

MEPS TRY TO LEVERAGE ENLARGEMENT IN MACEDONIA CIA PROBE

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The European Parliament committee investigating CIA activities in Europe has said that EU candidate state Macedonia should cooperate better with its investigation as part of its preparations for accession to the union.

A delegation from the parliament's special committee, probing alleged clandestine terror suspect flights by US intelligence service CIA, on Thursday (4 May) briefed fellow MEPs on a visit to the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia last week.

The delegation was in Macedonia in order to probe reports on a CIA abduction of the Kuwaiti-born German Khaled el-Masri, who is believed to have been captured by American agents in Macedonia and flown from Skopje to Kabul, Afghanistan.

MEPs painted a gloomy picture of the cooperation they received from Skopje, saying they met with "reluctance and contradiction" from Macedonian officials, and were not provided with answers to all of their questions.

"We did not get all that many answers," Italian Socialist MEP and the group's rapporteur, Claudio Fava told committee colleagues in Brussels.

Macedonia in December last year got the formal status of EU candidate state.

MEPs in the committee said that in Macedonia's further road towards possible EU membership, human rights and common values should be a key topic.

"As regards those countries that are already member states of the EU, we cannot ask much, but for the candidate states we should be able to make demands on cooperation," Mr Fava said.

Green MEP Cem Ozdemir, who declared himself a "great supporter of enlargement," told EUobserver that no matter the pressure that the US may have put on Macedonia to help carry out dodgy operations, Skopje should have chosen its collaboration partners with more care.

"Macedonia does not want to become the 51st state of America, but a member of the European Union," he said.

The MEP added "The European Commission must make it clear to Macedonia that it is important that we have full cooperation."

Mr Ozdemir stated "This is all like a really bad B-movie. They [the Macedonians] are playing with the committee," referring to "conveniently disappearing" hotel ledgers or border registration documents, hastily missing or replaced personnel who "forgot" their mobile phones and seemingly "lost" keys to important archives.

But a diplomat in the Macedonian mission to the EU said that Macedonia, contrary to what the MEPs are

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suggesting, had shown in all possible ways that it wishes to cooperate fully with the parliament's committee.

"A clear proof of that is that the committee delegates were accepted by the highest authorities, namely the president, prime minister and interior minister of the country," the diplomat added.

On 13 March, Mr El Masri gave his testimony before the committee in Brussels, stating he was arrested by CIA agents in Macedonia in December 2003, flown to Afghanistan via Baghdad and held there for months.

Following five months of alleged torture he was then declared innocent and released in Albania.

The Macedonian government has denied knowledge of wrongdoings, saying Mr El Masri had been on holiday in the country, and then left via land into Kosovo.

Macedonian officials told MEPs that this was proven by passport stamps from the border, as well as by common border procedures on registration of foreigners exiting Macedonia.

MEPs said that these documents were however never presented to them.