



EUROPEAN UNION - FORMER YUGOSLAV REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA JOINT
PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEE

MISSION REPORT

to

Skopje, on 19-20 September 2018

including the

**15TH MEETING OF THE EU-FORMER YUGOSLAV REPUBLIC OF
MACEDONIA JOINT PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEE (JPC)**

Participating Members:

Mr Alojz PETERLE, Chair of the D-MK	EPP, Slovenia
Ms Biljana BORZAN	S-D, Croatia
Mr Michael CRAMER	Greens/EFA, Germany
Mr John HOWARTH	S-D, United Kingdom
Mr Tunne KELAM	EPP, Estonia
Mr Dimitrios PAPADIMOULIS	GUE/NGL, Greece
Ms Marijana PETIR	EPP, Croatia
Ms Maria SPYRAKI	EPP, Greece

Background

The EP delegation visited Skopje for the 15th EU-former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia JPC. This was a second meeting in 2018 marking a return to normal inter-parliamentary relations, following a 3 year standstill due to the political crisis in the country. The visit was marked by mostly positive and constructive atmosphere, with meetings taking place at an important moment ahead of the 30 September referendum on the “name issue”.

The following meetings/visits took place:

- **Briefing with Ambassador Samuel ŽBOGAR, Head of the EU Delegation**

The Ambassador started his presentation by focusing on the EU financial assistance to the country. He explained that the EU delegation had started a decisive campaign to promote their projects and enhance visibility in the eyes of the population, with the aim of underlining the direct connection between the projects under implementation and the EU money.

He stressed that the timing for the JPC meeting was excellent – right when people had started realizing how much support there is for their country in Europe. He warned, however, that there were serious doubts about reaching the quorum in the 30 September referendum and failure to finalize the process would mean a very important opportunity missed. Regarding the reforms, significant progress was achieved by the country, but the EU should keep pressure for important reforms to be continued (judiciary, public administration, intelligence service, electoral reform).

- **Meeting with CSOs (focus: media freedom)**

MEPs heard representatives of 13 organizations working in the field of media, who described the media situation in the country:

- Improved atmosphere, but no tangible changes in media freedom since the year before,
- Number of attacks against journalists decreased by 2/3, but political pressure increased,
- Economic difficulties are forcing media to establish clientelistic relations with the government and the self-censorship is widespread, thus limiting the media plurality,
- Political establishment is reacting negatively and unconstructively to any kind of criticism.

- **Meetings with political leaders**

DUI leader Mr Ali Ahmeti underlined that there was no other alternative for the country than full reconciliation and integration in the EU. He reiterated that compromises had to be made at that very important moment and that the country is and has always been European.

The VMRO-DPMNE leader Mr Hristjan Mickoski expressed his belief that the country is not going in the right direction and that the government only works on a single issue. He explained that his party opposes the agreement with Greece because of its content and the manner in which it was reached, not the agreement in principle.

The SDSM Vice-President, deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defence Ms Radmila Sekerinska assured MEPs that referendum was not taking all government's attention and the work on priority reforms was continuing. She expressed her certitude that the agreement is a win-win solution solving a three-decade long situation and expressed optimism about the outcome: compromises need to be made for the country's future.

Speaker of the *Sobranie* Mr Talat Xhaferi underlined that he was ready to take the political responsibility for the decisions that needed to be taken – the referendum and next elections would bring all the answers.

- **15th EU-former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia JPC**

The first session was dedicated to an **exchange of views on the relations between the European Union and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, follow-up on reform process and focus on the rule of law issues:**

The EU is a strategic priority for the country, EU and EP's support for reforms is crucial (focus of last year – Rule of Law and good neighbourly relations is already bearing fruit). The government is further working on Plan '18, the work on reforms hasn't stopped despite the referendum and the preparations for the negotiations. The European Commission will continue its support and keep reminding the importance of accelerating the reforms.

The second session focused on the **Jean Monnet Dialogue, situation of media and good-neighbourly relations and regional cooperation:**

EP mediators Eduard KUKAN and Knut FLECKENSTEIN explained the purpose of the Jean Monnet Dialogue - to facilitate the discussions among the parties. First successes of the

Dialogue – agreement on the Code of Ethics (already adopted by the *Sobranie*) and the progress on the Rules of Procedure. Regarding the preparation for the 2nd round, a proposal was made to improve the inclusion of small parties, namely those which are part of the governing coalition.

Situation of media was discussed once again – MEPs found that it was not satisfactory even in the regional context. Strong independent institutions are crucial for ensuring freedom of expression.

Regarding good neighbourly relations, new approach of the country towards its neighbours is already paying-off, with significant increase in trade with Bulgaria, cross-border cooperation and progress in developing the corridor 8. EP Vice-President PAPANIMOU underlined that Balkans needed to show a positive example based on cooperation, reconciliation and regional growth and assured that the EP was ready to help the country and its citizens in this process. D-MK Chair PETERLE reiterated that good neighbourly relations were essential for the spirit of the EU.

Adoption of recommendations: adopted as amended by large majority on both sides.

Conclusions

Important and timely delegation visit to the country at a politically important moment. High-level interlocutors and informative exchanges with the civil society, as well as lively debates between the MEPs and MPs.

Possible follow-up

Regular continuation of inter-parliamentary relations, due preparation of the 16th JPC in Brussels or Strasbourg in 2019.

Attachments:

- Programme
- List of participants
- Recommendations