



Weekly Briefing

**North Macedonia external relations briefing:
The Ministry of Foreign Affairs organises the first
Prespa Forum Dialogue
Gjorgjioska M.Adela**


China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin

Kiadásért felelős személy: Huang Ping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.

 +36 1 5858 690

 office@china-cee.eu

 china-cee.eu

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs organises the first Prespa Forum Dialogue

Summary

Under the title “Western Balkans - The missing puzzle for completing Europe”, the first Prespa Forum Dialogue (PFD) took place in Ohrid and Otesevo (Prespa) on the 1st and 2nd of July 2021. Organised by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Forum has been described as “a platform created by the Government of the Republic of N. Macedonia to enable countries, leaders, organizations, and citizens to build long-term relationships and strengthen partnerships”.¹ The Forum was attended by high-level officials, bureaucrats and think tank representatives from the Balkans, the EU and the United States. It took place 8 days after the EU General Affairs Council (GAC) meeting at which Bulgaria stuck to its firm position not to allow the start of EU accession talks with N. Macedonia. In view of this, the Bulgarian veto represented the “big elephant in the room” during the PFD and many of the political statements were interpreted in relation to this issue.

According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Prespa Forum Dialogue (PFD), which was organised for the first time between the 1st and 2nd of July “aims to inspire and promote good-neighborly relations and cooperation”. Moreover, “it is envisioned as a place for exchanging views and ideas on possible solutions to outstanding bilateral issues, thus assisting governments, institutions and the civil society, including the youth, in the consistent implementation of the spirit and letter of the signed bilateral and regional agreements.”² Foreign Minister Bujar Osmani as host and organizer of the conference held a press conference dedicated to the event. He stated that “this is by far the biggest event we have ever organized, which was a challenge from every aspect: organization and technical, protocol, even political, to host highest-level guests from the region, Europe, even the U.S.” Moreover, Osmani added that the forum will be dominated by topics about diplomacy, international relations, geopolitical

¹ Prespa Forum Dialogue Website, available at <http://pfd.mk/>

² Ibid

reality, and modern challenges.³ Finally, he stated that “the Prespa Forum will try to find ways of inserting the missing piece of the puzzle and thus make Europe complete, which is the topic of the Conference – meaning that the six countries from the Western Balkans are an intrinsic part of Europe, fully integrated in the European Union in the future.”⁴

Agenda of the Prespa Forum Dialogue

Taking place within the timespan of two days, the Forum was titled “Western Balkans: The Missing Puzzle for completing Europe”. The agenda on July 1st started with a session dedicated to economy and business: “On the Road to A Better Connected and Integrated Region – What is at Stake? How do we get there?”. The discussion’s keynote speaker was the Deputy Assistant Secretary at the U.S. Department of State Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, Matthew Palmer. He stated that the “United States is disappointed that the issue of opening the first intergovernmental conferences for North Macedonia and Albania wasn’t resolved despite the strong advocacy and reasonable solutions by the Portuguese EU Presidency and the major European partners”.⁵ Palmer added that “The United States believes the region’s efforts towards establishing a Common Regional Market are enormously important steps on the path toward EU membership.” Moreover, he emphasized that “regional cooperation and economic integration are vital if aspirant states hope to push back the limits to their economies, counter the malign influences that would keep them undemocratic, and reverse the trend of youth seeking better opportunities abroad.”⁶

³ MFA Press Release “Osmani: The echo from Ohrid and Prespa will resonate throughout the world” published on 01.07.2021, available at

<https://mfa.gov.mk/en/page/13/post/2644/osmani-the-echo-from-ohrid-and-prespa-will-resonate-throughout-the-world-> accessed on 01.07.2021

⁴ Tweet by MFA Bujar Osmani, published on 01.07.2021, available at

https://twitter.com/Bujar_O/status/1410505173873664000?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwtterm%5E1410505173873664000%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5Es1_c10&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fpublish.twitter.com%2F%3Fquery%3Dhttps3A2F2Ftwitter.com2FBujar_O2Fstatus2F1410505173873664000widget%3DTweet, accessed on 02.07.2021

⁵ Macedonian Information Agency (2021). “Palmer-US is disappointed N. Macedonia and Albania didn’t open negotiations EU must keep its promises”, available at <https://mia.mk/palmer-us-is-disappointed-north-macedonia-and-albania-didn-t-open-negotiations-eu-must-keep-its-promises/?lang=en> accessed on 01.07.2021

⁶ Ibid

The day continued with a session titled “Building confidence through Dialogue”, which included Foreign Minister of N. Macedonia Bujar Osmani, FM of Serbia Nikola Selaković, FM of Albania Olta Xhaçka and FM of Romania Bogdan Aurescu. The participants in the discussion exchanged views on how the gap between the expressed political will and the actual situation on the ground influences regional cooperation. The most high-profile event of the day was the panel “The road to Prespa”, which featured the Macedonian Prime Minister Zoran Zaev, former Prime Minister of Greece Alexis Tsipras, former Minister of Foreign Affairs Nikola Dimitrov, former EU High Representative Federica Mogherini, former Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Johannes Hahn, and US Assistant Secretary of State in the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs Philip T. Reeker, as the chief architects of the 2018 Prespa Agreement. “The international community recognizes the significant progress made by N. Macedonia. Much remains to be done and the opening of negotiations with the European Union is the beginning of the process that requires further commitment”, Reeker stated during the panel.⁷

The remaining panels which took place on the 1st of July included a Civil Society and Media Session titled “The civil society and the media in the regional and European integration processes”⁸, a panel on “Ohrid Framework Agreement – 20 years later” as well as a panel titled “Women, Peace and Security – a viewpoint from the Western Balkans”. On the second day of the Forum the most prominent event was the high-level plenary session titled “Resetting the EU-US Synergy towards the Western Balkans”. It was attended by Macedonian President Stevo Pendarovski, President of Montenegro, Milo Djukanovic, the President of the Republic of Slovenia, Borut Pahor, the US Acting Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, Philip Reeker, the EU Commissioner for Budget and Administration, Johannes Hahn, the French Senator, Alain Richard, and Secretary General of the Community of Democracies, Thomas Garrett. During the panel discussion, the President Stevo Pendarovski called on the United States and the European Union to help the Western Balkan countries restore new synergy, reset the region and revive joint cooperation. Moreover, Pendarovski stressed that the European Union is not capable of leading alone, and the United States would not want to lead alone, while regional elites are not interested and would not want to make a thorough change

⁷Macedonian Information Agency (2021): “Reeker - US is with N.Macedonia as an ally and a friend” available at <https://mia.mk/reeker-us-is-with-north-macedonia-as-an-ally-and-a-friend/?lang=en> accessed on 02.07.2021

⁸ During this panel, German Minister of State for Europe stated: “The bilateral questions, for example Macedonian and Bulgarian relations, should not stay in the way of the EU accession process”.

in societies.⁹ The President’s statement was interpreted as a call for a greater involvement on behalf of the United States in the resolution of the dispute with Bulgaria, which has blocked the Macedonian negotiation talks with the EU.

Although the Forum’s title suggested a focus on the European Union, the event itself seemed to be dominated by the high level presence from the United States. As stated by the US Embassy in Skopje, the US delegation at the event was represented by two high level diplomats from the US State Department, which aimed “to highlight U.S. support for continued dialogue and cooperation toward stability and progress in N.Macedonia and the region.”¹⁰ Furthermore, the US Embassy tweeted that “the Prespa Forum Dialogue is a chance to recognize how far the country has come in the last 20 years since the signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, and in recent years since the Prespa Agreement.”¹¹ Overall, the messages sent by both Reeker and Palmer reaffirmed the US support for the Ohrid Framework Agreement (2001) and the Prespa Agreement (2018), both of which were a product of significant involvement on behalf of the United States. Palmer described the two agreements as “diplomatic success stories”, adding that “the hard-fought Prespa and Ohrid Agreements exemplify the triumph and value of compromise”. Moreover, he added that “leaders took risks to make them happen, and I hope that will serve as inspiration as we consider the other political obstructions we face that at times prove intractable.”¹².

Conclusion

The first Prespa Forum Dialogue took place less than 10 days after the EU General Affairs Council (GAC) meeting at which Bulgaria stuck to its firm position not to allow the start of EU accession talks with N. Macedonia. In view of this, the Bulgarian veto and the absence of a high level Bulgarian delegation from the event represented the “big elephant in the room” during the

⁹ President Pendarovski at Prespa Forum: It is time for a reset and progress of the Western Balkan countries, published on 05.06.2021, available at <https://pretsedatel.mk/en/prespa-forum/> accessed on 05.06.2021

¹⁰ US Embassy Tweet, available at <https://mobile.twitter.com/USEmbassySkopje/status/1410581046282883072> accessed on 02.06.2021

¹¹ US Embassy Tweet, available at <https://mobile.twitter.com/USEmbassySkopje/status/1410581046282883072> accessed on 02.07.20201

¹² Prespa Forum Tweet, available at <https://mobile.twitter.com/PrespaForum/status/1410578916163698690> accessed on 03.06.2021

PFD. As a result many of the political statements were interpreted in relation to this issue. Although the Forum was titled: “Western Balkans - The missing puzzle for completing Europe”, it was the high presence from the United States which seemed to direct the discussions and the expectations for the coming month. In this context, the PFD can be interpreted as a signal of renewed diplomatic activity in response to the Bulgarian veto in the EU, which could follow the examples set by the Ohrid Framework Agreement (2001) and the Prespa Agreement (2018) both of which were the product of strong US involvement.