Consolidating stability and prosperity in the Western Balkans

2008/2200(INI) - 24/04/2009 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted by 305 votes to 35 with 8 abstentions a resolution 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. Members also point out the need for the Western Balkan countries to **assume ownership** of their rapprochement to the EU. They stress that the integration process must be driven from within and that successful accession depends on the existence of a strong civil society, a low degree of corruption and an overall change-over to knowledge-based economies and societies.

The resolution emphasises 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. 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. Parliament notes the decision by certain Western Balkan countries to lodge complaints or seek advisory opinions from the International Court of Justice on bilateral disputes, and considers that the EU should make every effort to assist a comprehensive settlement of the pending issues.

The resolution 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. 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.

Parliament goes on to stress the importance of a **liberalisation of the Schengen visa regime** for the citizens of the countries of the Western Balkans. It urges the Council and the Commission to conduct the process in as transparent a manner as possible and with clearly defined benchmarks, in order to facilitate external monitoring and increase public accountability of the process. A cumbersome visa procedure,

compounded by the understaffing of consulates and embassies in the region, is liable to generate hostility towards the EU among the people of the region.

The resolution 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.