Situation of women in the Balkans

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The European Parliament adopted, by 574 votes to 10 with 42 abstentions, a resolution on the situation of women in the Balkans.

The own-initiative report had been tabled for consideration in plenary by Zita **GURMAI** (PES, HU) on behalf of the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality.

Overall, Parliament considers that the continuation of political and economic stabilisation and the creation of democratic institutions in the countries of the Balkans require the active participation of women.

MEPs note that women were disproportionately affected by cuts in social services and public spending such as health care, child and family care. These non-wage benefits and services which were previously provided enabled women to participate in paid employment and consequently to reconcile work and family life. While over-represented in some traditionally "female" jobs, Parliament deplores the lack of representation of women in certain sectors of activity. In that respect, it calls for special measures to avoid the feminisation of “lower paid” sectors. It is also concerned that the "gender pay gap" phenomenon exists, and that women have difficulties in setting up their own businesses.

Gender equality and the creation of social infrastructure: Parliament invites the governments of the countries in the Balkans to establish a legal framework for equal pay for both sexes, to assist women in the reconciliation of private and professional life and to provide good quality, accessible and affordable childcare facilities and care facilities for the elderly to that effect, and in addition to remove obstacles which inhibit female entrepreneurship. It draws attention to the generally insufficient healthcare infrastructure, especially in rural areas, and calls on governments to ensure regular screening of cervical and breast cancer for women, and of HIV/AIDS, to which women are more vulnerable than men.

Combating stereotypes: Parliament underlines the importance of education in eliminating stereotypes of which they are victims. In this context, the Commission is called upon to monitor closely and to press for the fulfilment of the Copenhagen Criteria, in particular in relation to equal opportunities for women and men and women's rights in the candidate and potential candidate countries. They invite the candidate and potential candidate countries of the Balkans to **harmonise their antidiscrimination and gender equality legislation** with the acquis communautaire.

No longer consider women in the Balkans to be war victims: Parliament considers that women who have been victims of war, should no longer be seen only as war victims but rather as actors of stabilisation and conflict resolution. It stresses that women in the Balkans in general can only fulfil this role once equally represented in political and economic decision-making. Parliament calls on the countries which have not done so already, to promote female representation and, where necessary, to **apply quotas effectively in political parties** and national assemblies.

Domestic violence: Parliament notes with concern that, despite the legislative framework recently put in place in most of the Balkan countries, domestic violence and verbal abuse remain present. It invites the countries concerned to take measures to create shelters for victims and to ensure that law enforcement institutions, legal authorities and public servants are more sensitive to this situation. It stresses that domestic violence is even more widespread than existing data show and that it is necessary to put in place awareness-raising campaigns in the fight against stereotypes, discrimination, domestic violence, and for gender equality in general, complemented by the promotion of a positive picture through female role models in the media.

Treatment of human beings: Parliament notes with anxiety that the countries of the Balkans are transit countries in the process of trafficking in human beings and that generally women and children are the victims of the trafficking. It calls for urgent action to be taken to prevent prostitution, and more specifically child prostitution and pornography, to strengthen penalties for coercion into, or incitement to, prostitution and/or participation in the creation of pornographic materials, and to criminalise child pornography on the internet.

Strengthen the importance of NGOs defending women's rights: Parliament stresses the importance of NGOs and women's organisations in developing the democratic processes and stability in the region and it calls on the Commission to provide pre-accession funds for strengthening women's rights in the Balkans, in particular through these NGOs and organisations.

Suffering of Roma women: Parliament underlines that Roma women suffer from multiple discrimination (racial, ethnic, gender), and are more vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion, therefore a **differentiated approach** is needed to tackle these problems. MEPs state that Roma women in particular encounter prejudice in many countries and are affected by lack of citizenship, have limited access to quality education, face inadequate living conditions, are unable to access healthcare services and encounter high unemployment and low levels of political and public participation in society. They call on the candidate and potential candidate countries in the Balkans to guarantee the elimination of all forms of discrimination and prejudice against women who suffer from multiple discrimination, especially the Roma. They also invite the Balkan countries to introduce an effective and practical antidiscrimination strategy to be implemented at all levels (national and local).

Lastly, MEPs calls on the European Institute for Gender Equality also to monitor gender equality in the countries of the Balkans with special attention on candidate countries.

It should be noted that the EPP-ED group had proposed, and then withdrew, a motion for a resolution as an alterative to the existing one.