

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions 2006 enlargement package — Pre-candidate countries

(2007/C 197/04)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- trusts that the future of the Western Balkans countries lies in the European Union, and acknowledges the progress made by the potential candidate countries in implementing the road map towards realising their European perspective;
- also recognises that, taking a realistic view of current circumstances and allowing for all the progress that has been made so far, serious problems remain in key political and economic fields and in relation to civil society, and that solving these problems will require considerable effort on the part of all concerned;
- would also like to emphasise that the pace of the potential candidate countries' EU accession primarily depends upon the outcome of the reform processes in each country. At the same time, the EU's integration capacity also needs to be taken into account;
- in that context, would also stress that this is more than just a 'technical' issue, given that integration capacity not only involves the EU's institutional capacity to operate effectively but is also always contingent on the political support of the public in the Member States for any decisions that are taken;
- points out that whilst cooperation between the EU and the Western Balkans region is in place for reform measures such as trade liberalisation, privatisation, regulatory reform and foreign investment promotion, a clear framework for working together on the regional and local level has so far been lacking; the Western Balkans Working Group created by the Committee of the Regions in February 2006 is conceived as providing such a framework, which should place indigenous social and economic development at local and regional level higher on the EU political agenda;
- recalls that the monitoring of the enlargement process at national, regional and local levels is a major challenge given the relevance of the issue to the European Union's future and the need to stabilise the Western Balkans; this is why it was important for the Committee of the Regions to create a political forum to promote the development of this process, which involves fostering dialogue with all stakeholders in order to define its political positions.

I. Policy recommendations

Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council — Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2006-2007 including special report on the EU's capacity to integrate new members

COM(2006) 649 final

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

Enlargement strategy and main challenges

1. trusts that the future of the Western Balkans countries lies in the European Union, and acknowledges the progress made by the potential candidate countries in implementing the road map towards realising their European perspective;

2. also recognises that, taking a realistic view of current circumstances and allowing for all the progress that has been made so far, serious problems remain in key political and economic fields and in relation to civil society, and that solving these problems will require considerable effort on the part of all concerned;

3. emphatically advocates continuation of the reform processes which are needed to stabilise the region as a whole; however, is aware that long-term prospects for accession pose a dilemma for potential candidate countries: the more distant the goal of accession, the greater the risk of the reform process losing momentum; However, this must not involve any watering-down of accession criteria or any backing-away from the principle of strict compliance with conditions; notes that sufficient incentives must be put in place and assistance provided to facilitate continuation of the reform process at all levels;

4. welcomes all appropriate EU measures to help stabilise the development of individual countries, especially in terms of combating corruption and organised crime, and in assisting the establishment of effective administrative structures, a process which inevitably also has to involve the regional and local levels; in this context, also welcomes any appropriate initiatives to support the autonomous development of political and economic cooperation in the region;

5. would also like to emphasise that the pace of the potential candidate countries' EU accession primarily depends upon the outcome of the reform processes in each country. At the same time, the EU's integration capacity also needs to be taken into account;

6. in that context, would also stress that this is more than just a 'technical' issue, given that integration capacity not only involves the EU's institutional capacity to operate effectively but

is also always contingent on the support of the public in the Member States for any decisions that are taken and reminds EU leaders of the importance of listening to the public, but also of the importance of leadership to secure public support for further enlargements when the overall assessment for enlargement is positive;

7. suggests that the EU institutions step up measures enabling the public and the associations representing them publicly to state and exchange their views on the integration process;

8. recognises at the same time the importance, richness and value that the Western Balkans, the individual countries and peoples, will bring to the whole of the European Union;

9. with this in mind, supports all endeavours to proceed with pre-accession and accession processes while ensuring strict compliance with the criteria that have been set, which — partly in view of possible implications for common policies — must be framed in as transparent a way as possible, enabling broad political debate on future enlargements. This will be the only way to secure the requisite public acceptance. The CoR and its members will play an active role in this debate, aware as they are that the future of the Western Balkan countries is a key test for the vision of a shared Europe;

10. calls on all stakeholders in the region to play an active and constructive part in resolving those contentious issues that are still obstructing progress towards a shared future; of these, the Kosovo issue is without doubt of particular importance, as it impacts on the entire region;

11. for the period before eventual accession, strongly calls for suitable measures which, while absolutely maintaining the prospect of accession, would both help to sustainably enhance the outlook for the constructive development of the Western Balkan countries concerned, and also improve the pre-accession process through practical steps;

12. in this context, recognises that people living in the Western Balkans attach a great deal of importance to the prospect of visa facilitation, and very strongly supports the desire to promote direct contacts including through the provision of more scholarships for students and young workers from the region;

13. backs suitable measures to promote cross-border and interregional cooperation with local and regional authorities in EU Member States, and approaches to intergovernmental cooperation in the Western Balkan region encompassing as many policy areas as possible;

14. points out that whilst cooperation between the EU and the Western Balkans region is in place for reform measures such as trade liberalisation, privatisation, regulatory reform and foreign investment promotion, a clear framework for working together on the regional and local level has so far been lacking; the Western Balkans Working Group created by the Committee of the Regions in February 2006 is conceived as providing such a framework, which should place indigenous social and economic development at local and regional level higher on the EU political agenda;

15. recalls that the monitoring of the enlargement process at national, regional and local levels is a major challenge given the relevance of the issue to the European Union's future and the need to stabilise the Western Balkans; this is why it was important for the Committee of the Regions to create a political forum to promote the development of this process, which involves fostering dialogue with all stakeholders in order to define its political positions;

16. points out that through this working group, the CoR intends to foster permanent dialogue with local and regional political representatives in the Western Balkans. In addition, it will encourage and support the organisation of information and communication campaigns on the enlargement process in the local authorities and regions of Europe and the Western Balkans.

Albania

17. would point out that substantial efforts are still needed to consolidate devolved structures and thus strengthen conditions for developing local democracy; administrative restructuring and modernisation should help build up — rather than break down — regional and local administrative capacity;

18. welcomes the progress that has been made in protecting minority rights, but is concerned that too few resources have been put into combating human trafficking. There must be rapid improvements particularly for the weakest in society, such as Roma children; draws attention to the key role of players at local and regional level in implementing the legislative framework in this area in particular;

19. in the light of the current draft legislation on municipal financing, welcomes any measures that help improve funding arrangements for local and regional levels and expand their scope in promoting investment at local and regional level;

20. welcomes improvements in public administration, and in particular in the field of public procurement (here too, new draft legislation is in the pipeline, and is currently being debated

in parliament), an area which has hitherto lacked transparency; and proposes that the local and regional levels be more closely involved in further shaping the relevant provisions;

21. is pleased that the economic situation has visibly improved, and expects further efforts to meet the obligations arising from the Stabilisation and Association Agreement signed in 2006;

22. considering the results of the local elections held on 18 February 2007, takes note of the conclusions of the OSCE observation mission and calls for better focus on ensuring elections in line with the international standards in the future;

23. welcomes the progress made in combating corruption and protecting human rights, and expects continued endeavours to be made for improvements in these areas.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

24. notes the need for constitutional reforms and the fulfilment of obligations under the Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the EU, so as also to give a stronger impetus to the accession process over the coming months;

25. supports all measures which could help to achieve progress in stabilising Bosnia and Herzegovina; to this end, it attaches particular importance to strengthening local democracy in both entities. A resulting improvement in political relations at local level could substantially contribute to stabilising the overall situation;

26. welcomes the progress that has been made in combating corruption and in the area of human and minority rights, and calls for the efforts that have been made up to now in these areas to be further strengthened. Vigorous local democracy and stronger civil society can play an important role in this process;

27. strongly advocates intensive cooperation with the International Criminal Court in The Hague;

28. supports all measures conducive to establishing a true single market within the country, while noting that activities at local level can play an important role in this regard;

29. thus, for this reason too, calls for the financial and institutional strengthening of the local level, which must be accompanied by the development of effective administration;

30. calls for sincere efforts by both entities to achieve more constructive cooperation and welcomes the results of work by non-governmental bodies and non-profit organisations in relation to the new local self-governance development strategy.

Montenegro

31. acknowledges the work done by the country since independence to build up state structures, and welcomes the progress which has already been made in this direction;

32. in particular, welcomes the reform of local authorities, which has kicked off with a series of legislative proposals aimed at strengthening local government, in keeping with the work programme for more effective self-government;

33. also welcomes the government's plans to set up a coordination centre for monitoring the devolution process, whose tasks will include fuller clarification of responsibilities and of the accompanying financial arrangements;

34. finally, also welcomes the new code of ethics for civil servants, which also applies to local authority employees. The code will help to ensure continued progress in addressing the remaining shortcomings — for example in terms of combating corruption — in the course of public administrative reforms;

35. acknowledges that progress has been made in combating corruption and welcomes the cooperation with the International Court of Justice in The Hague;

36. calls for stronger measures to protect minority rights. The situation of Roma and refugees in particular requires special attention.

Serbia

37. recalls its opinion on the Western Balkans of October 2006, which states that all of these countries are welcome to join the European Union, and reaffirms its continued engagement with Serbian local and regional authorities;

38. regrets the decision of the Serbian parliament to reject UN envoy Martti Ahtisaari's proposal on the future status of Kosovo, and hopes that, as talks continue, a constructive solution acceptable to all parties will be found; calls on Belgrade to play an active and constructive part in consultations on resolving the Kosovo issue;

39. welcomes the progress which has been made in developing public administration and making it more effective, but

would also call for corresponding efforts, in line with the subsidiarity principle, in the development of devolved and local administrative structures;

40. recommends that Commission assistance for institution-building give special consideration to local government capacity, in particular to assist the implementation of law and to improve communication and cooperation between central and local government;

41. urges Serbia to ratify the European convention on local self-government as soon as possible;

42. welcomes the progress that has been made in combating corruption, and urges continued endeavours in this field;

43. calls for unreserved cooperation with the International Court of Justice in The Hague;

44. welcomes the clear progress that has been made in the negotiations on visa facilitation and readmission.

Kosovo

45. welcomes the efforts by UN special envoy Martti Ahtisaari to determine the future status of Kosovo, and stresses that a viable solution to the status issue must be found in the near future that safeguards the rights of all people living in Kosovo;

46. calls on Pristina to play an active and constructive part in the consultations to resolve the Kosovo issue;

47. welcomes the progress that has been made in combating corruption, acknowledges the efforts which have been made up to now in the field of human and minority rights, and calls for further action in this area;

48. is pleased that the Kosovo institutions have drawn up a framework programme for local government reform, with the aim of improving security and living conditions in municipalities;

49. although some progress has been made, emphasises that local-level administrative capacity remains inadequate, both in terms of the administration itself and of strategic planning.

Brussels, 6 June 2007.

The President
of the Committee of the Regions
Michel DELEBARRE

II. Procedure

Title	Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council — Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2006-2007 Including annexed special report on the EU's capacity to integrate new members
Reference	COM(2006) 649 final
Legal basis	Article 265 (1) TEC
Procedural basis	
Date of Commission referral	8.11.2006
Date of Bureau decision	25.4.2006
Commission responsible	Commission for External Relations and Decentralised Cooperation (RELEX)
Rapporteur	Wolfgang Gibowski (DE/EPP) , State Secretary, Plenipotentiary of the <i>Land</i> of Lower Saxony to the Federation
Explanatory memorandum	7.12.2006
Discussed in commission	25.1.2007
Date adopted by commission	29.3.2007
Result of the vote in commission	Adopted by a majority
Date adopted in plenary	6.6.2007
Previous Committee opinions	CdR 115/2006 fin (*) — Opinion on the Commission's Communication — <i>The Western Balkans on the road to the EU: consolidating stability and raising prosperity</i> (COM(2006) 27 final) Rapporteur Mr Franz Schausberger (AT/EPP) , adopted in CoR plenary, 14.6.2006

(*) OJ C 51, 6.3.2007, p. 16.