

European Union - North Macedonia

Joint Parliamentary Committee

17th meeting

18-19 December 2019, Strasbourg

Recommendations

Joint Parliamentary Committee held its 17th meeting in Strasbourg on 18 and 19 December 2019 under the joint chairmanship of **Mr Andreas SCHIEDER** (S&D, Austria) and **Ms Sonja MIRAKOVSKA** (NSDP, Republic of North Macedonia).

At this meeting, the Committee held an exchange of views with

- **Mr Andrej ZERNOVSKI**, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, on behalf of the government of North Macedonia,
- **Mr David CULLEN**, Head of Unit for North Macedonia, Kosovo, DG NEAR, on behalf of the European Commission,
- **Mr Gabriele VISENTIN**, Head of Division for Parliamentary affairs, on behalf of the European External Action Service
- **Mr Ilhan KYUCHYUK**, European Parliament's standing rapporteur on North Macedonia.

The Joint Parliamentary Committee exchanged views on the relations between the European Union and North Macedonia, on the rule of law, judiciary reforms and fight against organized crime and corruption, as well as the readiness of the electoral system and proposed reforms ahead of the early parliamentary elections.

The Joint Parliamentary Committee, pursuant to Rule 3 of its Rules of Procedure, addresses the following recommendations to the institutions of North Macedonia and of the European Union:

Taking into account:

- A. The 18 June 2019 European Council conclusions on enlargement and stabilization and association process, the 17-18 October 2019 European Council conclusions and the 15 October 2019 Presidency conclusions on enlargement and stabilization and association process,
- B. The 29 May 2019 European Commission [Communication](#) on EU Enlargement Policy and North Macedonia 2019 [Report](#),
- C. The [recommendations](#) from the 16th Joint Parliamentary Committee meeting of 28 March 2019 in Strasbourg,
- D. The conclusions from the 2nd Jean Monnet Dialogue with the *Sobranie* of 23 June 2019;

- E. European Parliament resolutions of 29 November 2018 on the 2018 Commission Report ([2018/2145\(INI\)](#)) and of 24 October 2019 on opening accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania ([2019/2883\(RSP\)](#)),
 - F. The European Economic and Social Committee “Resolution on opening accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania: EU credibility and geostrategic interests should be upheld”, of 31 October 2019;
 - G. The joint letter of 3 October 2019 by Presidents Tusk, Sassoli and Juncker, and President-elect Von der Leyen on the opening of accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania,
 - H. The 15th meeting of the Stabilisation and Association Council of 19 March 2019,
 - I. The declaration of the EU-Western Balkans summit of 17-18 May 2018 and the Sofia Priority Agenda,
 - J. The “Final Agreement for the Settlement of the Differences as described in the United Nations Security Council Resolutions 817 (1993) and 845 (1993), the Termination of the Interim Accord of 1995, and the Establishment of a Strategic Partnership between the Parties”, signed on 17 June 2018 at Lake Prespa,
 - K. The signature of the Accession Protocol to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) of 6 February 2019 opening the doors for North Macedonia to become the 30th member of NATO;
1. Points out the European Commission’s recommendation, in light of the significant progress achieved and the conditions set unanimously by the Council in June 2018 having been met, that the Council opens accession negotiations with North Macedonia;
 2. Appreciates the delivered tangible results in key areas identified in the June 2018 Council, such as the judiciary, fight against corruption and organized crime, intelligence services reform and public administration by North Macedonia, as well as efforts in resolving decades-long bilateral issues; reiterates that signing of the bilateral friendship treaty with the Republic of Bulgaria and the implementation of the Prespa agreement with Greece shows clear determination of North Macedonia to promote regional reconciliation and mutual understanding as well as good-neighbourly relations, and to continue the implementation of the necessary reforms; underlines the need to stay focused on further progress and full implementation of these reforms;
 3. Recalls the Council and the European Council conclusions, respectively of 26 and 28 June 2018, setting out the path towards the opening of accession negotiations in June 2019; notes the Council conclusions of 18 June 2019 to revert, no later than October 2019, to the issue of the Commission's recommendations to open accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania;
 4. Deplores, therefore, the failure to agree on opening of accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania at the October 2019 European Council meeting;
 5. Calls on the Council and Member States to recognise the negative repercussions of the non-decision on the whole region and the overall stability of the EU noting with concern that this could allow other foreign actors, whose activity might not be in line with EU values and interests, to engage more closely with both North Macedonia and Albania; calls on all Member States to

commit to taking a positive decision as soon as possible on opening accession negotiations with both countries at the March 2020 Council meeting at the latest;

6. Underlines that prospect of EU membership has been a fundamental incentive for reforms and played a decisive role in the stabilisation of the Western Balkans; points out that possible reform of the enlargement process should not be a pre-condition and an obstacle to those countries who have already fulfilled the requirements for start of accession negotiations and that the ultimate goal is the fully fledged membership in the EU, and not any possible alternative to the accession process, as privileged partnership or placing them in a category of EU neighbourhood;

7. Calls on the European Commission to tackle enlargement related questions without any delay by formulating concrete proposals for an effective, credible and sustainable accession process and enlargement policy, and by assisting in reversing the destructive non-decision as soon as possible;

8. Thanks the Finnish Presidency of the Council for its efforts to facilitate an agreement during the October 2019 Council meeting and calls on the incoming Croatian Presidency to keep enlargement high on the EU agenda as a crucial tool to ensure the global role of the EU, to emphasize to the EU capitals the benefits of opening of the EU accession negotiations with North Macedonia and the need to acknowledge the opportunities for the transformation processes in the country;

9. Insists on the need to maintain the principle of fair and rigorous conditionality and the principle of own merits, so that the timetable for accession and the pace of negotiations of each country are determined by the speed and quality of its reforms;

10. Gives its support to the Berlin Process and to the conclusions adopted at the last summit in Poland, at which leaders unanimously reaffirmed their unequivocal support for the European perspective of the Western Balkans; welcomes in this regard the joint presidency of the Republic of North Macedonia and the Republic of Bulgaria next year, as an important symbol of greater ownership of the process that should contribute to expansion of mutual cooperation between the countries in the region and a motivation for finding solutions to open bilateral issues; supports the idea for holding an inter-parliamentary meeting within the frames of the presidency as an important segment of indirect inclusion of citizens and their contribution to the process;

11. Reminds that the future without a clear perspective of EU enlargement may lead to migration of young people from the region; re-affirms their importance for the future of the Western Balkans and for the need to strengthen their perspectives to remain in the region; supports the work of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) and expects delivering of tangible results in the cooperation between young people and mobility in the region; welcomes the promotion of the Youth Lab for the Western Balkans (WB6 Lab) as a model for regional innovations of young leaders;

12. Welcomes the process of preparation of the draft law for young participation and youth policies in parliamentary procedure, which has included all concerned parties, youth organizations and youth party branches in a Working Group led by Members of Parliament from all parliamentary groups, as well as government representatives with the main goal being recognition of forms of youth organization and providing guaranties for their participation in policy creation processes; looks forward to its adoption by consensus and expresses hope that such processes will continue in future;

13. Welcomes the considerable improvement of Parliament's role as the main institution for political dialogue and its constructive engagement in the Jean Monnet Dialogue (JMD); welcomes

the important achievements of the first two dialogues on the adoption of the new Code of Ethics and the considerable progress on the reform of the Rules of Procedure that had been recommendations from the European Commission's 2019 Report; welcomes the plans to hold of the 3rd JMD dialogue at the end of January 2020 to allow for the consolidation of the achievements so far before the start of the election campaign; recommends its continuation as a key instrument of support also after the 2020 early parliamentary elections;

14. Strongly encourages North Macedonia to continue its efforts to further consolidate reforms of essential importance for the country; welcomes the re-confirmation of the national consensus on EU membership by all the political leaders proving the consensus on the EU integration as the only option for the future of the country;

15. Welcomes the determination of the country and the good progress achieved in addressing the 'Urgent Reform Priorities' and recommendations from the Venice Commission and the Senior Experts' Group on systemic Rule of Law issues, including reforms addressing the functioning of the judiciary, the system of interception of communications, media and fight against corruption;

16. Acknowledging the considerable progress achieved, underlines that continuous efforts and steps need to be taken to further strengthen rule of law and promote an independent justice system; calls to put additional efforts to restore public trust in judiciary; calls on these reforms to continue including by finding a sustainable solution to the work of the Special Prosecutor's Office; encourages the authorities to adopt the draft law on the Public Prosecutor's Office to ensure that the accountability for the wiretaps continues to be established; welcomes current investigations and procedures, including those stated in the Recommendations of the 16th meeting of the Joint Parliamentary Committee; emphasizes that determining accountability and delivering court judgements for those who committed criminal acts should be done in a transparent way and in accordance with the laws;

17. Remarks that despite good progress and some level of preparation achieved, corruption is still prevalent in some areas and remains an issue of concern; notes the improved legal framework for prevention of corruption and conflict of interest; welcomes the increased transparency of the appointment of the new members of the State Commission for Prevention of Corruption; welcomes efforts undertaken by the State Commission for Prevention of Corruption to tackle conflict of interest and nepotism; calls to use existing mechanisms to prevent corruption including the verification of assets of public officials; calls on all relevant authorities to further intensify the fight against corruption;

18. Urges North Macedonia to continue efforts against organised criminal networks; further implement strategies against organised crime and measuring their impact; welcomes progress made on improving track record, enacting legislative change, stepping up law enforcement cooperation and improving the operational capacity to fight trafficking in human beings; notes the work of the Public Prosecutor for Prosecuting Organised Crime and Corruption; underlines that coordination remains crucial for all stakeholders involved in fighting organised crime;

19. Welcomes good progress made in implementation of the public administration reform strategic framework, improved public consultations and increased transparency and calls to further enhance accountability of the administration and prevent its politicisation; underlines the need to ensure full respect of merit-based recruitment, promotion and dismissal for senior civil service and other positions;

20. Notes the continuous alignment of the legal framework of North Macedonia with the EU standards with regard to the fundamental rights; welcomes the improved legislation against hate crime and discrimination, as well as the determination to fight violence against women by adopting

the action plan for implementing the Istanbul Convention; calls to make additional efforts to consistently disseminate and address Recommendations of European and international human rights bodies, notably regarding treatment of detained persons, women and persons with disabilities and fight all discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation and gender identity; call for strengthening consistent follow up of the recommendations issued by independent and regulatory bodies; underlines that all political parties and politicians have a special responsibility for creating a culture of tolerance and inclusion;

21. Notes the continued improvement of the operational environment for the civil society organisations and their constructive role in supporting democratic processes; underlines the need to further strengthen checks and balances and ensure meaningful consultation processes between the government and the civil society; highlights the importance of ensuring the financial sustainability of the civil society organisations such as broader tax harmonisation and predictable public budgeting;

22. Notes the improved climate for media freedom and freedom of expression; underlines the need for the political elites and public officials to uphold the freedom of expression by demonstrating a higher level of tolerance towards criticism; draws attention to the importance of fighting against hate speech in the media - in line with EU and OSCE guidance; calls to demonstrate strong political commitment for the implementation of amendments to the Law on Audio and Audio-visual Media Services; underlines the need to ensure the independence and professional standards of the public broadcaster as well as its financial sustainability;

23. Underlines the need to further enhance Parliament's oversight and legislative functions and fully restore checks and balances; welcomes the consensus across party and ethnic lines reached in Parliament on several instances on laws requiring 2/3 majority;

24. Welcomes the fact that crucial institutional and governance reforms have demonstrated their commitment to tackle long-standing challenges, and notes that it is essential to stay on the path of reform to further strengthen the stability of the economy; acknowledges furthermore, that the employment rate has increased by 2.2 pp and welcomes the fact that there was a marked drop in youth unemployment, and call attention to the importance of fighting brain drain with a particular focus on the youth;

25. Welcomes the progress made by the government of North Macedonia in addressing and implementing the recommendations of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE/ODIHR); notes with satisfaction that the presidential elections on 21 April and 5 May 2019 were well organised and respected fundamental freedoms, allowing the citizens to make an informed choice between candidates;

26. Highlights that due to the postponement of the decision on opening accession negotiations with the country snap elections were scheduled in North Macedonia; insists that early parliamentary elections of 12 April 2020 are held in a credible, inclusive and transparent way, in a democratic atmosphere based on national reconciliation, constructive dialogue and participation; stresses the need to implement the remaining OSCE/ODIHR recommendations issued after the Presidential elections;

27. Draws attention to the OSCE/ODIHR priority recommendations, which call for a review of the legislative framework, the adoption of legal provisions to ensure the stability and professionalism of the electoral administration, audits by the State Audit Office (SAO) that ensure a comprehensive review of compliance with campaign financing rules, an update and

harmonization of data across institutions to ensure a more accurate voter list and refined rules related to media coverage of the campaign, campaign financing and election dispute resolution;

28. Welcomes the government's continued commitment to increase trust among the communities; underlines the importance of the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA) in providing the framework for preserving the multi-ethnic character of the society;

29. Welcomes the continued promotion of good-neighbourly relations and regional cooperation by the government of North Macedonia; encourages recent initiatives to advance regional cooperation like the initiative between North Macedonia, Albania and Serbia, recalls the importance for regional initiatives to include all partners and to not isolate any country in the Western Balkans and to be based on EU rules, building on commitments previously taken; reiterates that the settlement of bilateral issues with neighbours significantly contributes to the reconciliation in the whole Western Balkans; calls for the continuation of such policies, which constitute an important part of the EU accession process;

30. Highlights that North Macedonia is currently on its way to becoming the 30th member of NATO and hopes for a swift ratification of the NATO Accession Protocol by all partners; it reiterates its belief in the positive impact that the accession of North Macedonia to NATO will have for peace and stability in the region; underlines that the accession of North Macedonia to NATO is an encouraging sign of improved climate in the region;