

Štefan Füle

European Commissioner for Enlargement and European
Neighbourhood Policy

Address at the plenary debate on the former Yugoslavic Republic of Macedonia

Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

European Parliament, Strasbourg

Strasbourg, 14 March 2012

President, Honourable Members of the European Parliament,

I am delighted to be discussing the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia with you - one week after I attended the hearing in the Parliament hosted by Mr. Howitt. Today will be yet another opportunity to take stock of the developments in the country during the last year.

I would like to thank especially Mr Howitt for the high quality report we are discussing today.

I am pleased that the European Parliament draft resolution broadly shares the Commission's findings in the 2011 Progress Report. Once again, and the third time in a row, there is a consensus between us that accession negotiations should start. As you are aware, the Council has not acted on the recommendation, but has stated its willingness to return to the issue during the Danish presidency.

It is in this context that I am travelling to Skopje later today to launch the High Level Accession Dialogue. Our aim is to move the country closer to the European Union and to keep the EU agenda as the driving force of the transformation in the country. It is by no means a substitute for actual negotiations.

The Dialogue will take forward the reform agenda in the country by achieving a clear agreement on the reforms to be taken in five key policy areas:

First, as regards rule of law, which is a policy area of strategic importance to the European Union, we will associate the country with the new approach which is currently being followed with Montenegro.

Secondly, regarding freedom of expression, the Commission and the Parliament share the view of the importance of this in the enlargement process. As a result of our joint efforts on this, I am pleased that first steps to address our concerns have been taken by the government in Skopje. A dialogue between the state and journalists has been established. One of the key points discussed was the decriminalisation of defamation. I therefore very much welcome the announcement by Prime Minister Gruevski and Deputy Prime Minister Arifi that defamation will be fully decriminalised.

Thirdly, public administration reforms must go forward, namely the implementation of the 2011 reform strategy.

Fourth, electoral reform needs to be completed.

And the fifth area is the development of a functioning market economy.

The Commission will continue to support the country in addressing all these challenges through targeted financial cooperation. I have taken good note of the Parliament's suggestions concerning the IPA-Programme and the Civil Society Facility in this regard.

Honourable Members, the Commission also agrees with your view of the importance of good neighbourly relations between the country and its neighbours and the need to increase mutual understanding. We are closely monitoring developments in this field and will assess them again in the 2012 Progress Report.

Finally, you have requested that the European Union should be ready to assist in resolving the name issue. The UN has a clear mandate to mediate on the name issue between the country and Greece. We are helping to create a climate conducive to compromise and we encourage the countries to find one. For the European Union to become engaged in a more substantial way there would have to be a clear demand by both parties.

As I have said on many occasions, it is a political reality that a solution to the name issue will greatly facilitate further progress in European integration. I welcome the

fact that the two sides are re-engaging and strongly encourage them to build on the progress made in 2011.