

Croatia's 2007 progress report

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The Committee on Foreign Affairs adopted the own-initiative report by Hannes **SWOBODA** (PSE, AT) on Croatia's 2007 progress report, commending the Croatian authorities on the positive results achieved so far, particularly with regard to the number of negotiation chapters which have been opened. However, MEPs urge the newly formed Croatian government to step up its efforts to meet the benchmarks for the remaining chapter. Noting that much of Croatia's body of law has been aligned with EU standards, MEPs call this country to develop the administrative capacity required in order to implement the new legislation. MEPs also await new reforms, notably in the area of judicial reform in order to:

- further reduce the backlog of pending cases;
- enhance the independence, impartiality and professionalism of the judiciary;
- give renewed impetus to the process of rationalising judicial courts and ensuring that infrastructural investments are in keeping with the newly developed "judicial map".

MEPs commend the Croatian authorities on their continued efforts to prosecute those guilty of war crimes and urge them to take additional measures to ensure the protection of witnesses in the framework of the judicial process. While congratulating the full cooperation of the Croatian authorities with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), MEPs are concerned about the negative impact which the judgments of the ICTY on the Vukovar war crimes cases have had on Croatia's public perception of the work of the ICTY. Therefore, it is necessary to restore popular support of the ICTY within Croatia. The Croatian authorities are also called to strictly comply with the conditions necessary for the provisional release of defendants arraigned before the ICTY.

MEPs also call for further efforts to be made to fight against discrimination, of which the Roma community was subject. Measures are also expected to support the rights of national minorities (notably, via the school system, bilingualism in public administration or the fair representation of minorities within the judiciary and public administration system).

On the economic front, MEPs hope that Croatian growth, which is sustained, will result in increased employment opportunities. Although they commend the reforms led in the environmental protection sector, measures are also needed to encourage ecologically sustainable development. For this reason the Croatian authorities are called to reassess the efficiency of the current system of environmental protection measures (coastal water-treatment plants, differentiated waste collection, heat recovery plants, and the elimination of illegal rubbish dumps) and to raise public awareness of environmental issues. In this context, MEPs regret the decision of the Croatian Parliament to introduce unilaterally the Ecological and Fishing Protection Zone in the Adriatic, despite the agreement reached in 2004 with the Italian and Slovenian authorities and the European Commission, which could have serious repercussions on the pace of the accession negotiations.

Regarding the technical implementation of the legislation, MEPs await tangible signs of its implementation, especially as far as judicial reform, the fight against corruption and economic reforms are concerned.

Concerning the recent criticism voiced by the Commission with regard to the way in which EU funds are being managed by Croatian authorities, MEPs urge the Croatian authorities to address the administrative weaknesses identified as a matter of urgency. This would enable the lifting of the temporary suspension of

contracting under the PHARE 2006 programme (with a total financial envelope of EUR 68.5 million) as well as the reinstatement of the initial allocation for the financial year 2008 under the IAP Component 1, following a reduction of EUR 5 million.

Recalling that a real climate of international confidence can be crucial to ensuring stability in the Balkans, MEPs call on Croatia to do everything in its power to resolve all outstanding border issues. They recall that addressing border-related issues is defined as a priority of the Accession Partnership of Croatia and, in this respect, express their concerns regarding the commencement of the Pelješac bridge construction works despite opposition voiced by Bosnia and Herzegovina. For MEPs, every effort must be made for a negotiated resolution of this issue between the two states. Therefore, efforts are anticipated in the field of regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations, notably towards Bosnia and Herzegovina.

MEPs also call for the sustainable reintegration of wartime refugees.

Finally, MEPs hope that increased efforts, by both Croatia and the European Union, can lead to the finalisation of the accession treaty in time for the European Parliament to make its final decision before the next European elections in June 2009. Therefore, they call on the Commission to step up its efforts to finalise the negotiation material so as to enable the EU to respond rapidly and efficiently to progress made by Croatia, in meeting the opening and closing benchmarks in terms of accession.