

VIRTUAL STUDY VISIT TO

FMA, CSDP AND BREXIT

The virtual study visit to North Macedonia conducted by the Former Members' Association was a new experience for me. While I had previously participated in conferences 'on-line', as necessitated by the pandemic, it was my first study trip of this kind, with a comprehensive programme, including a museum visit. Our discussion partners were in Skopje; Hans-Gert Pöttering, who led the delegation, was in Brussels; and the remaining participants, including several from the UK, were in their studies and living rooms in various parts of Europe.

In contrast to real delegation visits of this kind, getting from one ministry to another was not an issue, with the result that numerous meetings could be held in a relatively short period of time. We were able to speak with President Stevo Pendarovski, Foreign Minister Bujar Osmani and representatives of parliament and civil society, among others. The programme also included a discussion with students from the University of Skopje.

A key topic of the talks was what would happen after Brexit. In that connection, the fact that President Pendarovski had written a doctoral thesis on the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy was of particular interest. I have published a book on the same subject, which includes a contribution from Hans-Gert Pöttering. This prompted a debate on European defence and Brexit, which is particularly topical at the moment. The following thoughts are my contribution to this debate:

So far, the UK has primarily sought to put a brake on European efforts to develop an independent security

and defence policy. In the discussions held in the European Parliament's Subcommittee on Defence, which was established in 2004, my then colleague Geoffrey van Orden, as the Tories' security policy spokesman, repeatedly expressed the view that the development of an independent European security and defence policy would be harmful and only lead to unnecessary duplication.

The UK was particularly outspoken in its opposition to the emergence of the European Defence Agency, which was set up to coordinate Member States' procurement and defence research activities.

The departure of the British might now have been expected to have removed a major obstacle to the development of the Common Security and Defence Policy. So far, however, these hopes have been dashed.

A clear-eyed assessment of the current priorities of and the situation in the European Union reveals that at present there is scope only for small steps in the area of defence.

One such step would be the further development of the European Defence Agency (EDA), which was established in 2004 to promote defence capabilities, joint procurement and joint research. President Trump is currently exerting strong pressure on the NATO member countries to increase defence spending. Here I see a danger of many duplications — not between NATO and the EU, but unnecessary duplications between the 27 Member States that arise when each of these countries acts without coordinating with its European neighbours. The EDA

must foster the establishment of a European internal defence market and help to ensure that effective use is made of the resources made available through the new Defence Fund. If the EDA is to carry out this task, its funding needs to be increased.

In the Brexit debate, statements emerging from the UK suddenly hinted at a greater appetite for involvement in the EDA. However, the simple fact that, in keeping with its foreign policy traditions, the UK will have no interest in helping to create an effective political entity on the continent after Brexit means that no credence should be given to these suggestions.

Nigel Farage, one of the architects of Brexit, has made this abundantly clear: 'After Brexit,' he said in a conversation with Michel Barnier, 'the European Union will no longer exist'. Boris Johnson's current rhetoric is less blunt, but it is consistent with the guiding principle of English foreign policy over the past four centuries, namely that the country has permanent interests, but no permanent allies.

The EDA and the other ESDP institutions only make sense as instruments of a comprehensive foreign and security policy for the European Union. Post-Brexit, that will be the Union of 27. It will not therefore be possible or appropriate to grant the UK special status in CSDP decision-making bodies after Brexit.

Karl von Wogau
Germany, EPP-ED (1979-2004)
kwogau@aol.com

NORTH MACEDONIA

NORTH MACEDONIA IN THE HEART OF THE BALKANS

After thirty years of dispute, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Greece agreed, in the 'Prespa Agreement', that the country should be renamed North Macedonia. It seemed that this was the last precondition for EU accession negotiations. Recently, however, Bulgaria has blocked North Macedonia on the basis of its opposition to the Macedonian language and its non-recognition of a Macedonian minority in Bulgaria. It was for these reasons that an FMA delegation to North Macedonia was organised. The Covid-19 emergency meant that it was the first virtual FMA delegation. No communication complications were encountered. The highest-ranking North Macedonian politicians set out the challenges and spoke of a strong desire and national commitment to joining the EU. A historical perspective makes it easier to understand the unenviable situation in which this young country in the heart of the Balkans now finds itself. Before the First World War, the territory was for decades a part of Bulgaria. The aftermath of that war saw the founding of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, incorporating part of Macedonia, which was divided between this kingdom and Greece.

Even at that time, Belgrade (later the capital of Yugoslavia) banned the use of the name Macedonia and its language. After the Second World War, when federal Yugoslavia was formed, Macedonia became one of its six republics, and in 1952 Macedonian became its official language. Slovenes from the post-war generation can understand and speak the languages of the other former Yugoslav republics; only Macedonian was different and largely incomprehensible to us. The Yugoslav republics cooperated with each other economically in accordance with the principles of a contract economy, directed by the Communist Party in Belgrade. In the 1991 independence processes, Macedonia was the only one of the former Yugoslav republics to achieve independence without war, but for three decades this small country, squeezed between countries to which it is historically connected, has had only modest military power and relatively low GDP. The pressures it has come under have various possible causes: from Serbia, due to its historical aspirations for a 'Greater Serbia', which to a large extent were responsible for the break-up of Yugoslavia; from Greece, owing to two thousand years of history and Alexander Great, who extended Macedonia all the way to India; and from Bulgaria, with its historical memory of having Macedonia within its territory for almost four decades. Macedonians' concern about being 'swamped' by Albanians should also be taken into account.

North Macedonia is again at the intersection of pressures in the Balkans today. It is also affected by

regional disputes, such as those between Serbia and Kosovo, and between Greece and Cyprus. However, their political orientation is towards finding peaceful solutions by diplomatic means. They stress that despite Greece blocking their EU application, they have not experienced a single incident. Slovenia and North Macedonia have always traditionally had good political and economic relations and this continues today. Stevo Pendarovski, the North Macedonian President, says that Slovenia and Croatia are their example to follow on the path to the EU. North Macedonia exports quality wine, vegetables and fruit. Economic cooperation in the region continues regardless of the various obstacles and political disputes. The country's cultural heritage, its natural features and the hospitality of its people need to be experienced first-hand. The country offers an unforgettable experience at the heart of the Balkans. EU integration can bring to North Macedonia, among other things, freedom of movement, which is something those of us with experience of the Iron Curtain can appreciate.



H.E. Mr. Stevo Pendarovski, President of North Macedonia, during the virtual meeting

Zofija Mazej Kukovič
Slovenia, EPP-ED (2011-2014)
zofija.mazejkukovic@gmail.com

EU ACCESSION BUDGET INVESTMENT IN NORTH MACEDONIA

“We have a lot of history here, far too much. What we need is a bit more future”, the FMA virtual study visit to North Macedonia was told by Nikola Dimitrov, Deputy Prime Minister for European Affairs. I had heard him say it before when I was in Skopje for the Joint Parliamentary Committee with the then Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. It’s a line that well sums up the political dynamics of North Macedonia’s long road to EU accession.

A far-sighted and politically brave agreement struck between former Greek PM, Alex Tsipras and his FRYM counterpart, Zoran Zaev, road mapped the resolution of longstanding barriers to accession talks. The Prespes Agreement was ratified somewhat against the odds and the constitution of FRYM duly amended to re-name the country as North Macedonia. Progress on relations with Bulgaria has followed and NATO membership duly came about on 27 March. The scale of the political challenges that have been overcome must now be rewarded. EU Accession, however, remains a long way off. Fundamental challenges in governmental, economic and rule of law standards will be required before accession

can become reality and the timeline is calibrated in years rather than months. The challenge for both the European Union and North Macedonia is to ensure progress is both demonstrable and sustainable. At present opinion polling shows 83% of the population backing EU membership, but the absence of progress can erode support and enthusiasm. While the blockages to progress could only be resolved in the West Balkans, the EU had excuses, now it has to demonstrate its political will to turn its West Balkan strategy from theory to practice. The European Union Budget will be an important tool in ensuring accession progresses and that demonstrable benefits are delivered. The priority for the North Macedonian Government is infrastructure improvement. Lines of communication between capitals in neighbouring states are limited and frequently tortuous. Improvements in connections to neighbouring capitals and key centres: Tirana, Sofia and Thessaloniki, are the most obvious drivers for an effective return on EU accession investment in terms of economic performance. The second priority is digital infrastructure. North Macedonian

politicians have adopted an approach to technology that draws heavily on the experience of Estonia and other small EU member states. For the EU there are good reasons to direct accession funding toward the strategy. North Macedonia can become a successful digital economy but to do so it needs substantial improvements in cyber security. Enabling secure digital development of a potential member state is also self-evidently in the interests of the Union.

The third priority must be cultural and educational investment through the substantial expansion of programme-linked funding, in particular Erasmus+, but also Horizon and Creative Europe. There is a clear synergy with digital investment and the creation of opportunities for young citizenry to see their enthusiasm for the EU realising life opportunities.

Demonstrable economic and social progress in North Macedonia and Albania through EU budget pre-accession investment matters not just to those populations but sends a clear signal to the other states in the West Balkans with aspirations of EU accession: make the necessary changes and real progress will follow. North Macedonia has come a long way from Prespes, the onward route to Brussels now requires investment.



A moment of the virtual meeting with H.E. Mr. Nikola Dimitrov, Deputy Prime Minister for European Affairs

John Howarth

United Kingdom, S&D (2017-2020)

john@pwbpolicy.com
@johnhowarth1958

THE SITUATION OF RULE OF LAW IN NORTH MACEDONIA

Democracy in North Macedonia was under serious threat for almost a decade between 2006 and 2016, when the judiciary, public prosecution, police and media were under the control of the former government, ruling VMRO-DPMNE party and its leader and ex-Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski. After the wiretapping scandal erupted in 2015 and contents of wiretapped conversations were publicly disclosed, the European Commission described the country in 2016 as a "state and institutional capture". The main features of the captured rule of law and captured judiciary were clientelistic relations between the judiciary and political elites, manipulation of the Automated Court Case Management Information System, culture of absolute impunity of politicians amid a surge of political corruption, misuse of amnesty, lack of accountability of public prosecutors, political pressure on the police in the initial stages of criminal proceeding, abuse of institutions and the lack of clear long-term reforms in the judiciary, public prosecution, the police and secret services. Today, despite the fact that VMRO-DPMNE is no longer in power and its leader and former Prime Minister Gruevski is in exile in Viktor Orbán's Hungary, traits of state capture remain in the judiciary, public prosecution and police. We must uncover the extent of the "state capture" in order to be able to understand existing institutional weaknesses, but also to develop strategies for early detection, prevention and proper sanctioning of such abuses. Progress made in the last four



years in the area of rule of law and judiciary are very well described in the 2019 European Commission country report as well as in the up-date on the pace of the reforms released in March 2020. European Commission's recommendation for starting the accession talks, was followed by the EU Council decision in June 2020 stipulating that the first intergovernmental conference between EU and North Macedonia should take place by the end of this year. At this point, I would like to reiterate civil society call that the accession talks need to start as soon as possible. In order to secure commitment and progress in the reforms and democratization of the society overall, the government should among other things conduct a comprehensive assessment of the root causes of "state capture" and strengthen the ability of the judiciary, public prosecution and the police to be proactive in the fight against corruption. Political influence should be removed and the Parliament should select non-judge members in the Judicial Council. There should be

full and timely implementation of the procedures on enforcement requests for ECtHR decisions and authorized bodies should conduct mandatory and timely audits of the use of the ACCMIS (Automated Court Case Management Information System). Newly adopted changes to the accession negotiations methodology would give more powers to the EU to act when acceding country shows significant backsliding under the rule of law. The European Union should therefore continue to demonstrate political will in order to make the upcoming negotiations process with North Macedonia more predictable, dynamic and credible.

Fani Karanfilova-Panovska
Executive Director
Foundation Open Society-
Macedonia

NORTH MACEDONIA: CULTURAL HERITAGE AND ...

North Macedonia, an ethnic melting pot at the heart of the Balkans, has an incomparable artistic, historical and cultural heritage.

Known for its enchanting religious sites, such as churches and monasteries, built between the 11th and 16th centuries, it has preserved some magnificent Byzantine frescoes and icons portraying refined masterpieces of the Macedonian school of ecclesiastical painting.

From the baroque perspectives and Ottoman memories of Skopje to its canyons and orthodox monasteries, such as the Monasteries of St. Jovan Bigorski, St. Clement and St. Panteleimon, and to the blue lakes in the south, such as Lake Ohrid, it is a magical place, a gem of peace and tranquillity, which provides a unique refuge for numerous endemic species of flora and fauna. It is also home to the town of Ohrid – one of the oldest human settlements in Europe, the ancient capital of the Bulgarian Empire – of great historical and cultural value – and a UNESCO world heritage site since 1979. It formerly had 365 Orthodox churches and used to be called the 'Jerusalem of the Balkans'. It now

has fewer churches, but which house illustrious examples of Byzantine art and architecture which should be safeguarded and promoted – as opposed to newer buildings – including through targeted restoration measures specifically designed for historic buildings.

The Orthodox Ss. Cyril and Methodius Cathedral, joint patron saints of Europe, can be found in Tetovo.

In the capital, which was rebuilt after the disastrous earthquake in 1963, the Old Bazaar – the largest in the Balkans – can be admired, alongside the market and the main mosques, such as that of Mustafa Pasha, as well as the National Art Gallery, the old Turkish bath converted into a museum in 1948. The Memorial House of Saint Mother Teresa, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979, is certainly of particular historical and spiritual value. The house was built on the ruins of the Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, where she had been baptised and where she used to pray.

The nation has a great legacy in terms of its art, architecture and music, to the extent that its

festivals, involving performances, music, theatre and cinema, are well known. Recently, for example, the Giffoni Youth Film Festival was held there – a meeting point for different generations and a festival which, based in Skopje, brought together film buffs, culture and ideas, with many of its events also online.

It is important to bear in mind that, at the end of last year, the conflicts in the Balkans were unfortunately marked by the ferocity with which significant cultural heritage was destroyed, or 'ethnically cleansed', in the desire to destroy symbols that constitute the heritage which represents the most profound identity of a people.

In North Macedonia, religious and ethnic identities often coincide and today, Muslims cohabit peacefully with Orthodox Christians and churches with mosques. The Macedonian Orthodox Church (64.8 %) is the main religion for Macedonian Slavs; Islam (33.3 %) is practised mostly by the Albanian population and by the Torbesh and Turkish minorities; the Catholic Church (0.72 %), by Albanians, with a dozen or so parishes, and 1.5 % are represented by other unspecified faiths (e.g. those of the Aromanians and Roma).

The country is a mosaic of cultures, ethnicities and religions – where Macedonian and Albanian are the main languages spoken – surrounded by Serbia, Albania, Greece and Bulgaria. But it is precisely the difficult relations with its neighbouring states that have been one of the reasons preventing North Macedonia from 'taking off', together with its scarcity of resources and poor infrastructure.



A moment of the meeting with the President of the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia, (the Sobranie), H.E. Mr Talat Xhaferi

...INFRASTRUCTURE ON THE ROAD TOWARDS THE EU

Even now, Sofia has once again brought up the issue of the historical and cultural legacy that had been the subject of lengthy disputes – which appeared to have been settled three years ago with the signing of the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation – according to which Macedonian is considered to be a Bulgarian dialect and the Macedonian national hero Goce Delčev is in actual fact of Bulgarian ethnicity.

In 2019, the country resolved its fierce dispute with Greece by changing its name to 'North Macedonia' and in March it officially joined NATO, hoping to be able to join the European Union in 2025. The EU enlargement process to the Balkans has slowed down dramatically owing to the COVID and Brexit crises. With its October communication entitled 'Enhancing the accession process – A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans', the Commission is assessing the key progress made in each country: this covers, inter alia, the rule of law and judicial culture, the fight against corruption, freedom of expression and media pluralism. Josep Borrell, Vice-President of the Commission/ High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs, stated: 'The citizens of the Western Balkans are part of Europe and we have a shared interest in helping these six partners move forward on their EU path. With the Economic and Investment Plan, we are backing our Enlargement Package assessment with action, providing deep and strong support for economic recovery and reform – for a modern, greener and more prosperous Western Balkans delivering better to their citizens on



A moment of the meeting with the Chair of the Committee on European Affairs, Dr Arbr Ademi

the road to the EU'. He went on to say that there would be a 'rigorous assessment' of the transposition of the EU acquis, while Olivér Várhelyi, EU Commissioner for Enlargement, reiterated the need for 'rigorous but fair assessments', confirming further progress in the implementation of reforms in North Macedonia, which, in March, had managed to secure the long-awaited opening of accession negotiations, and is preparing itself for the first intergovernmental conferences.

The geographical location of North Macedonia, at the heart of the Balkan peninsula, has contributed substantially to the development of the transport network and, above all, of the country's road system, which includes the two interlinked pan-European corridors: Corridor VIII, East-West, and Corridor X, North-South.

The country, a strategic partner in areas such as immigration and terrorism, is moderately prepared when it comes to the transport sector. Further political efforts are still needed to deliver the necessary sectoral reforms; to strengthen the operational and administrative capacity of inspection bodies and to develop enforcement capacity

in order to reduce fatal accidents on roads and railways, including by adopting legislation on Intelligent Transport Systems (ITS) and combined transport, working on a strategic framework for the implementation of ITS and core networks.

In particular, the country should further strengthen the operational and technical capacity of all management institutions and stakeholders involved in the development of the Trans-European Transport Networks (TEN-T) and Trans-European Energy Networks (TEN-E), and harmonise its legal framework with the Trans-European Network Regulation.

It is vital that North Macedonia continue its reforms, in order to facilitate the movement of resources towards more productive opportunities, to complete its work on infrastructure and structural transformation, promoting the adoption and innovation of technology, developing new employment opportunities and making effective use of its strategic position.

Monica Baldi
Italy, EPP-ED (1994-1999)
baldi.monica@email.it

INTERETHNIC DIALOGUE AND RIGHTS OF WOMEN

Thanks to an online 'Study visit' to North Macedonia by representatives of our association (FMA), we now have a much clearer understanding of the problems this small country and candidate for EU membership currently faces.

North Macedonia's location and diverse ethnic make-up have influenced the country's history, politics and record on women's rights. The states that emerged from the ruins of the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century still bear the burden of their imperial past. Since breaking away from Yugoslavia in 1991, North Macedonia has functioned as an independent multi-ethnic state. In my opinion, the country's greatest achievement is that it has managed to operate as a unified state that brings together Macedonians (64%), Albanians (25.2%), Turks (2.7%) and Roma (1.8%) as well as smaller numbers of Serbs, Bosnians and Vlachs (according to the most recent 2002 census). Under the constitution, all ethnic groups enjoy the same legal rights and the state protects and promotes their respective cultures. Moreover, minority groups can use their own language in official contexts if they make up at least 20% of the population of their municipality, while Albanian MPs can use their language in the parliament. Šuto Orizari, a suburb of Skopje, has adopted Romani as an official language; meanwhile, the government has demonstrated a firm political commitment to integrating the Roma people into Macedonian society and improving their living conditions, mainly through education. It should also be noted that many women led NGOs are



Anna Karamanou during the virtual study visit

working in the country to improve life for its Roma population. Women have contributed a great deal to the political discussion over the last 30 years, alongside organisations that have done important work to promote international dialogue, reconciliation and the peaceful coexistence of the country's various communities. The feminist movement has grown substantially over the years, booming around the late 1990s and the early 2000s, and it has managed to unite women from different ethnic groups and faiths as well as representatives of political parties, popular organisations and even individual women activists. Relations, however, were often marred by violent ethnic clashes primarily between Albanians and Macedonians, culminating in seven deaths in 2012. Moreover, the rise of nationalist movements between 2006 and 2017 impeded the progress that had been made in previous years to resolve external conflicts and improve relations with Greece and Bulgaria. After the elections in 2017 and more recently in July 2020 saw Zoran Zaev's pro-European coalition come to power, both international relations and tensions between ethnic groups have improved, especially after the Prespa Agreement (July 2018),

which opened up the possibility for the country to join both NATO and the EU. In addition, the feminist movement was able to ensure that at least 40% of local and parliamentary ballots featured women candidates, and that laws were passed against domestic violence, sexual harassment and workplace discrimination. The movement was also able to protect both abortion and LGBTQI rights. Despite this progress, however, women still struggle to find employment in North Macedonia, with 39% of women in work compared to 61% of men. Meanwhile, women continue to be under-represented in government and other leadership positions: for example, none of the country's four vice presidents are women and only 6 of its 87 mayors are female. Of course, problematic patriarchal stereotypes persist, alongside ethnic and communal tensions. For this reason, we believe that empowering women and working towards real sexual equality will help to modernise North Macedonia and align it more closely with European values.

Anna Karamanou
Greece, S&D (1997-2004)
annkaramanou@gmail.com

MEETING WITH THE YOUNG GENERATION

In October a group of former MEPs met with university students from 5 universities in North Macedonia via zoom at the end of a virtual study visit to Skopje. After a short introductory speech from Dr Hans-Gert Pöttering (FMA President and Former President of the European Parliament) the meeting was opened up for a Q&A session.

Although the students were a little overawed at first and hesitant to speak, FMA member Jackie Jones, a former Professor of Law, helped to break the ice by asking the students to say something about themselves and their studies. Many were studying law, International Relations, European Affairs and related subjects. They were very keen to know how long it would be before Northern Macedonia would be a fully fledged member of the EU. Already their generation have missed out on many opportunities and it was obvious that the students shared our European values and were keen to experience the benefits enjoyed by their peers in neighbouring countries that have already joined the bloc. As a former member of the Education and Culture Committee I was able to take some credit for the broadening out of the Erasmus+

scheme to include a wider demographic of young people not just university students. North Macedonian youth are able to participate in aspects of the scheme and also the newer European Solidarity Corps programme which focuses on volunteering.

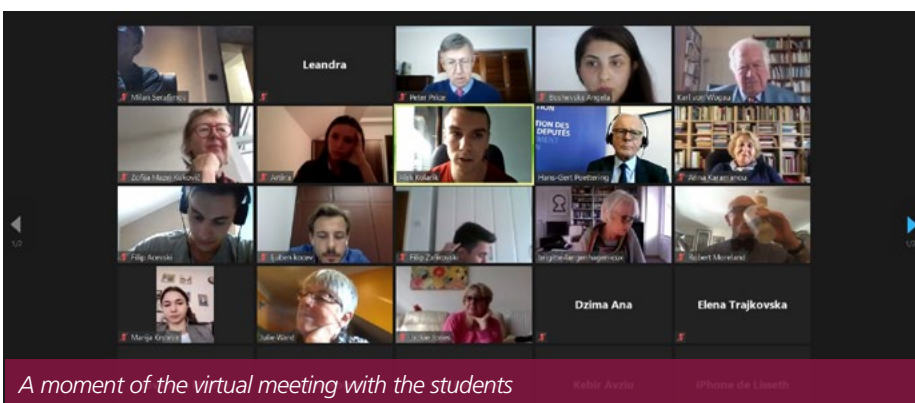
Unsurprisingly, issues related to historic problems between North Macedonia and its neighbours, Bulgaria and Greece, were discussed. Students were reminded that the successful resolution of the name dispute with Greece demonstrates that even the most difficult issues can be solved with political will and that the EU was gearing up to progress the accession process after a year of delays that began when President Macron blocked agreement at the Council Summit in October 2019. We emphasised that our study visit was evidence of a renewed political effort to bring the remaining Balkans countries into the European family, recognising that peace and stability in the region means a peaceful and secure Europe for all.

We enjoyed a lively discussion about what it means to be an EU Member State with comments about the regrettable withdrawal of the UK and references to the unfortunate

backsliding by some Member States particularly with regard to women's rights and gender equality. North Macedonia has made more progress than some Member States by ratifying the Istanbul Convention. Meanwhile, improvements are being made regarding LGBT rights at a legislative level but there's still a lot of ground to make up.

Female students on the call were particularly appreciative to hear strong women politicians:

"I've been so passionate about women's rights and gender equality my whole life so when you mentioned it on the zoom meeting, I had to say something," wrote Artina Mustafi, a law student from Tetovo, in a twitter message she sent to me later. "As a muslim feminist, I get a lot of Islamophobic, sexist and misogynistic DMs from people who think that it's absurd to identify as a feminist since I'm Muslim... but I've never stopped talking about how Islam is inherently feminist and I'll never stop fighting against racism, homophobia, xenophobia even though I live in the Balkans, which I think makes it a little bit harder since people are not that open minded. I'm willing to do everything to help my country change for the better. We are stronger together..."



Julie Ward

United Kingdom, S&D (2014-2020)

julie4nw@gmail.com

@julie4nw

A moment of the virtual meeting with the students

A DREAM FOR A NORTH MACEDONIA CITIZEN

I am Viola Mahmudi, a law student. Every citizen of the Republic of North Macedonia wants our country to be part of the EU.

If my country became part of the EU, I would hope, firstly, that salaries would go up, because they are very low here. It is impossible for families to live a normal life on minimum wage, because expenses such as electricity, telephone bills and food are very high.

I would like more jobs to be created and for more than half of the people receiving unemployment benefit to be given jobs so that they do not have to rely on money or favours from political parties, something which is very common in the Republic of North Macedonia.

One of the most important things I would like to see would be an end to corruption, because in my country, corruption prevails in all institutions, hospitals, schools and universities – with many reliant on the support of a particular political party.

I would also like to see better

infrastructure. For example, I would like to see more people use public transport so that we can have cleaner air. I would also like to see improved conditions for people with special needs, who are often overlooked.

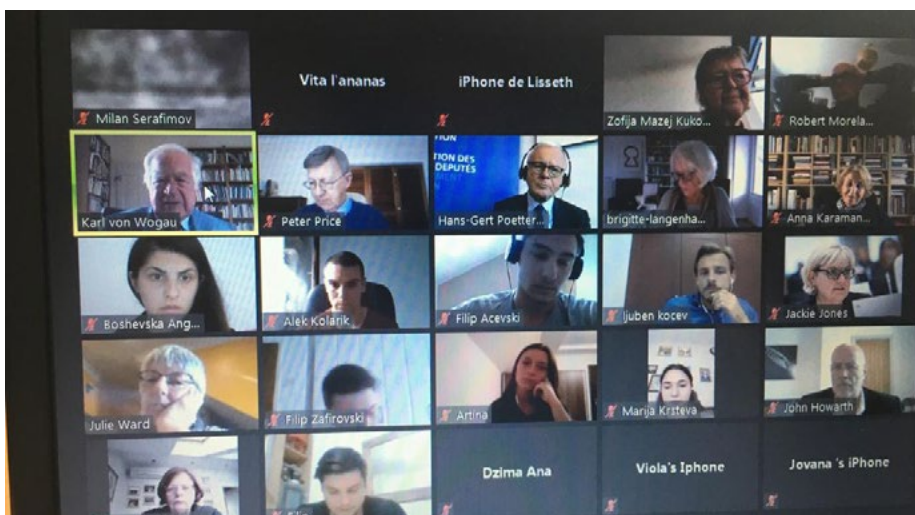
This could include installing audible signals at pedestrian crossings and providing ramps to facilitate access to public buildings.

Regional cooperation in the Balkans still needs more work because there is a lot of tension between peoples of different ethnicities. However, I think that this situation will be resolved in the near future because we all want to live in harmony. We have all experienced wars with senseless killings.

Inter-ethnic dialogue in the Balkans will not be resolved until the day when corruption and electoral fraud are stamped out and until political parties and the people in them are aware that the main goal for themselves and for every citizen of the Balkan countries is to follow in the example of EU countries. As long

as there are irresponsible people in our countries who want to steal for themselves, with the poor being left to deal with the consequences, inter-ethnic dialogue in the Balkans will always be a failure.

When it comes to the future of these countries, many young people end up getting left behind. Even student protests in our countries are pointless because the sons and daughters of ministry directors or similar pass all of their exams without ever attending class, and they then go on to take jobs away from more deserving students. The same is true in all Balkan countries. So my question is, how can there ever be regional cooperation with these people in charge?



A moment of the virtual meeting with the students

Viola Mahmudi

Student at University of Tetovo
v.mahmudi218050@unite.edu.mk

IF NORTH MACEDONIA JOINED THE EU ...



Photo by Thiago Rocha on Unsplash

My expectations from the accession of North Macedonia to the EU, a community of stability, democracy, security and prosperity, are high. I would expect to see the standard of living in general improve and to see increased economic development, including gross domestic product growth, higher wages and pensions, free movement of labour, goods, services and capital, growth of the internal market and domestic demand, and investment in achieving fair competition.

I think that EU membership would bring about reform in the North Macedonian judicial system, which would make courts unbiased and fair, make them issue transparent rulings regardless of race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity or age, and help to reduce the backlog of cases pending trial. I would also expect such a judicial reform to bring in judges who have the requisite legal training, who have not been involved in criminal offences in the past or while in office, and whose decisions

are not influenced by political parties or the policies they support; in short, judges that meet the vetting criteria. I would also expect to see a reform of the executive branch, with the government appointing adequately trained officials with the right skills to successfully lead their respective departments. By doing so, the government will reap success in all areas of the executive branch, both in terms of political leadership and when it comes to managing and leading individual departments. What is more, the executive branch should place special emphasis on the fair distribution of resources and ensure that departments are committed to achieving institutional progress and ensuring that the head of state openly exercises his or her legal rights in relation to the departments of the executive branch.

Most human rights are enshrined in North Macedonia's Constitution. If North Macedonia is to join the EU, it has to develop these rights and harmonise them with EU

legislation. For example: Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) states 'No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment', which is not yet fully implemented in North Macedonia. Article 8 ECHR lays down the right to respect for private and family life, which is also often violated in North Macedonia. Article 9 ECHR on 'Freedom of Thought, Conscience and Religion' is not upheld because we are a multi-confessional and multi-ethnic state and this right has suffered consistent blows. Article 10 ECHR covers freedom of expression, which in North Macedonia is threatened by a number of dominant factors, including political, economic, ethnic and religious ones. Finally, Article 14 ECHR covers the right not to be discriminated against, observance of which has intermittently improved over time in North Macedonia – comparing pluralism under Yugoslavia to the present situation – as successive political governments have abused or upheld it.

Against this background, I believe that North Macedonia should work consistently and effectively at meeting the EU's legal criteria in order to accelerate the accession process, given that EU membership is a crucial issue for the state and its citizens.

Artina Mustafi

Student at University of Tetovo
a.mustafi219002@unite.edu.mk