

Report on FYROM's 2006 progress report

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The own-initiative report by Erik **MEIJER** (UEL/NGL, NL) on the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia was adopted by a large majority (558 votes for, 47 against and 8 abstentions). The report made it clear that the contested issue of the country's name can not form part of the conditions for EU membership.

It should also be noted that the European Parliament emphasises that special attention must be paid to the trafficking of human beings and that strengthening regional cooperation, inter alia through the Southeast European Cooperative Initiative, is becoming a necessity in the fight against international organised crime networks.

MEPs welcome the progress made by the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, since its application to become a Member of the European Union, in meeting the Copenhagen political criteria and in implementing the recommendations of the 2004 European Partnership, the provisions of the SAA and the requirements of the Stabilisation and Association Process. They point out that the reform momentum must be maintained and that the adopted legislation must now be properly and promptly implemented, especially in the fields of the police, the judiciary, public administration and the fight against corruption, in order to establish a true market economy, to stimulate economic growth and employment and to improve the business climate. MEPs also commended the Government of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia for its cooperation in the field of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), notably its participation in the EU mission ALTHEA and its willingness to contribute to the development of the ESDP capabilities and future EU-led civilian and military crisis management missions.

The Parliament notes with satisfaction that following the internal conflict of 2001, in close cooperation with the EU, solutions have been found through the Ohrid Framework agreement to enable all citizens, regardless of their ethnic background, to live together in equality and peace, by strengthening the use of minority languages in public administration and education, through municipal reorganisation and by means of the application of the double majority principle (the Badinter principle) that protects the position of non-majority communities in parliamentary decision-making.

According to the MEPs, the Ohrid Framework Agreement has transformed the country by taking full account of its multi-ethnic and multicultural character, thus representing a core part of the Copenhagen political criteria for EU membership. They call on this basis, following the implementation of the agreement, for the status of EU candidate country that was granted in 2005 to be accompanied as soon as possible by the actual start of accession negotiations.

Concerning the name of the country, Parliament regrets the on-going conflict with Greece on this matter. The Parliament points out that there are a number of countries in Europe whose name coincides with that of part of the territory of a neighbouring state, and that each state chooses its name in freedom. It welcomes the fact that the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia has changed its national flag and has made constitutional amendments to confirm the absence of territorial claims against neighbouring countries but regrets the recent name change of the national airport to "Alexander the Great".

The Parliament urges the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Greece to bring talks under the aegis of the UN on this issue to a successful conclusion as soon as possible.

Parliament takes the view that the name issue is not an obstacle to the opening of negotiations for EU accession and that, as is the case for all other candidate countries, its integration into the EU will depend exclusively on fulfilment of the Copenhagen criteria, the conditions of the stabilisation and association framework, and the EU's capacity to integrate new Member States.

The Parliament calls on the authorities of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to continue approximating EU environmental legislation and standards and to implement and enforce adopted legislation. It also recalls that a major incentive and guarantee for the stability and prosperity of the entire region of South-East Europe is the building-up of a modern cross-border infrastructure, and therefore draws attention to the importance of maintaining and improving the railway network, domestic rail traffic and the transit function between Greece and many other EU Member States.

As regards unemployment, the Parliament expresses serious concern over the fact that unemployment remains extremely high and calls on the Government, in view of the enormous challenges in this field, to devise efficient policies to combat poverty and social inequalities. It considers that the education and training system, investment in human capital and the population's access to the internet must be improved in order to respond to the needs of society. Attention is also drawn to the desirability of adopting measures to facilitate easy frontier traffic with Kosovo, thus enhancing cooperation in the areas of education, culture and employment, as well as maintaining family ties.

Urgent measures need to be taken to improve the situation of the Roma by using the National Strategy on Roma, involving well-developed Roma civil society as the main partner; considers that matching government funds with funds from the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance and institutionally recognising the Roma Advisory Group should be a way towards improving the social inclusion of the Roma in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

The Parliament recommends that the country should learn from European best practices in public administration and education that take account of ethnic and linguistic differences. It calls for further agreement on the way in which the two largest ethnic communities and the different minorities can live with one another on an equal and harmonious basis. In this respect, it calls for the effective implementation of the constitutional provisions designed to guarantee equitable representation of non-majority communities in the public administration.

MEPs call urgently for maintenance and consistent application of the independence of public broadcasting established in the Law of November 2005, which – unlike the previous situation of political interference – complies with European media standards.

The European Parliament welcomes the initialling of the visa facilitation and readmission agreements with the EU as a transitional step towards a mutual visa-free travel regime. It also welcomes the introduction of the new passports with biometric security features by the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. It takes note of the difficulties faced by the citizens of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia due to the non-recognition by one Member State of the EU of its passports and recalls that this issue has been raised and examined in detail during negotiations on the visa facilitation agreement.