



*DELEGATION TO THE EU-FORMER YUGOSLAV REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA
JOINT PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEE*

DRAFT MINUTES
of the 14th meeting of the
*DELEGATION TO THE
EU-FORMER YUGOSLAV REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA
JOINT PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEE*
Strasbourg, 7-8 February 2018

The meeting began on 7 February, at 15:00 with the opening remarks of Mr Alojz PETERLE, Co-Chair of the EU-former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Joint Parliamentary Committee. Mr PETERLE welcomed distinguished guests Mr Goran MILEVSKI, Co-Chair of the EU-former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Joint Parliamentary Committee, Mr David CULLEN, Head of Unit for the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Kosovo, DG NEAR, on behalf of the European Commission, Mr Eduard AUER, Head of the Western Balkans Division, on behalf of the European External Action Service, and Mr Nikola DIMITROV, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the government of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

1. Adoption of the draft agenda

The draft agenda was adopted without amendments.

2. Adoption of the minutes of the 13th meeting of the EU-former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Joint Parliamentary Committee held on 3-4 December 2015 in Strasbourg

The minutes were adopted without amendments.

3. Opening of the 14th meeting of the EU-former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Joint Parliamentary Committee by Mr Alojz PETERLE and Mr Goran MILEVSKI

In their opening speech the Chairs of the EU-former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Joint Parliamentary Committee, Mr MILEVSKI and Mr PETERLE, welcomed all the members of the Committee.

Mr PETERLE noted that much has changed regarding the political situation in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia since the last JPC in Skopje in December 2015.

Furthermore, Mr PETERLE noted that with its recently published Strategy for the Western Balkans, the European Commission brought the region back on the agenda. Mr PETERLE expressed hopes that this new momentum would not only lead to a solution regarding the name dispute, but would also bolster the due implementation of the Urgent Reform Priorities outlined by the European Commission in June 2015.

Mr MILEVSKI expressed his commitment to hold regular Joint Parliamentary Committee meetings in the forthcoming period, because of the JPC's importance in the re-establishment of the interparliamentary dialogue, as well as its role in fostering the European integration of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Mr MILEVSKI shared his expectations for substantial progress in 2018 as both the *Sobranie* and the government are fully dedicated to the implementation of the required legislative reforms. Mr MILEVSKI noted that the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia aims to be a modern EU country that shares European values and expressed his hopes that the country will receive a date to officially commence negotiations during the upcoming European Council meeting in June.

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

Mr DIMITROV reminded the audience that the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia was the first country in the Western Balkans to sign a Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the EU, and that it received eight positive recommendations (of which two were conditional) from the European Commission to commence with official accession negotiations. Mr DIMITROV noted that his government considers the current increased engagement of the EU with the Western Balkans as a second chance, given the backsliding that occurred in the country as a result of the protracted political crisis. He emphasized that the current government is determined to improve its relations abroad and is eager to work on domestic reforms at home, especially in the field of judiciary reform. In light of these reforms Mr DIMITROV referred to the new Chief Prosecutor that was elected in December 2017, to the ongoing work of the Special Prosecutor's Office, and to various laws that are currently going through parliamentary procedure. Mr DIMITROV concluded that the government is equally dedicated to restoring media freedom in the country, and has already taken several confidence-building measures to improve the bilateral relations with its neighbours.

Mr CULLEN stated that the European Commission's Strategy for the Western Balkans has provided all countries in the region with a renewed, realistic, and merit-based EU membership perspective. Despite the fact that the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia has not officially commenced with negotiations, Mr CULLEN expressed his hopes that the country would catch up with the countries currently negotiating. Nevertheless, Mr CULLEN noted that the challenges addressed by the Strategy should be addressed with greater rigor and candidness by all Western Balkans states looking to join the European Union. Furthermore, Mr CULLEN stressed the importance of continued implementation of the Pržino Agreement and adherence to the Urgent Reform Priorities formulated in the Priebe Report. In addition, Mr CULLEN welcomed the willingness of the government to reform the national intelligence agency and noted that the European Commission will continue to monitor this process very closely. Finally, Mr CULLEN stated that the European Commission is encouraged by the restart of negotiations on the name issue under the auspices of the United Nations.

Mr AUER noted that the upcoming EU - Western Balkans Summit in Sofia will provide a historic opportunity for the countries of the region, as it is the first of its kind since the summit in Thessaloniki in 2003. He furthermore reiterated that the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy has frequently stated that she wants each of the Western Balkans countries to make sustainable and irrevocable progress on their respective paths towards the European Union during her mandate. In addition, Mr AUER emphasized that enlargement is a joint effort of the various EU institutions involved in the process, and that these institutions are all fully committed to the European integration of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Mr AUER concluded his statement by expressing his desire for all political forces within the *Sobranie* to constructively engage with the European integration process.

Mr VAJGL started his statement by referring to the debate within the European Parliament following the publication of the European Commission's Strategy and noted that he finds the Strategy an excellent initiative. In this light, Mr VAJGL also emphasized the good cooperation with the European Commission, which previously led to the drafting of the Pržino Agreement and the Urgent Reform Priorities listed in the Priebe Report. He expressed his hopes that the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia will focus on fostering inclusive inter-party relations, and noted that also the previous governments deserve credit for delivering on the country's European integration. He called upon the main opposition party to permanently return to parliament and adopt a constructive stance in light of the many reforms required.

Mr DZHAMBAZKI noted that the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia went through a tough period and that it is time for the country to take matters in its own hands. Mr DZHAMBAZKI acknowledged the reforms implemented by the current and previous governments and finally noted that he hopes for a more constructive stance by representatives of Greece regarding the name dispute.

Mr CHRYSOGONOS, replying to Mr DZHAMBAZKI, explained the difficulties for Greece and its citizens to accept certain proposals put forward by the government of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to solve the name dispute.

Mr VAJGL, replying to Mr CHRYSOGONOS, noted that he hopes the Joint Parliamentary Committee does not bring up issues that have been discussed in previous sessions.

Ms SPYRAKI welcomed the six flagship initiatives presented by the European Commission's Strategy for the Western Balkans and expressed hopes that the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia will remain dedicated to the European integration process. Nevertheless, Ms SPYRAKI emphasized that there is a considerable gap between legislation and practice, citing the backsliding mentioned earlier in various reports of both the European Commission and the European Parliament. Regarding the name dispute, Ms SPYRAKI noted that any change in name should be reflected in the country's constitution and should be implemented according to the *erga omnes* principle. Ms SPYRAKI noted that her party would not vote in favour of a date to start accession negotiations in case the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia does not fulfil the conditions listed in the Commission's Strategy.

Mr MILOSHOVSKI stated that relations between the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and the European Commission and the European Parliament have always been good. He added that it is mainly due to the inability of the Council of the European Union to provide the country with a date to start accession negotiations that the country has been held

back on its path towards the European Union. Mr MILOSHOVSKI welcomed the improved atmosphere during the JPC meeting and recalled the 1995 Interim Accord, as well as the December 2011 judgement of the International Court of Justice regarding the entry of the former Yugoslav Republic into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Mr MILOSHOVSKI noted that he hopes Greece will respect this ruling in light of the UN-led negotiations concerning the country's name.

Ms SPYRAKI, replying to Mr MILOSHOVSKI, noted that the Interim Accord of 1995 has repeatedly been violated by the previous governments.

Mr ZARIANOPOULOS, replying to the previous speakers, presented the position of his party regarding the name dispute and discussed the role of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and other international stakeholders in this field. Mr ZARIANOPOULOS additionally discussed the need for the *Sobranie* to discuss constitutional amendments in order for the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Greece to foster good neighbourly relations.

Mr CRAMER reflected on the reunification of Germany and noted that the symbolic gestures put forward by the government of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia in the last few months form a step in the right direction.

Mr DIMITROV reflected on the previous debate and noted that discussions focusing on identity issues and ancient history are not conducive to finding a compromise regarding the name dispute. Instead, Mr DIMITROV expressed hopes that a mutually acceptable solution may be found on the basis of non-exclusivity, and that such a compromise would be beneficial for the entire region.

Mr CULLEN, in response to Mr VAJGL, reiterated that the current government of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia indeed benefits from the groundwork that was already in place before the current government was installed, and that this also formed the basis for the positive recommendations the Commission previously issued. Nevertheless, Mr CULLEN noted that the European Commission became increasingly concerned when the backsliding became more apparent, leading to the subsequent conditional recommendations to start accession negotiations.

In the final statement, Mr AUER recalled the important role played by MEPs in brokering a political issue in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia at the height of the political crisis in 2015, and affirmed the positive momentum felt in both the country and the rest of the Western Balkans.

The following members took part in the debates: Mr PETERLE (MEP), Mr VAJGL (MEP), Mr DZHAMBAZKI (MEP), Ms SPYRAKI (MEP), Mr CHRYSOGONOS (MEP), Mr ZARIANOPOULOS (MEP), Mr CRAMER (MEP), Mr MILOSHOVSKI (MP).

5. Implementation of the 3-6-9 Plan and of the Recommendations of the Senior Experts' Group on systemic Rule of Law issues, with an emphasis on judicial reforms, electoral reforms, reforms in the work of the Parliament, media reforms, public administration reforms and cooperation with the civil society

This agenda item was divided in six sub-items.

Media freedom

The first sub-item dealt with the topic of media freedom.

Mr HOWARTH discussed the linkage between the challenges faced by the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and EU member states in terms of media freedom, reflecting on global trends in this regard. Mr HOWARTH stressed the need for journalists to operate freely and without fear in the country, and for the public broadcaster to become free from state interference. Mr HOWARTH further pointed towards the importance of reforming government advertising in order to bolster media freedom.

Ms LAZAREVSKA advocated on behalf of the independence of the public broadcaster and defended the right of journalists to freely report without undue influence. Ms LAZAREVSKA stressed the need to reform the Law on Free Access to Public Information, a topic recently discussed in the *Sobranie*. In addition she discussed other debates taking place in the *Sobranie* in the field of media freedom, including on the subsidization of print media and on the amendments made to the Law on Audio and Audio-visual Media Services.

Judicial reforms

The second sub-item dealt with judicial reforms.

Mr MILOSHOVSKI focused on the adoption of the 3-6-9 Plan and stressed the need for real substantive reforms in the field of rule of law. Mr MILOSHOVSKI furthermore discussed the creation of the Council for the Reforms of the Judiciary and questioned its role in the reform process, given the fact that two of its members recently resigned citing political interference. In addition to this, Mr MILOSHOVSKI discussed the role of the Special Prosecutor's Office and shared his concerns regarding two specific cases of judge promotions.

Reforms in the work of the Parliament

The third sub-item dealt with the work of the *Sobranie*.

Mr MILEVSKI stated the need for the *Sobranie* to improve its track record concerning its supervisory role, especially vis-à-vis the state intelligence services. According to Mr MILEVSKI, both commissions operating in this field should be enhanced through capacity-building initiatives. Multiple initiatives aimed at enhancing these commissions were discussed.

Public administration reforms

The fourth sub-item dealt with reforms carried out in the area of public administration.

Mr KITEV discussed the ongoing process of public administration reform in the country. He emphasized the need for the public administration to become more service-oriented and implement merit-based recruitment procedures. He also noted that a special reform team had been set up in order to monitor the implementation of the government's strategy and action plans for public administration reform. Mr KITEV then proceeded to discuss how legislative changes that were passed by parliament in the previous year have made promotion procedures more transparent and merit-based. Finally, Mr KITEV acknowledged the need for the public administration to expand the use of e-services and noted that the international community supports the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia in this endeavour.

Cooperation with Civil Society

The fifth sub-item dealt with reforms aimed at the inclusion of civil society organizations.

Mr MEMEDI underlined the importance of incorporating feedback from civil society and to have an inclusive dialogue with civil society organizations. He discussed the various initiatives undertaken by the government to foster open governance, including the process of developing an action plan. Mr MEMEDI finally stated that the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia still needs to work on improvements in this field, but that there is sufficient political will within the parliament to adopt an inclusive stance vis-à-vis civil society organizations.

The sixth sub-item, which dealt with electoral reforms, was not discussed by the speakers.

The following members took part in the debates: Mr HOWARTH (MEP), Mr MILOSHOVSKI (MP), Mr MILEVSKI (MP), Mr LAZAREVSKA (MP), Mr KITEV (MP), Mr MEMEDI (MP).

6. Inter-ethnic relations, neighbourhood and regional cooperation

This agenda item was divided in three sub-items.

Neighbourly relations and regional cooperation

The first sub-items discussed by the speakers involved neighbourly relations and regional cooperation.

Mr DZHAMBAZKI commenced his statement recalling the treaty on good neighbourly relations signed between the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and the Republic of Bulgaria in August 2017, and noted that bilateral trade has increased significantly since the signing of the agreement. Nevertheless, Mr DZHAMBAZKI reiterated the need for the Sofia - Skopje transport corridor to be modernized in order to further bolster trade relations between both countries. Furthermore, Mr DZHAMBAZKI reflected on the decision made by the government of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to rename Skopje's airport and argued that this is a positive symbolic gesture.

Mr MEMEDI discussed the importance of fostering good neighbourly relations in light of the country's European integration process, focusing on the connectivity agenda. He referred to the constructive meetings between Prime Minister Zaev and Prime Minister Tsipras that took place earlier in 2018, and also recalled the meeting between Prime Minister Zaev and Prime Minister Rama in December 2017. Regarding relations with the Republic of Albania, Mr MEMEDI emphasized that finalization of Corridor VIII remains crucial. He also noted that completion of the Skopje - Prishtina highway would reflect well on the country's good neighbourly relations. Mr MEMEDI shared his hopes that the upcoming EU - Western Balkans Summit in Sofia and the 2018 Western Balkans Summit in London would further facilitate the EU's connectivity agenda in the region.

Mr KOVATCHEV discussed the European Commission's connectivity agenda and the revitalization of Corridor VIII and Corridor X, noting that it is essential for the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and the Republic of Bulgaria to enable easier modes of transport between the two capital cities. Mr KOVATCHEV further criticized the decision of the main opposition party in the country to not attend the ratification session of the good neighbourly relations agreement.

Mr PETERLE welcomed the heightened level of engagement in the realm of good neighbourly relations, citing the treaty signed between the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and the Republic and Bulgaria, as well as the ongoing negotiations taking place between Prime Minister Zaev and Prime Minister Tsipras.

Ms BORZAN noted that she regards the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to be back on its European path after years of political crisis. She referred to the efforts of the government to reach out to its neighbours and noted that such gestures should be answered in similar fashion by the government of Greece. Ms BORZAN finally stated that there is no alternative to regional cooperation.

Commenting on the name negotiations, Ms SPYRAKI reiterated the position of her party, as mentioned in the previous session. In response, Mr PETERLE noted that earlier reports presented by the European Commission have not included the notion that the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia would have to solve its bilateral dispute with Greece prior to the commencing of official negotiations.

Inter-ethnic relations: Implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement and the new Law on the Use of Languages

The second sub-item discussed was the state of inter-ethnic relations in the country.

Discussing the implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, Mr ALIMI heralded the signing of the agreement in 2001 as a landmark for inter-ethnic relations. He noted that the agreement enabled greater inclusion of national minorities and also reflected well on the country's European integration process. Mr ALIMI thanked the international community for its continued monitoring of the six pillars of the agreement and welcomed the government's initiative to also monitor the implementation of the Law on the Use of Languages in the upcoming two years. Mr ALIMI further drew attention to the opposition's plan to submit thousands of amendments to the Law, criticizing this practice and expressing hopes that the main opposition party will not block parliamentary procedure in this manner.

Mr MILOSHOVSKI, replying to Mr ALIMI, criticized the adoption procedure of the Draft Law on the Use of Languages by citing misuse of the "European flag" indication, which allows for an expedited adoption procedure. Mr MILOSHOVSKI further stated that he is of the opinion that the Law will only further divide the country.

Commenting on the Law on the Use of Languages, Mr PETERLE expressed his concerns about the blocking of parliamentary procedure and shared his hope that all parties involved will adopt a constructive stance.

Mr ALIMI, replying to Mr PETERLE's statement on the Law on the Use of Languages, explained the rules of procedure for adopting the Law in light of the Ohrid Framework Agreement. Mr ALIMI stated that the Law is in compliance with the country's constitution.

Follow-up on the Trieste Summit

The third-sub item discussed focused on the follow-up of the Trieste Summit.

Mr KITEV discussed the outcomes of the 2017 Western Balkans Summit in Trieste, which took place in the framework of the Berlin Process initiative, paying special attention to the

signing of the Transport Community Treaty. Furthermore, he provided a timeline concerning the organization of the Regional Digital Summit, which will take place in Skopje in April 2018.

The following members took part in the debate: Mr DZHAMBAZKI (MEP), Mr KOVATCHEV (MEP), Mr PETERLE (MEP), Ms BORZAN (MEP), Ms SPYRAKI (MEP), Mr MEMEDI (MP), Mr ALIMI (MP), Mr MILOSHOVSKI (MP), Mr KITEV (MP).

7. The Berlin Process, with a special focus on the efforts of the EP mediation unit with a long-term perspective to incorporate young parliamentarians from WB countries

Mr DUCCI, Head of the Democracy Support Unit within the Directorate-General for External Policies of Union of the European Parliament, briefly explained the work of the Democracy Support and Election Coordination Group (DEG). Mr DUCCI focused his statement on the inclusion of youth in the decision-making process.

Mr MILEVSKI in turn clarified the priorities of the Berlin Process initiative, emphasizing its connectivity agenda.

Mr PETERLE noted that the Berlin Process and also the Jean Monnet dialogue should be considered inclusive processes and advised his counterparts to engage in all these forums now that the momentum appears to be favourable towards the Western Balkans.

The following members took part in this debate: Mr PETERLE (MEP), Mr MILEVSKI (MP)

8. Adoption of the recommendations

The recommendations of the EU - the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia 14th JPC meeting were adopted.

9. Any other business

There was no other business.

10. Date and place of the next JPC meeting

It was proposed to hold the next Joint Parliamentary Committee meeting on 19-20 September 2018 in Skopje.

The meeting was ended at 11:31.