EU not starting the official negotiations with North Macedonia, which was, in her view, a great source of hope for the citizens. She shared her personal ties with Bulgaria but voiced her wish for a more open dialogue after the general elections. She repeated the importance of the *Jean Monnet Dialogue* process, and appreciated the participation of the opposition in key areas. She reminded that Sobranie is soon going to debate on the Ombudsperson's Annual Report and the institutional coordination oversight. She mentioned the key report regarding the level of protection of human rights and freedoms, and informed that a national strategy against corruption was adopted for the first time, and is scheduled for the plenary debate.

Member Maja Morachanin reiterated the justified expectations to start the accession negotiations as soon as possible, and stressed that North Macedonia has and continues to invest efforts into approaching the EU. She mentioned the high expectations of the citizens of North Macedonia towards the EU and spoke about the union's 'unity in diversity' [in people, cultures and languages] motto which is, in her opinion, not in line with the current neglect of the Macedonian identity. Furthermore, she spoke about the importance of the protection of the environment and climate change, and appreciated the carbon neutrality goal of 2050 and that the Green Deal principles are in the 2020-2024 government priorities. Furthermore, she expressed satisfaction that renewable energy sources, particularly solar and wind are slowly becoming more prominent in the country.

MEP Tineke Strik expressed solidarity of her political group towards the citizens of North Macedonia, reiterated the call upon member states to lift the veto, and showed a strong wish to kick-start the IGC and the official negotiations after the general elections in Bulgaria. She enquired about the work of the Special Envoy of North Macedonia dedicated to the bilateral issue. In his reply, Deputy Prime-Minister for European Affairs Nikola Dimitrov stated that it

is part of the Friendship Treaty, and that he wishes to see a full implementation of article 2 of the treaty, to use the common history between the countries as a bridge, and for Bulgaria to be the biggest supporter of North Macedonia's accession. Ms. Strik continued her presentation by asking about the current state in the country regarding disinformation and potential foreign influence in the media, and concluded by enquiring about the Commission's Economic and Investment plan, including through consideration of climate targets in this plan.

MEP Vladimír Bilčík welcomed that the focus on enlargement is back in the EP's policy-making processes, especially after the experiences with the pandemic, and wished to see more progress this year compared to 2020. He expressed hope to open the accession negotiations with the country and to start applying the new methodology, and stressed the need to have a strategic outlook in the discussions on the enlargement. He pointed out the successful resolutions of bilateral and historical issues in Central Europe, which could provide some good practices and experiences to learn from. He concluded by commending the success of the *Jean Monnet Dialogue* and the *Simone Veil Programme*, and expressed his wishes to continue collaborating in other fora, in addition to the JPC format.

4. Any other business

Nothing to report.

5. Date and place of the next JPC meeting

To be discussed and confirmed in line with epidemiological developments and consequent sanitary measures.