

**Public Lecture by Richard Howitt MEP, Foreign Affairs
Committee, European Parliament to mark standing down as
Rapporteur on EU accession**

Skopje, 4 December 2014

First, I want to say it has been a privilege to serve as Rapporteur working to try to bring your country closer to EU membership.

In my new role in the European Parliament I promise you I will continue to advance that aim.

I have been elected as spokesperson for my political group for the whole Foreign Affairs Committee and for all countries, but I am genuinely sorry that means that this is not compatible with me being able to continue my role with you in particular.

Nevertheless, let me tell you that I have opted to remain Shadow Rapporteur for your country on behalf of my political group, which will mean I will continue to be part of negotiating parliamentary positions on your country's EU membership.

I am deliberately in Skopje this week in a joint visit with my successor, to introduce him, to demonstrate our joint commitment and to do my utmost to help him to be successful.

I believe he will show the same enthusiasm for the country as I have always sought to show myself.

And I believe we will offer continuity in the European Parliament in seeking to help your country to advance.

I use the word "enthusiasm" because I deliberately got to know your country and I want to say how much I have genuinely enjoyed each of my visits here.

I want to offer sincere thanks for the deep warmth and friendship I have

received from many in your society.

As some of you know, I didn't just come here as a politician but, as a private citizen, I also brought my own family here on holiday - I have to say at my own personal expense. We enjoyed the beauty of your country, its diversity and its wonderful people.

Afterwards, when my children saw the Macedonian flag flying at the London Olympics, they were excited. And they want to come back here too.

Indeed my fourteen year old daughter once said to me, as I explained one of my visits: Why don't you just draw up a bit of paper, saying "I agree to all the terms and conditions of the European Union," get them to tick a box at the bottom, sign it and then they can join tomorrow?!

I wish it was as easy as that.

But it isn't.

Am I disappointed that we have not made more progress than we have?

Yes, of course I am.

I have always said that those of us from the European Union can't want a European future for your country more than the people of the country want for yourselves.

Occasionally I have felt that some of you may not, and I do stand by this statement.

However, I recognise my own disappointments simply match a deep and genuine disappointment of many in this country, that greater progress towards the EU has not been achieved.

And although our feelings cannot be more than yours, I hope people here will understand that there are friends of this country who do fully share your feelings, your frustrations and disappointments.

Today I express my hope that this country and its people will remain committed

to a future in the European Union

Keeping faith that it can happen and that it will happen.

And to say that your determination, your enthusiasm, your commitment is crucial to making it happen.

Understand too that those of us who say we want it to happen are ourselves making this statement in good faith.

We have faith in your country's European future.

And I have to say that I do not see any viable alternative for your country.

There are enough frozen conflicts in Central Europe.

And I do not want this country to become a new frozen conflict, but one inside the external geographical boundaries of the European Union itself.

What are some of my greatest satisfactions working as Rapporteur for your country?

The way people here have genuinely welcomed and opened up to me in my work in each and every one of my visits.
Without doubt.

I am satisfied that in each year I have delivered large European Parliament majorities, across the political spectrum, in favour of the start of EU accession talks for your country.

Always paragraph one, point one and without qualification.

I am satisfied that we have defended the visa liberalisation regime, which I know is so important to people here - as a sign as to whether Europe is really keeping the door open to you.

I have very much valued my relationship with outgoing Commissioner Stefan Füle.

I believe he was an excellent Commissioner and I hope our record showed a good example of Europe's ability to work together.

I have already begun to build a good relationship with his successor, Johannes Hahn. I believe he will give great emphasis, among other things, to the economic case for your EU membership, a case which I know is strongly felt here by everyone and much-needed for your country.

I hope you will agree, when I record points of personal satisfaction, that I have always kept my own promises as well.

I'm proud that, despite many predictions to the contrary, I believe I was able to maintain a reputation for political impartiality and to retain respectful and constructive relations with political actors across the different political parties in the country.

I am satisfied with the way those parties have engaged with their equivalents in European Union countries, which is part of bringing you in to the EU family. And I encourage this to continue in the future.

I am satisfied that I have not avoided difficult questions such as the situation of Roma peoples or of recognition of the rights of LGBT people.

Overall I recognise that some of my own criticisms would have been hard to accept. And I accept there are some issues where some would have been disappointed that I didn't go further.

But throughout I adhered to my promise to be as objective as possible and to offer criticisms which were friendly in character because they were always motivated by a desire for this country to succeed.

I believe that is the right position for someone in my position to take and that is part of the friendly advice which I offer to my successor too.

I do record a great satisfaction in my role in assisting to negotiate the agreement between the political parties dated 1 March 2013, even if this negotiation failed to be as long-lasting as I would wish.

What are my biggest disappointments?

Of course that a commitment was made at Thessaloniki to all Western Balkans countries, and that there is real concern that the European Union does not have the collective will to honour the commitment made.

My own concern has been intensified that Europe's own strategic interests in relation to the country and the region could be compromised, if EU countries allow ourselves to have a false complacency about the maintenance of political status quo in Skopje.

On the name issue.

There may be issues about sequencing.

There may be a proper debate about the UN process towards mediation.

There may be a proper sense of grievance - perhaps on both sides.

But I can only conclude that there is no shortcut which will be able to achieve EU membership for this country, without a mutually agreed, negotiated solution to the name dispute.

And this is ultimately an issue of political will between the two capitals.

I believe there was a timeframe when a solution was possible but that the opportunity was not taken.

I do not know when a similar window will open again.

But what I do know is that, when it does, this country has to be ready to take it - not just its Government but its people too.

And that requires consistent advocacy towards a solution within the country, and leaders at all levels and in different spheres being willing to undertake that advocacy.

In terms of my personal position, I never pretended I could be the mediator. But I did travel to Athens and to Sofia too to undertake private discussions, and did my best to at least try to foster a better atmosphere and environment in which agreement could be reached.

In the European Parliament and in all my public pronouncements, I referred to the name issue in a way which sought to be respectful to both sides, and which succeeded in avoiding battles about the name issue within the European Parliament itself.

Each year I was confronted by dozens of amendments from colleagues who quite simply wanted to use my own text to 'score points' in favour of their own side or deliberately to provoke the other.

And each year I was able to prevent them doing so.

But I did understand the sense of grievance here and wanted to show that the feelings of the people here were important in Brussels.

So I adopted what I thought was the right approach objectively and legally, to use the adjective "Macedonian" in my own text and to persuade the European Commission to do the same.

And in a similar way during each of my visits, I have sought to meet ordinary people of the country, not just its politicians or other leaders.

I've been in schools, talked with parents and with children. I've met young people's groups and students. I've met local Mayors. I've been in Roma communities. I witnessed the elections high up in remote mountain villages.

Each of these was important for my own understanding.

But I hope in doing this, to have continuously sent a message that European Union membership isn't simply about the Government of the country or about this country as a nation state. It's for the people of this country, your well-being, your future and that of your children.

For all its flaws, the European Union has brought political unity out of our own

history of conflict and division. The EU has been an island in the world of relative peace, stability and of prosperity.

I wanted to show throughout my work and I want to repeat to you today: joining the European Union is an aspiration which you are right to cherish.

It's an aspiration for which it's worth making difficult compromises to achieve.

It is a better future for this country.

It is the only good future for this country.

And what is my biggest worry?

I do worry about cohesion in the country and believe it is still necessary to be vigilant in preventing any development which could lead to a return to conflict.

I agree with Carl Bildt, then Swedish Foreign Minister, when he said - I paraphrase - Europe must not wait to focus on a country after conflict has arisen but must show the intelligence to do so to prevent it happening.

The history of religious difference is unique in this country.

Nevertheless the challenges of religious differences are common to all our countries. And non-discrimination on the basis of religion and belief is a core value of the European Union and part of fundamental human rights in the United Nations.

International engagement must help you to promote true and lasting reconciliation here.

Throughout I have remained aware of how fragile the situation could be here.

But I want to record how the Ohrid Framework Agreement was a truly historic act, one which showed leadership in the region and one which saved lives.

One of the further satisfactions of my time as Rapporteur was to be present and to take part in the events marking its tenth anniversary.

I am worried that the actions promised at the time of the review are being forgotten. They must not be.

But my appeal to you today as well, is for the spirit not just the letter of Ohrid to remain - however difficult that sometimes may seem.

Now let me turn to why we haven't seen as much progress towards Europe as everyone in this room would have liked to have seen?

I have tried different strategies to seek to make a breakthrough and to make progress.

That the name issue is dealt with "in the early phase of the negotiations" rather than prior to them starting.

That the country is awarded "functioning market economy status."

I have been prepared to criticise the UN process whilst being careful not to undermine it.

But perhaps one of the ways we can make further progress might be by reforming the approach within the UN itself.

Where we are already fellow Member States.

I have called for there to be a quantification of the costs of non-enlargement.

I have recommended an immediate start to the screening process.

I have sought to link progress here to progress elsewhere.

Conversely I have used the argument that you must be treated on your merits, irrespective of others.

And it is a question of merit.

All we are talking about is starting talks, not concluding them.

And I remain firmly in the belief that you sufficiently meet the Copenhagen criteria in order to be able to start accession talks.

Now let me say a word, next, about how I've sought to deal with the repeated failures each December, for the European Council to act on the positive recommendation of the European Commission and the European Parliament.

We came closest to success in 2012 by the way, which made what happened next even more disappointing.

Nevertheless this demonstrated a point to European politicians that what they do there does have consequences here.

That is not an excuse for anyone to fail to take their responsibilities here, but represents a statement of our mutual responsibility.

Over the period I've been Rapporteur, I've worked with some Member States and with our friends in the United States, who at different times have worked very hard to try to make a difference.

I've pressed a number of EU presidencies not to allow your country to be - what I have described in simple terms - as "left behind."

But I think it is only responsible to share a brutal truth with you today.

Some of them have been and are willing to leave this country behind.

Whatever their concerns, the problems of Skopje were not at the same level in their minds as the problems of Belgrade-Pristina, of Sarajevo or indeed of Ankara.

Please don't take this as a message to envy or even to start to compete with your neighbours. One clear aspect of your country's progress has been its engagement and leadership in the wider region, for which I congratulate you.

But I make a wider point that in wanting deep engagement from EU Foreign Ministers, you are competing with complex situations in the wider region and in

the world.

We're asking them to come to difficult decisions about Skopje, when they're worrying about Kabul, Baghdad, Jerusalem, Cairo and Kiev.

And that brutal truth is that this country hasn't been and may not be important enough in that reckoning, to lead EU member states to want to do the difficult things to make the diplomatic breakthrough here.

I've seen countries engaged with your issues who have in practice walked away.

They remain engaged in name but I've seen in name only.

They've not been convinced that this country was willing to do the things it had to do on its side.

And I'm not simply talking about the name issue.

And so the outcome is that you are left behind.

I don't like or agree with that.

But my message is that to change it will not come from outside.

The change has to come, I suggest, from within the country.

Which brings me to the whole issue of reform.

Of course adapting your national legislation to meet the European Union acquis is an immense effort.

But the word 'reform' has become a truism, even a mantra of the EU enlargement process.

No-one says or can say that they are against reform. And vast numbers of strategies and action plans and programmes of reform are designed - and to some extent are delivered - all in fine detail.

One of the things I chose to do was to sit in the offices with your national civil servants responsible for the reform process. To show them how seriously their work is perceived to be and to personally thank them for their continuing efforts.

I want to place on record my respect for the professional, committed and conscientious way those officials conduct their duties.

I want to pay the same respect and thanks to all the EU Delegation colleagues in Skopje and to the group of EU ambassadors here - to acknowledge the great cooperation and assistance which they have given to me in my work too.

And which I have sought to give to them.

However when it comes to the reform process, my experience as Rapporteur for your country and, comparing it with other candidate countries, is that the incentive to make the most difficult reforms comes only as the real prospect of EU accession draws nearer.

Some of the sensitive changes that need to happen in this country on procurement, on combatting corruption, on judicial reform, on media plurality have indeed begun. But I do have the impression that the decisive changes, the most significant reforms necessary, are still a long way away.

That budget decisions too do not yet fully reflect the commitments made.

I hope as a country you will not choose to wait. I believe big steps now will be seen outside and can help to change external perceptions and thus change the decisions needed from outside.

But that requires political will that only you within the country can determine.

And let me say some of the most difficult moments I have had to deal with as Rapporteur have been where there has been the appearance of backsliding.

Momentum appears to me to be a key facet of the EU enlargement process- not just in this country.

And not simply the absence of reform but the appearance of deterioration, or going backwards, is deeply damaging to the prospects of success.

It fundamentally questions the commitment to reform itself.

This is the bicycle where you have to keep moving forward in order not to fall off altogether.

And I do urge you to do everything possible to avoid backsliding in all of the sensitive areas, where you know your country is under scrutiny.

Now as Rapporteur, I have always sought to encourage you to seek to avoid misunderstandings, gestures, statements or actions which could provoke opposition from your neighbours - irrespective of whether there is provocation in return, intentional or unintentional.

As someone from Western Europe, I have come to respect the extra importance history plays in the politics of South East Europe.

In the political tradition of my own country, politics is more about the future than the past. Indeed sometimes as politicians, we get frustrated at how short the memory is in our electorate.

But I acknowledge that it is different here.

It is why I made a point of congratulating you in one of the parliamentary reports I authored on your country's success in the European Basketball Championships.

Some criticised me for encouraging what they considered to be an unhelpful point.

But partly as a sports fan myself, I believe in the power of sport to bring people together.

More than that, I wanted to send a signal in Brussels that we can respect legitimate national pride and patriotism here, as distinct from ultra-nationalism here or anywhere else, which must always be opposed.

Indeed to do one may actually assist in preventing the other.

But I do admit that I haven't found it easy to navigate the issues which have arisen concerning national monuments and religious symbols.

One suggestion I have made to your leaders is for you to create some public artworks that send a very different signal within the country and outside it: one of tolerance, reconciliation and of peace.

Of course you have already done this in relation to your Holocaust Memorial Museum, which honours an important memory for our whole world.

I do not compare what happened to Europe's Jews to any other division in our world. Any such comparison is invidious.

But the national museum of my country, the British Museum, was established to raise understanding and to combat bigotry and intolerance at a time when anti-Catholic, anti-Jewish sentiment was prevalent in Great Britain. The Imperial War Museum in London honours those who have fought and died for my country, but it faithfully reflects the true horrors of war and contributes to educate new generations on the need to build and maintain peace instead.

Not just in Britain but around Europe, we see symbols of inter-religious and international cooperation and unity.

From the massive works of the Spanish sculptor Eduardo Chillida Jusntegui to the pop art on the remaining fragments of the Berlin Wall in Germany.

I certainly don't want to encourage you to create more massive monuments at any great expense to your public purse.

But I suggest again that some small artworks representing the bringing of peoples together might indeed be a gesture or symbol which can help to do precisely that.

Next, I want to say a little about polarisation in the country.

Not division between ethnic or religious groups but between political parties and their opponents.

My country Great Britain has what is known as the 'mother of parliaments' in the world, dating from as long ago as the fourteenth century.

Key facets of parliamentary democracy are embedded in our history, including the separation of legislature and executive, the principle of ministerial accountability, the rights and obligations of a loyal opposition, the performance of parliamentary scrutiny, the existence of an independent civil service and the neutrality of the Speaker.

I promise you democracy is far from perfect in my own country and in other European Union states, but it has certainly been my ambition as Rapporteur to strengthen parliamentary democracy in this country and my conclusion today is that this work remains a priority for your country.

There will be people as always who will want me to pronounce on the current dispute between the major parties. But I have never sought to comment on who is right and who is wrong in this country and I will not do so this week.

Internal divisions cannot be solved from outside and it is up to those within the country to take responsibility for resolving differences.

On the principles.

I have always said that boycotts by political parties are the wrong step to take - and you will understand that I do not refer to just one political party in making that comment.

But I have always said too that proper respect for political opposition and for governmental accountability are essential elements of a healthy democracy in this country.

And I am of course concerned that the legal package following up the Committee of Inquiry recommendations set up through 1 March agreement including an improved budget process and for greater possibilities to set up committees of inquiry, are frozen today because of the current boycott.

My observation is that all parties have a responsibility to improve the functioning and legitimacy of parliament itself.

Instead I am saddened to record that there is a returning failure of political dialogue in this country.

The Sobranie is not yet fully trusted as a forum where political differences can be expressed and reconciled - and not just by one political party.

I hope our parliament-to-parliament contacts have begun to make a difference, to strengthen parliament itself as an institution.

I would like to encourage that to continue.

I see some of the differences between political parties today with genuine dismay.

A healthy democracy must also allow the expression of differences.

But I feel forced to have to warn again against the party interest superseding the national interest.

A certain level of consensus and of mutual respect for democratic standards is an essential prerequisite persuading international opinion that this country is ready to move forward.

Conversely, the failure of your institutions to be able to achieve this level of unity of respect, will be used by those who oppose you to hold this country back.

The question is not whether there are political differences in this country as there are in all countries, but in whether such political differences become some profound that they prevent the country from pursuing its strategic interests.

That is my worry.

And I would wish, today, to extend this comment on the scale of polarisation in

relation to the way that this is spread to your wider society.

Europe's motto is unity through diversity.

But in this country, real diversity in some areas of public life remains missing.

Still too many journalists and civil society organisations here define themselves, not by their own independence, but by their political affiliation.

I say "define themselves" because it is too easy - from outside - to suggest that this has somehow been determined by the politicians.

However the impression I have had is that this is more a product of the culture in your country and - let us be honest - in some of your neighbours too.

Indeed arguably in some of our European Union countries as well.

For the politicians, criticism has not simply to be tolerated but actually to be encouraged - not simply in your parliament but in the media and wider civil society too.

Journalistic ethics of free and fair reporting have to be encouraged in the media itself.

The 'association of journalists' here has sometimes been characterised as part of the political opposition.

But journalists are supposed to scrutinise those in power - whoever is in power. They are supposed to make those of us in the world of politics uncomfortable by asking and reporting hard questions about what we do?

It is part of our democracy that political debate can be conducted through a free and independent media.

Therefore I encourage all efforts to promote a more pluralistic media here in the years ahead.

Many of you in this audience will also be aware that - in a similar vein - I have

sought to encourage a more independent and pluralistic civil society too.

I set up a round table of civil society organisations on which I consulted on my work and which was carefully drawn from across the spectrum of different opinion within the country.

In those meetings, I called on civil society organisations to promote their own independence and objectivity, to make statements and undertake their activities true to the people and to the issues which they represent - to seek to avoid being identified simply by party political affiliation.

I included special sections in my reports giving recommendations on how civil society organisations as a whole can be strengthened.

Once again I hope those recommendations and the efforts which they represent can be continued in the future.

Let me finish today on a note of absolute humility.

I have talked to you in this lecture about my own country, of which I am proud. And about the virtues of European cooperation, of which I am equally proud.

But I do recognise our own mistakes, flaws and limitations.

I have never tried to 'preach' to your country that we are better, but to be self-critical about our own countries in the EU, in order to be able to share lessons and to build mutual understanding.

And some of you will remember that I arrived at Skopje Airport once in 2012, on an aircraft that had developed a fault and which was forced to make an emergency landing.

As the 'plane landed, I really didn't know if I would walk away from it alive.

Such a realisation of your own mortality is the most poignant reminder of the limitations of what we can achieve in politics or in life.

But I want to say this.

I have got no idea what I will do in my future career beyond what I am doing today and, of course, I hope it will be long, happy and fulfilling.

But if my 'plane today or tomorrow did crash and it all came to an end, the experience of working as a Rapporteur trying to achieve something with and for your country, is an experience I would be very happy to record as a highlight of my career and of what politics is meant to try to be.

It has been an incredible experience and has given me a life-long interest in your country which I promise I will not lose.

Once again I would like to thank you and, through you, I would like to thank all in this country for the privilege of being able to do this work.

And when I finish by wishing you well and say to you that I will never forget my commitment to you - I think you will understand that this is something which I really mean.

ENDS.