



NORTH MACEDONIA, SERBIA AND MONTENEGRO: THREE COUNTRIES BOUND FOR THE EUROPEAN UNION

Report on the visit by the France-Western Balkans Inter-parliamentary Friendship Group to North Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro

12 to 17 September 2021

A delegation from the France-Western Balkans Inter-parliamentary Friendship Group, led by its President, **Ms Marta de Cidrac** (*Les Républicains - Yvelines*), and composed of **Messrs Arnaud Bazin** (*Les Républicains - Val d'Oise*), Deputy President for North Macedonia, **Mickaël Vallet** (*Socialiste Écologiste et Républicain - Charente Maritime*), Deputy President for Serbia, and **Vincent Ségouin** (*Les Républicains - Orne*), Deputy President for Montenegro, visited **North Macedonia** (12 to 14 September), **Serbia** (14 and 15 September) and **Montenegro** (15 to 17 September).

The aim of this mission was to take stock of **the internal situation in these countries, the process of rapprochement with the European Union, and their relations with France.**



Map of the Balkans

I.- Countries facing major challenges in the field of democracy, the rule of law and the fight against corruption

- On 8 September 2021, **North Macedonia** celebrated the 30th anniversary of its referendum on independence. The parliamentary elections of 15 July 2020 were won by the social democratic party of Prime Minister Zoran Zaev, which, with the support of the Albanian minority party, has made joining the European Union its strategic priority.
- In **Serbia**, the main opposition parties' boycott of the 21 June 2020 parliamentary elections strengthened the position of President Aleksandar Vucic and his SNS party, which dominates the Parliament and political life.



The delegation with the President of the Republic of Serbia, Mr Aleksandar Vucic

- In **Montenegro**, the parliamentary elections of 30 August 2020 were marked by the victory of the opposition to President Milo Djukanovic, leading to the first alternation of power since the country's independence in 2006. Political relations remain tense and focus on the autonomy of the Montenegrin Orthodox Church vis-à-vis the Serbian Church.



The delegation with the Prime Minister of Montenegro, Mr Zdravko Krivokapic

After remaining relatively unscathed at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, these countries have since been hit hard by **the health crisis**. Confronted by a shortage of vaccines, some of them, such as Serbia, have turned to Russian and Chinese vaccines.

In economic terms, GDP per capita is 39% of the EU average in Serbia and Macedonia, and 50% in Montenegro. Serbia has weathered the crisis relatively well, unlike Montenegro, whose economy is highly dependent on tourism.

Finally, the three countries are facing **major demographic challenges**, characterised by declining birth rates and emigration to Europe.

II. - EU accession negotiations: a key lever despite the obstacles

Although the European aspirations of the Western Balkan countries were recognised as early as 2003, the progress made in the accession negotiations varies greatly from country to country.

- **North Macedonia** was granted candidate country status back in 2005. The signing of the Prespa agreement in June 2018 settled the dispute with Greece over the country's name. However, the actual start of accession negotiations has been **vetoed by Bulgaria**, due to a bilateral dispute over language, the country's name and relations with the Macedonian minority in Bulgaria. Although the context of the forthcoming presidential and parliamentary elections in Bulgaria does not seem very favourable, **the delegation hopes that a satisfactory compromise** can be found quickly with Bulgaria to enable the start of accession negotiations for North Macedonia, which has been knocking on the European Union's door for 16 years.



The delegation with Mr Nikola Dimitrov, North Macedonia's Deputy Prime Minister for European Affairs

- **Serbia**, which has opened 18 out of 36 chapters of the accession negotiations, hopes to open more chapters under the Slovenian or French Presidencies of the European Union. However, the European Commission believes that considerable progress still needs to be made in terms of democratic pluralism, the rule of law, judicial reform and press freedom. Regional reconciliation also remains a challenge, including dialogue with Kosovo.



The delegation with the Serbian Minister for European Integration, Ms Jadranka Joksimitovic

- **Montenegro**, which started negotiations in 2012, is the candidate country that is at the most advanced stage of the process, having opened all the chapters. The new Montenegrin government has confirmed the priority goal of EU membership.



The delegation with Ms Zorka Kordic, Montenegro's Chief Negotiator

At the initiative of France, a **new methodology** was adopted by the European Union in March 2020 in order to improve the credibility of the negotiation process by introducing stronger political oversight, including the possible reversibility of the process.

As highlighted by the European Commission in its latest reports, the three countries continue to face many challenges in terms of **democracy, respect for the rule of law and the fight against corruption**. At the same time, as the delegation was able to observe first hand during its meetings, the sluggishness of the accession process is leading to a **growing weariness and discouragement** in these countries, particularly among young people, who are tempted to emigrate to the European Union.

Given these tensions and the economic, security and migration issues, along with the growing influence of Russia, China and Turkey, **the members of the delegation consider that the European Union should increase its engagement in the Balkan region**.

III. - The French strategy for the Western Balkans: a contrasting implementation

At the instigation of the President of the Republic, France adopted a **"French strategy for the Western Balkans"** in April 2019, in order to demonstrate France's return to the region. This initiative provides for enhanced political interactions and greater cooperation on security and defence. The most visible manifestation of this strategy has been the return of the French Development Agency (AFD), which has opened a regional office in Belgrade.

While the delegation welcomes these good intentions, it notes that **they have not been accompanied by a significant increase in the number of French diplomatic staff and resources, which remain well short of our ambitions**. The French embassy in Podgorica has two diplomats, for example, while Germany has seven and the United States has 300 officials. French cooperation credits amount to €30,000 per year, compared to €60 million for Germany.

Yet France is **exceptionally well regarded**, based on the past comradeship in arms and its political and military involvement in resolving the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia.



The delegation laid a wreath in tribute to French soldiers at the military cemetery in Skopje

In economic terms, the presence of French companies remains very small. However, our companies possess renowned expertise in sectors such as transport, energy, water and waste treatment, in which these countries have substantial needs.

In Serbia, for example, despite the awarding of the Belgrade airport concession contract to the Vinci Group and the construction of the Suez waste treatment plant near Belgrade, France is only **ranked sixth among Serbia's partners**, far behind Germany, China, Italy and Russia. However, France hopes to win the contract to build the Belgrade metro system despite fierce competition from China.

In Serbia, as in North Macedonia and Montenegro, it would be advisable to reinforce the French economic presence, particularly at the SME level. **An economic symposium on the Balkans** should soon be organised by the Friendship Group in the Senate in order to encourage French companies to take greater interest in this region.



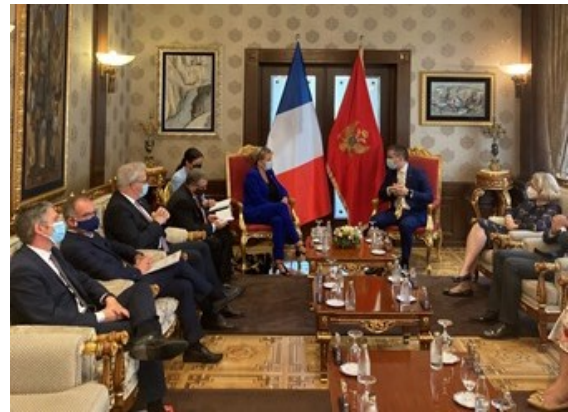
The delegation visited the Suez waste treatment plant in Vinca near Belgrade

As far as **cultural and linguistic cooperation** are concerned, and despite the presence of French cultural centres and schools, the **French language is losing ground**, lagging far behind English, as well as German and Italian. Very few scholarships are granted to students from these countries. Our country should do more to encourage the **speaking of French**, in particular by training administrative staff in French, granting more scholarships to students, and promoting the creation of bilingual or international classes in education.



The delegation visited the new French school in Podgorica

In this respect, in its discussions with its interlocutors, the delegation insisted on the benefits of **parliamentary diplomacy and interparliamentary cooperation** for strengthening dialogue and exchanges. The French Senate has been selected as the lead partner in the European Union's "Interpares" programme to develop the Montenegrin Parliament's capacity to monitor foreign, European and defence policy.



The delegation and Mr Aleksa Becic, President of the Parliament of Montenegro

Members of the delegation



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Composition of the Friendship Group: http://www.senat.fr/groupe-interparlementaire-amitie/ami_674.html