

European Union - North Macedonia

Joint Parliamentary Committee

22nd meeting

22-23 November 2023, Strasbourg

Recommendations

The Joint Parliamentary Committee held its 22nd meeting in Strasbourg on 22-23 November 2023 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 Zulfi Ismaili**, Ambassador, Head of Mission of North Macedonia to the EU, on behalf of the Government of North Macedonia,
- **Mr Alberto Cammarata**, Deputy Head of Unit NEAR.D.3-Albania, North Macedonia, European Commission, on behalf of the European Commission,
- **Ms Elsa Fenet**, Head of Division 'Western Balkans', EEAS, on behalf of the European External Action Service

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. Granada Declaration of the European Council of 6 October 2023
- D. 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;
- E. The Communication on the New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans (COM (2023) 691 final and the proposal for a Regulation on the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans (COM(2023) 692 final), adopted by the Commission on 8 November 2023;
- F. 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;
- G. The EU-Western Balkans Summit in Tirana and adopted Declaration of 6 December 2022;
- H. 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;
- I. The 16th meeting of the Stabilisation and Association Council held for the first time in Skopje, on 17 March 2023;
- J. 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));
- K. The Recommendations from the 21st Joint Parliamentary Committee meeting of 16-17 May 2023 in Skopje;
- L. The conclusions of the third Jean Monnet Dialogue with the *Sobranie* of 1 February 2020;

1. Upholds the belief that EU membership represents a long-term investment in peace, democracy, prosperity, security and stability in Europe; underscores that the EU integration process has a significant transformative power and contributes to democratic consolidation; recalls that maintaining its credibility among the candidate countries and potential candidate countries should be at the forefront of the EU's future decisions on the region; calls, in this respect, on the EU to reinvigorate its approach to the region, and determine 2030 as the deadline within which the process of full membership will be realised;

2. Strongly welcomes North Macedonia's strategic orientation to EU integration that reflects the consensus among political parties and the support among citizens; calls on further internal dialogue between all stakeholders, to keep focus on this millennial goal; reiterates that each country should be judged on its own merits and that the accession process should not be misused to settle bilateral disputes;
3. Welcomes the successful progress of the screening process and the high degree of alignment with the EU legislation; reiterates that it is not a mere technical exercise, but rather an instrument to address matters and concerns that are close to the citizens' daily lives, and in that respect calls for a comprehensive citizen outreach; reiterates, further, the importance of strengthening the transparency, accountability and inclusiveness of the process and the role of the Assembly of North Macedonia in it; calls for attention to be paid to the European Commission Progress Report for 2023 as a roadmap for the next steps related to the reform processes; welcomes the mobilization of significant resources by institutions for active involvement in the screening process;
4. Encourages efforts in fostering a constructive inter-party dialogue aimed at reducing divisions across party lines that spill over on the entire Macedonian society and polarise it; points out that further steps are necessary to proceed with the negotiations and benefit from the current momentum in the enlargement process; calls on all parliamentary political parties to work constructively and in the spirit of consensus on EU-related reforms, as well as to limit the undue use of the EU flag instrument in the Parliament;
5. Welcomes North Macedonia's transition reform record; commends its ongoing activities in further advancing the democratic process and delivering results in key policy areas; encourages the country to continue with the accession process, despite the challenges; underscores that the reforms represent a long-term investment in the citizens' prosperity;
6. Welcomes North Macedonia's overall contribution to regional cooperation and stability in the Western Balkans; encourages North Macedonia to continue its engagement in regional initiatives, underlining the importance of their inclusiveness; praises the country's continued commitment to nurturing good neighborly relations and its role as a model for the peaceful resolution of bilateral disputes through dialogue and mutual understanding, in that sense, reminds that bilateral agreements should be implemented in good faith by all sides, including between North Macedonia and Greece and the Treaty on Friendship, Goodneighbourly Relations and Cooperation with Bulgaria; calls for the finalization of the infrastructure and the opening of the Klepalo border crossing between North Macedonia and Bulgaria for the benefit of the citizens of both countries;
7. Commends North Macedonia's full and consistent alignment with the EU's foreign and security policy, including the clear-cut response to the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine; praises North Macedonia's activities to assist the citizens of Ukraine and its institutions;
8. Supports efforts to reach a timely agreement on constitutional changes and calls on all political forces to play a constructive role in this regard; asks in particular also the member states' government who set this additional requirement for the North Macedonia, to do their utmost to support these efforts;

9. Recalls that the rule of law and institutional integrity are the backbone of democratic transformation, societal resilience, socioeconomic cohesion; recalls the constitutional principles of the separation of powers, and checks and balances that are of crucial importance for the rule of law; welcomes the adoption of the New Strategy for Public Administration 2023-2030 and its Action Plan of July 2023;

10. Underlines the paramount importance of securing the unobstructed work of an independent, professional, transparent and impartial judicial system for the overall progress in areas of judiciary and fundamental rights, as well as in justice, freedom and security; encourages, in this regard, unwavering commitment, effectiveness, and credibility in upholding the rule of law by combating criminal activities; encourages, furthermore, the government to continue with the foreseen reforms, building on progress already made; welcomes efforts to step-up investigations, prosecutions and final convictions in corruption cases, including at high level; encourages the authorities to continue with the full implementation of the recommendations of the Group of States against Corruption of the Council of Europe (GRECO); Welcomes the proactive role of the State Commission for the Prevention of Corruption in providing guidance to public institutions on anti-corruption policies;

11. Commends North Macedonia's commitment to fostering harmonious inter-ethnic relations and inter-community cooperation; welcomes the steady implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, which is a cornerstone of stability in the country; welcomes efforts to promote the rights of smaller ethnic communities;

12. Applauds the work of North Macedonia's vibrant civil society and its vital contribution to the development of democracy in the country and the stability of the interethnic relations; highlights the importance of youth empowerment and promoting gender equality; encourages efforts to convince civil society of benefits of EU membership through programs and educational resources for the public in light of recent discouragement from delays in the ascension process; welcomes the implementation of the Strategy for Cooperation and Development of Civil Society 2022-2024; welcomes the harmonization of the Criminal Code with the Convention of the Council of Europe on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence;

13. Takes note of the ongoing process of consultations on the pending electoral reform; points out that the reform should be conducted in a timely, transparent and inclusive manner, and address all relevant 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 transparency in the financing of political parties; encourages the working group for electoral reforms in the Ministry of Justice to continue working on the implementation of the recommendations of the OSCE/ODIHR regarding the Electoral Code;

14. Commends North Macedonia's steady progress in assuring media freedoms, as confirmed by moving up 52 places in the Reporters Without Borders' annual reports over the past two years, which places the country on the 38th place out of 180 countries, and the highest of all Western Balkan countries; underlines that this represents a good basis for further improvement of journalists' professional standards; encourages, in that context, legislative efforts in harmonizing

and implementing the legal framework for the media, aligned with European standards; welcomes the adoption of amendments to the Criminal Code to increase the protection of journalists in the performance of their professional duties, as well as the appointment of a prosecutor who will monitor the proceedings in response to attacks on journalists;

15. Acknowledges the EU's continuous assistance in supporting the accession-related reforms on all levels, notably through the Instrument of the Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) and currently the new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans as the main funding sources; welcomes particularly, in this regard, the Plan and its primary goal to support economic growth and significantly accelerate socio-economic convergence and integration in the EU single market before membership, upon meeting the necessary reforms; looks forward to the comprehensive implementation of the Economic and Investment Plan and the Green and Digital Agenda for the Western Balkans, as important tools in tackling socio-economic disparities, improving infrastructure and regional connectivity, and helping the country improve the green and digital transition; welcomes progress in regional gas interconnections and in renewable energy;

16. Commends the recent activities of the Assembly of North Macedonia and the constructive engagement of parliamentary factions across political spectrum in the implementation of the agreement reached during the third round of the Jean Monnet Dialogue, i.e., adoption of new Assembly's Rules of Procedure; commends the parliamentary factions' commitment to reaching this goal in the spirit of democratic consensus; reiterates that this is not a 'box-ticking exercise' but a vital achievement aimed at strengthening the Assembly so that it can deliver to its citizens; welcomes the upcoming fourth round of the Jean Monnet Dialogue planned for December and its focus on the role of the Assembly in the enlargement process;

17. Commends North Macedonia's successful Chairmanship of the OSCE and of the South-East European Cooperation Process this year, and the efforts in promoting and strengthening their values and founding principles, in particular in the current complex geopolitical context in both Europe and the world;

18. Supports the Government's efforts to deal with the energy crisis despite the challenges; points, however, to the fact that its moderate progress in this area requires the transposition and implementation of the newly adopted package for electrical integration and acceleration of the transition to green energy and reducing dependence on gas and coal;

19. Notes the certain degree of preparation of the country in the area of the environment, encouraging taking further steps to implement the decisions made, especially in terms of reducing air pollution at the local and national level, pollution of water resources, operationalization of the system for regional waste management in the Eastern and North Eastern regions, implementation of the Paris Agreement, including through the adoption of the Climate Law, and strengthening of institutional capacity to supervise their implementation.