

European Union - North Macedonia Joint Parliamentary Committee

21st meeting

16-17 May 2023, Skopje

Recommendations

The Joint Parliamentary Committee held its 21st meeting in Skopje on 16-17 May 2023 under the joint chairmanship of **Ms Sonja MIRAKOVSKA** (NSDP, North Macedonia) and **Mr Andreas SCHIEDER** (S&D, Austria).

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

- **Drita ABDIU HALILI**, State Secretary in the Secretariat for European Affairs, on behalf of the Government of North Macedonia,
- **H.E. David GEER**, Head of EU Delegation to North Macedonia, on behalf of the European Commission and the European External Action Service
- **H.E. Ami LARSSON JAIN**, Ambassador of the Kingdom of Sweden to North Macedonia, on behalf of the Presidency of the Council of the EU.

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 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 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 Council conclusions on Enlargement and Stabilisation and Association Process of 13 December 2022;
- C. The Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions 2022 Communication on EU Enlargement policy, REPowerEU Plan COM (2022) 230 of 18 May 2022;

D. The Commission North Macedonia 2022 Report SWD(2022) 337 of 12 October 2022;

E. The Agreement between the European Union and North Macedonia on Operational Activities Carried Out by the European Border and Coast Guard Agency in North Macedonia., of 26 October 2022;

F. The EU-Western Balkans Summit in Tirana and adopted Declaration of 6 December 2022;

G. The Berlin Summit held in Berlin on 3 November 2022, and the European Commission Energy Support Package of €80 million for North Macedonia to support measures tackling the ongoing energy crisis;

H. The 16th meeting of the Stabilisation and Association Council held for the first time in Skopje, on 17 March 2023;

I. The European Parliament Resolution 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));

J. The Recommendations from the 20th Joint Parliamentary Committee meeting of 5-6 October 2022 in Strasbourg;

K. The conclusions from the third Jean Monnet Dialogue with the *Sobranie* of 1 February 2020.

1. Welcomes the Council conclusions reaffirming the commitment to enlargement and the acceleration of the process, under the criteria for implementation of the necessary reforms and tangible progress on the fundamentals including rule of law, economy, functioning of democratic institutions, and public administration reforms as decisive for the meeting and requirements for future membership; reiterates that each country should be judged on its own merits and that the accession process should not be misused to settle bilateral disputes;
2. Fully agrees with the Council position that EU membership represents a long-term investment in peace, democracy, prosperity, security and stability in Europe, recalling that it should be at the forefront of the EU's future decisions on the region, to maintain its credibility among the candidate countries;
3. Upholds its strong belief that the EU integration process has a significant transformative power and contributes to a general democratic consolidation, institutional integrity, long-term growth and socio-economic cohesion; re-affirms that the country continuously demonstrates the best transition reform record in the region; commends the country's current activities in further advancing the democratic process and delivering results in key policy areas;
4. Highly appreciates the steady EU-integration course of the country; encourages it continue with the accession process, despite the challenges, as a confirmation of its strong commitment to a fully-fledged membership in the EU; welcomes, also, the implementation of the necessary reforms, adopted primarily to achieve prosperity for the citizens and enhance the democratic processes in the country;

5. Praises holding the Stabilisation and Association Council meeting in North Macedonia for the first time, thus underlining the EU's full and unequivocal commitment to the EU membership perspective of the Western Balkans and to the accession negotiation process of North Macedonia;
6. Welcomes the positive assessment of the ongoing screening process; reiterates that this is not only a technical exercise as it addresses matters and concerns which are close to the citizens' daily lives; reiterates, also, the importance of strengthening the transparency, accountability and inclusiveness of the process and the role of the Assembly in ensuring a broad outreach to citizens;
7. Recognizes that the Ombudsman's Office remains the central body for the promotion and enforcement of human rights in the country;
8. Recalls that the overall progress in areas of judiciary and fundamental rights, as well as in justice, freedom and security to ensure independent, professional, transparent and impartial judicial system remains crucial; encourages, in this regard, the government to continue with the envisaged reforms, building on progress already made; sustained efforts are needed to ensure the independence, professionalism, transparency and impartiality of the judicial system; encourages North Macedonia to further step-up investigations, prosecutions and final convictions in corruption cases, including at high level;
9. Commends the entry into force of the Agreement between the European Union and North Macedonia on Operational Activities Carried Out by the European Border and Coast Guard Agency in North Macedonia on 1 April 2023 and the launch of the joint operation, with the deployment of officers of the European Border and Coast Guard Standing Corps, on 19 April 2023; this will support North Macedonia's efforts to manage its borders, prevent irregular migration and tackle cross-border crime; notes its signing in the Macedonian language without footnotes or additions, on an equal footing with the 24 official languages of the European Union;
10. Welcomes the country's progress of 52 places in the Reporters Without Borders Report over the past two years, according to which the country is ranked the highest of all countries in the region and is on the 38th place out of 180 countries in the world, which represents a good basis for further improvement of journalists' work conditions and professional standards; supports, in that context, government's continued efforts to harmonize and implement the legal framework for the media in accordance with European practices;
11. Notes the ongoing consultation process with representatives of civil society and on the expert level for electoral reforms; points out that electoral reforms should be carried out in a timely, transparent and inclusive manner, and address the remaining recommendations of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe's (OSCE), Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights and the Venice Commission, including on reforms related to transparency in the financing of political parties;
12. Encourages all efforts for maintaining a constructive dialogue and reducing divisions across party lines; points out that further steps are needed to proceed with the negotiation process and benefit from the current momentum in the enlargement process; calls on all parties represented in the Parliament to continue working constructively in the spirit of consensus on EU-related reforms;
13. Recalls the need for a consent within the Jean Monnet Dialogue (JMD), aimed to strengthen the inter-party dialogue within the Parliament and to create conditions for the amendments to the existing Rules of Procedure; urges the participants to implement the agreements made during the third round of the JMD held in 2020, so that the fourth round can take place as soon as possible;

14. Commends North Macedonia's continuous commitment to stable inter-ethnic relations and inter-community cooperation; takes a positive note of the steady implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, which is an essential element for democracy and stability in the country; notes the commitment of the government to build greater trust among communities and increase the societal cohesion and integration; additionally welcomes, in this regard, all steps taken to promote the rights of the smaller communities;
15. Commends the work and contribution of North Macedonia's vibrant civil society to the ongoing development of democracy in the country and the stability of the interethnic relations; underscores the importance of empowering the youth;
16. Acknowledges the EU's continuous contribution on all levels, in supporting the EU accession-related reforms for political, economic and social transformation, through the Instrument of the Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) in particular as the main funding source; urges, in this context, the strengthening of the administrative capacity of IPA structures to ensure the full implementation and use of the allocated funds;
17. Looks forward to the full implementation of the Economic and Investment Plan and the Green and Digital Agenda for the Western Balkans, as important means in alleviating the socio-economic disparities, improving infrastructure and regional connectivity, as well as helping the country improve the green and digital transition in the field of climate policy, sustainable energy, sustainable mobility, circular economy, depollution, sustainable agriculture and food supply and the protection of nature and biodiversity;
18. Notes that the Progress on the implementation of the Organic Budget Law is slow; notes that the new Organic Budget Law was adopted by the Parliament in September 2022 after a lengthy procedure, requires substantial secondary legislation, the development of which is only in its initial phase; takes note, moreover, of the fact its implementation depends heavily on the introduction of the new integrated IT system (IFMIS), which is yet to be established as well;
19. Welcomes the Energy Support Package of EUR 1 billion put forward by the European Commission at the Berlin Process Summit held on 3 November 2022, for the Western Balkans, of which EUR 80 million for North Macedonia aimed to address immediate, short- and medium-term needs and protect the most vulnerable groups affected by the energy crises, in particular businesses, households and SMEs, while advancing energy transition and diversification, thus decreasing its dependence on Russian fossil fuels and stimulating supply of energy from diversified sources and accelerating decarbonisation;
20. Applauds the fact that statistics in the areas of energy and environment, environmental protection expenditures, waste, water, and environment-related taxes have been further aligned with the EU acquis; notes that, in October 2021, the State Statistical Office of the Republic of North Macedonia (SSO) reported data to Eurostat for the first time, including on compiled Environmental Protection Expenditures (EPEA) tables and quality reports, with preliminary data compiled for Environmental Goods and Services Sector, Air Emission Accounts and Physical Energy Flow Accounts; points out that the compilation of tables for environmental expenditure for the government is outstanding;
21. Emphasises the need for further progress in climate protection and additional measures to improve air quality and reduce pollution; welcomes the efforts to protect nature, increase recycling rates, and modernize and expand its waste management system;
22. Strongly commends North Macedonia for its consistent cooperation on foreign policy issues and in particular its full alignment with the EU common foreign and security policy, including on EU

restrictive measures – a clear signal of North Macedonia's strategic commitment to its EU path; praises, also, the county wide-range activities to help the citizens of Ukraine and its institutions;

23. Welcomes the fight against terrorism and the prevention/countering of violent extremism in line with the objectives set out in the joint action plan on counter-terrorism for the Western Balkans and the bilateral implementing arrangement;

24. Emphasizes the country's continued commitment to nurturing and promoting good neighborly relations and regional cooperation and its role as a model for the peaceful resolution of bilateral disputes through dialogue and mutual understanding; highlights, at the same time, its proactive approach to implementing bilateral agreements by delivering concrete results to all stakeholders; takes note of the implementation of the Prespa Agreement with Greece; and in that sense especially welcomes the cooperation in the field of energy, as an important segment of bilateral relations;

25. Welcomes the recent installation of the exhibition of artists from Bulgaria and North Macedonia in the European Parliament in Brussels entitled "Together", on the initiative of the Rapporteur Ilhan Kyuchyuk, whose special guest was President Roberta Metsola; highlights the symbol of common representation through culture, which knows no borders and has the power to rise above all differences, as well as the EU's support to the promotion of events in the spirit of its fundamental values of unification through diversity;

26. Welcomes the ongoing meetings between North Macedonia and Bulgaria, including those on expert level, aimed at further implementation of the Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation, which needs to continue to be implemented consistently and in good faith by both sides; stresses, in this context, the importance of excluding the cultural-historical issues from the negotiation process and addressing them on bilateral level;

27. Praises the country's unequivocal decision to join the international partners' unanimous condemnation of the unjustified aggression against Ukraine as a sovereign country, thereby confirming its strategic European orientation; praises, further, the commitment to adhere to all restrictive measures imposed by the EU on the Russian Federation, and to provide, according to its capabilities, humanitarian, military and diplomatic assistance to Ukrainian institutions and citizens; welcomes, at the same time, the EU's decision to provide support to address the consequences of the decisions taken, as a clear demonstration of solidarity with the country;

28. Commends the constructive role of North Macedonia in developing bilateral cooperation with all neighbouring countries and its proactive role in regional initiatives; commends, furthermore, its Chairmanship of the OSCE and the South-East European Cooperation Process this year and the activities taken to further promote their shared values and founding principles, especially in such critical times for the continent and the world in general;

29. Welcomes North Macedonia hosting the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue meeting in Ohrid on 18 March 2023, which confirmed the country's credibility as a constructive regional partner and its commitment to contribute to the efforts of the international community towards normalisation of relations between Parties.