

Answers to the Assembly members' questions

I'll take them as they were questioned. I'll start with the lessons learned for others, in terms of whether disputes in the region will be solvable if we take the European narrative out of the equation.

What we have witnessed with the renewed tensions on the border of Kosovo and Serbia is actually one signal.

For us, the European context was an incentive.

Many European leaders, when they came to Skopje to campaign and called the people to vote 'yes' at the referendum, to confirm the Prespa agreement, in a way promised that this would mean the start of accession talks. So the lesson for others in the region will be: if this promise remains unmet, is it worth doing this? Some say it openly and on the record. Look what Europe did to Mr Zoran Zaev. Why would I do this? Without the European context, resolving the remaining issues in the region will be increasingly difficult.

On the concrete question of the judgment relating to gender recognition. The issue has been resolved for the individual applicant, for the citizen, in question. The systemic solution of course will take a legislative amendment. The government adopted it; it's in the parliamentary procedure. Talking to the Minister of Justice, I think we foresee its adoption in November. We are now in the campaign for local elections. Parliament is not fully functional in that respect. The tone in the public discourse is such that I think it would be difficult for those members of the parliament who are not fully convinced not to support this amendment. So the plan is to have this done in November this year.

There was a question on minorities, especially the smaller communities.

North Macedonia is a multiethnic society. We see it as a strength. We have a tradition of tolerance. In part, this was strengthened by the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA.) We marked 20 years since it was signed. An agreement that introduced equitable representation in the public administration, language rights and more decentralisation. The government actively promotes a policy called "one society for all" or "one equal society for all." Regardless of our ethnic backgrounds, we are in a common House. We have common successes and we have common challenges. Society has moved to an extent where the issues that are pressing concern mostly non-ethnic issues. In many ways with the multiethnic agenda of the country, you can never say "this is done." You can never say "we did it, now we can move on." It will always take engagement and attention from society, from the country. But by and large, the issues that the country face - let's say, the fight for more economic prosperity, better education, more justice, and more accountability, are values and processes that unite all ethnic communities, bigger and smaller.

We also have a tradition of deciding together, in part regulated using the so-called Badinter majority principle. So when there is a political decision to be made that touches upon issues of ethnic communities, they should be part of the decision-making. There should be a majority, also, of those representing the ethnic communities in question.

There was also a question of "how we can help?" You are helping a lot. That's also related to the question, and apologies for that, because this is the pressing pain, this is why I talk more about the EU. The way we see the European Union is not unrelated to the values and processes of this organisation. For the citizens of the region, when you say 'European,' the word brings positive associations of democracy, of freedom, of having your rights respected, of having equal opportunities, of decency, of normalcy, of economic prosperity.

The bulk of our reforms to become more European are very much in line with the principles of this organisation.

When I say you already help a lot, I refer to the Venice Commission. This is an instrument we use very often when we amend legislation or have dilemmas and we try to align with European standards, and the Group of States against Corruption, the Council of Europe (GRECO) as well. Now we have local elections so I am seeing many public opinion polls. When you ask people their number one concern, it is justice and the fight against corruption. So in this respect, GRECO is extremely important.

Then the projects supported through the horizontal facility, the Council of Europe has an office in Skopje. I think this is also very helpful.

In terms of the narrative of values, I think the two organisations are very much part of the "one vision" for our continent.

The frustration; there was also a question about what have you done on democracy, on rule of law.

First of all, we've had a steady stream of really free and fair elections. I think we have that pretty much covered. We work closely with this organisation but also the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) to make sure that this is not an issue. We changed the way judges are appointed. In many ways we did everything that we could to use the blueprint of an independent judiciary. There is an atmosphere in the country that everyone must be accountable. We've had steady judgements against former holders of power, but also current holders of power - which is extremely important.

On media freedom, I think we are doing very well. I think this is noted in all the reports of Reporters without Borders (RSF) and many others. We learned it the hard way. We had the crisis of 2015 and 2016, where the state then - under a leadership that obviously had autocratic tendencies - tried to control the media. At that time the state, using taxpayers money, was the biggest advertiser in the media sphere holding almost up to 60% of the media market. What we did was we said we will not use taxpayers money to advertise. There was a big debate about whether we should do it to promote the vaccination campaign. We found other ways to do it and we didn't do it again. With all our deficiencies and issues, North Macedonia today is actually a very vibrant democracy where the media is free and everything is reported.

We also made progress on anti-discrimination. We had a legal system in place. The previous government amended that; we brought it back so that anti-discrimination clearly also applies to sexual orientation and gender identity.

The country is moving in the right direction. What's most important is that it is because of society. The people have learned that when they make a stand and are loud, the political parties, the political decision-makers follow.

Lastly, on the frustration, people do feel betrayed. In many ways, because the promise of the government was based on the European promise, the government is struggling as well. The narrative is not complete, and the promise is not met.

I don't think there is an alternative to becoming European. I think it is easier to do so if you have the reform tool of the accession process. But having it or not having it, we're going to stick to the plan to make North Macedonia a functional European democracy governed by the rule of law.

Of course, when Europe doesn't deliver on its promises, it will lose trust and it is losing trust. It will lose the leverage that it has in this region that is geographically in its midst.

Thank you Mr George KATROUGALOS for your question. I think we all feel the same because we were part, the two of us, we were part of this process together. I believe we will make it in the end, but we live in a world where the right thing to do is not always done.

I think, and I hope, that I have covered the five questions that were raised.

Thank you for, I think, very important questions. This time I will do it the other way around.

I'll start with the last one.

First of all on migration - I don't think there is an easy fix. The way to stop people from leaving is to make sure that they have good conditions for a European way of life at home. And this is not only jobs and salaries, it's also a perspective that the country is moving in the right direction and that the future will be brighter - five years from today, 10 years from today. It's also about what people care about justice being done. So, rule of law is also part of it. About, especially in Covid-19 times, but also without Covid-19 times, having good hospitals, having good schools for children. So I think the way to do this is to focus and deliver and have a realistic long-term plan. You can't do this overnight. You can't even do this in one democratic term. But I am convinced that the whole region can do this in the next decade to somehow revert this trend. Otherwise, we will be failing the next generation, essentially.

When North Macedonia became independent, I was coming of age: 18-19 years old. 30 years later, I still don't think that we have made it - at least for the next generation to have a better start than my generation. The whole region is, I think, facing this challenge together. I don't think there is an easy fix. Sometimes politicians talk about building walls. Even if we build a wall around the whole region, we won't stop young people from leaving unless we make better conditions for them at home. And the European perspective is part of this.

On the question of Bulgaria; and also, I would like to thank the deputy Mr Piero FASSINO from Italy for making this motion for a resolution to have the Parliamentary Assembly support the European future of the region. I think this is an important signal in a time where these signals matter, and are desperately needed. So I very much support the initiation of designating a rapporteur and looking forward to reading the report, the resolution and the recommendations in this process.

With Bulgaria, their elections - parliamentary and presidential - are committed to continuing to try to find an understanding, also bilaterally, on issues where we can find an understanding. I think the stakes are really immense: for our friendship, for the future of the region, for the people. The effects of the policies of the last two years are such that in the polls, Bulgaria is seen as a problem, as a troublemaker. When you ask the citizens whether they think that another country creates a problem for them, for their nation, Bulgaria is by far the first one. And among the friendly countries, it continually decreases.

So I don't know about the polls in Bulgaria about North Macedonia, but I think we have to realistically look at what we are doing, I think, because of history that we cannot change. History is very important - we are all proud of our history. The history that we create today must be something that we will be proud of. And this is more important than; because today we can change it. So this is what we are trying to do. We can't really talk about who we are. No country can tell us who we are. This is a self-determination, this is a self-identification question. We can't talk about our language, this is not decent to do in the 21st century, I'm sorry. On this continent, in the 21st century, it is not being a good neighbour to tell your neighbours "but your language is this or that". It's not something you do. And a solution must make sense from the perspective of the European values. Otherwise, it won't be a solution.

How can you build a friendship if you use a position of leverage and you bully your neighbour on issues that are so intimate? You can't build a friendship. And we start a process that is extremely important, but this now is derailed. And I am honest when I say not exactly because of our fault.

Turkey, thank you for your kind words on our NATO membership. The question is whether, if I understood the question right, I don't see any negative influence in terms of our European aspirations and work coming from Turkey. We have enjoyed traditionally good relations - we are not always looking on the issues from the same perspective, which is I think something normal and natural. But I cannot say that there is a disruptive attempt or policies coming when it comes to this effort for European integration of the region.

And then I also thank you, and all the kind words from Lithuania, and from you personally. I come back to this resolution. I think the very fact that there is a debate today on this topic from the European perspective is actually very helpful. The timing is great and, please, engage so that there is a resolution. And, in a way you helped those European forces that realize it's time for action. This is my response on what it is that you can do.

I remember our meeting in Skopje when you were heading the ODIHR mission and I think you can probably confirm what I said on the free and fair elections in Northern Macedonia.

Thank you for the questions.

I'll try to be brief because I think we are over the planned time - one minute over, so not too bad.

On Open Balkan, I think regional cooperation is obviously extremely important. We are a region of 18 million people, there are many borders. The less important we make those borders, I think the better off for the region and its economic attractiveness as a market and as a region of doing business.

The question is I think very legitimate that came at the end. After, you know we discussed the the Open Balkan initiative, whether integration should start first by training the single market. Thinkers, think tanks have been raising this issue noting that we have no results from the enlargement policy from the accession process, so I think it's a legitimate debate to discuss whether the region should first join the single market.

I think that the more we cooperate regionally, the fewer tensions and problems we will have because common interest will prevail. Whether it's through the Berlin process or whether it's through this initiative, I think it makes sense for us to make our countries more connected.

There are too many trucks waiting on the borders. We need to take down those barriers for trade. We need to increase the trust between the different institutions from the region. We suffered from fires this summer and other natural disasters are, with climate change, frequently happening so the agreement to organise ourselves in a way that, when there is a country hit, we all run to help, is obviously something that is quite sound.

Thank you for the point from Azerbaijan. I'm glad to hear that there was contact, there was a meeting between the ministers for agriculture. We are very proud of our agricultural products so I think this and other areas, there is potential definitely to cooperate more.

Finally to Ms Ekaterina GECHEVA-ZAHARIEVA who raised several questions, I'm going to also be very open and honest here.

First of all, we have a commission against discrimination in the country. When I checked whether there are complaints to see if these allegations that come from Bulgaria that we somehow discriminate against citizens who consider themselves to be ethnically Bulgarian, there is not a single complaint in this commission against discrimination. I don't think there is a case here in the European Court of Human Rights in this context. I know about other cases that are there, but not against North Macedonia. So, I struggle to see if these allegations - because I hear them very often publicly, on record from Bulgarian politicians - is this part of the domestic context? Is this really a bubble where this is really believed?

We are a country that is multiethnic. We have it in our constitution and in our political tradition that ethnicities... everyone is equal, and that we're in this together. We have a common house - not all countries in the region have these policies by the way. We don't really have an issue in recognising or not recognising minorities. We think this is a question for the people concerned; if they feel there's something separate then they're entitled to a certain set of rights, both individual and collective.

We now have a census. It ends today. It's been a while. I did it two days ago. I had people in my home. They asked about my ethnicity. There was no list to choose from. I was free to say. So frankly, I think we should definitely meet and have an honest discussion about this, but the volume of allegations that somehow we discriminate, and not having one complaint is a problem. If this is a matter of domestic politics maybe I can understand, but I really struggle to see how this will be fruitful for what we started doing which is facing history, accepting reality, and working together to build a common European future.

On hate speech: first of all official holders of office, I don't think there is one illustration of that. In the previous Bulgarian elections there was a TV commercial of a political party which portrayed North Macedonia as a Bulgarian land. This is territorial pretensions; this, I could interpret as hate speech. So, when you, let's say the increase of the anger that you define as 'hate speech' coming from our side, from the private people, from the citizens, is exactly triggered because you tell them who they are. You want to tell them what their history is, and you want to tell them what their language is. Naturally, people will revolt. We as a country will always condemn incidents, but the current Bulgarian policy towards North Macedonia is an investment in antagonism, not in friendship.

My last point - because we are in this organisation, in the Council of Europe - we are very supportive of the initiative for the Observatory of History Teaching in Europe. I think part of the issues or a big part of the issues between our countries is about history and about history teaching. I think it will help us if you also join this initiative so that we can learn from comparative examples and how this was done when other countries had issues of historical narratives.

Thank you so much.