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Recent political developments in "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" in the context of regional stability

Recommendation 1705 (2005)

Reply from the Committee of Ministers
adopted at the 950th meeting of the Ministers' Deputies (7 December 2005)

1. The Committee of Ministers welcomes the Parliamentary Assembly's report (doc. 10547) and Resolution 1440 (2005) on "Recent Political Developments in "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" in the context of regional stability". These texts encourage the authorities of "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" and the international community to work together towards the lasting consolidation of the progress of the past several years with the common objectives of strengthening good governance and democratic institutions, reinforcing the trust of citizens in the political system and promoting the cohesion of society in this country.
2. The Committee of Ministers fully endorses the statement made in paragraph 1 of Recommendation 1705 (2005) noting that "a number of fields in which "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" should endeavour to accomplish further improvements fall under the specific area of expertise of the Council of Europe." The necessity of these improvements has been highlighted in the recent opinion of the European Commission on the country's application for membership of the European Union and in the accompanying proposal for the European Partnership. The Committee of Ministers also fully shares the view of the Assembly that intensified co-operation with "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" is appropriate not only in recognition of the importance of the next stage of reform consolidation in this member state, but also of the valuable contribution which "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia"'s successful democratic transition makes to the lasting peace and stability in the region of the western Balkans. Indeed, the remarkable achievements made with the implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement and the launching of a far-reaching process of decentralisation are examples of successful consensual public policy reforms for the region. "The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" is also an important actor in the increasing level of transborder, regional and bilateral co-operation in the region, which the Committee of Ministers views as a very constructive development.
3. Recognising that this country has entered an important new stage of its European integration, and to celebrate the 10th anniversary of its membership of the Council of Europe, the Secretary General undertook an official visit to "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" from 11 to 14 November. He emphasised the substantial progress made in the 10 years following its accession to this Organisation, and especially the successful implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement of 2001. He also reiterated the continued commitment of the Council of Europe to support the transition process and to face the challenges ahead. Following the visit of the Secretary General, the Secretariat will develop a coherent programme of co-operation with the authorities which may be implemented from 2006.
4. With regard to the specific areas for action listed in the recommendation, the Committee of Ministers wishes to inform the Parliamentary Assembly of the following:
5. With regard to sub-paragraph (i): the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe has made recommendations on improving future electoral processes following its observation of the municipal elections of 2005. It will follow the implementation of these recommendations closely with the relevant national and local authorities. The Secretary General, during his recent visit, particularly stressed the importance of the upcoming parliamentary elections in 2006 being internationally recognised as free and

fair. Furthermore, the Venice Commission has been seized for opinion on the future reformed electoral code by the Minister of Justice and will issue an opinion on the text at its next plenary session on 16 and 17 December 2005.

6. With regard to sub-paragraph (ii): the Venice Commission has adopted an opinion (Opinion 355/2005) on the constitutional amendments concerning the reform of the judicial system at its plenary session of 22 October 2005. This opinion covers a broad scope of issues pertaining to the independence and the efficiency of the judiciary. In addition, the Council of Europe continues to work closely with the relevant national authorities for the establishment of the future "School of Magistrates" and for the human rights training of legal professionals, and is preparing a project on penitentiary reform.

7. With regard to sub-paragraph (iii): the Government of "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" has committed itself to the implementation of its Work Programme for Better Local Government. The Council of Europe is ready to continue its assistance to the Ministry of Local Self-Government and the Trilateral Committee (Ministry of Local Self-Government, Agency for Civil Servants and National Association of Local Self-Government Units) to support the implementation of the National Work Programme. This will focus on the provision of legal assistance and capacity-building for local government. Furthermore, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe will carry out a monitoring exercise on the state of local and regional democracy in this country in early 2006.

8. With regard to sub-paragraph (iv): the Council of Europe's Group of States against corruption (GRECO) has adopted at its 25th Plenary Meeting (Strasbourg, 10-14 October 2005) the Evaluation Report on "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia", prepared in the framework of the Second Evaluation Round. It is expected that – according to standard practice – the authorities will authorise publication of the report in due course, which will also provide useful guidance for further technical co-operation in this area. The measures taken by the national authorities in order to comply with the recommendations made in the Evaluation Report will be assessed at a later stage by GRECO in a special compliance procedure. Additionally, since early 2004 "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" has been actively participating in the regional PACO-Impact project "Implementation of anti-corruption plans in South-East Europe". This project will run until summer 2006 and technical assistance activities for the strengthening of the national anti-corruption services and the anti-corruption State Programme will continue. It is hoped that PACO-Impact will secure additional funding in order to implement a second phase (PACO-Impact II) of its actions in South-East Europe from late 2006 through 2007.

9. With regard to sub-paragraph (v): the Venice Commission, as mentioned above, has been seized by the Ministry of Justice for an opinion on the draft electoral code. In this context, the Venice Commission will refer to its own "Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters" and "Guidelines on the Financing of Political Parties". These texts could also usefully be published in relevant local languages, together with the Committee of Ministers' own Recommendation Rec(2003)4 on common rules against corruption in the funding of political parties and electoral campaigns. The Council of Europe would be prepared to organise in early 2006 a regional conference on the role of political parties, bringing the expertise of the Parliamentary Assembly, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, the Venice Commission and other relevant partners to the attention of the national and local authorities, party officials and members, and civil society representatives.

10. With regard to sub-paragraph (vi): the Council of Europe supports the Skopje School of Political Studies as a civil society initiative for enhanced development of European leadership skills and political awareness amongst professionals. Additionally, a multi-faceted programme to support education in "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" is in preparation to be implemented from 2006 and will concentrate on human rights and civic education, bilingual and plurilingual education, history curriculum and teaching methods.

11. With regard to sub-paragraph (vii): the Council of Europe could place the expertise it has developed in the framework of the Intercultural Dialogue and Conflict-Prevention Project at the disposal of "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia". It also encourages the participation of specialists from "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" in the new project "Promote European identities through culture and heritage" adopted at the Third Summit. "The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" fully participates in the joint Council of Europe/European Commission Social Institutions Support Programme in South-East Europe, with the regional office of the programme established in Skopje. "The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" is also one of the beneficiary countries within the current Joint Council of Europe-European Commission Regional Programme for the development of monitoring and communication tools with the national Programmes for Roma in South-East Europe. There is an ongoing dialogue in progress with the Advisory Committee on the implementation of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National

Minorities and additional assistance will be provided in 2006-2007 with regard to the implementation of selected key recommendations of the first monitoring cycle of the Framework Convention. In the event that the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages will be ratified in the near future, the Council of Europe will provide expertise and assistance with its implementation.

12. With regard to sub-paragraph (viii): “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” has demonstrated a serious commitment to the joint Council of Europe-European Commission CARDS Regional Police project aimed at strengthening police capacities against serious crime in South-East Europe. The country is now expected to implement the regional strategy on tools against organised and economic crime recently adopted under the joint project by the Ministers of the Interior and Security of South-East Europe. “The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” also benefits actively from the Moli-Macedonia project on the establishment of a functioning system to prevent money laundering and terrorism financing and enabling authorities to co-operate internationally in accordance with European and international standards and Moneyval recommendations.