

Report on the 2019-2020 Commission Reports on North Macedonia

2019/2174(INI) - 10/03/2021 - Committee report tabled for plenary, single reading

The Committee on Foreign Affairs adopted an own-initiative report by Ilhan KYUCHYUK (Renew Europe, BG) on the 2019-2020 Commission reports on Northern Macedonia.

Recalling the commitment made in Thessaloniki by the European Council in 2003 that the future of the Western Balkan countries lies in the EU, Members welcomed the clear strategic orientation of North Macedonia and its commitment to EU integration.

EU Member States are called upon to honour their commitments and show clear political will to enable the Council to approve the negotiating framework and hold the first intergovernmental conference with North Macedonia as soon as possible.

Members recalled that progress in the accession negotiations under the revised enlargement methodology continues to depend on the implementation of continuous, thorough and irreversible reforms in key areas.

Rule of law

The report stressed the crucial importance of enforcing the rule of law through judicial reforms and the systematic prosecution of high-level criminal and corruption networks.

Members encouraged the implementation of measures to ensure the professionalism, independence, integrity and accountability of judges and prosecutors and called for the full use of mechanisms to strengthen the professionalism and integrity of the judiciary through audits, financial investigations and asset confiscations.

The report called for continued proactive efforts to combat organised crime and corruption in a systematic manner and through systematic preventive measures, financial investigations, the prosecution of financial crimes, including money laundering, and terrorist financing, and the imposition of appropriate sanctions. It urged 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 whistle-blowers.

Functioning of democratic institutions

Members considered it essential that the opposition plays a constructive role in ensuring the proper functioning of *Sobranie*, the Assembly of North Macedonia, and the adoption of key legislation in the context of the EU and NATO reform process. They called on *Sobranie* to improve the legislative process by minimising the use of fast-track procedures and increasing transparency.

The report called for further measures to improve transparency in the financing of political parties and called on the new government to prioritise reform of the public administration by integrating and systematically applying merit-based standards in public appointments and promotions, strengthening the culture of transparency, professional independence, accountability, integrity and gender and ethnic balance throughout the civil service and public enterprises.

Fundamental rights, media

Members expressed their support for efforts to ensure inclusive policies to protect the fundamental rights and freedoms of all citizens, with particular attention to women, young people, people with disabilities, ethnic communities, ethnic minority groups, LGBTQI+ people and the low-skilled unemployed. They called for the effective implementation of the relevant regulatory framework to strengthen prosecution capacity for protection against hate crimes, hate speech and gender-based violence.

The report called for continued constructive efforts to strengthen inter-ethnic relations and to recognise and protect all communities and their cultural heritage. It called for the rights of non-majority communities to be safeguarded and for their proper integration and representation in public life and the media to be ensured.

Members also considered that the overall enabling environment for freedom of expression and media independence needs to be further improved through a more effective legal framework, self-regulation and transparency in ownership and advertising markets.

Socio-economic reforms

Members welcomed 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. It called on the Commission and the Member States to allocate a sufficient number of COVID-19 vaccines to citizens in all Western Balkan countries.

The report encouraged the government to prioritise measures to mitigate the economic downturn and address 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.

Members considered that that substantial efforts will still be needed to meet the target for energy efficiency, renewable energy, security of supply and emission reductions. They called for political will to implement the Paris Agreement. They reiterated the call to address alarming levels of air pollution by ensuring compliance with emission ceiling for large combustion plants and by developing a national strategy for phasing out coal.

Regional cooperation and foreign policy

The report called for the creation of new opportunities for high-level political and policy dialogue with the Western Balkan countries, through regular EU-Western Balkans summits and intensified ministerial contacts, in order to strengthen political ownership of the enlargement process.

Regretting that Bulgaria and Northern Macedonia have yet to reach agreement on outstanding bilateral issues, Members called for continued dialogue to achieve lasting results in the implementation of bilateral agreements in good faith.