Report on the 2021 Commission Report on North Macedonia

2021/2248(INI) - 19/05/2022 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted by 368 votes to 178, with 50 abstentions, a resolution on the 2021 Commission report on North Macedonia.

Parliament clearly reaffirmed its support for **North Macedonia's commitment** to democracy and the rule of law, underpinned by its pro-European strategic orientation, its strong commitment to European values, EU-related reforms and the EU integration process, and its good neighbourly relations and inclusive regional cooperation.

Recalling that the integration of the whole Western Balkans is in the interest of the Union, Members urged the Council to demonstrate full political commitment to enlargement and to accelerate the pace by formally starting accession negotiations with Albania and Northern Macedonia, especially in the geo-strategic context of relations with Russia and its aggression against Ukraine, given that both countries have fulfilled the necessary conditions and achieved sustainable results, including across the areas of the fundamentals.

Bulgaria and North Macedonia are urged to find a swift agreement that resolves bilateral issues in order to avoid further delays and obstacles to accession progress.

Parliament commended North Macedonia for its continued efforts to strengthen the rule of law, the independence of the judiciary and minority rights, to fight corruption and organised crime, to reform its public administration and to consolidate media freedom. It encouraged the country to continue and intensify these efforts.

Functioning of democratic institutions

Parliament welcomed the fact that North Macedonia continues to have the best record of democratic transition in the Western Balkans, with a marked improvement in transparency, political dialogue and electoral pluralism. It reaffirmed the need to:

- maintain a constructive dialogue between the government and the opposition and a broad and transparent consensus on Union-related reforms;

- finalise the electoral reforms in a timely, transparent and inclusive manner.

Political parties in North Macedonia should improve the transparency of party financing and strengthen the pluralism and integrity of internal party democracy.

Media and civil society

The resolution stressed the need to:

- further align, in an inclusive and transparent manner, the legal framework applicable to online and offline media, in line with the EU acquis and standards;

- review the rules governing public funding and advertising of political parties in the media in order to ensure a pluralistic and fair distribution of public funding and to ensure fair competition and editorial independence;

- implement measures that enhance the safety of media professionals and prevent intimidation;

- strengthen independent investigative journalism, objective fact-checking and media literacy to combat hate speech, disinformation and foreign interference campaigns.

Fundamental rights

Parliament called on North Macedonia to take steps to ensure an adequate representation of women in all decision-making positions, and to further address the lack of implementation of women workers' rights and tackle gender stereotyping, gender imbalance and the gender pay gap in the labour force.

The resolution stressed the need to:

- ensure the constitutional protection of the rights of all ethnic communities in equal measure;

- develop a new strategy to address the difficulties faced by the Roma community;

- make further progress in ensuring that the rights of people with disabilities are upheld;

- prevent and systematically prosecute all cases of hate speech, hate crime and intimidation, investigate related attacks and ensure the safety of those targeted, such as journalists, persons belonging to minorities and other vulnerable groups;

- improve access to asylum and reception conditions, establish an appropriate migration management and registration system and adopt a systematic approach to combating trafficking in human beings and irregular migration.

Rule of law

While recognising the progress made, Parliament stressed the need to push forward the reform of the rule of law. It recalled that updates to the penal code should address, *inter alia*, provisions on violence against women, economic crime, money laundering, corruption, confiscation of assets and dissemination of disinformation, and should step up the fight against organised crime, including illegal timber cutting.

Members welcomed the ongoing bilateral and international investigations and cooperation aimed at dismantling transnational crime networks, including with Eurojust, Europol and Frontex, which have stepped up interventions against trafficking in human beings, drugs and illegal arms and the risks of radicalisation. They acknowledged the political, operational and logistical support of North Macedonia to Frontex and the border and coast guard services of the Member States.

Socio-economic reforms, environment, energy and transport

The resolution recommended that North Macedonia:

- continue to take measures to improve the business climate and infrastructure under the Growth Acceleration Financing Plan, combat tax evasion, modernise education, broaden social security coverage, advance digital transformation and reform the energy and transport markets, while taking short-term measures to mitigate the impact of the pandemic and soaring energy and food prices;

- reduce poverty and social exclusion by improving universal access to social, education and health services, in particular for disadvantaged populations and vulnerable groups;

- significantly raise its ambitions and strengthen its political will to implement last year's recommendations regarding the green transition. The EU should step up its support for sustainable transition to move away from coal and phase out fossil fuels in the context of the global energy crisis;

- improve air quality, especially in urban areas, and strengthen measures on biodiversity, water, air and climate protection, as well as recycling and regional waste management;

- significantly improve the quality of their strategic environmental assessments (SEA);

The Commission is invited to assist North Macedonia as far as possible in drafting and implementing an action plan to reduce the country's dependence on energy sources imported from Russia.