

European Union - North Macedonia Joint Parliamentary Committee

19th meeting

28 June 2022, Skopje

Recommendations

Joint Parliamentary Committee held its 19th meeting in Skopje on 28 June 2022 under the joint chairmanship of **Mr Andreas SCHIEDER** (S&D, Austria) and **Ms Sonja MIRAKOVSKA** (NSDP, North Macedonia).

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

- **Mr Bojan MARICHKJ**, Deputy Prime Minister in charge of EU affairs, on behalf of the Government of North Macedonia,
- **Mr David GEER**, Ambassador, Head of the EU Delegation to North Macedonia, on behalf of the European Commission and 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, environmental issues and health, civil society and media, good-neighbourly relations and regional cooperation, as well as on the state of play in the Jean Monnet Dialogue.

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 Council conclusions of 26 June 2018 on the enlargement and stabilisation and association process, of 25 March 2020 and on the stabilisation and association process and 14 December 2021 on the enlargement and stabilisation and association process, as well as the Council conclusions of 24 June 2022,
- B. The European Commission 2021 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy (COM(2021)644) and the North Macedonia 2021 Report (SWD(2021)294) of 19 October 2021,
- C. the Commission communication of 5 February 2020 entitled 'Enhancing the accession process – A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans'(COM(2020)0057),
- D. The EU-Western Balkans summit, held in Brdo pri Kranju on 6 October 2021, and its declaration,

- E. European Parliament Resolutions of 19 May 2022 on the 2021 on the Commission Report (2021/2248(INI)) and of 24 October 2019 on opening accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania (2019/2883(RSP)),
- F. The Recommendations from the 17th Joint Parliamentary Committee meeting of 28 March 2019 in Strasbourg and the Joint Statement of the Co-Chairs following the 18th EU-North Macedonia Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) meeting of 25 March 2021,
- G. The conclusions from the 3rd Jean Monnet Dialogue with the *Sobranie* of 1 February 2020,
- H. The 15th meeting of the Stabilisation and Association Council of 19 March 2019,
- I. The Commission communication of 29 April 2020 entitled ‘Support to the Western Balkans in tackling COVID-19 and the post-pandemic recovery’ (COM(2020)0315),
- J. The Commission communication entitled ‘An Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans’ (COM(2020)0641), and the Guidelines for the Implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (SWD(2020) of 6 October 2020,

1. Recalls the unanimous decision taken by the European Council in March 2020 to open accession negotiations with North Macedonia, in the light of the progress achieved on reforms and the fulfilment of the conditions; also welcomes the European leaders’ reaffirmed, unequivocal support for the European perspective for the region, expressed at the EU-Western Balkans Summit held on 6 October 2021, as well as in the June 2022 Council Conclusions, as a mutual strategic interest and a broader European strategic determination, based on fair and rigorous conditionality and the merit-based principle; points to the importance of respect of this principles to avoid a perception for unequal treatment in the accession process;

2. Expresses its disappointed that the EU leaders, at the June 2022 Council meeting, again could not deliver on its promises and achieve progress on starting accession negotiations with North Macedonia, having in mind the continued commitment to the implementation of reforms by the country’s authorities despite the challenges and the fact that the country continues to demonstrate the best democratic transition record across the Western Balkans; in this regard, emphasises that the delay in the official start of the accession negotiations is having a negative impact on EU credibility; urges to start officially the accession negotiations with North Macedonia with the adoption of the Negotiation Framework in the spirit of European values and criteria, and the holding of the first Intergovernmental Conference as soon as possible;

3. Takes note of the current position of the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia for acceptance of the negotiation framework with pure formulation of the Macedonian language, clear protection of the Macedonian identity, treatment of historical issues outside of the framework and start of negotiations before the procedure for constitutional changes, that according to the Government should represent a basis for beginning of the EU accession negotiations;

4. Reminds of the EU’s successful transformative power in the integration process, which should be at the forefront of all EU Member States’ decisions, to prevent further negative influences by third parties jeopardising the European concept of a united continent; in this regard, emphasises that the delay in the official start of the accession negotiations is having a negative impact on EU credibility, producing significant decrease in support for the EU integration process among the general population in the country;

5. Commends the tangible results delivered on the fundamentals, such as the rule of law, the fight against corruption and organised crime, including the Europe at Home agenda and the Action Plan on the fight against corruption; values the country's continued efforts to further advance the democratic processes and its commitment to deliver results in the key policy areas, including checks and balances in the legislative process, which demonstrates its unchanged focus on making further progress in the accession process;
6. Takes note of the progress made in the implementation of judicial reform strategy, thereby further addressing the recommendations of the Venice Commission and the Senior Experts' Group on systemic Rule of Law issues; in this context, takes note in particular of the implementing legislation to improve the work of judges and prosecutors, so that they maintain their role as guardians of the independence of the judicial system and manage to continue operating in a transparent manner; emphasises the need to further advance the reform to strengthen the institutional independence, funding, quality, coordination and transparency of the judiciary;
7. Welcomes the considerable progress and continued efforts made in the fight against corruption and organised crime, and the consolidated track record on investigating and prosecuting high level corruption and organised crime, as well as the strengthened institutional framework, as part of the country's commitment to prevent corruption and sanction corrupt behaviour; also welcomes the recommendations of the Council of Europe Group of States against Corruption (GRECO), encouraging the authorities to continue further with their full implementation;
8. Praises the legal framework for the protection of fundamental rights for being largely in line with European standards and the ratification of most international human rights instruments; encourages further efforts to ensure proper functioning of institutions in charge of the prevention of and protection against discrimination; notes the improvements in ensuring women's rights and gender-responsive policies; commends, in particular, the implementation of the Istanbul Convention and the consequent harmonisation of the legal and institutional framework, as well as the work of various Inter-Party Parliamentary Groups in the Parliament of North Macedonia to address issues of discrimination of marginalised groups and to help their members by providing them better access to institutional support; notes with concern the increase in misinformation and discriminatory speech against LGBTI+ people and human rights defenders in the media and political discourse; urges the authorities to take decisive steps to improve the prison conditions;
9. Commends the continuous implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, which provide the framework for stable inter-ethnic relations and a multi-ethnic society; welcomes in particular the country's dedication for respect and protection of the rights of the smaller ethnic communities and diversities, which makes it an example for multi-ethnic democracy; supports the country to continue with its implementation, thus fulfilling the spirit of the Agreement;
10. Welcomes the commitment of the Parliament to the EU reform agenda and the active role of the opposition parties in parliamentary work, as well as its continued exercise of its legislative functions, including its oversight function of the executive; underlines the importance of reducing parliamentary polarisation and improving legislative quality for further strengthening democratic institutions;
11. Calls for continuation of the Jean Monnet Dialogue and the implementation of the agreements made during the third round of the Dialogue held in early 2020, with a view of organising the fourth round of the Dialogue later this year;
12. Commends the facilitation of an environment enabling the continuous operation of civil society organisations, their active and important role in the reform process and their participation in the decision-making processes on a regular basis, including in the debate for the prevention of and

protection against discrimination notes, in particular, their significant contribution in ensuring the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, with a particular focus on providing assistance in this regard to the most vulnerable segments of society;

13. Praises the favourable media climate that allows critical media reporting, the promotion of freedom of expression and pluralistic viewpoints; calls for the resumption of the self-regulation efforts to improve the standards of professional journalism and achieve impartiality, independence and financial sustainability; recalls the need for reform of the public broadcaster, by ensuring its independence and financial sustainability; also calls for continued fight against hate speech in the media, fake news and disinformation - which increased especially during the COVID-19 pandemic - including by strengthening independent investigative journalism, non-biased factchecking and media literacy; points to the need for revision of the media legal framework in accordance with the EU *acquis* and for further harmonisation of national laws with the revised European Directive on Audio-visual Media Services;

14. Welcomes North Macedonia's updated climate pledges; stresses the urgent need under the current circumstances for engaged actions that will contribute to resilient energy efficiency and sustainable development of the country through diversified sources; takes into account the country's endorsement of the Green Agenda as part of the broader regional agenda to reflect the European Green Deal and good level of preparation in the trans-European networks; stresses, however, that further progress should be made in the field of environment and climate change, and in the promotion and implementation of policies for the use of alternative sources of energy production;

15. Emphasises the need for further steps to improve the air quality, the protection of water and biodiversity, as well as the management of regional waste; welcomes the adoption of the Long-term Strategy for Climate Action and the preparation of the Law on Climate Action; encourages further implementation of the legal framework on climate change and the implementation of environmental protection and sustainable development plans at national level;

16. Endorses the positive role of the European Union during the COVID-19 pandemic, by including North Macedonia in areas previously reserved for EU Member States such as the EU Joint Procurement Agreement and the EU Health Security Committee as observers, and by providing very substantial financial assistance of around EUR 230 million for various socio-economic recovery measures, including the full disbursement of the macro-financial assistance, the support to micro and small companies and women and men in risk of unemployment, as well as its assistance in regards to urgent medical equipment, vaccine purchase and vaccine grants; notes the proactive role of the government to protect overall public health and the functioning of the key institutions and to mitigate the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 crisis; encourages the authorities to maximise the full benefit of the EU financial assistance, including through IPA and the Economic and Investment Plan, and to strengthen the administrative capacities;

17. Welcomes the holding of the September 2021 population census, which was the first since 2002 and was conducted in line with the relevant UN standards and the EU's statistical legislation, as a great achievement in obtaining and renewing data on the population; welcomes the publication of its results and looks forward to their use for future planning and their implementation in appropriate social, economic and demographic policies that will benefit all citizens;

18. Notes with regret that the data obtained from the census show continuous migration and brain drain, especially of young people, to EU Member States; encourages authorities to continue with the implementation of the adopted legal framework for youth participation, and the role of the parliamentary Working Group to provide guarantees for their increased participation in policy creation and the decision-making processes;

19. Welcomes the ongoing talks between the governments of North Macedonia and Bulgaria to overcome the outstanding impediments to the start of accession negotiations; underlines that the Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation represents a good base for settling differences and should be implemented consistently and in good faith, in accordance with European values and by avoiding actions that violate the provisions of the Treaty; encourages Bulgaria and North Macedonia to solve their cultural-historical dispute separately from North Macedonia's accession process and to immediately allow the organisation of the first Intergovernmental Conference as North Macedonia has fulfilled all official criteria;

20. Applauds the positive and constructive approach of North Macedonia towards regional cooperation and open bilateral issues, and its active role in regional initiatives; stresses, in this context, the importance of the continued implementation of the Prespa Agreement with Greece by all parties; welcomes North Macedonia's steady commitment to Euro-Atlantic security and its contribution to the EU-led crisis management missions and activities, as well as its full alignment with the EU foreign, security and defense policy, including with the restrictive measures against Russia and commends the country's efforts to host refugees; underlines the support to North Macedonia in addressing the consequences of the war in Ukraine, in particular in key areas of common interest.