Relations between the European Union and Serbia

2007/2126(INI) - 25/10/2007 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted a resolution based on the own-initiative report drafted by Jelko **KACIN** (ALDE, SI) on relations between the European Union and Serbia. It believes that Serbia deserves special commendation for the peaceful resolution of a series of difficult challenges over the past year, including the dissolution of the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro, fair and free parliamentary elections and the formation of a new government with a pro-European engagement. Parliament welcomes the completion of technical negotiations on an SAA between the Serbian Government and the EU after a 13-month break. It encourages both parties to make all the necessary arrangements in order to avoid technical delays prior to signature of the SAA, so that the signature can take place before the end of 2007. Members regard the signature of the SAA as an important step in the road towards EU accession.

Parliament congratulates Serbia on its recent progress in cooperating with the ICTY, which has made it possible for the SAA negotiations to be resumed and for the ICTY's Chief Prosecutor, Carla del Ponte, to give a positive assessment regarding Serbia's cooperation with the Tribunal. It welcomes the arrest of Zdravko Tolimir and Vlastimir ðorñevi, the assurance of Prime Minister Koštunica to Carla del Ponte that more arrests are likely (including ex-Bosnian Serb General Ratko Mladi), and the creation of new structures aimed at centralising all activities to apprehend fugitives, including improved transparency of the National Security Council. It reminds Serbia that signature of the SAA is conditional upon full cooperation with the ICTY, and that this should lead to the arrest and transfer of all remaining indictees, whilst noting that the recent arrests prove that the Serbian authorities are able to apprehend indicted war criminals. Full cooperation with the ICTY is not only an international obligation but also a key step towards achieving lasting reconciliation in the region. To this end, Parliament calls on the Serbian parliament to fulfil its commitments arising from the ICJ judgment and to adopt a declaration denouncing the genocide in Srebrenica. Given the timetable for closure of the ICTY, which currently envisages the conclusion of trials by 2008, it would be necessary to consider extending the mandate of the ICTY were indicted war criminals to be arrested after that date.

Parliament feels that resolving the issue of the status of Kosovo will both consolidate stability in the Western Balkans and facilitate the integration of the region into the European Union.

It is pleased to note that Serbia has made significant economic progress since 2000, with an average annual growth rate of 5%, nut also notes that this has not translated into a reduction in poverty or in the high unemployment rate (which is over 20%). Parliament calls on the Serbian government to make a firmer commitment to employment creation and poverty alleviation and to adopt concrete measures aimed at a more balanced economic development in all districts of the country, with particular attention being paid to underdeveloped south-eastern and eastern parts of the country. The further development of administrative structures and procedures can increase trust in the rule of law, strengthen the market economy and encourage economic growth in Serbia.

Parliament strongly believes that a key human rights issue is to find durable solutions for refugees and IDPs, especially since Serbia is still hosting a very high number of refugees, mostly from Croatia and partly from Bosnia-Herzegovina, and IDPs from Kosovo. It deeply regrets that the end-of-2006 deadline for resolving all outstanding issues foreseen by the Sarajevo Declaration on the return of refugees and property reparations, signed on 31 January 2005 by Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia-Montenegro, has not been met and that little progress has been made since.

It recognises the progress made in the fight against organised crime and corruption, whilst noting that corruption, particularly in the police and the judiciary, remains a serious problem and that official investigations into corruption often appear to be politically motivated. Corruption is a major obstacle to attracting greater foreign investment, and Parliament calls on the Serbian government to implement a comprehensive anti-corruption strategy. The fight against organised crime must be pursued. Promotion of the rule of law must form one of the government's top priorities.

Members believe that the citizens of Serbia are entitled to be told the truth about the recent policies of war and genocide committed in their name, and to have knowledge of the perpetrators of war crimes. Serbia must honestly confront its recent past in order to progress. Coming to terms with the past is an integral part of the road to reconciliation with Serbia's neighbours. Parliament calls on the government to re-open the Truth and Reconciliation Commission established in 2001, not least in order to promote a positive climate in those parts of the country which have been most affected by inter-ethnic conflict. It urges the Commission to promote initiatives facilitating people-to-people contacts in the region and to allocate a greater proportion of funds to this end.

Parliament moves on to call on the Council and the Commission to allocate to the International Commission for Missing Persons (ICMP) sufficient financial resources to enable that organisation to complete its work of identifying all missing persons in the territory of the former Yugoslavia by 2010. The work of the ICMP contributes significantly to the process of truth, justice and reconciliation in the region.

The report calls on Serbia to continue to play a responsible role in the region, and encourages the Serbian Government to promote good neighbourly relations with Bosnia-Herzegovina and to continue the dialogue with its south-east European neighbours on border issues, given that territorial demarcations between Serbia and Croatia and between Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina have yet to be established. It commends Serbia on improved inter-ethnic relations, in particular in Vojvodina where there has been a reduction in, although not a total cessation of, inter-ethnic incidents. The Serbian authorities must take additional measures to promote the development of national minorities in multi-ethnic Vojvodina, to promote peaceful coexistence amongst them and to ensure that the police, the judiciary and other state bodies act on an ethnically neutral basis. Parliament welcomes the earmarking of funds in the 2007 budget for projects directly linked to the Decade of Roma Inclusion, but was concerned by the overall lack of a systemic policy approach towards improving the lives and living conditions of the Roma, including IDPs and returnees, and by persisting discrimination against the Roma community.

It welcomes the adoption of a comprehensive national strategy to combat human trafficking, but urges the Serbian Government to be more stringent in prosecuting cases and ensuring that traffickers receive and serve prison sentences consistent with the nature of the offence.

Parliament believes that the transformation of Radio Television of Serbia (RTS) into a public service represents a step forward, but draws attention to the lack of public debate surrounding modifications to the Law on Broadcasting and shortcomings in the procedure for appointing RTS board members. It deeply regrets that there has been no progress in the resolution of cases involving murders of journalists and deplores the recent attempted assassination of a prominent investigative reporter of war crimes and organised crime.

As regards civil society, Parliament notes the existence of a well-developed NGO sector and welcomes efforts by the authorities to consult with the civil sector. It condemns, however, the public denigration of civic society actors who criticise the government or draw attention to sensitive issues such as war crimes. It deplores a recent spate of politically motivated assaults and warns of the increasing prevalence of hate speech in the media and politics targeted at human rights activists, journalists and politicians.

The report welcomes the signing of the visa facilitation and readmission agreements on 18 September 2007 and urges the Council to ensure that they enter into force by the end of 2007. It calls on the Council,

with the support of the Commission, to establish a concrete roadmap for visa-free movement and to adopt support measures designed to increase travel opportunities for a greater proportion of citizens, particularly young people. Parliament emphasises the importance of mobility for the political and economic development of Serbia, since mobility grants people the opportunity to gain first-hand experience of the EU and facilitates Serbia's European integration process. It calls for greater participation in life-long learning and cultural exchange projects.

Parliament calls on the Serbian authorities to adopt, as a matter of urgency, restitution laws in line with those of other countries, which provide for real-cost compensation when appropriate, instead of government bonds. Lastly, the new Member States are asked to play an active role in Serbia's move towards the EU, allowing Serbia to benefit from their experience of reforms.