

**Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on 'Enlargement strategy and main challenges 2007-2008
Pre-candidate countries'**

(2008/C 172/12)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- believes that a clearer message to pre-candidate countries about the way they will accede to EU is needed. Individual accession might inspire and motivate countries to make the overall process faster. A country's success in implementing required EU benchmarks should be a determining factor in its pace towards accession;
- notices that further capacity building of local authorities and local government associations in pre-candidate countries is needed as, presently local and regional authorities are not adequately involved in EU accession processes;
- welcomes the initialling of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) with EU and urges Bosnia and Herzegovina authorities to work together towards implementing obligations undertaken by the Agreement;
- welcomes initiation of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) with EU and calls on Serbia to continue working towards fulfilling its obligations towards the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia as they remain a condition for further EU integration;
- welcomes the signing of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the EU and encourages the government of Montenegro to continue working on its obligations under the Agreement along the lines of the draft action plan for implementation.

Rapporteur: Councillor Martin HEATLEY (UK/EPP), Member of Warwickshire County Council

Reference document

Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament: Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2007-2008

COM(2007) 663 final

Policy recommendations

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

A General recommendations

General progress and timetable

1. believes that a clearer message to pre-candidate countries about the way they will accede to EU is needed. Individual accession might inspire and motivate countries to make the overall process faster. A country's success in implementing required EU benchmarks should be a determining factor in its pace towards accession;

2. believes that a fine balance must be found between maintaining enthusiasm and stability in the potential candidate country, and a cautious and proper preparation for the accession process;

3. believes that whereas enlargement is important for the EU as well as for the candidate and pre-candidate countries, in terms of economic growth opportunities, the securing of vital transport and energy routes, and other strategic considerations, without forgetting the EU common values, such as freedom, democracy and solidarity; in particular, the prospect of accession is vital to securing peace and stability in the Western Balkans. Nevertheless, is concerned with 'enlargement fatigue' shown in some EU member states and believes that greater public awareness should be promoted on the opportunities and challenges of further enlargement;

4. welcomes the marked improvement in the general economic growth, overall macroeconomic stability and raised standard of living in pre-candidate countries, however believes that more effort should be made in strengthening the rule of law and modernisation of social structures. These macroeconomic improvements should be aimed at increasing the quality of life of the citizens of these countries. Specifically, calls for the enforcement of the rule of law — notably through judicial reform — and the fight against corruption and organised crime, including people trafficking, should be top priorities in all pre-candidate countries;

5. calls on all pre-candidate countries to maintain and continually improve good neighbourly relations as they form an essential part of the process of moving towards the European Union. Also points to the need for the Western Balkan countries

to step up their efforts to find mutually acceptable solutions to pending issues with neighbouring states;

Communications

6. stresses that good communication is essential for the continuing success of the enlargement strategy. It is necessary to provide better information on the benefits and challenges of the current enlargement process, as well as to ensure an understanding and acceptance that the process is gradual and carefully managed. All spheres of governments of pre-candidate countries should be supported in their efforts to better inform their public about European values and the benefits of getting closer to EU membership as well as about conditions of EU membership. In this context, the publication of Commission's communications on enlargement should be assured in the languages used in the pre-candidate countries, including minority languages;

7. recommends that the new EU financial instrument, the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA), should be used to improve awareness about EU integration and foster trans-border cooperation, strengthen capacities of representative associations of local and regional government in the Western Balkans, and include them in accession processes;

8. recommends improving 'vertical' communication between central government offices in charge of EU integration in respective countries and local and regional authorities as well as local government associations;

Capacity-building and cross-border cooperation

9. believes that supporting measures that connect people at the local and regional level and encourage cooperation between EU and pre-candidate countries are valuable instruments of cultural and political understanding, which can overcome doubts about integration capacity. Recalls the important role played by twinning and cooperation between twin towns following the historic events of the 1990s;

10. calls for increased measures to promote inter-regional and inter-municipal cooperation between EU Member States and pre-candidate countries, in addition to existing cross-border mechanisms, encouraging, for instance, the inclusion of pre-candidate countries into EGTCs ⁽¹⁾;

⁽¹⁾ EGTC — European Grouping for Territorial Cooperation.

11. stresses that administrative capacity building, not least at local and regional level, is essential for successful fulfilment of the Copenhagen criteria. Local and regional authorities in the countries concerned are not informed enough and generally still lack capacity to absorb EU financial support. In this sense, the CoR has a major role to play in promoting training seminars in order to exchange good practices and lessons learned by EU regional and local authorities;

12. welcomes the agreement on visa facilitation signed between EU and the pre-candidate countries as it is important step in facilitating people-to-people contacts, not only between peoples of Western Balkans countries, but also between peoples of EU and pre-candidate countries as well;

13. notices that further capacity building of local authorities and local government associations in pre-candidate countries is needed as, presently local and regional authorities are not adequately involved in EU accession processes;

14. welcomes projects that connect local authorities of EU member countries and pre-candidate countries such as the 'Exchange Project' in Serbia that included one-third of municipalities and exposed them to European practice in project management as well as assisting with establishing links between EU and Serbian local authorities;

15. encourages capacity building of central, local and regional authorities in pre-candidate countries to align their environmental policies with EU recommendations;

16. democracy in the pre-candidate countries is young and fragile. Determined and sustained efforts are needed to develop and consolidate the institutions and rules of representative democracy. This is particularly true at the local and regional levels, given their crucial importance for a stable and open democratic society and for good governance;

Civil society and public life

17. believes that the civil sector is a very important element in building a democratic society. Further development and capacity building of this sector is needed in order to facilitate their significant role in increasing transparency and promoting democracy. The civil sector can play important role in informing public on EU and facilitating citizens' inclusion in accession processes;

18. calls for further improvement of women's, children's and old people's rights. Further steps should be taken to improve equal opportunities, ensure better employment and encourage more active involvement of women in political life. Protection

of women, children and old people against all forms of violence including human traffic needs strengthening;

19. encourages further improvement in the status of people with disabilities. Particularly important element is improvement of employment opportunities for people with disabilities as it is an essential step towards their full integration into society;

20. encourages further improvement of minority rights and creation of conditions necessary for minorities' cultural self-realisation and development. However, strong action is also needed to improve attitudes towards ethnic groups and promote tolerance and reconciliation;

B Country specific remarks

Albania

21. achievements in better administration are to be welcomed, notably developments related to the improvement of civil registry, ID cards and the introduction of biometric passports; expresses hope this will contribute to an improvement in the electoral process as the most recent local elections failed to be in line with international commitments and standards;

22. welcomes the government's more strategic approach to the fight against corruption. However, corruption is still very widespread and constitutes a serious problem in Albania. Moreover, despite some improvements, the judiciary system remains weak and there is a major need for further reforms, especially in the areas of independence, transparency and efficiency. That is why it is particularly important that the planned anti-corruption strategy for 2007-2013 be implemented and applied vigorously in line with the Council of Europe/GRECO recommendations;

23. notes the very positive climate in inter-religious relations as they represent valuable example in the region, but urges more improvement in the areas of human rights and freedom of expression;

24. calls on Albanian authorities to continue working towards improvement of in the status of minorities in line with European best practices and the Council of Europe's Framework convention for Protection of National Minorities. Strongly recommends to include representatives of minorities in the Albanian parliament and ensure that teaching of minority languages is extended to include all members of ethnic minorities throughout the country;

25. acknowledges Albania's effort in maintaining and developing further good neighbourly relations with Member States and other pre-candidate countries;

26. considers that a further upgrade of administrative capacity is needed in order to implement the SAA successfully. Local authorities' administrations and Albanian Association of Municipalities need further capacity building to be able to absorb IPA funds;

Bosnia and Herzegovina

27. welcomes the initialling of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) with EU and urges Bosnia and Herzegovina authorities to work together towards implementing obligations undertaken by the Agreement;

28. welcomes the declaration on reforms of police forces in Bosnia and Herzegovina and calls upon all signatories to work towards reforming the police according to EU principles. Police reform remains necessary for the signature of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA);

29. welcomes determination of local government structures in Bosnia and Herzegovina to adopt European best practice in improvement of service delivery and welcomes readiness of the local government associations of both entities to work together in improving the quality of local services to the citizens;

30. welcomes continuing reforms of local government and notes that legislation of both entities regarding local self-government is compatible with the European Charter for Local Self-Government;

31. considers that a further upgrade of administrative capacity is needed in order to implement the SAA successfully. Local authorities' administrations and local government associations in both entities need further capacity building to be able to absorb and to fully benefit from IPA funds;

32. welcomes progress that has been made in return of refugees and internally displaced persons and encourages relevant organisations and agencies to continue working on improving conditions for sustainable return;

33. welcomes improvement in cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia which is seems as being on generally satisfactory level, but full cooperation shall be required for the signature of Stabilisation and Association Agreement;

Serbia

34. calls on Serbia to continue moving closer towards EU and to endeavour to live peacefully with its neighbours;

35. welcomes initiation of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) with EU and calls on Serbia to continue working towards fulfilling its obligations towards the Interna-

tional Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia as they remain a condition for further EU integration;

36. acknowledges the progress that has been made in the field of public administration reform which is in line with European standards and notes good administrative capacity that Serbia has shown in the context of negotiations on the SAA;

37. welcomes the initiative launched by the Ministry of Justice to do in-depth analysis of the judiciary system as implementation of the legal framework provided by the new constitution is still pending. Further effort is needed to ensure the independence, accountability and efficiency of the judicial system;

38. welcomes further implementation of the national strategy against corruption, but notes that corruption is still widespread and constitutes a serious problem in Serbia;

39. welcomes the improvement in the respect for, and protection of, minority rights and encourages the government to focus its efforts in improving the rights of ethnic groups, particularly in the area of education, social protection, health care, housing and employment;

40. urges the Serbian Parliament to ratify European Charter on Local Self-Government;

41. considers that a further upgrade of administrative capacity is needed in order to implement the SAA successfully. Local authorities' administrations and Standing Conference of Towns and Municipalities need further capacity building to be able to absorb and fully benefit from IPA funds;

Kosovo (under UN SC Resolution 1244)

42. Kosovo's declaration of independence of 17 February is now a fact; it welcomes the decision to launch ESDP mission on the rule of law and stability, EULEX Kosovo. Maintaining the rule of law and stability is in the interest of everyone. Ethnic groups must coexist peacefully;

43. welcomes the introduction of the Strategy and the Action Plan on Public Administration Reform 2006-2011 as the public administration is weak and inefficient and reforms are still at early stages;

44. believes that whilst certain progress has been made at the local government level, its administrative capacities remain weak;

45. welcomes the establishment of the Kosovo Anti-corruption Agency but believes there is a lack of clear political will to fight corruption, which remains a major problem. Further capacity building of the Agency's staff is needed as well as continuing work on development of the legislative framework and implementing measures;

46. regrets that little progress was achieved in the area of civil and political rights and liberties and urges Kosovan authorities to undertake further investigations on over 2 000 missing persons as an important step towards reconciliation;

47. welcomes the fact that elections in Kosovo in November 2007 took place in a peaceful manner; calls of Kosovan and Serbian authorities to continue working towards peaceful settlement of the actual political situation and it strongly believes that there can be no place for violence in Kosovo and that multi-ethnic Kosovo can only be built through co-operation of all its communities;

Montenegro

48. welcomes the signing of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the EU and encourages the government of Montenegro to continue working on its obligations under the Agreement along the lines of the draft action plan for implementation;

49. welcomes the adoption of the new Constitution;

50. acknowledges the good record of post-independence Montenegro in establishing good bilateral relations with enlarge-

ment countries and neighbouring Member States as well as good progress in joining regional initiatives and the Council of Europe;

51. welcomes measures introduced by the government to combat organised crime and corruption but notices that these issues are still seen as a serious concern and urges the government to continue with improvement of anti-corruption measures and increased efforts in combating money laundering. Particular emphasis should be on continuation of reforms to the judiciary system;

52. notices continuing reform of public administration and recommends further capacity building, particularly in areas of transparency, accountability, public procurement as well as in managing of public assets and licensing procedures;

53. considers that a further upgrade of administrative capacity is needed in order to implement the SAA successfully. Local authorities' administrations and Montenegrin local government association need further capacity building to be able to absorb and fully benefit from IPA funds.

Brussels, 10 April 2008.

The President
of the Committee of the Regions
Luc VAN DEN BRANDE
