Consolidating stability and prosperity in the Western Balkans

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The Committee on Foreign Affairs adopted the own-initiative report drawn up by Anna IBRISAGIC (EPP-ED, SE) on consolidating stability and prosperity in the Western Balkans in response to the Commission Communication on the subject. It points out that the leverage of the EU and its ability to function as an agent of stability and a driver of reform in the Western Balkans depends on the credibility of its commitment to allowing those States in the region that fully satisfy the Copenhagen criteria to become full members of the EU. It stresses therefore that the Commission and the Member States must maintain a **firm commitment to future enlargement** encompassing the Western Balkans. The Council and Commission are urged to deal with recent and forthcoming applications for membership with all due speed.

The report stresses that the accession process must be based on a fair and rigorous application of the principle of conditionality whereby each country will be judged solely in the light of its capacity to meet the Copenhagen criteria, the conditions of the Stabilisation and Association process and all the benchmarks laid down in relation to a specific stage of the negotiations. The accession process must not be slowed down or blocked for countries that have satisfied the requirements previously set. However, the accession process must maintain **a clear regional perspective**. Efforts must be made to avoid a situation whereby differences in the pace of integration result in the erection of new barriers in the region, in particular with regard to the process of visa liberalisation.

All parties concerned must make serious efforts to find mutually acceptable solutions to outstanding **bilateral disputes** between EU Member States and countries of the Western Balkans and among countries of the Western Balkans themselves. In this context, good-neighbourly relations and acceptance of the respective cultural and historic heritage are extremely important for enhancing stability and security. The opening of accession negotiations with the countries of the Western Balkans and the opening and closing of individual negotiation chapters should not be obstructed over questions relating to bilateral disputes and countries should agree on procedures for solving bilateral issues before the start of accession negotiations, including recourse to the International Court of Justice.

The report states that it is necessary to continue to **promote inter-ethnic and intercultural dialogue** in order to overcome both the burden of the past and tensions in relations between the countries of the Balkan region. Civil society organisations and people-to-people contacts are instrumental in advancing reconciliation, facilitating mutual understanding and promoting peaceful inter-ethnic cohabitation. The Commission is asked to provide increased funding for initiatives promoting reconciliation between different ethnic groups.

Members support the efforts aimed at establishing by 2010 a **comprehensive Western Balkans Investment Framework** for the coordination of grants and loans offered by the Commission, by international financial institutions and by individual country donors. They welcome the Infrastructure Project Facility (IPF) and point out that IPF projects in the fields of transport, the environment, energy and the social sector should be carried out with a clear regional perspective. These coordinated loan/grant facilities should be directed in particular towards those potential candidate countries which do not have access to funds from all five components of the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA).

The report discusses the importance of transport infrastructure, energy policy, full cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, improvement in education and an end to

segregation in schools, the sustainable return of refugees and internally displaced persons, and the rights of journalists and independent media.