
The European Parliament,

– having regard to the European Council conclusions of 28 June 2018, the Council conclusions of 18 June 2019 and the European Council conclusions of 17-18 October 2019, which postponed the decisions on opening accession negotiations with the Republic of North Macedonia and the Republic of Albania,

– having regard to the European Council conclusions of 26 March 2020 on opening accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania, which endorsed the Council conclusions of 25 March 2020 on the enlargement and stabilisation and association process,

– having regard to the Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighbourliness, and Cooperation between the Republic of Bulgaria and the Republic of North Macedonia, signed on 1 August 2017 and ratified in January 2018,

– having regard to the Final Agreement for the Settlement of the Differences as described in UN Security Council resolutions 817 (1993) and 845 (1993), the termination of the Interim Accord of 1995, and the establishment of a Strategic Partnership between Greece and North Macedonia on 17 June 2018, also known as the Prespa Agreement,

– having regard to the Sofia declaration of the EU-Western Balkans summit of 17 May 2018 and the Sofia Priority Agenda, annexed thereto,

– having regard to the EU-Western Balkans summit in the framework of the Berlin Process of 10 November 2020,

– having regard to North Macedonia’s accession to NATO on 27 March 2020,

– having regard to the Commission communication of 5 February 2020 entitled ‘Enhancing the accession process – A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans’ (COM(2020)0057),

– having regard to the Commission communication of 6 October 2020 entitled ‘An Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans’ (COM(2020)0641), its Annex,
and the Commission staff working document entitled ‘Guidelines for the Implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans’,


– having regard to the Zagreb Declaration agreed during the EU-Western Balkans summit that took place via video conference on 6 May 2020,

– having regard to the Council conclusions of 5 June 2020 on enhancing cooperation with Western Balkans partners in the field of migration and security,

– having regard to the joint communication of the Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy of 8 April 2020 entitled ‘Communication on the Global EU response to COVID-19’ (JOIN(2020)0011), and 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),


– having regard to the Presidency conclusions of the Thessaloniki European Council meeting of 19-20 June 2003,

– having regard to the 2020 Sofia Summit of the Berlin Process, co-chaired by Bulgaria and North Macedonia,

– having regard to the European Council’s decision of 16 December 2005 to grant North Macedonia the status of candidate for EU membership,

– having regard to the ‘Pržino Agreement’ reached between the four main political parties in Skopje on 2 June and 15 July 2015, and the four-party agreement on its implementation of 20 July and 31 August 2016,

– having regard to its resolution of 25 November 2020 on strengthening media freedom: the protection of journalists in Europe, hate speech, disinformation and the role of platforms¹,

– having regard the joint statement by Members of the European Parliament on accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania of 8 December 2020,

– having regard to its resolution of 24 October 2019 on opening accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania²,

¹ Texts adopted, P9_TA(2020)0320.
– having regard to its previous resolutions on the country,
– having regard to Rule 54 of its Rules of Procedure,
– having regard to the report of the Committee on Foreign Affairs (A9-0040/2021),
A. whereas North Macedonia has made consistent progress and shown dedicated commitment on its path towards the EU, strengthening the climate of mutual trust, resulting in the decision of the European Council of 26 March 2020 to open accession negotiations;
B. whereas North Macedonia should be evaluated individually on its own merits against progress made on the criteria set by the European Council, and the speed and quality of reforms determine the timetable for accession to the EU; whereas the prospect of EU membership has been a fundamental incentive for reforms, and the enlargement process has played a decisive role in the stabilisation of the Western Balkans;
C. whereas the rule of law is a key benchmark for assessing the state of the democratic transformation and progress towards the EU accession;
D. whereas the European Council’s decision of 17-18 October 2019 to postpone the opening of accession negotiations with North Macedonia led to political instability in the country and early elections in 2020;
E. whereas the European Commission submitted a draft negotiating framework on 1 July 2020;
F. whereas the misuse of the accession process for the settlement of cultural-historical disputes by EU Member States would set a dangerous precedent for the future accession processes of the rest of the Western Balkan countries, especially given the historical context in the region;
G. whereas the country is maintaining a steady pace in adopting EU reforms, in particular in key areas such as the rule of law, fight against corruption and organised crime, intelligence services and public administration reform and functioning of democratic institutions and procedures;
H. whereas further consistent efforts are needed on strategic EU-related reforms, requiring the joint engagement of all leaders and stakeholders;
I. whereas the EU remains fully committed to supporting North Macedonia’s strategic choice for European integration and ultimately EU membership, based on the rule of law, multi-ethnic harmony and good neighbourly relations, in line with the 2003 ‘Thessaloniki agenda for the Western Balkans’;
J. whereas the EU’s engagement with the Western Balkans surpasses that of any other region, and demonstrates a mutual strategic commitment;
K. whereas the EU should continue promoting investment and developing trade relations with North Macedonia as the economic development of the country is of paramount importance;
L. whereas the EU is by far North Macedonia’s largest trading partner, accounting for 75% of the country's exports and 62% of its imports, and provides the most financial assistance, with the country benefiting from over EUR 1,25 billion in EU pre-accession funding since 2007;

M. whereas North Macedonia’s economy has been hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic, and measures to prevent the spread of the virus are negatively affecting the national budget;

N. whereas the EU has offered the most support to North Macedonia for mitigating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, mobilising EUR 66 million for urgent health needs and post-pandemic economic and social recovery; whereas the EU has made available up to EUR 160 million in macro-financial assistance to North Macedonia;

O. whereas the EU has mobilised EUR 3,3 billion to address the coronavirus pandemic in the Western Balkans, including EUR 38 million in immediate support to the health sector, EUR 467 million to build-up the resilience of health systems and to cushion the socio-economic impact, EUR 750 million in macro-financial assistance, EUR 385 million for support and reactivation of the private sector and EUR 1,7 billion in preferential loans from the European Investment Bank;

P. whereas North Macedonia remains one of the main transit routes for irregular migration;

Q. whereas regional cooperation between the countries of the Western Balkans is essential in order to maintain and strengthen their stability, and to improve the prosperity of the region; whereas good neighbourly relations are indispensable for North Macedonia’s progress towards EU accession;

R. whereas the Prespa Agreement and the Treaty on Good Neighbourly Relations are landmark agreements that represent a model for stability and reconciliation in the whole region of the Western Balkans, and have improved the spirit of good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation;

S. whereas the European Council has so far failed to approve the negotiating framework for North Macedonia, jeopardising the Union’s credibility and reducing the EU’s transformative power in the Western Balkans;

T. whereas in March 2020, following the entry into force of the historic Prespa agreement and the Friendship Treaty between North Macedonia and Bulgaria, the country became the 30th NATO member state, and the EU decided to open accession negotiations;

U. whereas joining NATO in 2020 marks a clear step towards greater stability, interoperability and defence integration into the Euro-Atlantic community, improving countries’ potential for eventual EU accession;

V. whereas the Conference on the Future of Europe can contribute to the EU accession aspirations of the Western Balkans countries;

W. whereas the full EU membership for North Macedonia is in the Union’s own political, security and economic interest;
1. Welcomes North Macedonia’s clear strategic orientation and commitment to EU integration, as manifested by continued implementation of accession-related reforms and the work on resolving bilateral issues with neighbouring countries;

2. Reiterates its full support to the European Council’s Thessaloniki pledge of 2003 that the future of the Western Balkan countries lies in the EU;

3. Calls on EU Member States to stand by their commitments and show clear political will, enabling the Council to approve the negotiating framework and hold the first intergovernmental conference with North Macedonia as soon as possible to prevent further delays, confirming the credibility, objectivity and reliability of the accession process;

4. Reminds Member States that enlargement policy must be driven by objective criteria, and not be impeded by unilateral interests; reiterates that the EU’s enlargement policy has been the Union’s most effective foreign policy instrument, and that its further dismantlement might lead to an unstable situation in the EU’s immediate neighbourhood;

5. Expresses its solidarity with the people of North Macedonia, and considers it important to ensure continuity of committed and active support to Macedonian progress towards the European Union;

6. Welcomes the fact that North Macedonia will exercise the Chairpersonship of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in 2023;

7. Believes that the Conference on the Future of Europe should appropriately include and actively engage representatives of North Macedonia and other Western Balkan countries, both at the governmental and at the civil society level, including the youth;

8. Urges the authorities and political parties of North Macedonia to sustain consensual efforts to strengthen democracy and the transformation process, to continue the fight against corruption, and to reinforce the rule of law, good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation, while improving the climate for media freedom and civil society;

9. Recalls that progress in accession negotiations under the revised enlargement methodology continues to depend on permanent, in-depth and irreversible reforms across fundamental areas;

**Rule of Law**

10. Stresses the paramount importance of upholding the rule of law through judicial reforms and the consistent prosecution of high-level corruption and criminal networks;

11. Commends the progress achieved in addressing the ‘Urgent Reform Priorities’ and in following up on the recommendations of the Venice Commission and the Senior Experts’ Group on systemic Rule of Law issues;

12. Acknowledges the adoption of legislation on the prevention of corruption and conflicts of interest, lobbying, access to information, whistleblower protection, the Public Prosecutor’s Office, and calls for their effective and steady implementation;
13. Takes note of the adoption by the government of two reform plans, namely the Europe at home agenda and the action plan on the fight against corruption, which aim to streamline the reform agenda in selected priority fields under the fundamentals cluster of the revised accession methodology;

14. Recalls that sufficient financial and human resources are needed to ensure effective and consistent dissuasion, prevention, detection, pro-active investigation of and sanctions mechanisms against public office holders through measures covering conflicts of interest, lobbying, codes of ethics and whistleblower protection;

15. Welcomes the creation of the post of Deputy Prime Minister for Anti-Corruption and Crime, Sustainable Development and Human Resources as a sign of a clear political commitment to addressing these issues as a matter of priority;

16. Urges the effective implementation of measures to secure judicial and prosecutorial professionalism, independence, integrity and accountability, including through an efficient implementation of codes of ethics and of the landmark law on the Public Prosecutor’s Office, ensuring sustainable solutions for the cases handle by the Special Prosecutor’s Office, and accountability for crimes stemming from the large-scale illegal wiretapping case; calls for additional efforts in all judicial institutions to contribute to restoring public trust in the judiciary;

17. Welcomes steps strengthening impartiality, transparency and accountability of the judiciary through the pro-active action steps of the Judicial Council, and calls for the effective implementation of the revised law on the Council of Public Prosecutors; calls for a full use of mechanisms to consolidate the professionalism and integrity of judiciary through verifications, financial investigations and asset confiscations; is concerned about restricted access to justice during the COVID-19 pandemic, encourages the authorities to speed up the digitalisation of the judiciary and related administration;

18. Encourages the conclusion of institutional reforms and the implementation of the ongoing reforms in the security and intelligence sectors, ensuring the financial, operational and functional independence of the new National Security Agency and the Operational Technical Agency, and meaningful parliamentary oversight over secret services;

19. Calls for continued proactive efforts to tackle organised crime and corruption in a systematic manner and through systematic prevention measures, financial investigations, prosecution of financial crimes, including money laundering, and financing terrorism, and adoption of appropriate sanctions; calls for continued efforts to launch operations aimed at dismantling criminal networks involved in various forms of trafficking such as in firearms, human beings, drugs; urges the country to further align with the acquis, and to conduct systematic financial investigations, stepping up the identification, tracing, freezing, confiscation and management of illicit assets;

20. Encourages measures to strengthen the newly-established Asset Recovery Office and improve the fight against money laundering and economic crimes; calls for joint efforts to be stepped up to tackle organised, economic and cyber-crime, including through improved co-ordination and partnership with Europol;
21. Acknowledges the progress achieved in addressing widespread corruption, including through an improved track record in investigating, prosecuting and trying cases of high level corruption, abuses of official position and illicit enrichment; notes the importance of the reinforced leading role of the Commission for Prevention of Corruption and of cooperation with it in this regard;

22. Urges the Public Prosecutor’s Office to process serious cases, and to pro-actively follow up on major cases referred by anti-corruption and audit agencies as well by whistleblowers;

23. Urges authorities of North Macedonia to continue and intensify their efforts to combat radicalisation and terrorism, and to address the issue of foreign terrorist fighters through the continuous cross-border exchange of information and increased cooperation between security agencies and civil society organisations (CSOs), religious leaders, local communities and educational, health care and social institutions, and through proper reintegration efforts;

**Functioning of democratic institutions**

24. Recalls that an opposition with a constructive role is essential for the functioning of the *Sobranie*, the Assembly of North Macedonia, and for the adoption of key legislation, such as the EU- and NATO-related reform process;

25. Commends engagement of the governing and opposition parties in the *Sobranie* on key decisions in the common national interest; notes that stronger policy dialogue between all political parties is a prerequisite of good governance and legislative functionality; calls on all parties in Parliament to remain constructive, to refrain from using nationalist and inflammatory rhetoric and to engage in political dialogue in good faith, especially on key health, economic, social and political efforts aimed at tackling the COVID-19 crisis;

26. Recalls the importance of Jean Monnet Dialogue (JMD) process in building confidence, strengthening democratic culture and enhancing parliamentary capacity by facilitating a political dialogue within the *Sobranie*; welcomes the constructive cross-party engagement in the JMD, and the commitment to implementing its conclusions and convening its fourth round;

27. Urges the *Sobranie* to improve the legislative process by minimising the use of fast track procedures, increasing transparency, ensuring timely and inclusive access to information on law-making, and conducting proper consultations and impact assessments; recalls the need to upgrade the parliamentary rules of procedure by consensus in order to empower the *Sobranie* and strengthen legislative oversight and budgetary scrutiny mechanisms; reiterates the importance of cooperation with and sustainable funding for civil society in order to ensure sound scrutiny of public institutions;

28. Takes note of the smooth conduct of the 15 July 2020 parliamentary elections, recalls that their legal stability was nonetheless undermined by frequent revisions of the legal and regulatory framework; underlines the need to thoroughly implement the outstanding recommendations contained in the final OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) report, including a timely, inclusive and comprehensive review
of the electoral code in advance of future elections, with further efforts needed to be carried out in order to ensure that voter lists are up to date and accurate;

29. Calls for additional measures to improve the transparency of political party financing and ensure democratic, competitive and representative intra-party functioning mechanisms, including through proper independent oversight; recalls the need to effectively implement the recommendations of the State Audit Office;

30. Urges the new government to prioritise public administration reform by embedding and systematically applying merit-based standards in public appointments and promotions, advancing the culture of transparency, professional independence, accountability, integrity and equitable gender and ethnic representation across the civil service and state-owned enterprises, while ensuring adequate whistleblower protection; calls for a thorough follow up on the recommendations of State Commission for Prevention of Corruption;

31. Urges authorities to ensure full transparency by further improving access to information, including on COVID-19, by ensuring regular cross-agency updates through the open governmental data portal and a full functionality of the Agency for Protection of Free Access to Public Information;

32. Encourages the authorities to retrieve and open up relevant Yugoslav secret service archives; takes the view that transparent handling of the totalitarian past, including the opening up of the secret services archives, is a step towards further democratisation, accountability and institutional strength in both the country itself and the Western Balkan region as a whole;

33. Insists on the need for further improvements in the transparency and visibility of EU funding, ensuring efficient control, audit and follow up;

**Fundamental rights**

34. Expresses its support for the efforts to ensure inclusive policies to protect the fundamental freedoms and rights of all citizens, with special attention to women, youth, persons with disabilities, ethnic communities, non-majority ethnic groups, LGBTQI+ persons, and the low-skilled unemployed; calls on the authorities to mitigate a disproportionately detrimental impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on non-majority communities, and to step up the fight against inequality;

35. Welcomes the fact that freedom of religion, thought and conscience continue to be guaranteed, and that discrimination on the grounds of religion is generally prohibited;

36. Calls on the national coordination body for implementing the national action plan on the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities to systematically engage with disability support organisations; underlines the need for further deinstitutionalisation and for the repeal of provisions allowing involuntary deprivation of liberty; stresses the need for adequate resources and infrastructure for necessary social protection and for ensuring decent living conditions for people with disabilities; welcomes the national action plan on the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and that the national coordination body for implementing the Convention meets regularly;
37. Welcomes the increased attention to and funding for Roma inclusion policies, and urges the authorities to improve the pace and capacity of implementation, coordination, monitoring and use of funds, including in housing and active labour market policies, in line with the 2019 Poznan Declaration on Roma Integration within the EU Enlargement Process; encourages the authorities to ensure unimpeded implementation of the law on persons without regulated civil status, and to resolve the issue of lack of personal documents for Roma;

38. Notes with concern the widespread hate speech, including on social media, particularly towards Roma, LGBTI+ persons and other vulnerable groups, countries and peoples; calls for the effective implementation of the relevant regulatory framework, ensuring a clear distinction between free public debate and hate speech, defamation or incitement to violence, stepping up prosecution capacities for protection from hate crimes, hate speech and gender-based violence; is concerned about cases of police brutality against vulnerable communities;

39. Welcomes positive steps towards institutional support for the advancement of the human rights of LGBTI+ persons, but notes that discrimination of the LGBTI+ community remains a prevalent problem, and that implementation of the regulatory framework by state institutions should be prioritised; calls for increased action to fight hate speech and hate crimes against LGBTI+ persons, encourage reporting of these crimes and stop impunity;

40. Welcomes the renewed adoption of anti-discrimination legislation by all political parties, and welcomes the transparent process of appointment of the Commission for Protection from Discrimination, ensuring protection and inclusion of all marginalised groups; encourages the Sobranie to adopt legislation which will enable a simplified, transparent and accessible procedure for legal gender recognition based on self-determination, and prevent discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity; notes the organisation of the first ever Skopje Pride in June 2019;

41. Calls for continued constructive endeavours to strengthen generally calm inter-ethnic relations, to recognise, protect and provide adequate support to all communities, and their cultural heritage; calls for the the rights of non-majority communities to be safeguarded, and for their adequate integration and representation in public life and media by ensuring sufficient human and financial resources for the institutions in charge of minority-related policies, making full use of the strengthened mandate of the Agency for Communities Rights Realisation to monitor and guide public institutions in upholding their legal obligations towards minorities;

42. Calls on North Macedonia to continue implementing the Ohrid Framework Agreement; supports the re-examination of the Law on Use of Languages in line with the Venice Commission’s recommendations made in consultation with all stakeholders concerned; welcomes the creation of an agency and inspectorate overseeing the overall implementation of the Law on the Use of Languages, and recalls the need to provide equal and non-discriminatory education in minority languages;

43. Invites the Ministry of Political System and Inter-Community Relations to advance social cohesion through the implementation of the ‘one society for all’ strategy, and urges the authorities to address the remaining challenges of discrimination, exclusion and underrepresentation; stresses the need to ensure that all minorities that live in North
Macedonia are provided adequate support and live free from intimidation or any kind of discrimination;

44. Welcomes the steady improvement in public consultations, and calls for further progress in ensuring meaningful and timely inclusion of civil society in the decision-making processes across different policy areas, as well as in safeguarding the financial sustainability of the non-governmental sector; notes that budget restructuring should undergo proper consultation processes, and should not undermine the sustainability of the civil society sector;

45. Calls upon North Macedonia to guarantee the functional independence of fundamental rights’ bodies, the appropriate allocation of funds to them, and complete transparent, inclusive and merit-based appointments of their members, thereby helping to improve the human rights situation in the country; welcomes the appointment of the new Ombudsperson, and calls for increased cooperation with civil society; commends the strengthening of the Ombudsperson’s office, and urges the authorities to step up implementation of its recommendations; welcomes the creation of the external police oversight mechanism in the Ombudsperson’s Office, and calls for continued efforts to address police impunity through systematic implementation of safeguards against ill-treatment by police, the use of genuinely independent investigators, and improved mechanisms for monitoring the police;

46. Welcomes the recent update to the Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence; urges the authorities to effectively implement these laws and prevent gender-based violence and violence against children, providing protection by establishing an effective mechanism for evidence gathering and the prosecution of perpetrators; stresses the importance of prevention measures, and the protection and support of victims of gender-based violence and domestic abuse, which have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic;

47. Urges North Macedonia to increase its efforts on gender equality and women’s rights, including by prioritising gender mainstreaming and increased cooperation with civil society, in particular women’s organisations;

48. Calls on lawmakers and all political parties of North Macedonia to take steps to improve the representation of women in all elected and appointed decision-making positions, following the positive trends in parliamentary representation facilitated by mandatory gender quotas; encourages the authorities to further address the lack of implementation of women workers’ rights, gender imbalances and the gender pay gap in the labour force, to take action on gender stereotyping, discrimination in legal provisions related to maternity leave and harassment in the workplace, and to ensure adequate childcare capacities;

49. Welcomes the country’s efforts in improving cooperation on managing irregular migration, border protection and addressing the basic needs of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants; calls for the further strengthening of international protection for those in need and for the prevention of violations of international law, such as alleged pushbacks; calls on the authorities to put in place an active monitoring mechanism, and to undertake the necessary steps to prevent these violations of international law; underlines that the contribution of North Macedonia to the protection of the European Union’s external border is of crucial importance, and calls on the EU to intensify its
support to border protection in the region; notes the progress made in tackling human trafficking and smuggling, and recalls the need to establish a viable mechanism for managing irregular migratory flows and to combat people smuggling networks, as the country remains on one of the main migratory transit routes; notes the ongoing cooperation, and supports the finalisation of the status agreement with the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) that would facilitate better protection of borders and the fight against cross border crime in full respect of fundamental rights; encourages the country to move forward with the adoption of a strategy on the integration of migrants, including reintegration of returnees;

Media

50. Acknowledges that the generally favourable environment for freedom of expression and media independence must be further enhanced through an improved legal framework, self-regulation, and transparency of ownership and the advertising market, while increasing the financial sustainability and impartiality of public and private media outlets, ensuring rules-based budgetary financing of media, transparency and reduction of political advertising, thus safeguarding fair competition and independent editorial policies;

51. Urges the authorities to swiftly implement systemic media reforms that would reinvigorate competition, increase the independence and capacity of the public service broadcaster and the media regulator, and support investigative journalism;

52. Notes the steps taken to enhance media self-regulation through the Register of Professional Online Media and by improving professional standards through the Charter on journalists’ working conditions and the draft fair working contract for digital media;

53. Urges the adoption of measures to safeguard the financial and operational independence of the public service broadcaster and the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services; commends the Agency’s efforts in monitoring transparency of media ownership and tackling instances of hate speech, discrimination and threats against reporters;

54. Encourages all actors in the political and media landscape to remain inclusive, thus ensuring fair representation of all relevant political viewpoints with the aim of helping citizens make an informed democratic choice;

55. Encourages further improvement of the legal framework, ensuring effective measures increasing the safety of journalists and tackling impunity for crimes against reporters; calls for effective investigations into physical threats and verbal attacks against media professionals;

56. Is concerned about disinformation and foreign interference campaigns aimed at exacerbating ethnic tensions, harming the country’s international relations and reputation, distorting public opinion and electoral process, and posing severe risks to media freedom, democratic societies and institutions, fundamental rights and freedoms, and the rule of law;

57. Notes the significance of ensuring media freedom and promoting quality journalism and media literacy for tackling widespread disinformation, fake news, nationalist rhetoric
and hate speech; underlines the need to investigate the origins of disinformation campaigns and foreign interference in the media; calls on the European External Action Service (EEAS) and Commission to improve coordination and strategically address disinformation and hybrid threats that seek to undermine the European perspective across the region; calls for the creation of a Balkan-focused Centre of Excellence to counter disinformation;

**Socio-economic reforms**

58. Notes the detrimental economic and social impact of COVID-19, and expresses support for a range of measures that have been taken in order to mitigate it; urges the authorities to make full use of continuing COVID-related EU support and related mechanisms, using the opportunities offered by the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, aimed at bringing the region closer to the EU single market; welcomes the EUR 4 million of immediate support for the health sector, and EU 62 million in support of the social and economic recovery that the EU provided North Macedonia at the onset of the pandemic, complemented by a macro-financial assistance package of EUR 160 million in loans;

59. Welcomes the package of grants worth EUR 70 million from the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance II (IPA II) to fund the access of Western Balkans partners to COVID-19 vaccines; calls on the Commission and the Member States to allocate a sufficient amount of COVID-19 vaccines to the citizens of all Western Balkan countries; encourages regional cooperation in the field of health, in particular on cross-border diseases in order to mitigate the burden in the region;

60. Encourages the Government to prioritise measures aimed at mitigating economic contraction and addressing structural needs, such as shortcomings in education and training, as well as the outflow of skilled workers and infrastructure investment gaps, boosting diversification, competition and digitalisation and tackling the informal economy; recalls the importance of strengthening the competitiveness of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs);

61. Notes the Government’s efforts in establishing the Law on Minimum Wages and broadening social assistance coverage; encourages the authorities to modernise the tax code, to improve the capacity, staffing, working conditions in the public healthcare and health insurance systems, as well as access to them; urges the adoption of targeted measures addressing child poverty and energy poverty, which have been aggravated by the pandemic;

62. Calls for the stepping up of socio-economic measures to address demographic decline and brain drain through active labour market policies that reduce long-term unemployment;

63. Stresses the need to advance efforts to ensure non-discriminatory access to the labour market for EU citizens, freedom to provide services, a mutual recognition of professional qualifications and elimination of non-tariff barriers to trade;

64. Recalls the importance of ensuring timely, comprehensive, high-quality cross-sectoral statistical data, and urges the country to conduct a long-overdue demographic census;
65. Recalls that substantial efforts are still needed to meet targets for energy efficiency, renewable energy, security of supply and emission reductions;

66. Recommends focusing public investments on sustainable growth and job-creation, and urges the country to increase the security and sustainability of its energy supply by boosting efficiency and diversification through the sustainable use of renewables;

67. Welcomes the adoption of the Energy Efficiency Law, and encourages North Macedonia to implement it; welcomes the progress achieved in further ensuring compliance with the obligations of the Third Energy Package, and creating an integrated regional energy market through future electricity and gas interconnectors with neighbouring countries; calls for steps to ensure competition in the rail market, advance construction of relevant rail corridors and ensure functionality of the relevant border crossings;

68. Calls on the Commission to implement the ‘more for more’ principle rigorously, in particular in relation to North Macedonia for IPA III or the Western Balkans Economic and Investment Plan, given the significant progress by the country over the reporting period and as a sign of solidarity from our Union;

69. Welcomes the adoption of the Economic and Investment Plan (EIP) and the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans to support the green and digital transition of the region, and to foster broader regional and cross-border cooperation and energy security; recalls their potential to enhance public infrastructure and regional connectivity, notably through Rail and Highway Corridor VIII to Bulgaria, gas interconnectors with Kosovo, Serbia and Greece, along with the Alexandroupolis liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminal project; reiterates the importance of developing air connections within the Western Balkans countries and with the EU Member States; stresses that EIP investments must contribute to the objectives of the Paris Agreement and the EU’s decarbonisation targets, and include ex ante environmental impact assessments; highlights the strategic value of enhancing connectivity and economic integration between North Macedonia and its neighbours;

70. Commends North Macedonia on being the first of the Western Balkan countries to develop a draft integrated national energy and climate plan, which provides a solid basis for an ambitious final plan, to be developed in line with Energy Community obligations;

71. Calls for political will to implement the Paris Agreement and ambitious environmental protection and sustainable development plans, including through restrictions on hydropower development in protected areas, preserving biodiversity and ensuring environmental liability;

72. Reiterates its calls to address alarming levels of air pollution, in particular in urban areas, by means of a transition to sustainable energy, heating and transport, and through investment in renewables, by improving inter-sectoral coordination, increasing local and national funding, ensuring compliance with the emission ceilings for large combustion plants, and developing a national strategy for phasing out coal;
73. Welcomes the progress made in improving water quality, and recalls the need to increase wastewater treatment capacities, reduce the high rates of marine plastic leakage, prioritise setting up of an integrated regional waste management system, and promote recycling;

74. Calls on the authorities to take necessary action to preserve Ohrid’s natural and cultural heritage by ensuring full implementation of the UNESCO recommendation on the Ohrid region;

**Regional cooperation and foreign policy**

75. Recalls the cooperative and constructive approach adopted by North Macedonia throughout the negotiations of the Prespa agreement with Greece and the Treaty on Good Neighbourly Relations with Bulgaria, showing the country’s strategic commitment to European integration; notes that EU Member states should facilitate holding the intergovernmental conference (IGC) with North Macedonia as soon as possible in order to acknowledge the country’s efforts in the EU accession process, and also to prevent further delays from undermining the reconciliation gains in the region;

76. Regrets the continuous lack of progress in implementing the previous European Parliament recommendations regarding discrimination against citizens openly expressing their Bulgarian identity and/or ethnic background;

77. Strongly encourages the authorities and civil society to take appropriate measures for historical reconciliation in order to overcome the divide between and within different ethnic and national groups, including citizens of Bulgarian identity;

78. Reiterates its full support for enhanced regional cooperation, and appeals to all parties to ensure the full and consistent implementation in good faith of the Prespa agreement with Greece and the Treaty on Good Neighbourly Relations with Bulgaria, as both are an important part both of bilateral relations; urges the partners to continue engaging and to resolve bilaterally all outstanding bilateral issues that do not have a bearing on the accession process, to act in a constructive manner, and to refrain from actions that might undermine European integration and the EU’s wider interests;

79. Notes that regional cooperation must be based on a common future in the EU, on an open-minded dialogue overcoming regional disputes and difficult past, and respect for fundamental European values; calls for the creation of new opportunities for high level political and policy dialogue with the Western Balkans countries through regular EU-Western Balkans summits and intensified ministerial contacts, in order to strengthen the political ownership of the enlargement process, to ensure better steering and high-level engagement, which is also aimed for by the revised enlargement methodology;

80. Regrets that the Council was not able to adopt the Negotiating Framework; looks forward to the swift adoption of the negotiating framework, with the aim of avoiding further delay and holding the first Intergovernmental Conference kick-starting accession talks as soon as possible; supports all the efforts to facilitate dialogue, and thus pave the way for a viable agreement; points out that the idea of the European Union is to overcome regional disputes and a difficult past, in order to work on a better, peaceful future and to prosper together;
81. Regrets that Bulgaria and North Macedonia have yet to find an understanding on pending bilateral issues; recalls the importance of continued dialogue in order to achieve sustainable results in the implementation in good faith of bilateral agreements, making full use of the framework and objectives of the Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation between the two countries; welcomes the appointment of North Macedonia's Special Representative for Bulgaria, and stresses the importance of continued dialogue in order to achieve a sustainable agreement on current bilateral issues; encourages Bulgaria and North Macedonia to reach a compromise over an action plan of concrete measures, the implementation of which will be regularly assessed in accordance with the Friendship Treaty;

82. Commends North Macedonia and Bulgaria on their successful Joint Chairmanship of the Berlin Process for the Western Balkans and its important achievements;

83. Calls for setting up and adequate public funding of an institutionalised youth dialogue between North Macedonia and Greece, and North Macedonia and Bulgaria based on the model of the Franco-German Youth Office (FGYO);

84. Calls once again on all regional political leaders to take urgent steps to set up the Regional Commission (RECOM) tasked with establishing the facts about all victims of war crimes and other serious human rights violations committed on the territory of the former Yugoslavia, building on the significant work carried out by the Coalition for RECOM;

85. Welcomes North Macedonia's accession to NATO on 27 March 2020 and its continuing commitment to the Euro-Atlantic security framework; welcomes the country’s contribution to NATO-led missions, as well as to the Kosovo Force (KFOR) through the Host Nation Coordination Centre, and its formal cooperation with the European Defence Agency; calls on North Macedonia to further continue its alignment with military and operational standards in order to enhance interoperability and coherence with the EU and NATO member states; welcomes North Macedonia’s commitment to the ‘Clean Network’ initiative;

86. Underlines the need for the EU and the United States to strengthen their partnership and coordination in the Western Balkans in order to advance key reforms, and improve governance and reconciliation;

87. Acknowledges the improving level of alignment of North Macedonia with the common foreign and security policy, and invites the country to continue increasing it, in particular regarding the restrictive measures against Russia; commends North Macedonia on its continued contributions to ongoing EU crisis management and common security and defence policy (CSDP) missions and operations, and stresses the need to maintain its commitment in the future; expresses concern over its increasing economic and energy dependence from third countries;

88. Welcomes North Macedonia’s continued commitment to regional initiatives, and calls for the steady implementation of obligations within various regional frameworks that advance the Common Regional Market;
89. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the President of the European Council, the Council, the Commission, the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, the governments and parliaments of the Member States, and to the President, Government and Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia.