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Committee on the Honouring of Obligations and Commitments by Member States of the Council of Europe (Monitoring Committee)

Post-monitoring dialogue with North Macedonia

Revised information note on recent developments in North Macedonia

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¹ Document declassified by the Monitoring Committee at its meeting on 1 February 2022.

1. Introduction

1. In October 2019, the Parliamentary Assembly adopted [Resolution 2304 \(2019\)](#) on the Post-monitoring dialogue with North Macedonia. The report submitted by the Monitoring Committee acknowledged that North Macedonia had undergone significant political changes in recent years, with the signature of the Pržino Agreements in 2015 and 2016 by the main political parties which solved a long political crisis and led to political alternation as well as the signature of the Friendship Treaty with Bulgaria in 2017 and the Prespa Agreement in 2018 with Greece, which resolved the name issue and re-launched the accession negotiations with NATO and the European Union – a strategic and consensual objective in the country. The Assembly had decided to continue the post-monitoring dialogue, asking the authorities, in particular, to strengthen the independence of the judiciary, the fight against corruption, the consolidation of its electoral framework, and the pursuit of inclusive policies aimed at guaranteeing the rights of minorities.

2. As rapporteurs, we monitored the developments in the country as much as it was possible to do, given the sanitary conditions that prevented us from travelling. We would like to thank the members of the delegation of North Macedonia to the PACE for their availability to meet in Strasbourg (when possible) or online, and for their readiness to assist us.

3. There were also changes of rapporteurs during this period, with the appointment of Mr Pocij from Poland (in September 2019), Ms Oomen-Ruijten from The Netherlands (December 2019) and Mr Csenger-Zalán from Hungary in June 2020 on behalf of the EPP/CD Group. In view of the exceptional conditions linked to the pandemic crisis that prevented the organisation of a fact-finding visit to the country, the PACE Bureau decided, on 18 March 2021 to extend the mandate of co-rapporteur Ms Christoffersen until 25 December 2021.

4. We had intended to pay a fact-finding visit to the country by the end of 2021. Unfortunately, given unexpected political developments in North Macedonia (see below) and domestic constraints in our parliaments, we had to postpone the visit. We proposed instead to organise an exchange of views in the Committee and present this information note, summarising, without being exhaustive, the main developments that occurred during these past months, and issues that will have to be monitored in the future.

2. Regional and European developments

5. The country remained dedicated to its Euro-integration process. On 26 March 2020, the Council of the European Union decided to open membership negotiations with North Macedonia (and Albania) - a decision the country was waiting for since 2009. PACE monitoring rapporteurs for these two countries [welcomed](#) this decision.

6. Since then, the adoption of the Negotiating Framework by the EU Council has been blocked by Bulgaria, despite the signing a bilateral Friendship Treaty in 2017. Bulgaria objects the use of the Macedonian language in the negotiating framework and has differing views on their shared history.² This issue was central in Deputy Prime Minister for European Affairs of North Macedonia Mr Dimitrov's address to the Parliamentary Assembly on 30 September 2021. The unstable political situation in Bulgaria in 2021 did not help to solve this situation: the elections of 4 April 2021 and 11 July 2021 proved unsuccessful to form a new parliamentary majority. The (third) early parliamentary elections of 17 November 2021 marked a watershed moment with a newly formed anti-corruption party "We Continue the Change" gathering 25% of the vote. This raised some hopes that a change in the leadership would unblock Bulgaria's veto to the launch of the EU accession negotiations. The visit of Bulgaria's new Prime Minister Mr Petkov to Skopje on 18 January 2022 followed by the visit of the new Prime Minister of North Macedonia Mr Kovaceski to Sofia on 25 January 2022 paved the way to a renewed political dialog. This also led to the signing of three memoranda (aiming at finalising the construction of the Skopje-Sofia railway, developing a closer partnership in agriculture and supporting small and middle-sized businesses in both countries³). These are encouraging and positive signs despite remaining political obstacles that need to be overcome in both countries."

7. North Macedonia was also actively involved in economic co-operation in the region. On 11 November 2019, at the Ohrid summit, the President of Serbia, the Prime Ministers of Albania and North Macedonia

² In October 2019, the Bulgarian parliament adopted the so-called Framework Position on North Macedonia's and Albania's EU accession process based on a solid consensus among the political class (including the Movement for Rights and Freedoms party representing the ethnic Turks in Bulgaria) and the public at large on the position vis-à-vis North Macedonia, whereby Bulgaria raised a number of preconditions in order to agree on the start of North Macedonia's accession process. [European Western Balkans](#) (27.07.2021).

³ <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/01/25/bulgaria-north-macedonia-pms-hail-partnership-play-down-disputes/>

agreed to create an economic zone of 12 million people to improve political and economic relations and strengthen cultural ties between the nations. This area was first known as the Mini-Schengen of the Balkans and is now called the Open Balkan Initiative.

3. Recent political developments

8. The decision of the Council of the European Union (EU) to postpone the opening of EU membership negotiations put Prime Minister Zaev's political responsibility at stake: in 2018, Mr Zaev had indeed suggested a link (correlation) between accepting, by referendum, the change of the name of the country and the Euro-Atlantic integration process (ie the opening of the accession negotiations).⁴ This process enabled, indeed, the country to join NATO in March 2020, but has not, so far, be successful when it comes to the European Union, which did not agree to launch the negotiations. Prime Minister therefore resorted, in 2020, to call early parliamentary elections, which were initially scheduled on 12 April 2020 but postponed to 15 July 2020 due to the sanitary situation.⁵

9. The July 2020 elections resulted in a slight victory of the coalition led by the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) with the BESA Movement (35,89% of the votes, leading the race by 12 000 votes out of 900 000). It formed a parliamentary majority with the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), which remained the strongest Albanian party (11,48%). In the opposition, the coalition led by the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party of Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) won 34,57% of the votes. The Coalition of the Alliance for Albanians (AfA) with the Alternative party (8,95%) and the Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA) (1,53%) also entered parliament. For the first time, an openly anti-NATO party, the Left party (Levica), entered parliament (4,1%).

10. The frustration resulting from the lack of progress on the EU integration process has probably also impacted the results of the local elections held on 17 and 31 October 2021. The opposition party VMRO-DPMNE won 42 out of the 81 mayoral seats in the country, a landslide victory compared to the previous elections, where the party had only 3 municipalities. The main ruling coalition's partners lost in particular the elections in the two main cities: in Skopje, Danela Arsovska, an independent candidate endorsed by the VMRO-DPMNE defeated the incumbent SDSM Mayor Mr Petre Shilegov. In Tetovo, Mr Kasami, leader of the BESA party defeated the incumbent DUI Mayor Teuta Arifi. Another interesting feature of these local elections was the fact that independent lists – including members of grass root green movements - for municipal councillors won over 56,000 votes across the country, becoming the fourth most popular force in the country, behind the SDSM, the VMRO-DPMNE and the DUI.⁶

11. Following the defeat of the SDSM party at these local elections, in particular in Skopje, Prime Minister Mr Zaev announced that he would tender his resignation as Prime Minister and leader of the party. In fact, the SDSM's Executive and Central Boards of the SDSM asked him to postpone his decision to resign. Mr Zaev said that he would stay in office to help stabilising, or even increasing his parliamentary majority.

12. In the meantime, however, the [Albanian] BESA party had joined the opposition which tabled a no-confidence motion. On the voting day, one MP from BESA, Kastriot Rexhepi – who had signed the no-confidence motion – did not appear in parliament.⁷ As a result, the opposition failed to gather the quorum and was short of one vote to have the parliament vote on the motion (the ruling coalition MPs did not attend the session).

13. Both the opposition and the majority then claimed to have a majority in parliament. The opposition demanded early parliamentary elections. The SDSM undertook negotiations with the [Albanian] Alternative party to join and consolidate the ruling coalition. On 5 December 2021, the two parties signed an agreement.

⁴ A consultative referendum (not legally binding) was organised on 30 September 2018, with the following question: "Are you in favour of European Union and NATO membership by accepting the agreement between the Republic of Macedonia and the Republic of Greece?" 94% of the 666 000 voters voted "yes". However, due to the low turnout (36,89%, i.e. less than the 50% threshold required), the State Election Commission declared the referendum invalid. [Doc 14964](#).

⁵ The elections were originally foreseen in April 2020, but were postponed to July due to the pandemic, following an agreement between the main political parties. The July 2020 elections were not observed by the Parliamentary Assembly due to the sanitary situation. ODIHR Special Election Assessment Mission (with a limited presence) assessed elections as generally effectively administered and without major incidents or tension: though recalling that long-standing recommendations pertaining to the voter register, the revision of electoral district boundaries, universality and equality of the vote in the electoral district abroad, and an effective campaign finance audit remained unaddressed.

⁶ [BalkanInsight](#) (26.11.2021).

⁷ There were several rumours about Mr Rexhepi being kidnapped, or blackmailed. Eventually he explained that he had changed his mind about joining the vote after Mr Zaev came back (and had not resigned) and he was hiding at a friend that day. He was then expelled from his party.

Four MPs from the Alternative party joined the SDSM coalition (which has now a majority of 64, out of 120). The Alternative party was allocated three ministerial posts (ie at the ministries of Health, Information and Diaspora), three deputy ministers (at the ministries of Culture, Agriculture and Transport or Finance), a post of deputy speaker of the Parliament and several positions as directors or members of boards of state institutions. It was also reported that two trials, ie the 2012 “Monster case” and the 2015 “Kumanovo clashes” case (which had sparked inter-ethnic tensions after the convictions of ethnic Albanians), could be subject to an international investigation.⁸ This might however raise some legal questions which will have to be closely followed.

14. Following this agreement, Prime Minister Zaev resigned from his position as leader of the SDSM on 12 December 2021 and as Prime Minister on 23 December 2021. Mr Dimitar Kovacevski, former Deputy Minister of Finance, was elected as Chair of the SDSM. A new government was approved by the parliament on 23 January 2022⁹ by 62 MP (out of 108 who voted). Mr Kovacevski became Prime Minister. His government comprises 12 ministers from the Social Democrats, 6 from the DUI, and 3 from the new junior coalition partner Alternative party. The new Prime Minister stated that the key goals of his government would be to ensure higher and sustainable economic growth, address the country’s energy crisis and to try to bring it closer to the EU¹⁰. Five small political parties from the ruling majority have however conditioned their support to the new government’s agenda to the revision of the electoral system within three months, a long-standing demand to replace the current six electoral districts with one single unit for parliamentary elections and help smaller parties win more seats in parliament.¹¹

15. The parliament has currently 39% of female MPs, and 42 MPs (ie 35%) are from the non-majority communities, which is the highest ever number.¹² The ruling coalition had a thin majority (61 seats out of 120 until December 2021, and 64 after the reshuffling of the government). Opposition parties remained actively engaged in parliament, but the work of the parliament was hindered by the pandemic in recent months. Concerning the storming of the parliament on 27 April 2017 (which had severely injured dozens of MPs, parliament officials and journalists and caused much damage to the building), a first-instance court in Skopje convicted, on 27 July 2021, the organisers of this storming, including the former Speaker of the parliament Mr Veljanoski, the former ministers of transport and communications and of education and science and the former Director of the Security and Counter-intelligence Administration (UBK) to 6-year prison sentences each and placed them under house arrest.

4. Recent reforms undertaken

16. Despite the obstacles hindering the opening of the EU accession negotiations, the authorities remained committed to their EU agenda. The Government adopted, on 10 March 2021, the “Europe at Home” Agenda based on the commitments arising from the 2004 EU Stabilization and Association Agreement and EC recommendations, which also aimed at implementing the recommendations of, *inter alia*, the Council of Europe, the Venice Commission and GRECO with regard to election reforms, fight against corruption and organised crime, human rights, the judiciary, media, public administration, etc. The first steps of the Agenda target a more efficient application of the Law on Public Prosecution, the strengthening the human and financial resource of the Council for Public Prosecutors, the adoption of a regular practice of transparent and argumentative decisions for the election and promotion of judges and public prosecutors, transparent evidence for procedures for unprofessional and unprincipled performance of judicial and public prosecutor’s functions and disciplinary responsibility.¹³

⁸ In 2012, five ethnic Macedonians were killed on a lake near Skopje, for which six ethnic Albanians were found guilty. In 2017, the Supreme Court already annulled the verdicts and ordered a retrial – the 5 out of the 6 defendants were sentenced again (3 of them to life sentences). In May 2015, a two-day shootout in Kumanovo left 18 people dead, including eight police officers; the surviving members of the armed group, all ethnic Albanians, were given long jail sentences. In May 2019, an Appeal Court confirmed the verdicts, which should now be reviewed by the Supreme Court. Prime Minister Mr Zaev indicated that the plan was that the government could ask the European Commission to send a “team of independent experts” to carry out “international investigation of the processes where there are suspicions that they were politically influenced”. In: [BalkanInsight](#) (6.12.2021).

⁹ <https://meta.mk/en/new-government-of-north-macedonia-elected-with-62-votes-in-favor/>

¹⁰ https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/north-macedonias-new-pm-to-meet-bulgarian-counterpart/

¹¹ <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/01/17/north-macedonias-newly-elected-pm-faces-raft-of-challenges/>

¹² [SWD\(2021\) 294 final](#), North Macedonia 2021 report of the European Commission, 19 October 2021.

¹³ [META. MK](#) (10 March 2021).

4.1. *Fight against corruption*

17. We have been following action taken to fight corruption, which remains prevalent. The appointment of a Deputy Prime Minister responsible for the coordination of anticorruption policies and the institutions involved in the fight against corruption is a positive step. We also welcome the adoption, in March 2021, of the “Action Plan 21” by the government to fight corruption and the adoption of the 2021-2025 National Strategy for the Prevention of Corruption and Conflict of Interest and related Action Plan by the parliament in April 2021. In its last report, the European Commission also noted some progress in the consolidation of the track record on investigating, prosecuting and trying several corruption cases, including at high level, the strengthening of the Prosecutor for Organised Crime and Corruption (OCCPO) and the State Commission for Prevention of Corruption (SCPC) which has been pro-active in preventing corruption and opened several cases, including against high-level officials and was allocated new premises.¹⁴

18. The country has continued to overcome major challenges that arose from the release of illegally wiretapped conversations in 2014 and the handling of the related cases: the revised law on the Public Prosecutor's Office was adopted and entered in force in June 2020; the cases initiated at that time by the “Special Prosecutor's Office arising from and surrounding the illegal wiretaps” moved forward¹⁵ after the arrest of the former Chief Special Prosecutor. Her seven-year prison sentence was upheld in July 2021 by the Skopje Court of Appeals in the so-called ‘racket case’ concerning alleged extortion and abuse of office. The revised Law on the Council of Public Prosecutors was also adopted. North Macedonia implemented a comprehensive reform of its intelligence services (also to accede to NATO): the new Law on the Intelligence Agency was adopted in January 2021 and the National Security Agency (NSA) was designed as an independent state body without police powers, unlike its predecessor the Bureau for Security and Counterintelligence (UBK)¹⁶.

19. In the last months, GRECO issued two reports. Concerning corruption prevention in respect of members of parliament, judges and prosecutors (Fourth Evaluation Round), GRECO stated in October 2020 that there were “noticeable efforts made by the authorities to revise the legislative frameworks” but consistent practical application of the new rules remained to be seen, such as for the revised Code of Ethics for MPs. Progress was noted to prevent corruption of lay judges; however the Minister of Justice was not removed from the Judicial Council. GRECO welcomed the substantially strengthened regulation of the terms for the selection, appointment and dismissal of the State Commission for Prevention of Corruption (SCPC)¹⁷. The European Commission noted that the SCPC remained pro-active in preventing corruption, opening cases, including those involving high-level officials from across the political spectrum, and addressing allegations of nepotism, cronyism and political influence in the process of recruitment of public sector employees¹⁸. In April 2021, GRECO published its compliance report on Preventing corruption and promoting integrity in central governments (top executive functions) and law enforcement agencies (5th Evaluation Round).¹⁹ GRECO welcomed the adoption, in August 2020, of a new “Code of Ethics for members of Government and holders of the public office appointed by Government”, but the fact that its implementation was left in the hands of a Deputy Prime Minister was however not compatible with GRECO practice. The new Code of Ethics for the police force and the external supervision of the police force were positive developments; the operational independence of the police needed however to be brought into line with the Council of Europe's standards for democratic policing and its depoliticisation ensured in law and in practice.

4.2. *Inter-ethnic relations: framework and census*

20. This year was marked by the 20th anniversary of the 2001 Ohrid Framework Agreement signed on 13 August 2001, ending a civil conflict opposing the ethnic Albanian UÇK—M forces against the security forces of then “former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”. This conflict had led to 100 deaths and thousands of civilians being displaced. This Agreement enabled the adoption, in 2002, of sweeping constitutional changes empowering ethnic communities in local and national politics, the public sector and education in areas where they make up more than 20 % of the population, based on the results of the census. Representation in the judiciary, police and civil service was to be proportionate to the share in the overall population.²⁰

¹⁴ [SWD\(2021\) 294 final](#)

¹⁵ [SWD\(2021\) 294 final](#)

¹⁶ [SWD\(2021\) 294 final](#)

¹⁷ [GrecoRC4\(2020\)4](#), Interim compliance report, Fourth Evaluation Round, 2 October 2020

¹⁸ [SWD\(2021\) 294 final](#)

¹⁹ Compliance report on Preventing corruption and promoting integrity in central governments (top executive functions) and law enforcement agencies (Fifth Evaluation Round) [GrecoRC5\(2021\)2](#), adopted by GRECO at its 87th Plenary Meeting (Strasbourg, 22-25 March 2021) and published on 27 April 2021.

²⁰ [European Western Balkans](#) (13.08.2021).

21. In this context, the census carried out in September 2021 was a positive development – and a crucial element for the future implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement. This census had been long awaited by PACE: the last census was conducted in 2001²¹ and an attempt to carry out a census in 2011 had failed. The full results of the 2021 census are not expected until March 2022, and we hope that their publication will be done in a transparent manner.

4.3 Human rights protection

22. In October 2020, the Parliament reinstated the Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination which was repealed in May 2020 by the country's Constitutional Court (the Venice Commission had issued an opinion on this law in 2018). The law creates a new body, ie the Commission for Prevention and Protection against Discrimination (CPPD). The parliament elected its 7 members.²² This process of selection sparked discussions, with NGOs raising concerns regarding not only the regularity of the procedure but also the lack of diversity in the composition of the elected Commission.²³

23. On 25 January 2021, the Parliament (with 61 votes) elected the new Ombudsman, with a mandate of 8 years: Naser Ziberi is a former member of parliament (1996 – 1998), former Minister for Labour and Social Policy and Vice President in the Government and had been proposed by the DUI party to be a candidate for the post of Prime-Minister.

24. A number of issues highlighted in previous PACE reports remains of concerns, notably in the field of hate speech, discrimination against women, Roma, and LGBTI people, as documented by NGOs.²⁴

4.4 Fight against torture and inhuman treatment

25. The European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) issued two reports in the recent months, highlighting some long-lasting issue and depicting an alarming situation. Following a periodic visit made in December 2019, the CPT reported, in May 2021, about many allegations of physical ill-treatment of criminal suspects by police officers. The CPT was highly critical of the “persistent failure of the authorities of North Macedonia to address certain fundamental shortcomings of the prison system. It highlighted the lack of a professional approach in managing complex situations within the prison system, the poor management and performance of staff, the low staffing levels, the poor quality of health-care provided to inmates, the lack of an appropriate regime on offer to inmates, the high-levels of inter-prisoner violence, the squalid material conditions and the endemic corruption of staff.” These problems were most acute at Idrizovo Prison which holds more than 60% of the overall prison population. The report also reported about the condition of juveniles held in the facility of Ohrid. Much more also needs to be done to advance the process of de-institutionalisation by establishing adequate community-based mental health services.²⁵

26. In December 2020, the CPT paid an *ad hoc* visit to examine notably the treatment and conditions of detention of prisoners held at Idrizovo and Skopje Prisons or persons detained by the police in Skopje. In its report published on 29 July 2021, the CPT noted some improvements (ie the renovation of one wing of the remand section of Skopje Prison and the closure of three problematic wings of Idrizovo Prison). But most of the longstanding concerns of the CPT in respect of “the cramped, unhygienic and decrepit conditions in prisons” persisted, prisoners being locked up in their cells for 23 hours per day and denied visits by their children. The CPT emphasised that “concerted action must be taken by the relevant authorities to eliminate various shortcomings which may amount to inhuman and degrading treatment of prisoners and to combat the phenomenon of corruption in prison”. The authorities were urged to deliver a strong message of zero tolerance of ill-treatment to all police officers and to take steps to improve the implementation in practice of fundamental safeguards against ill-treatment.²⁶

²¹ The last census in 2001 showed that 64 % of the 2.1 million population was Macedonian, 25 % ethnic Albanian while Roma, Turks, Serbs and other minorities made up the rest.

²² 4 of them will have a mandate of 5 years (Igor Jadrovski, Neda Chalovska – Dimovska, Imko Bejaroski and Irfan Deari) and 3 of them will have a mandate of 3 years (Kire Vasilev, Ismail Kamberi and Vesna Bendevska)

²³ <https://www.equalitylaw.eu/downloads/5378-north-macedonia-new-equality-body-establishing-and-setbacks-100-kb>

²⁴ See for example the 2020 Report by [Amnesty International](https://www.amnesty.org/en/reports/2020/09/2020-report-on-north-macedonia/) on North Macedonia.

²⁵ [CPT/Inf \(2021\)8](https://www.cpt.int/en/web/cpt/-/council-of-europe-anti-torture-committee-publishes-report-on-its-2020-visit-to-north-macedonia), Report to the authorities of North Macedonia on the visit to North Macedonia carried out by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) from 2 to 10 December 2019, published on 11 May 2021 and the Government's response [CPT/Inf \(2021\)9](https://www.cpt.int/en/web/cpt/-/council-of-europe-anti-torture-committee-publishes-report-on-its-2020-visit-to-north-macedonia).

²⁶ See <https://www.coe.int/en/web/cpt/-/council-of-europe-anti-torture-committee-publishes-report-on-its-2020-visit-to-north-macedonia> and the Report to the Government of North Macedonia on the visit to North Macedonia carried out by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) from 7 to 9 December 2020. [CPT/Inf \(2021\) 18](https://www.cpt.int/en/web/cpt/-/council-of-europe-anti-torture-committee-publishes-report-on-its-2020-visit-to-north-macedonia)

5. Concluding remarks

27. In the past years, North Macedonia has undertaken a process of normalisation, both at national and international level. Our Assembly had previously praised the ability of the political parties, despite the polarisation along political and ethnical lines, to reach agreements (see the Pržino Agreements of 2015 and 2016), agree on the postponement of elections in times of pandemic (2020), and restore some trust in election processes (despite long-lasting issues that need to be addressed well ahead of the next elections). The July 2020 elections resulted in a thin and fragile ruling majority – with political factions in parliament doomed to co-operate, especially on issues requiring the qualified majority. At international level, a series of agreements signed with Bulgaria (2017), Greece (2018) and the neighbouring countries Serbia and Albania (to foster the Open Balkan Initiative) have also created new opportunities.

28. The country has experienced several traumatic events during the year 2021, including the Covid-19 pandemic²⁷, the wildfires during the summer 2021, the deadly fire in the modular COVID hospital in Tetovo in September (which cost the lives of 14 patients), or the tragic car accident on the Struma highway in November that cost the lives of 46 citizens, including children. The country however showed resilience, and the inter-ethnic relations remained stable. The emergence of new political parties, such as Levica or the Green movements, also show that there is a lively political scene and citizens ready to engage in politics.

29. Over the past years, the country has made many efforts to improve its standards. This progress needs to be consolidated, and the laws fully implemented. There is still a solid consensus among political parties of North Macedonia in favour of a European integration process based on European values. Despite the positive signal received from the European Union in 2020, it was disappointing to see that the EU failed so far to keep its promises and has not yet managed to open the EU accession negotiations. We also note with concern that the unfulfilled EU promise has fostered political instability in the country, uncertainty and disillusion. On the other hand, the perspective of an EU integration could be a strong push factor to make reforms, improve the norms of the country which should be built on Council of Europe standards, and eventually improve the living conditions of the people. We therefore encourage authorities of North Macedonia, together with the opposition and the civil society, to remain committed to their (pan)European objectives and continue to work in co-operation with the Council of Europe. And we encourage neighbouring countries – and Bulgaria in the first place - to support the European aspirations of North Macedonia, for the benefit of the citizens of the country and of the whole region. In this respect, we view the relaunch of the political and economic co-operation between Skopje and Sofia in 2022 as an encouraging sign to pursue the negotiations and find the necessary political compromise that could eventually lead to the opening of the EU accession negotiations.

30. We hope that the rapporteurs will be able to pay a visit to North Macedonia in the near future and assess the reforms and progress made by the country in the framework of the post-monitoring dialog with the Parliamentary Assembly.

²⁷ By early October 2021, North Macedonia had recorded in total around 193,000 cases and about 6,750 deaths related to the pandemic. Around 35% of the population were fully vaccinated in early October. [SWD\(2021\) 294 final](#)