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**Joint Parliamentary Committee**

15TH MEETING

**DRAFT MINUTES**

Skopje, 19-20 September 2018

**SOBRANIE**

The meeting began on 19 September at 15.30 hours, with the introductory address by Mr Goran MILEVSKI, Co-Chair of the Joint Parliamentary Committee (EU-MK JPC). Mr MILEVSKI greeted the renowned guests, Mr PETERLE, Co-Chair of the EU-MK JPC, Mr ZHERNOVSKI, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ambassador ŽBOGAR and all present MPs. Upon opening the 15th JPC meeting, Mr MILEVSKI welcomed the establishment of the practice for regular holding of meetings in this format, and noted that the large attendance by MPs confirms the interest of the European Parliament for the country as a strong supporter, friend and promoter, for which he expressed sincere gratitude.

**1. Adoption of the draft agenda**

The draft agenda was adopted without amendments.

**2. Adoption of the minutes of the 14th meeting of the EU-MK JPC held on 7-8 February 2018 in Strasbourg**

The minutes were adopted without amendments.

**3. Opening of the 15th JPC meeting by Mr Goran MILEVSKI and Mr Alojz PETERLE**

In his opening address, co-chairman Mr MILEVSKI stated that since the last meeting held in Strasbourg, the Government and the Assembly have successfully completed the 3-6-9 Reform plan and implemented the necessary reforms, have completed a long-standing and historic process with Greece with the signing of an agreement that should open the doors to NATO and EU membership. He emphasised that EU integration remains a strategic priority of the Government and the Assembly of the country, which remain dedicated to fulfilling all reform steps in priority areas as well as in relation to the commitments under the Stabilisation and Association Agreement, with the expected support of all international friends in the finalisation of the Euro-Atlantic aspirations and integration country.

Mr PETERLE greeted the participants and said that a week before the 15th JPC meeting in Skopje he had the honour of listening to Prime Minister Zaev and Prime Minister Tsipras speak in the European Parliament, when they voiced the will to undertake steps that would put an end to the polarisation, establish better relations and work together on the European perspective. According to Mr PETERLE it is up to the citizens to take the opportunity that is of great importance for the future of the country. He underlined that the Assembly has many activities ahead, but expressed satisfaction that the political powers in the country support this agenda. He voiced hope that the future will meet the expectations of the citizens.

**4. Exchange of views with representatives of the Government, of the Council of the European Union and the European Commission**

Mr ZHERNOVSKI emphasised that this meeting, organised for the second time this year, is held at a particularly important political moment for the country – in anticipation of the referendum. He briefed that the activities of the Government were carried out on two tracks: implementation of deep and sustainable domestic reforms in the rule of law and building independent institutions, as well as restoring the position of the country in international relations, primarily through promotion of good-neighbourly relations. Mr ZHERNOVSKI expressed satisfaction that in the period of the campaign for the referendum the project for the integration in the European Union unites everyone along ethnic lines. He briefed that for the first time, there is a joint campaign, for the first time there are joint billboards with the same cause, same meaning in both Macedonian and Albanian languages. This demonstration of unity, assessed Mr ZHERNOVSKI, makes the country a Little Europe and presents a guarantee that it will be a member of the European Union and a member of NATO. In the end, Mr ZHERNOVSKI thanked the European Parliament as an institution and MEPs individually for the wholehearted and continued support.

Ms Kalinka GABER stated that the Government is working hard to restore the lost confidence of citizens in the ability of the country to overcome challenges, which it faces. In terms of European integration, she informed about the successful realisation of the 3-6-9 Plan in the past year and the progress achieved in priority areas. Ms GABER emphasised that in order to ensure continuity and focus on the reforms after the meeting of the Council of the EU, the recommendations that the country received and the underlining of 4 priority areas, the Government is working on the finalisation of the plan 18 that continues the implementation of the emergency reform priorities and delivering of further sustainable results in the field of the judicial system, security and intelligence services, the reform of the public administration and fight against organised crime and corruption. The Government continues to work on the realisation of the recommendations of the annual report on the country by the European Commission in all chapters. Ms GABER noted that this is done so that by next June, all countries that had some remarks and doubts regarding the progress that the country has made in the past year, could be given arguments that it deserves to start negotiations. She also informed about the start of the screening process in Chapter 23.

Mr Samuel ŽBOGAR said that is was an honour to represent Commissioner Hahn and Ms Mogherini, who recently in Skopje voiced strong support by the institutions of the EU for the common European future. Mr ŽBOGAR noted that mutual relations are progressing at a good pace. He stressed that good-neighbourly relations are among the principles of the EU and in that vein he welcomed the agreements with Bulgaria and Greece as well as the commitment to the reforms because of which there is visible progress on the European path. Mr ŽBOGAR said that the JPC, that is MPs of both parliaments have contributed greatly to this process. The EU is a major supporter of the reform efforts of the country, particularly in the rule of law and will continue to remind of the need for reforms. Mr ŽBOGAR briefed on joint projects, such as the ERASMUS + programme that has allowed more than 5000 young people to work and study all around Europe, as well as infrastructural projects, projects for improvement of the environment, in the field of agriculture, promotion of cultural heritage and improvement of tourism. Mr ŽBOGAR said that he wishes to see the country as an equal member with all rights and obligations in the family of the European Union.

**5. Follow-up on the reform process: results of the 3-6-9 Plan and the new Reform plan 18 with emphasis on judicial reforms, reforms in the intelligence system, fight against corruption and organised crime and the work of the SPO**

Ms MIRAKOVSKA and Mr KELAM spoke on this topic.

Ms MIRAKOVSKA emphasised that the 3-6-9 Plan in the part of the Assembly aimed at improving interparty cooperation between the majority and the opposition and thus ensure the necessary compromise for significant reforms that require a two-thirds majority, as well as to intensify the cooperation with the civil society in the process of adopting laws. She said that the Assembly adopted the Code of Ethical Standards and that one of the upcoming tasks is amending the Rules of Procedure of the Assembly in order to strengthen its independence, improve its functioning as a house of representatives for the citizens, allow greater involvement of the civil sector in the legislative process and improve its visibility and accountability before the public. Ms MIRAKOVSKA noted that with the implementation of the 3-6-9 Plan and in expectation of the Plan 18, political parties reaffirmed the consensus to work together for the country to move forward towards membership in the EU, aware that the political dialogue is the essence of each democratic process that should provide sustainability, cohesiveness and inclusiveness in society, and the Assembly, in the same manner as other institutions, has demonstrated its capacity to face challenges in the following phase of its European integration path.

Mr Tunne KELAM reiterated that cooperation on the domestic front is necessary due to a national, existential and essential aim, that is, EU and NATO membership, because non-membership means continuation of uncertainty. Therefore, Mr KELAM called for implementation of reforms and realisation of goals. He said that the increased dynamics of reforms and the fact that things are moving forward are encouraging. He praised the cooperation with nongovernmental organisations, the public administration reform and noted the progress achieved in the freedom of expression and improvement of the media climate but conveyed the message from the meeting with journalists that there is lack of pluralism in the media.

The following agenda point was subdivided into five items.

**Judicial reforms**

The first item covered the topic of judicial reforms, with addresses by Mr MEMEDI and Mr PETERLE.

Mr Rexhep MEMEDI spoke about efficient, independent judiciary, freed from pressures as a precondition for functional democracy. He said that at the end of 2017, the Government adopted the Strategy for reform of the judicial sector for the period 2017-2022 with an Action Plan, which gives direction for overcoming normative and institutional shortcomings. Mr MEMEDI emphasised that reforms and aligning the judicial system with European standards is an important element for which there is a consensus among all parliamentary parties in the Assembly, taking into account that the main element in the process of building a healthy and sustainable system is the practical implementation of all legal reforms.

Mr PETERLE emphasised that a country without efficient judicial system cannot count on foreign investments or development of the economy and that is why the European Commission pays great attention to this sector and demands reforms that will really lead to an independent judicial system. He reflected that every effort for judicial reforms is welcome, particularly within the 3-6-9 Plan and called for continuity in the efforts and for complete implementation of the reform plan.

**Fight against organised crime**

Mr VELKOVSKI and Ms SPYRAKI spoke on the second item.

Mr Dime VELKOVSKI emphasised that the fight against organised crime and corruption is effective when investigations are initiated and conducted in a legal manner, in accordance with the principles of objectivity and impartiality. He informed about the Strategy of the Government for strengthening of the capacities for conducting financial investigations and confiscation of property, which includes an action plan, about the legislative amendments in terms of protection for whistle-blowers, amendments to the Law on Prevention of Corruption in order to redefine the status and composition of the State Commission for Prevention of Corruption, its competences and aims, specialised personnel and equipment, so that its work could be efficient, more transparent and independent of political influence.

Ms Maria SPYRAKI, focusing on the fight against corruption, stated that although all the speakers voice optimism for the situation in the country, however, the last report of the European Commission notes problems such as corruption, non-transparency and fight against organised crime. She emphasised that according to the report, corruption remains a problem in many segments and that she expects visible results instead of pink reality. According to her, the country is not ready to start negotiations with the EU. She emphasised that although her party will not vote for the Prespa Agreement, they will still help the country tackle the challenges and become a member of the EU in accordance with the Copenhagen Criteria.

**Work of the SPO**

Mr KITEV addressed the participants regarding the third item.

Mr Betiane KITEV said that court hearings have finally started on all of the charges brought by the SPO and approved by the court. He emphasised that the competences of the SPO include cases of wider social significance and such that the discovery and determination of the truth is of particular public interest and interest for the citizens. Mr KITEV noted that before the expiration of the legal term of the SPO, appropriate legal preparations need to be made for adjusting the legal norms that would allow for the integration of this Public Prosecutor’s Office in the Public Prosecutor’s Office.

**Electoral reforms**

Mr MILOSHOSKI spoke regarding the fourth item.

Mr Antonio MILOSHOSKI made a comparison between the electoral legislation and electoral reforms on the one hand and the campaign for the upcoming referendum on the other hand, i.e. what is on paper versus what happens in practice. He noted that the Government through a Declaration undertook the obligation not to allow intimidation and pressure on administration, but that in practice there are examples of threats. The Government also adopted Guidelines for prohibition of the use of state resources during a campaign, which is not respected, that is, premises, vehicles and state administration employees are used for the campaign. Mr Antonio MILOSHOSKI urged for a more precise recording of such oversights and for the Agreement with Greece not to be used for abuse of electoral norms. Regarding the referendum, he stated that in consultation with the voters, he chooses to boycott the referendum, which is his legal right pursuant to Article 7 of the Law on Referendum.

**Reform of the intelligence system**

Ms ZATUROSKA and Ms PETIR addressed the participants.

Ms Liljana ZATUROSKA reflected that the working group for the reform in the security and intelligence services was established, composed of representatives of relevant institutions, the opposition and expert public, and the group has prepared the Plan of measures and activities for overcoming the weaknesses of the existing system of interception of communications, and in the interest of guaranteeing the legality, protection of human rights and the security of the country and the citizens. She emphasised that the reforms are implemented in reality, in accordance with the established dynamics for the necessary changes, with the ultimate aim of restoring the confidence in the system. She also stated that, in a transparent procedure with informing and consultation with the expert and broader public, the package of laws required for reform of the system of interception of communications was adopted, which includes the Law on Interception of Communications; the Law on the Operational-Technical Agency (OTA); the Law amending the Law on Electronic Communication and the Law amending the Law on Classified Information.

Ms Marijana PETIR noted that although some progress has been made, there are some delays and the recommendations of the High-level Group of Experts are not implemented. She emphasised that the establishment of the Operational-Technical Agency does not remove the monopoly of the Administration for Security and Counterintelligence, and also pointed to a lack of transparency and coordination among those working on reforms in the security system, as well as lack of exchange of analytical data between intelligence services. Ms PETIR emphasised that the country is a member of the European family and deserves to become a member of the European Union, but that this should be done without obstacles and blackmail.

In the debate that followed regarding the Agreement with Greece hope was expressed that the two countries would look to the future and forget nationalisms. Furthermore, the possibility for change of the electoral model was mentioned, that is, for the country to be one electoral district so that smaller political parties could have MPs in the Assembly, and to further implement open lists as the highest level of democracy. In terms of the referendum it was noted that no one may influence the citizens’ decision on how to vote and that it should not be painted in political colours. The support from all political parties in the European Parliament for the Agreement with Greece was emphasised, and the Agreement was assessed as a compromise. The importance of parliamentary oversight on security services was underlined, as well as the strengthening of the fight against corruption. The democratic atmosphere in the Assembly and the progress achieved, which was noted in the reports of the EU were welcomed.

The following members took part in the debate: Mr MILEVSKI (MP), Ms LAZAREVSKA (MP), Mr MILOSHOSKI (MP), Mr PAPADIMOULIS (MEP), Mr HOWARTH (MEP), Mr ILIOSKI (MP), Mr CRAMER (MEP), and Ms BORZAN (MEP).

**6. Report on the Jean Monnet Dialogue**

Mr KUKAN and Mr FLECKENSTEIN addressed the participants.

Mr KUKAN informed about the activities in terms of the Jean Monnet Dialogue, which besides him includes MEPs VAJGL and FLECKENSTEIN in cooperation with Commissioner Hahn, and is aimed at facilitating the dialogue between political parties. The first round of the dialogue led to the adoption of the ethical code and results regarding the Rules of Procedure of the Assembly. Mr KUKAN stated that preparations are made for the second round of negotiations on current topics. A proposal was made to improve the inclusion of small parties, namely those, which are part of the governing coalition. Mr FLECKENSTEIN noted that he hopes that the dialogue will continue to produce results in the future.

**7. Situation of media**

Ms LAZAREVSKA addressed the participants.

Ms LAZAREVSKA stated that the freedom of the media and the right to an independent, accurate and timely reporting are of key importance for building public opinion, raising public awareness and control of the work of state and public office-holders. She noted that it is necessary to pave the way through regulations, but also to allow media to perform their jobs independently and professionally through developing democratic and ethnic principles. Ms LAZAREVSKA said that in conditions when there is a sincere desire for quality change of the situation, the process of the adoption is blocked because of unprincipled policy of the opposition, which is also responsible for the inexistence of independent public broadcasting service.

In the debate that followed it was stressed that the environment regarding freedom of the media has become more complex not only in Macedonia, but globally, and it has become more important to be first than to be accurate. It was noted that some progress has been made, but police activities regarding attacks on journalist are not serious enough. MEPs found that the situation of media was not satisfactory even in the regional context. It was agreed that strong independent institutions are crucial for ensuring freedom of expression.

The following members took part in the debate: Mr HOWARTH (MEP), Ms PETIR (MEP).

**8. Good-neighbourly relations and regional cooperation**

Mr Ejup ALIMI and Mr Dimitrios PAPADIMOULIS addressed the participants.

Mr ALIMI stated that the country is promoting a new approach towards its neighbours in order to overcome long-standing issues by building friendly bilateral relations and promotion of cooperation in areas of substantial importance for the stability and sustainable development of the region, that is, increased connectivity in terms of transport, energy, youth mobility, protection of the environment, cross-border cooperation, fight against organised crime and corruption. He emphasised that the ratification of the two bilateral agreements with Bulgaria and Greece showed courage, leadership, diplomacy and sincere intentions and demonstrated that open issues can be resolved with dialogue and open approach. Mr ALIMI thanked the international community and MEPs for their support and underlined that regional cooperation is a key prerequisite for successful integration in the European Union and NATO.

Mr PAPADIMOULIS stated that good-neighbourly relations and regional cooperation are one of the criteria for joining the European Union. He assessed that after the signing of the Prespa Agreement, bilateral relations have been raised to a higher, more positive level, a new dynamics is introduced to the relations and there is a new political approach based on dialogue and mutual trust and respect that affects the whole region. EP Vice-President PAPADIMOULIS underlined that Balkans needed to show a positive example based on cooperation, reconciliation and regional growth and assured that the EP was ready to help the country and its citizens in this process. EU-MK Co-Chair PETERLE reiterated that good neighbourly relations were essential for the spirit of the EU.

**9. Adoption of the recommendations**

The recommendations of the 15th EU-MK JPC meeting were adopted.

**10. Any other business**

There was no other business.

**11. Date and place of the next JPC meeting**

It was proposed to hold the next Joint Parliamentary Committee meeting at a term that shall be determined additionally.

The meeting was ended at 11:00.