

# Croatia's 2007 progress report

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The European Parliament adopted, by 588 votes to 39 with 22 abstentions, a resolution on Croatia's 2007 progress report, in response to the Commission's report on this subject. The own-initiative report had been tabled for consideration in plenary by Hannes **SWOBODA** (PSE, AT) on behalf of the Committee on Committee on Foreign Affairs. Parliament commends 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 on 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 and urges them to exercise continuous vigilance in order to avert the risk of ethnically biased rulings and to ensure that all measures are in place to protect the integrity of the judicial process. They call for urgent additional measures for the protection of witnesses. While welcoming the fact that Croatia is continuing to cooperate fully 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. The Croatian authorities are also called to ensure strict compliance with the conditions necessary for the provisional release of defendants arraigned before the ICTY.

MEPs also encourage the government and the parliament to pursue efforts to ensure the elimination of all forms of discrimination and prejudice, including vis-à-vis the Roma community. They call for the adoption by the government of a global anti-discrimination strategy and its effective implementation at state and local level. Measures are also expected to support the rights of national minorities (notably, via the school system, bilingualism in public administration or the adequate 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, 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 welcome the recent decision by the Croatian Parliament not to apply the Ecological and Fishing Protection Zone to EU Member States until a common agreement in the EU spirit is reached.

Parliament insists that new legislation should be rapidly implemented, since this provides a reliable yardstick against which to assess the country's preparedness for membership, a preparedness based on facts and not merely on the adopted legislation, especially as far as judicial reform, the fight against corruption and economic reforms are concerned. It calls on the Croatian government to ensure that public invitations to tender are issued as required by Community law. Parliament has learned with concern about

recent criticism voiced by the Commission with regard to the way in which EU funds are being managed by Croatian authorities and urges the latter to address the administrative weaknesses identified so as to allow the lifting of the temporary suspension of contracting under the PHARE 2006 programme (with a total financial envelope of EUR 68.5 million) and the reinstatement of the initial allocation for the financial year 2008 under IPA 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 over uncertain sea borders. Parliament notes that construction work on this project is currently halted, and calls for a negotiated resolution of this issue between the two states. It calls on Croatia to maintain its constructive attitude and continue to play a positive role in the region in order to support and strengthen the consolidation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Members share the Commission's view that, with increased efforts on the part of Croatia and continuous support by the EU institutions, accession negotiations should, in any event, be concluded in 2009. They call on the Commission to step up its efforts and increase the resources allocated for the preparation, processing and finalisation of negotiating material so that the EU can respond rapidly and efficiently to progress made by Croatia in meeting the relevant opening and closing benchmarks.