

17 May 2022,

Skopje

OPEN LETTER

to the Members of the European Parliament

regarding the Draft Resolution on the 2021 Commission Report on North Macedonia

Honourable Members of the European Parliament,

The European Parliament will soon vote on its Resolution on the 2021 Commission Report on North Macedonia. We commend the fact that the Motion for a resolution once again recommends the official launching of accession negotiations with North Macedonia (Paragraph 5; Paragraph 69), as it did in its previous resolutions.

However, the Motion entails content, which entirely undermines this position.

- Paragraph 75 introduces bilateral issues as conditions in the accession process. Specifically, the text in this Paragraph, which *inter alia* calls “...to start accession negotiations, while resolving the pending bilateral issues contained in the ‘4+1 measures’ to be sufficiently implemented and addressed during the EU integration process” is an actual approval of the Bulgarian veto on the start of the negotiations. Moreover, the “4+1 measures” are not an official document, but an informal list of Bulgarian evolving requests.
- Furthermore, the Amendment introducing Paragraph 75b, which calls “for historical reconciliation based on the defined common history, as stipulated by the Treaty of friendship, good-neighbourliness and cooperation would endorse the Bulgarian pressure to impose its own interpretation of history using its position as an EU Member State. In addition, the text in Paragraph 79 implies pressure on the Joint Multidisciplinary Expert Commission on Historical and Educational Issues, which should independently and professionally carry out its task. This is in a situation when Bulgaria refuses any form of international expertise to be involved in the discussion on issues that also relate to European history, such as the Holocaust.
- The Amendment 1 (for introducing Paragraph 75a) which “*Regrets the continued lack of progress in implementing its previous recommendations regarding discrimination against citizens openly expressing their Bulgarian identity and/or ethnic background*” is not supported by evidence. In reality, citizens in North Macedonia freely enjoy the right to freedom of expression and association in North Macedonia, unlike the situation in Bulgaria, which is not implementing the relevant judgments of the Court for Human Rights, as stated in European Parliament resolution of 8 October 2020 on the rule of law and fundamental rights in Bulgaria (2020/2793(RSP)).
- We also turn your attention to Paragraph 80, which implies “...*lack of implementation of the 2017 Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation*”, which has so far not been supported by objective evidence. On the contrary, according to EC country report 2021 “*there was a particular focus on overcoming pending bilateral issues with Bulgaria, bringing further impetus to the implementation of the Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation and on efforts to unblock the official launch of accession negotiations.*”
- The Motion for Resolution equally assesses and praises the Prespa Agreement and the Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation as “*landmark agreements that*

represent a model for stability and reconciliation throughout the Western Balkans and have improved the spirit of good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation” (Recital E). These agreements are not identical– neither on the basis of merit, nor on legal nature, nor on impact. In reality, the current blockage of the accession negotiations based on the Bulgarian interpretation of the implementation of the Treaty of Friendship not only runs contrary to the Prespa agreement, but entirely delegitimises its achievements.

The conditions that Bulgaria poses to North Macedonia in the accession process and that you would endorse by accepting the texts above implies negation of the Macedonian identity.

The negation of the Macedonian language has led to the blockage of the signature of the status agreement with the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) by Bulgaria. The Motion for Resolution (Paragraph 40) *“notes that the status agreement with the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) has not yet been signed owing to pending bilateral issues”*, but does not state the reason for it. The fact is that Bulgaria is blocking the signature of the Agreement, objecting to the use of “Macedonian language”¹, which demonstrates the persistent negation of the Macedonian identity. This not only runs contrary to the Prespa Agreement, but poses serious risks to the joint interests of the EU, North Macedonia and the region in a situation of geo-political crisis.

By approving the positions elaborated above you would endorse the ultimatum that Bulgaria imposed on North Macedonia, using the EU membership as a tool. The European Parliament would endorse the bilateralisation of the accession process and actually give consent to the unilaterally posed conditions by Bulgaria that have nothing to do with accession criteria, contrary to the Enlargement strategy.

North Macedonia already made unprecedented compromises in the aim of EU membership, including changing its name. The EU has so far not kept up to its commitments, despite the fact that North Macedonia has fulfilled all the conditions and, as is stated in the Resolution (Recital F), *“has maintained a steady and determined pace in advancing EU reforms, with a focus on the fundamentals, and should continue keeping up the reform momentum and demonstrating the best democratic transition record across the Western Balkan region”*.

If the bilateral issues imposed by Bulgaria enter the accession process, its essence of being a transformative power for the society and the Europeanization process would not only be jeopardised, but would run contrary to the values of the Union.

These are not the values we have believed in. These are not the values we have fought for at home, consistently advocating for EU-accession related reforms.

The stalled accession process has already created wide disappointment, decrease of trust and diminishing of the EU influence in North Macedonia and in the region. In North Macedonia the recognition of the EU as a foreign factor has seen a drastic decline from 44.8% in 2019 to 9.5% in 2021.²

The controversial message that you will send with this year’s resolution to North Macedonia and the region will have a very harmful impact in to the current geo-political situation.

If you accept the positions elaborated above, it would be an utterly wrong message, that would further undermine the credibility of EU in North Macedonia and the region and would not contribute to stability. Moreover, this represents a danger of creating a precedent which can later be **misused** by

¹https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/bulgaria-blocks-north-macedonia-frontex-agreement/;
https://www.dnevnik.bg/sviat/2020/10/21/4129858_zaradi_makedonskija_jezik_bulgaria_edinstvena_blokira/

² Public opinion analysis on North Macedonia’s EU accession process, IDSCS, Skopje, February 2022. https://idscs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/AS_From-a-poster-to-a-foster-child-2021-public-opinion-analysis-on-North-Macedonias-EU-accession-processENG-2.pdf.

other Member States to pose any bilateral concerns or demands they might have towards any other candidate country.

Signed by:

European Policy Institute (EPI) – Skopje
Civil Rights Defenders
European Policy Centre (CEP) – Belgrade
Institute Alternative (IA) – Podgorica
Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM) – Tirana
Group for Legal and Political Studies (GLPS) – Pristina
Foreign Policy Initiative BH (FPI) - Sarajevo