



Delegation to the EU-North Macedonia Joint Parliamentary Committee

D-MK_PV(2023)0424

MINUTES

of the meeting of 24 April 2023, 15.30-17.00
Brussels

Mr Andreas SCHIEDER (S&D, AT), the Chair of the EU-MK Joint Parliamentary Committee greeted the attendees and welcomed them to this preparatory meeting of the upcoming 21st EU-North Macedonia JPC meeting scheduled for 16 -17 May in Skopje. He reminded the guests of the previous JPC meeting held in October 2022, which took place shortly after the beginning of the screening process for North Macedonia. He expressed an interest in hearing about the subsequent developments.

Mr SCHIEDER clarified that the meeting minutes would be prepared and circulated by the Delegation Secretariat, as usual. He informed the attendees on the availability of translation services in English, German, and Bulgarian. He then proceeded to item number three of the agenda, namely the exchange of views on the political and economic situation in North Macedonia. Highlighting the forthcoming trip to Skopje in May, he emphasized the significance of this discussion.

Mr SCHIEDER welcomed the following guest speakers:

- **H.E. Ambassador Zulfi ISMAILI**, Ambassador of the Republic of North Macedonia to the EU;
- **Ms Michela MATUELLA**, Acting Director of the Western Balkans in the Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR) from the Commission;
- **Ms Elsa FENET**, Head of the Division for South East Europe and Western Balkans in the European External Action Service (EEAS).

The Ambassador, Mr Zulfi ISMAILI, expressed his gratitude to the Chair for his active involvement. He highlighted the historic nature of the previous year, which marked the beginning of the accession negotiations and bilateral screening process with the EU, indicating a new phase in the EU-MK relations. He reminded that the screening process started in September and is progressing according to plan. The presentations for the first and second cluster of screenings have been successfully completed, with ongoing screenings in other clusters expected to end later this year, he added.

Mr ISMAILI emphasized North Macedonia's unwavering commitment to domestic reforms,

strengthening democratic institutions, and upholding the rule of law, recognizing their critical importance for citizens and the overall process. He outlined the key priority of strengthening the Assembly's work through constructive political dialogue. Efforts to improve procedural rules through the Jean Monnet Dialogue will continue, along with the implementation of the European agenda through consensus on key reform areas, he shared. The Ambassador also stressed the significance of the Commission for European Affairs and the Council for European Integration as vital platforms for constructive national debates on EU reforms and accession negotiations.

Highlighting another important event, Mr ISMAILI mentioned the successful 16th EU-North Macedonia Stabilisation and Association Council held in Skopje, after a four-year hiatus since the last one in 2019. He acknowledged the challenges faced in recent months, particularly related to inflation, increased food and energy prices, and the overall economic situation. The Ambassador expressed gratitude for the substantial support provided by the EU, including a EUR 80 million energy-crisis support package and EUR 100 million of macro financial support to mitigate the consequences of the Russian aggression.

The Ambassador reaffirmed the government's commitment to the electoral reform, aiming to address the remaining OSCE ODIHR Recommendations before the upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections next year. A new working group comprising representatives from political parties, NGOs, and competent authorities has been formed to focus on electoral legislation reforms and drafting a new electoral code, he informed. He highlighted progress in implementing the justice reform strategy, with judicial institutions demonstrating integrity and independence in applying new rules for the selection, promotion, and dismissal of judges and prosecutors. He also shared that the final phase of preparing a new justice reform strategy and action plan for 2023-2027 is underway. Once again, the Ambassador emphasized North Macedonia's dedication to combating corruption, involving civil society in decision-making processes.

In terms of regional engagement, Mr ISMAILI highlighted the country's active role in fostering good neighbourly relations, regional cooperation, and security. North Macedonia currently holds the chairmanship of the OSCE, as well as the Presidency of the Adriatic Charter. Starting from July, the country will assume the Presidency of the Cooperation Process in South East Europe. The Ambassador then briefed the attendees on North Macedonia becoming full members of the Union for the Mediterranean last year and hosting the Serbia-Kosovo Dialogue in Ohrid this March, reflecting their transformation into a provider of stability in the region. He further emphasized the country's participation in other regional initiatives, such as the Berlin process. He noted that while overcoming political difficulties, the government successfully signed three agreements within the common regional market, facilitating free movement and preparing for gradual integration into the EU common market. These agreements have been ratified and are now in effect, the Ambassador stated.

Ms Michela MATUELLA acknowledged the Ambassador's insights and provided additional perspectives from the Commission. She emphasized the significance of their relationship with North Macedonia within the context of EU geopolitics and stressed the importance of continuing to collaborate and strengthen their ties.

Responding to the Chair's request for an update on the screening process, Ms MATUELLA focused on a few key aspects. She highlighted that the screening process had commenced

immediately after the first Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) in July, and all meetings under Cluster 1 (covering fundamental areas such as the rule of law, economic criteria, public administration reform, and democratic institutions) have been concluded. She shared that the revised methodology adopted recently will determine the pace of negotiations and have implications throughout the entire process.

Ms MATUELLA informed that screening reports are currently being prepared - which is the next step for Cluster 1. For Cluster 2, focused on the internal market, screening meetings to assessing the implementation progress have also been completed, including both explanatory sessions on EU *acquis* and bilateral meetings.. Bilateral screenings for Cluster 3, focused on competitiveness and inclusive growth, have been completed, and explanatory sessions for Cluster 4, centred on the green agenda and sustainable connectivity, have begun, Ms MATUELLA added. She underlined that, overall, the screening meetings are progressing as planned, displaying a high level of preparation and engagement from North Macedonia. The scheduled completion of this exercise is set for November 2023.

Ms MATUELLA additionally stressed that the screening reports prepared by the Commission will serve to identify gaps and guide North Macedonia in its reform process. She emphasized the importance of continuous implementation of reforms alongside the screening process, highlighting the need for cross-party political consensus on the reform agenda. The Parliament and the National Council for European Integration play crucial roles in this process, she noted.

Acknowledging common challenges, particularly in light of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine and its implications in the Western Balkans, Ms MATUELLA emphasized the significance of working towards common solutions. She highlighted the EU's support for North Macedonia, including the launch of an energy support package of EUR one billion for the Western Balkans, from which North Macedonia has benefited already, half of which has gone into budget support. Additional financial support of EUR 100 million has been proposed for macro financial assistance. She also stated that the collaboration on the common regional market and the ratification of three agreements by the Assembly of North Macedonia are important steps in preparing the region for accession.

Ms MATUELLA then mentioned the FRONTEX Status Agreement, the first of its kind signed with North Macedonia, underlining the importance of its implementation.

In conclusion, Ms MATUELLA reiterated the necessity for cooperation among different political forces, emphasizing that progress cannot be made without their collective efforts.

Ms Elsa FENET acknowledged positive developments and tangible progress in certain areas since the last meeting in Strasbourg, particularly in the context of standing together against Russia's war of aggression towards Ukraine. Ms FENET emphasized the importance of sending out encouraging messages to North Macedonia.

Referring to the IGC, she clarified that it was not the culmination of the process but rather the first step. She emphasized the need for continued progress and urged the attendees to carry this message of continuity during their visit to Skopje in May. During the SA Council meeting in March, she noted that the EU HRVP, Mr Josep BORRELL, highlighted the positive developments observed and stressed the importance of progressing further, creating conditions for the opening of the next cluster, while staying committed to reforms.

Ms FENET also expressed support for the government's decision to amend the Constitution. She emphasized the broader geopolitical context and the importance of working on security and defence cooperation to address vulnerabilities in the country. She then commended the full foreign policy alignment demonstrated by North Macedonia, while recognising the efforts and costs associated with it. The EU, in response, has provided support in areas such as cybersecurity and defence, considering the country's vulnerability, she added.

Acknowledging the security concerns faced by North Macedonia, Ms FENET assured that the EU remains committed to providing any necessary assistance. She highlighted cooperation with the Foreign Minister in his role as OSCE Chair, particularly appreciating the clear positions taken against Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, during a challenging time for chairing the organization.

Highlighting the government's clear target of EU membership within 2030, Ms FENET stressed the importance of translating this goal into concrete actions. She echoed the previous speaker, Ms MATUELLA, in emphasizing the need for active engagement and collaboration between the government and the opposition, whether in the context of constitutional amendments or broader reform agendas.

In conclusion, Ms FENET reiterated the key messages of continuity, cooperation, and active involvement from both the government and the opposition.

The Chair then addressed two questions to the guest speakers.

Regarding the bilateral issues and the necessary constitutional changes, Mr SCHIEDER's first question sought insight on the process. He inquired regarding the stability of the government and the Assembly, contemplating the possibility of snap elections or the Assembly continuing until the end of its term, which would occur next year.

The Chair then asked the speakers regarding any messages that the European Parliament could convey to Skopje during their visit in May; to the Assembly of North Macedonia, different political actors, as well as the Macedonian people.

Mr Thijs REUTEN identified a problem within the European Parliament, emphasizing the obligation of the Parliament to promote the interests of the European Union as a whole. He also underlined the importance of stronger attendance of MEPs in interparliamentary meetings.

Recalling a previous session, Mr REUTEN noted the constructive attitude displayed by the Macedonian Parliamentary Delegation towards the discussed topics. He also mentioned a positive conversation he had with a mixed-group delegation of Macedonian MPs two months earlier, sensing a sense of urgency for change among them, including members of the opposition.

Reinstating the significance of the upcoming meeting in Skopje, Mr REUTEN believed it to be crucial as it precedes the final votes in the Assembly. Against the backdrop of destabilization attempts in the region, triggered by the war in Ukraine, he acknowledged North Macedonia's steady progress towards EU membership. He said that these efforts ought to be appreciated in

other countries in the Western Balkans as well. Mr REUTEN expressed concern that jeopardizing this moment would entail significant risks and advocated for the EU to consider revising the current deal.

He then acknowledged the need for North Macedonia to finalise the process of amending the Constitution, although shared that the EU should be willing to reconsider a different scenario. Mr REUTEN expressed his commitment to persuading the Assembly of North Macedonia to vote in favour of the necessary changes for the benefit of the people as a whole.

Additionally, Mr REUTEN posed a question, requesting an update on the discussions in the Assembly. He also addressed questions to Ms MATUELLA and Ms FENET, seeking information about the Commission and the EEAS' efforts in promoting and seizing this final opportunity for change. He concluded his remarks by commending the government of North Macedonia for their patience and collaborative efforts towards their Bulgarian counterparts.

Ambassador Zulfi ISMAILI first addressed the question concerning the constitutional change. He emphasized the importance of the ongoing process, noting that a working group consisting of experts, political parties, and NGOs has already been established and tasked with drafting the constitutional amendment. The group's work was recently completed, and the amendment will be put forward for discussions with citizens, NGOs, and the media in May. In June, the government intends to submit the amendment to the Assembly.

Mr ISMAILI explained that the parliamentary process usually takes approximately three to four weeks, during which the initiative will be reviewed by parliamentary committees, before being brought to the plenary for a vote. A two-thirds majority is required to initiate the process, which is anticipated to take place by the end of June or the beginning of July. After that, it will take around three months to finalize the constitutional changes, culminating in another two-thirds majority vote. The aim is to demonstrate to citizens that the constitutional amendment is not a mere conspiracy theory circulating on social media, but rather a means to enhance the rights of communities within North Macedonia further. The Ambassador also highlighted the importance of displaying North Macedonia as an example in the region, aligning with the French proposal.

Mr ISMAILI further stressed the ongoing nature of the process, which requires political cooperation, determination and responsibility from all political actors. He regarded the visit of the European Parliament as timely and significant, as the EP enjoys strong support from Macedonian citizens; more so than any other EU institution. The Ambassador noted the importance of the EP's messages and the need to demonstrate that momentum is restored in the enlargement process. Despite North Macedonia being targeted by Russia's disinformation campaign, he reiterated the country's commitment to not losing this good momentum. The goal is to progress alongside Albania and open the first Cluster by the end of the year, he said. Lastly, the Ambassador said that the opening of the first Cluster would be a significant step, and stressed the importance of taking concrete steps to counter Russian propaganda.

Ms Michela MATUELLA complemented the Ambassador's answer. She acknowledged that the constitutional amendment constitutes a sovereign decision of North Macedonia and its Assembly. She emphasized, however, North Macedonia's commitment to include the Bulgarian minority into the Constitution, which enabled the Council's decision last July. This commitment should be the guiding spirit in delivering any message, she said. Ms MATUELLA noted the importance of clarifying the substance of the constitutional amendment, as she argued to have not encountered anyone questioning its content from any spectrum or any side. She

stressed that the focus should be on demystifying the issue and highlighting that the amendment poses no problem for Macedonian citizens.

She underlined the need for cooperation between all EU institutions, such as the EP, EC, EEAS and the Council, in working together and explaining the benefits of EU membership. Ultimately, MPs and citizens will have to make the choice, and it is crucial to make it clear that the current stage is about allowing the negotiations to continue or not, she added. Unlike before, the accession negotiations have started, and halting the screening process would not only pose a risk to North Macedonia but also jeopardize the momentum that has been generated. Ms MATUELLA highlighted the importance of creating favourable conditions for discussions, calming the situation, and avoiding sending out conflicting messages. She stated that it remains essential to build a narrative that is not polluted, as such narrative would make it increasingly challenging to progress through future stages of the accession process.

Ms Elsa FENET highlighted the significance of the SA Council meeting, which conveyed the message that Europe is actively engaging with North Macedonia after the first IGC. She emphasized the timeliness and importance of the upcoming visit in May, as it provides an opportunity to engage with and involve North Macedonia, while fostering a sense of togetherness. Demonstrating the potential losses of not progressing further is crucial, she said.

Ms FENET suggested that the message to be conveyed should be that North Macedonia is now much closer to its goals compared to the past. She questioned the idea of allowing domestic politics to hinder the progress of the entire country. She also stressed the sovereign nature of the constitutional amendment, clarifying that they should not be seen as dictated by outsiders. Ms FENET emphasized, however, the need to hold the respective politicians accountable for their actions. She concluded by arguing that at times of detrimental decision-making, they could be faced with a choice between their country's interests and their party's interests, and that it is important to stress the significance of prioritizing the country's overall welfare.

**ПРИСЪСТВЕН ЛИСТ/LISTA DE ASISTENCIA/PREZENČNÍ LISTINA/DELTAGERLISTE/
ANWESENHEITSLISTE/ΚΟΗΛΟΛΙΓΓΑΤΕ ΝΙΜΕΚΙΡΙ/ΚΑΤΑΣΤΑΣΗ ΠΑΡΟΝΤΩΝ/RECORD OF ATTENDANCE/
LISTE DE PRÉSENCE/POPIS NAZOČNIH/ELENCO DI PRESENZA/APMEKLĒJUMU REĢISTRŠ/DALYVIŲ SĄRAŠAS/
JELENLÉTI ÍV/REGISTRU TA' ATTENDENZA/PRESENTIELIJST/LISTA OBECNOŠCI/LISTA DE PRESENÇAS/
LISTĂ DE PREZENȚĂ/PREZENČNÁ LISTINA/SEZNAM NAVZOČIH/LÄSNÄOLOLISTA/DELTAGARLISTA**

Βιοπο/Mesa/Předsednictvo/Formandskabet/Vorstand/Juhatus/Προεδρείο/Bureau/Predsjedništvo/Ufficio di presidenza/Prezidijs/ Biuras/Elnökség/Prezydium/Birou/Předsednictvo/Predsedstvo/Puheenjohtajisto/Presidiet (*)
Andreas Schieder (C)
Членове/Diputados/Poslanci/Medlemmer/Mitglieder/Parlamendiliikmed/Μέλη/Members/Députés/Zastupnici/Deputati/Deputāti/Nariai/ Képviselek/Membri/Leden/Posłowie/Deputados/Deputați/Jäsenet/Ledamöter
Thijs Reuten; Marion Walsmann
Заместници/Suplentes/Náhradníci/Stedfortrædere/Stellvertreter/Asendusliikmed/Αναπληρωτές/Substitutes/Suppléants/Zamjenici/ Supplenti/Aizstājēji/Pavaduojantysnariai/Póttagok/Sostituti/Plaatsvervangers/Zastępcy/Membros suplentes/Supleanți/Náhradníci/ Namestniki/Varajäsenet/Suppleanter

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mr Zulfi ISMAILI, Ambassador, Head of Mission, Mission of the Republic of North Macedonia to the EU - Ms Michela Matuella, Head of Unit for Albania and North Macedonia, DG NEAR, European Commission - Ms Elsa FENET, Head of Division 'Western Balkans', European External Action Service
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Наблюдатели/Observadores/Pozorovatel é/Observatører/Beobachter/Vaatlejad/Παρατηρητές/Observers/Observateurs/Promatrači/ Osservatori/Novērotāji/Stebėtojai/Megfigyelők/Osservatori/Waamemers/Observatorzy/Observadores/Observatori/Pozorovatelia/ Opazovalci/Tarkkailijat/Observatörer

По покана на председателя/Por invitación del presidente/Na pozvání předsedy/Efter indbydelse fra formanden/Auf Einladung des Vorsitzenden/Εσιμεhe kutsel/Με πρόσκληση του Προέδρου/At the invitation of the Chair(wo)man/Sur l'invitation du président/Na poziv predsjednika/Su invito del presidente/Pēc priekšsēdētāja uzaicinājuma/Pirmininkui pakvietus/Az elnök meghívására/Fuq stedina tač-Chairman/Op uitnodiging van de voorzitter/Na zaproszenie Przewodniczącego/A convite do Presidente/La invitația președintelui/Na pozwanie predsedu/Na povabilo predsednika/Puheenjohtajan kutsusta/På ordförandens inbjudan

Съвет/Consejo/Rada/Rådet/Rat/Nöukogu/Συμβούλιο/Council/Conseil/Vijeće/Consiglio/Padome/Taryba/Tanács/Kunsill/Raad/Conselho/Consiliu/Svet/Neuvosto/Rådet (*)

Комисия/Comisión/Komise/Kommissionen/Kommission/Euroopa Komisjon/Επιτροπή/Commission/Komisija/Commissione/Bizottság/Kummissjoni/Commissie/Komisja/Comissão/Comisie/Komisia/Komissio/Kommissionen (*)

Европейска служба за външна дейност/Servicio Europeo de Acción Exterior/Evropská služba pro vnější činnost/EU-Udenrigstjenesten/Europäischer Auswärtiger Dienst/Euroopa välisteenistus/Ευρωπαϊκή Υπηρεσία Εξωτερικής Δράσης/European External Action service/Service européen pour l'action extérieure/Europiska služba za vanjsko djelovanje/Servizio europeo per l'azione esterna/Eiropas Ārējās darbības dienests/Europos išorės veiksmų tarnyba/Európai Külügyi Szolgálat/Servizz Ewropew għall-Azzjoni Esterna/Europese dienst voor extern optreden/Europajska Służba Działañ Zewnętrzych/Servizo Europeu para a Acção Externa/Serviciul european pentru acțiune externă/Európska služba pre vonkajšiu činnost/Evropska služba za zunanje delovanje/Euroopan ulkosuhdehallinto/Europeiska avdelningen för yttre åtgärd (*)

Други институции/Otras instituciones/Ostatní orgány a instituce/Andre institutioner/Andere Organe/Muud institutsioonid/Άλλα θεσμικά όργανα/Other institutions/Autres institutions/Druge institucije/Altre istituzioni/Citas iestādes/Kitos institucijos/Más intézmények/Istituzzjonijiet oħra/Andere instellingen/Inne instytucje/Outras Instituições/Alte instituții/Iné inštitúcie/Muut toimielimet/Andra institutioner/organ

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Секретариат на политическите групи/Secretaría de los Grupos políticos/Sekretariát politických skupin/Gruppernes sekretariat/Sekretariat der Fraktionen/Fraktsioonide sekretariaat/Γραμματεία των Πολιτικών Ομάδων/Secretariats of political groups/Secrétariat des groupes politiques/Tajništva klubova zastupnika/Segreteria gruppi politici/Politisko grupu sekretariāts/Frakcijų sekretoriai/Képviselőcsoportok titkársága/Sekretarjat gruppi politici/Fractiesecretariaten/Sekretariat Grup Politycznych/Secr. dos grupos políticos/Sekretariate grupuri politice/Sekretariát politických skupin/Sekretariat političnih skupin/Poliittisten ryhmien sihteeristöt/Gruppernas sekretariat

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Igor Miskulin, Adam Isaacs
Сътрудник/Asistente/Asistent/Assistent/Assistenz/Βοηθός/Assistant/Assistente/Palīgs/Padējējas/Assisztens/Asystent/Pomočnik/ Avustaja/Assistenten
Tanya Bolneva

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