

European Union - North Macedonia Joint Parliamentary Committee

20th meeting

5-6 October 2022, Strasbourg

Recommendations

Joint Parliamentary Committee held its 20th meeting in Strasbourg on 5-6 October 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 MARICIKJ**, Deputy Prime Minister for European Affairs and Chief Negotiator, Government of North Macedonia
- **Ms Michela MATUELLA** - Head of Unit for North Macedonia and Albania and Acting Director for Western Balkans, DG NEAR, European Commission
- **Ms Elsa FENET** - Head of Division 'Western Balkans', 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, civil society and media, environmental and energy issues, 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, of 14 December 2021 on the enlargement and stabilisation and association process, of 24 June 2022, the Council conclusions on Enlargement – North Macedonia and Albania of 18 July 2022, approving the Negotiating Framework with North Macedonia, and the holding of the Intergovernmental Conference of 19 July 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 19th Joint Parliamentary Committee meeting of 28 June 2022 in Skopje,
- 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,
- K. The Conclusions of the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia of 16 July 2022,

1. Praises the Conclusions adopted by the Assembly of North Macedonia on 16 July, paving the way for the start of the accession talks, as a crucial step on the country’s EU accession path; recognises the complexities considered in this compromise, which acknowledges and respects Macedonian cultural identity and guarantees the recognition of the Macedonian language;

2. Strongly welcomes the long overdue approval of the Negotiating Framework by the Council on 18 July, which marked the start of the accession negotiation process with North Macedonia, and the holding of the first Intergovernmental Conference on 19 July; stresses that this marks the beginning of a new phase in the accession process for North Macedonia and the implementation of the unanimous decision taken by the European Council in March 2020 to open accession negotiations;

3. Welcomes the start of the screening which is the first step in the accession negotiation process; stresses that the screening is not only a technical exercise as it addresses matters and concerns which are close to the daily life of citizens; takes note of the Decision of the Government for Establishment of a Negotiation Structure for Accession of the country in the EU to consolidate the coordinative mechanism for the accession process in accordance with the new enlargement methodology; in this regard; stresses the importance to strengthen the transparency, accountability and inclusiveness of the process; highlights the role of the Parliament in ensuring a broad outreach to citizens in this regard; encourages the EU to continue to accelerate the pace of the accession negotiation process for North Macedonia, based on fair and rigorous conditionality and the merit-based principle; points to the importance of respect of this principle to ensure equal treatment in the accession process;

4. Reiterates its firm belief that the EU integration process possesses a significant transformative power and should deliver on the goals of democratic consolidation, institutional integrity, long-term

growth and socio-economic cohesion, which should be at the forefront of all EU Member States' decisions, to prevent further negative influence by third parties jeopardising the European concept; underlines, in that respect, that the start of the accession negotiations sends an important signal for the Western Balkans and beyond, confirming that they represent a geopolitical priority for the EU; expresses its strong belief that Europe is not complete without the Western Balkans;

5. Reiterates the position that the country continues to demonstrate the best democratic transition record across the Western Balkans, despite numerous challenges; commends the continuing reforms bringing about tangible results on the fundamentals, such as the rule of law, and the fight against corruption and organised crime, including the Europe at Home agenda and the Action Plan on the fight against corruption; commends the country's ongoing efforts to further advance the democratic process and deliver results in key policy areas;

6. Welcomes the efforts made to ensure the implementation of the legal framework for the protection of fundamental rights and the proper functioning of institutions in charge of the prevention of and protection against discrimination, in line with European standards; notes the ongoing improvements in ensuring women's rights and gender-responsive policies, including through 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; notes with concern the rise of misinformation, discriminatory and hate speech against LGBTI+ persons and human rights defenders in the political discourse, online media and social media platforms;

7. Recognises that some progress was achieved in the implementation of the judicial reform strategy, including in terms of further addressing the recommendations of the Venice Commission and the Senior Experts' Group on systemic Rule of Law issues; reiterates its calls for the implementation of the reform in view of institutional independence, funding, quality, coordination and transparency of the judiciary;

8. Welcomes North Macedonia's commitment to prevent all forms of corruption and to sanction corrupt behaviour; finds, in that respect, encouraging the progress achieved in the fight against corruption and organised crime, including at a high level; encourages the authorities to continue with the full implementation of the recommendations of the Council of Europe Group of States against Corruption (GRECO); welcomes efforts to introduce anti-corruption education in schools;

9. Commends North Macedonia's stable inter-ethnic relations and cooperation; praises the continuous implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, which represents the framework underlying the multi-ethnic society; welcomes the attention given to the protection of the rights of the smaller ethnic communities and calls on all stakeholders to continue reinforcing inter-ethnic stability and cooperation;

10. Commends North Macedonia's positive climate for the work of civil society organisations; commends, furthermore, the continuing and significant contribution of civil society organisations to the reform and decision-making processes, and to the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, notably of the most vulnerable members of society; encourages North Macedonia to continue on its present path to avoid any potential backsliding;

11. Welcomes the media climate in North Macedonia as being open for critical reporting, and protecting freedom of expression and pluralistic viewpoints; recalls the necessity to revise the media legal framework in accordance with the EU *acquis* and to reform the public broadcaster, ensuring its independence and financial sustainability; calls for continued fight against disinformation and hate speech in the media; welcomes the efforts made to strengthen media literacy, including the promotion of the independent investigative journalism and non-biased fact-checking;

12. Stresses the utmost importance, particularly under the current circumstances, of engaged and coordinated actions in contributing to a more resilient and efficient energy system and in fostering sustainable development by diversifying energy sources; stresses that further progress should be made in the field of environment and climate change, beyond updated climate pledges and the endorsement of the Green Agenda, with the aim of promoting and implementing policies on the use of alternative sources of energy production; emphasises the need for further steps to improve air quality, the protection of water and biodiversity, as well as the management of regional waste;
13. Recognises the commitment of the Assembly of North Macedonia to the EU reform agenda and the role of the opposition parties in parliamentary work, including the Assembly's oversight function of the executive; while fully acknowledging the legitimate diversity of political views, positions and opinions, encourages all political actors to reduce parliamentary polarisation and calls on all political forces to engage in peaceful dialogue to work for the EU future of their country; reminds that the Assembly should remain the principal forum of political debate;
14. 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; in particular, calls for intensified work of the Jean Monnet Working Group with a view of agreeing on the amendments to the Rules of Procedure; furthermore, as soon as the amendments to the Rules of Procedures have been agreed on and adopted, calls for organising the fourth round of the Jean Monnet Dialogue;
15. Welcomes the substantial financial assistance close to EUR 240 million provided by the European Union for various socio-economic recovery measures, including macro-financial assistance, support to micro and small companies and persons at risk of unemployment, and in the form of medical equipment, vaccine purchases and vaccine grants during the COVID-19 pandemic; encourages the authorities of North Macedonia to maximise the full benefits of the EU financial assistance, including through the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance and the Economic and Investment Plan, and to pursue their endeavours in strengthening administrative capacity at all levels of government; underlines the belief that political and economic incentives for accession countries should not substitute but rather facilitate the final goal of fully-fledged EU membership;
16. Welcomes the meetings between North Macedonia and Bulgaria, including those on expert level, and stresses the importance to address any cultural-historical discussions separately from North Macedonia's accession process; reiterates its view that the Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation needs to be implemented consistently and in good faith by all sides;
17. Praises North Macedonia's constructive role in developing and cultivating regional cooperation and its active role in regional initiatives; underlines, particularly, the continued implementation of the Prespa Agreement with Greece by all parties; welcomes North Macedonia's continued commitment to Euro-Atlantic security and its contribution to the EU-led crisis management missions and activities, as well as its continued full alignment with the EU foreign, security and defence policy, including on restrictive measures against Russia; commends the country's efforts to provide assistance to Ukraine.