

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on the enlargement package 2006 — Candidate countries

(2007/C 197/03)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- recalls that the Enlargement has been a success story for the European Union and Europe as a whole and stresses the importance of a regional and local perspective on the enlargement process for ensuring internal stability, democracy at grassroots level being a vital part thereof;
- stresses the importance of continued fulfilment of the Copenhagen political criteria with particular regard to the need for strengthening freedom of expression, freedom of religion, women's rights, minority rights and trade union rights and the need for further upgrading of the human rights institutional framework;
- stresses that political follow-up 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. This is why it decided to create a Working Party on Croatia and on Turkey, which involves fostering dialogue with all stakeholders in order to define its political positions;
- welcomes progress made on the political and economic criteria in Croatia, and on the *acquis* as well as on the implementation of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement, and welcomes the continued fulfilment of the Copenhagen political criteria by Croatian authorities;
- welcomes the substantial reforms enacted by Turkey but remains concerned about the pace of reforms having slowed down and recalls that the setting-up of a JCC with Turkey remains its political objective;
- welcomes the continued progress of the reforms and that the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia is well on track to satisfy the Copenhagen political criteria, but takes note of the slower pace of reforms in 2006.

I. Policy recommendations

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

COM(2006) 649 final

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

General recommendations

1. recalls that the successive rounds of enlargement have from the outset been of central importance to the project of European integration;

2. recognises the important role of the enlargement process for the democratic and stable development of the countries in the process of accession, for the stability of the European region and the security of the European Union;

3. recalls that the Enlargement has been a success story for the European Union and Europe as a whole. It has helped to overcome the division of Europe and contributed to peace and stability throughout the continent;

4. stresses the importance of a regional and local perspective on the enlargement process and recognises the important role of regional and local policies for ensuring internal stability, democracy at grassroots level being a vital part thereof;

5. stresses that each country pursuing membership of the European Union must be evaluated on its own merits according to its achievements in aligning itself with the rigorous criteria of membership;

6. stresses that good European governance, based on the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality, can be achieved through decentralisation without imposing a uniform template;

7. points out that a balanced transfer of powers and financial resources to decentralised authorities is essential to the exercise of effective local and regional democracy;

8. calls for cooperation efforts and exchanges of experiences and best practices gained under the pre-accession policy implemented with the local and regional authorities of the EU member states and candidate countries.

Croatia

9. welcomes progress made on the political and economic criteria, and on the *acquis* as well as on the implementation of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement, and welcomes the continued fulfilment of the Copenhagen political criteria;

10. stresses that political follow-up 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. This is why it decided to create a Working Party on Croatia, which involves fostering dialogue with all stakeholders in order to define its political positions;

11. outlines that through this working party, it intends to foster permanent dialogue with political representatives in Croatia. In addition, it will encourage and support the organisation of information and communication campaigns on the enlargement process in the cities and regions of the European Union and Croatia;

12. stresses that one way of developing prosperity and stability in Croatia and the Western Balkan region is through active cross-border cooperation between local and regional authorities;

13. welcomes that a strategy for public administration reform is being drawn up and draws attention to the need to address capacity issues in local and regional administrations;

14. considers it important that the government has begun implementing strategies for reforming the judiciary and fighting corruption, and welcomes that Croatia has moved forward on minorities and refugee return, but stresses the need for continued reform efforts in all of these areas and recommends that progress be accelerated especially on the latter two issues;

15. stresses the importance of good democratic and decentralised governance in addressing citizens' needs and points to the significant role of local and regional authorities in conducting reform policies;

16. welcomes the continuation of Croatia's full cooperation with the ICTY and stresses the need for further progress in the conduct of war crimes trials, including witness protection;

17. recommends that progress be made in addressing issues of public procurement to ensure transparent procedures are available to all levels of the administration;

18. welcomes the recent evolutions in regional policy and coordination of structural instruments but draws attention to the need for greater administrative capacity for the implementation of EU funding.

Turkey

19. welcomes the substantial reforms enacted by Turkey but remains concerned about the pace of reforms having slowed down;

20. stresses that political follow-up 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. This is why it decided to create a Working Party on relations with Turkey, which involves fostering dialogue with all stakeholders in order to define its political positions;

21. recalls that the setting-up of a JCC with Turkey remains its political objective;

22. outlines that through this working party, it intends to foster permanent dialogue with political representatives in Turkey. Furthermore, the working party encourage and support the organisation of information and communication campaigns on the enlargement process in the cities and regions of the European Union and Turkey;

23. stresses the importance of continued fulfilment of the Copenhagen political criteria with particular regard to the need for strengthening freedom of expression, freedom of religion, women's rights, minority rights and trade union rights and the need for further upgrading of the human rights institutional framework;

24. draws attention to the importance of democracy at grassroots level and the important role that local and regional authorities must play in the implementation of these policies;

25. emphasises the importance of local administrations and the key role of city councils;

26. welcomes the recent progress in establishing an ombudsman for public administration disputes;

27. stresses that improvement in the legal framework governing public procurement is essential to ensure transparent and accountable local governance providing vital services to citizens;

28. welcomes the passing of the law establishing regional development agencies and suggests that transparency and accountability in agency management be improved.

The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

29. welcomes the continued progress of the reforms and that the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia is well on track to

satisfy the Copenhagen political criteria, but takes note of the slower pace of reforms in 2006;

30. welcomes that the elections in July 2006 were conducted generally in accordance with international standards, but stresses that significant efforts are needed to address remaining irregularities and to fully meet those standards at the next elections;

31. recommends that efforts are made to strengthen the fight against corruption in order to ensure transparency and democratic accountability at all levels and that reforms of the police and the judiciary be implemented;

32. stresses the importance of full implementation of the Ohrid Agreement;

33. stresses the importance of democracy at grassroots level and points to the important role that local and regional authorities can play especially in ensuring the correct implementation of the laws governing protection of minorities and fostering good inter-ethnic relations;

34. welcomes the implementation of the 2000 Law on Civil Servants and the recent decentralisation efforts, and encourages municipal authorities to be pro-active in ensuring their rights and competences are respected;

35. stresses the need to secure the independence and professionalism of the administration;

36. calls upon the government to make the considerable efforts needed to align legislation on regional development with the Community *acquis* and to strengthen administrative capacity in that area to ensure efficient implementation of regional policy;

37. welcomes the launch of visa facilitation and readmission negotiations with all the countries of the region with a view to concluding the negotiations as soon as possible. The conclusion of such agreements will promote people-to-people contacts between the EU and the Western Balkan countries and will increase the opportunities for travelling, especially for the younger generation;

38. calls on the European Commission to take the necessary steps for providing a legal basis enabling the setting up of a Joint Consultative Committee between the CoR and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

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 European Union (EU)'s capacity to integrate new members
Reference	COM(2006) 649 final
Legal basis	EC Treaty Article 265(1)
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	Mr Antti Liikkanen (FI/PES) Member of Rovaniemi Municipal Council
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 unanimously. Simplified procedure Rule 26
Date adopted in plenary	6 June 2007
Previous Committee opinions	<p>CdR 50/2006 fin ⁽¹⁾, Opinion on the Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Civil Society Dialogue between the EU and Candidate Countries COM(2005) 290 final. Rapporteur Mr Isidoro Gottardo (IT/EPP), adopted in CoR Plenary 27.4.2006</p> <p>CdR 499/2004 fin ⁽²⁾, Opinion on the Proposal for a Council Decision on the principles, priorities and conditions contained in the European Partnership with Croatia COM(2004) 275 final. Rapporteur Mr Isidoro Gottardo (IT/EPP), adopted in CoR Plenary 13.10.2005</p> <p>CdR 495/2004 fin ⁽³⁾, Opinion on the Recommendation of the European Commission on Turkey's progress towards accession COM(2004) 656 final. Rapporteur Ms Helene Lund (DK/PES), adopted in CoR Plenary 6.7.2005</p>

⁽¹⁾ OJ C 206, 29.8.2006, p. 23.

⁽²⁾ OJ C 81, 4.4.2006, p. 42.

⁽³⁾ OJ C 31, 7.2.2006, p. 11.