



СОБРАНИЕ

JOINT PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEE

19TH MEETING

MINUTES

Thursday, 28 June 2022

Skopje

The meeting began on June 28 at 1:00 p.m., with an opening address by Ms Sonja MIRAKOVSKA (NSDP, Sobranie), co-chair of the JPC - Republic of North Macedonia and the European Union, who expressed satisfaction that after a long break due to the pandemic, the meeting was being held with physical presence.

1. Adoption of the draft agenda

The draft agenda was adopted without amendments.

2. Adoption of the minutes of the 18th meeting of the Joint Parliamentary Committee – Republic of North Macedonia and the European Union, held on March 25, 2021, virtually

The minutes were adopted without amendments.

3. Opening of the 19th JPC meeting by Ms Sonja MIRAKOVSKA and Mr. Andreas SCHIEDER

In her opening address, Co-Chair Ms Sonja MIRAKOVSKA emphasized that since the 18th virtual meeting, many things had changed in the wider European neighbourhood. Russian aggression against Ukraine took place and that caused a radical change in the European integration course and long-term strategic positioning of the European Union (EU) in terms of the enlargement process, and its energy, economic and defence plans. She reminded that the Republic of North Macedonia had one of the longest and most complex dossiers in the EU and that the politicians, with the support of the citizens, managed to overcome numerous challenges in the past decades. Mirakovska called for quick reaction of the European institutions, i.e., for the start of the negotiations as soon as possible, since otherwise, the external influences could become even more dominant, and the support of the citizens could drop completely.

Co-Chair Mr. Andreas SCHIEDER (S&D, Austria) spoke via video conference, as he was prevented from traveling to Skopje due to, as he explained, his flight as well as hundreds of flights being canceled across Europe. He underlined that the European Parliament (EP) and especially the members of the JPC were the strongest allies and supporters for a quick start of the negotiations with North Macedonia, given that the country implemented essential reforms in the area of justice and other important fields, working jointly with EU. He expressed his understanding for the red lines regarding the issues of identity, language and history, but emphasized that the most important thing was to look to the future in Europe.

The deputy Co-Chair, Ms Irena JOVEVA (Renew, SL), in her short address, emphasized that the large majority of members in the EP supported the European integration of North Macedonia and expressed confidence that the agreement could be reached, if there was political will and a sincere desire for cooperation.

4. Exchange of views with representatives of the Government, of the Council of the European Union and the European Commission

Mr. Bojan MARICIKJ, Deputy Prime Minister of the Republic of North Macedonia in charge of European Affairs, emphasized that it was important that the promise given at the EU summit in 2003 for the European perspective of the countries of the Western Balkans was fulfilled without

delay. He reminded that North Macedonia fully harmonized its foreign and security policy with the EU in relation to Russia, even though this had consequences for the country. In the past period, the state made difficult decisions to close open bilateral issues, showed commitment to building friendships and making reasonable decisions, and therefore, the disappointment from the new blockade was immense. He informed that an acceptable proposal would be one that will contain the key elements, namely: a clear formulation for the Macedonian language in the negotiation framework and protection of the Macedonian identity, exclusion of historical issues from the negotiation framework and the beginning of accession negotiations before the start of the constitutional amendments for the inclusion of Bulgarians and other communities in the Constitution. Emphasizing that the state remains committed to reforms and maintaining the pro-European course, he recalled the key achievements in the past period, namely significant progress in the fight against high-level corruption and the strengthened capacities of the supervisory authorities, the continuation of reforms in the judiciary, the continuation of the digitalization process and interoperability for the exchange of electronic databases between institutions, the successful implementation of the census. He reported that the use of IPA funds had a great effect on the implementation of European reforms and asked for the support of his colleagues in the EP so that the funds would not decrease. At the end, he appealed to the members of the EP to keep the debate on the European perspective of the countries of the Western Balkans high on the agenda in the context of the reforms that would take place in the Union within the framework of the Conference on the Future of Europe. Bearing in mind that Europe was at a turning point in history, decisions about its future should also include the Western Balkans region, as an integral part of the Union, because only a united Europe would be resistant to all current and future threats, concluded Maricic.

Mr. David GEER, Head of the EU Delegation in the Republic of North Macedonia, on behalf of the European External Action Service and the European Commission, underlined that due to the lack of a decision on the start of accession negotiations with North Macedonia at the lately held meeting of the European Council, he had understanding about the wave of public frustration and disappointment, but that efforts should continue. He assessed that EU membership represented the best perspective for stability, prosperity and democratic future of the country. He noted the progress in the implementation of reforms since the last meeting of the JPC and emphasized that

the EU, together with some member states, remained the largest donor in the country. He commended the justice reforms, the efforts to implement the Green Agenda, the waste management plan, the water legislation, the upcoming changes to the environmental law and nature protection. He noted that the vibrant civil society and professional media, as essential values of democracy, continued to monitor government policies and contributed to civil and state institutions and were valuable in the fight against fake news and hate speech. He welcomed the holding of a working weekend within the framework of the Jean Monnet dialogue and emphasized that it was crucial to finalize the revision of the parliamentary Rules of Procedure and to continue the discussions on other important topics. In the end, he regretted that the Parliament was increasingly a victim of political polarization between the Government and the opposition, which had serious negative impact on the legislative agenda and the broader reform process. Although almost all MPs agree on the country's European future, they could not always agree to support the necessary reforms, and in that, the greatest losers were the citizens, while political discussions were reduced to mutual accusations.

MEP Mr. Ilhan KYUCHYUK (Renew, BG), the permanent rapporteur for North Macedonia in the European Parliament, stressed that North Macedonia had an important role in the geopolitical context and was one of the allies in relation to aggression by Russia. The Government was taking steps to bring the EU closer to its citizens, and that was evident in the field of economy, as well as in the fight against corruption and organized crime. He emphasized that in every country the government and the opposition fought for ideas and with arguments when it come to the strategic priorities of the country, but that the reform agenda should be the top priority of both the Government and the opposition, because the citizens wanted to be part of the EU, which would provide many more opportunities for future generations. He expressed regret that the EP failed to convince some member states, including Bulgaria, that the veto should be lifted and the green light given for the future of North Macedonia, but despite the fact that the EU from time to time failed, when it come to democratic standards and standard of living, the EU was still leading and, in the future, it would be the best place to ensure the strategic interest of North Macedonia. He appealed for unity in the fight against corruption and achievement of higher democratic standards and reforms in the state, because that was the most important thing for the citizens. He emphasized that as a rapporteur and as an MP coming from Bulgaria, he believed that the losers from the current

situation were North Macedonia, Bulgaria and the EU and called for a visionary approach, friendship and decision-making in order for the country's European path to continue.

5. Focus on the rule of law issues

Ms Zaklina LAZAREVSKA (SDSM, Sobranie) gave a detailed review of the measures and laws that were adopted since the last meeting of the JPC, with an aim of strengthening the rule of law. She informed about the implementation of the Justice Sector Reform Strategy 2017-2022, the digitization of the judiciary, the adopted Strategy for the Inclusion of Roma 2022-2030, and the amendments to the Law on Social Protection, which introduced new model of assessing the needs of persons with disabilities. Regarding police reforms, she emphasized that the state acted on GRECO's recommendations for prevention of corruption and promotion of integrity of top executive functions and law enforcement agencies, which resulted in amendments to the Law on Internal Affairs and the Law on Police. The resolution on the migration policy of the Republic of North Macedonia (2021-2026), together with its Action Plan, was adopted by the Assembly in December 2021, as well as the National Strategy for International Border Management. The Parliament also adopted the National Strategy for Combating Human Trafficking and Illegal Migration 2021-2025 and the National Action Plan for Combating Child Trafficking 2021-2025. In the field of fight against corruption, the Strategy for Strengthening the Capacities for Conducting Financial Investigations and Asset Confiscation for the period 2021 - 2023 was adopted, and in February 2022, the Government also adopted a new Law on Prevention of Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing. Regarding the reform of public administration, Ms Lazarevska emphasized that the package of Laws on Public Administration would be adopted by the end of 2022.

MEP Ms Marion WALSMANN (EPP, DE) joined the meeting via video connection and noted progress in the strengthening the rule of law on the part of the Parliament, as well as other institutions, and stressed that it was especially important because the EU was not only an economic and social project, but also a legal project. Regarding the rule of law, Mrs. Walsmann distinguished several areas, namely the protection of fundamental rights, improvement of management capacities, transparency, efficiency, effectiveness, and the fight against corruption, and

emphasized that the analysis of these areas showed what has been achieved and what challenges need to be addressed. About the fundamental human rights, she assessed that although the state was moving in the direction of basic European values, it was necessary to improve conditions in prisons and to find alternatives to detention. Reforms of the judiciary should include digitization, which should improve the accessibility of institutions. North Macedonia should keep pace with EU countries and introduce new technologies. It was important that there was no political influence in the hiring of staff. According to her, the process of new codification of Criminal Law was an important and immense task. At the last meeting of the JPC, it was noted that there was a problem with the appointment of Judges of the Constitutional Court and that more support was needed. She noted great progress in the fight against corruption and emphasized that the State Commission for the Prevention of Corruption opened many procedures that led to the passing of verdicts. Regarding the working method of the Assembly, Mrs. Walsmann pointed out some existing situations that needed to be overcome by amending the Rules of Procedure and called for the completion of the pending works. The fight against corruption was a topic that had the highest priority for the member states, and the fight against fake news was also a challenge. She emphasized that the support for the country to deal with the challenges in these areas will continue in the future, both in word and deed.

Ms Zaklina PESHEVSKA (VMRO-DPMNE, Sobranie) said that the situation in the country could be best portrayed through reports, statistics and numbers, and in that sense presented the state of play. She reminded that the National Strategy for the Prevention of Corruption and Conflict of Interest 2021-2025, regrettably, had only 20% implementation, and that the report of the State Commission for the Prevention of Corruption stated that out of 165 initiatives, only 3 ended up in court, although the most initiatives were for officials from the executive power. She further referred to the 2021 European Commission's Report on North Macedonia which noted that in Chapter 23 on Judiciary and Fundamental Rights the country has some progress or a score of 2, which was a result of country's courts not dealing with cases on time. The same applied to public prosecutors and the Academy of Public Prosecutors and Judges, although in 2019 a new Law on Public Prosecution was adopted. The Ombudsman's report noted a 90% increase in complaints by citizens in the area of freedom and basic human rights in the judiciary, children's rights, and consumer rights, which, according to Peshevska, was an indication that citizens were not being

protected and that the Ombudsman himself stated that selective justice was implemented in the country, that is, political persecution of political opponents had been carried out for the last 5 years. Although the Parliament held a key role in passing the laws, in her opinion, it had a declarative role and was completely under the control of the Government, i.e. over 50% of the laws were passed in a shortened procedure and with an abused European flag. Regarding freedom of speech, Peshevska stated that in the past year there had been a 70% increase in investigations against journalists. She expressed great disappointment with the foreign policy of the country and the relations with Bulgaria and emphasized that the Government in the last 5 years did not have enough capacity for transparency and inclusiveness in the negotiation process. Regardless of the fact that North Macedonia was not a member state of the EU, it should have still been protected in some way because Bulgaria had unreasonable demands and the Government was silent about that. Regarding the events in the Bulgarian Assembly, Ms Peshevska said that she also expected condemnation from the EU because those were not European values. North Macedonia was once again on the waiting list, and that created strong frustration among citizens, strong political polarization, reduced the credibility of the EU and left room for third parties to interfere. Expressing revolt against everything that was happening in the Parliament, the violation of the Rules of Procedure and the lack of freedom of speech, and as a sign of protest, Ms Peshevska announced that the deputies of VMRO DPMNE would leave the Joint Committee meeting, as a strong message to the EU Mission in the country for everything what was happening.

6. Environment and health

Ms Maja MORACHANIN (DOM, Sobranie) gave detailed information about what had been done in the past in the field of environment and climate. From the point of view of legislation adopted in the Parliament: Law on Ambient Air, a set of Laws on Waste Management, amendments and additions to the Law on the Environment, the Law on the Treatment of Contaminated Areas, i.e. on 16 hot ecological spots in the country, as well as the Law on Environmental Surveillance for better coordination of inspectorates at the local and central level. Harmonization of environmental and climate legislation was forthcoming, namely the Law on Industrial Emissions, the Law on Climate Action, as well as the law on Spatial Planning. Ms Morachanin informed that the percentage of protected areas has increased, namely a new national park had been declared in the

area of Shara Mountain, and Osogovo and Maleshevo become also protected areas, thus increasing the protected area by 5%. The so-called Green Group was established in the Parliament as an informal group with over 30 MPs from different political parties, committed to the preservation of the environment. The members of the Group worked together with non-governmental organizations to promote environmental protection. Among the challenges in the forthcoming period, she singled out strengthening the capacity of institutions at the central and local level, improving their cooperation and allocating greater financial resources for environmental protection, as well as waste management, i.e. the establishment of regional sanitary landfills. Regarding the energy transition to renewable energy sources and energy efficiency, she emphasized that the country's legislation was in line with EU directives. The conditions for installing solar panels had been simplified and the state would provide subsidies for this purpose. As a positive example, she named the installation of photovoltaics at the Oslomej coal plant and the plan to do the same at the Mining and Energy Combine Bitola thermal plant, for which a loan was secured from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development.

MEP Vladimír BILČÍK (EPP, SK) emphasized that the members of the EP Delegation were very dedicated to the progress of North Macedonia on its European path, that in the EP there were many friends and supporters of the country and that many representatives of the Member States were frustrated by the existing situation. Mr. Bilčík underlined that he understood the frustration that dated back years, but expressed regret that some JPC colleagues decided not to participate further in the discussions, as in his opinion, that was not the way to move forward, i.e. dialogue was the only way to progress in the European politics. Emphasizing that the boycott of the talks, the boycott of the dialogue, the boycott of the institutions, was not the way to move forward, Bilčík called on the MPs to return and continue the discussions. That would send a strong message to those who decided on giving the green light for North Macedonia to start negotiations, something that, according to him, should have happened years ago.

7. Civil society and media

MEP Irena JOVEVA (Renew, SL) started her address with a call that more attention should be paid on youth policies during the European Year of Youth. She emphasized that youth

unemployment was 35% and the brain drain index was 6.1 on a scale from 0 to 10, with an increasing trend. As reasons she named the lack of opportunities, corruption, socio-economic circumstances, but also the hesitation on the part of EU. Ms Joveva underlined that this issue should not be neglected because of its huge consequences. In relation to civil society and the media, she expressed concern regarding the recognition of transgender persons and regretted that the proposed Law on Easier Gender Recognition was withdrawn. She also expressed concern about the reduction of funds for the Ministry of Health for HIV prevention, as well as the reduction of funds for the work of the Anti-Corruption Commission. Joveva assessed the situation in the media as improved, with a reduced number of lawsuits against journalists, but criticized the trend of political parties to set up their own media. She regretted that with the amendments to the Media Financing Law, which provided for the allocation of 1% of the state budget to MRT public service, less funds have been allocated in the last three years and the situation was worse than before the law was passed. She emphasized that it should not be allowed for journalists and media houses to be ruined because the erosion of that pillar of democracy would have a strong negative impact on the entire society.

8. Good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation

MEP Vladimír BILČÍK (EPP, SK) emphasized that good neighbourliness and regional cooperation were an important part and basis for successful European integration and that they were prerequisites for previous EU enlargements. He pointed out that he is aware that there were issues in the region that were extremely complex and touched on history, but he reminded that the countries in Central Europe also had deep historical differences 25-30 years ago and expressed his belief that the success of the countries of Central Europe could be mirrored among the countries of the Western Balkans. He also reminded of the long road taken by France and Germany to solve their own problems and called to look to the future. Regarding regional cooperation, he referred to the Open Balkans Initiative and said that it cannot replace the path of European integration. He drew a parallel with the Visegrad Four, which was of great importance in the 90s, and pointed out that although the four countries harmonized both domestically and regionally, that cooperation never took precedence over their strategic goal – EU membership. He underlined that Open Balkan deserves support as long as it goes hand in hand with the idea of joining the EU. He said that he

shared the frustration that North Macedonia was in, but also that he hoped for a positive breakthrough. Finally, he called for joint efforts as to avoid getting stuck in the past and in the frustration of the current moment.

Ms Fisnike BEKTESHI SHAQIRI (DUI, Sobranie) stressed that good neighbourly relations and active participation in regional initiatives were one of the main pillars of North Macedonia's foreign policy. She gave a detailed overview of bilateral relations with the Republic of Albania, the Republic of Kosovo, the Republic of Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republic of Greece, the Republic of Turkey, and highlighted the positive trend of development and bilateral cooperation in areas of common interest. Regarding the cooperation with the Republic of Bulgaria, she noted that there was an increased dynamic of bilateral relations, especially after the joint session held between the Governments at the beginning of 2022 and the setting up of working groups, which had held regular working meetings and so far, had signed several cooperation agreements. She also informed that the Multidisciplinary Expert Commission for Historical and Educational Issues held three meetings. Regarding the regional initiatives, Bekteshi Shaqiri emphasized that North Macedonia continued to proactively participate in the South Eastern European Cooperation Process (SEECP), and would take on the chairmanship in June next year, in the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), in the Central European Initiative (CEI), as and in other regional initiatives such as: the Adriatic Ionian Initiative (AJI), the Regional Initiative for Migration, Asylum and Refugees (MARRI) based in Skopje, the Western Balkans Fund, the SECI Center, the RACVIAC Center, SELEK, NALAS, the EU Strategy for the Adriatic Ionian Region (EUSAIR) and others, thereby contributing to the achievement of the goals defined by their action plans. Regarding the Open Balkan Initiative, which stemmed from the Berlin process and which aimed to promote and strengthen the capacity of the region, in order to bring concrete benefits to citizens and businesses, Bekteshi Shaqiri emphasized that the initiative is not an alternative to the EU, but meant faster and more prepared to the EU.

A short debate followed. It focused on North Macedonia as a positive example in the region for cooperation with neighbors and for closing open bilateral issues. It was underlined that the country fulfilled the conditions for the start of negotiations and that it was high time for the EU to fulfil its

promises because otherwise there would be an increase in Euro-scepticism. Members participated in the debate: Ms. Maja Moracanin (DOM, Sobranie) and Mr. Bajram Kadrija (DUI, Sobranie).

9. Report on the Jean Monet Dialogue

MEP Marion WALSMANN (EPP, DE) underlined that Jean Monnet brought all sides to the table and supported the democratic structure in polarized and frustrating times. In the three previous meetings of Jean Monnet process, the dialogue had made some progress, but some of the obligations had not been fully implemented. She expressed complete understanding of the situation in which the country was, the challenges of the complicated bilateral dispute with Bulgaria and the postponement of the negotiations, but reminded that a lot had been achieved with the process and therefore it should continue. Stressing that parliamentary cooperation between political parties should be restored, she appealed to her colleagues from the Assembly to show readiness for compromise, and as she stated, the cornerstone of that would be the adoption of the new Rules of Procedure. She reiterated that the signals from the EP were clear, there was a willingness to cooperate to help the country's European perspective despite all the difficulties. She sent a message to the citizens, especially to the youth, not to lose hope. In the end, she called for setting a new date for the Jean Monet dialogue in the fall, in a place outside of North Macedonia, in order to continue the dialogue in a concentrated form.

Ms Sonja MIRAKOVSKA (NSDP, Sobranie) emphasized that the Jean Monnet process, which had been ongoing since 2018 and in which many things have been completed, should have its own conclusion. She stated that the goal of the process was not only to amend the Rules of Procedure, but also to enable for the budgetary and security independence of the Assembly, adoption of the Code of Ethics, and as the reason why the process was not finalized, she indicated the fact that the dialogue took place during two parliamentary mandates. Namely, at the third meeting held at the end of January 2020, the participants were close to reaching a consensus because 90% of what was negotiated was agreed upon, with the only remaining issues being the name of the state, disputed by the opposition and the method of election of the Secretary General of the Assembly. She underlined that all issues that cause frustrations have been detected and that the premise had been confirmed that hard rules and a soft ball are needed, rather than the other way around. Mirakovska

expressed regret that the coordinator of VMRO-DPMNE was not present in the room, as a direct participant from the last meeting of the Jean Monnet dialogue, which was held in May without the participation of the MEPs and at which everything that has been agreed so far was noted, as a starting position from which to proceed further. She reported that the way the plenary session worked was not disputed, but the problems stemmed from the work of the working bodies, because the rules were not clearly defined. She expressed her belief that if success was achieved in solving the work of the commissions with slightly stronger rules, things in the Parliament would go much better. Praising the role of MEPs in the process, Mirakovska expressed her expectation that the next meeting of Jean Monnet will be held during October or November.

10. Adoption of the recommendations

The recommendations of the 19th meeting of the MPC of the EU-North Macedonia were adopted unanimously.

11. Miscellaneous

There were no other items on the agenda.

12. Date and place for the next MPK meeting

It was proposed that the next meeting of the Joint Parliamentary Committee be held at the European Parliament in Strasbourg on 5 and 6 October 2022.

The meeting ended at 18:30.