Resolution on the Commission's 2009 enlargement strategy paper concerning the Western Balkan countries, Iceland and Turkey

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Following the debate which took place during the sitting of 25 November 2009 the European Parliament adopted a resolution tabled by the Committee on Foreign Affairs on the Commission's 2009 enlargement strategy paper concerning the Western Balkan countries, Iceland and Turkey. It remains **strongly committed to the enlargement policy,** which has proved to be one of the most successful of all EU policies and has benefited both existing and new Member States. Members believe that lessons can be learned from previous enlargements and also recall the need to allow for adequate institutional, financial and political consolidation whilst pursuing the enlargement process. The EU's ability to function effectively and to develop must remain indispensable tenets of the EU enlargement policy. Parliament calls on the EU institutions to **analyse and increase the integration capacity of the EU.**

Parliament feels that, in order to **maintain the support of EU citizens** for further enlargement and the commitment of the citizens of the candidate countries to continue reforms, it is crucial to present them with clear and comprehensive information on the benefits and implications of this policy. It calls on the Commission and the Member States to make efforts to that end, but stresses that successful information campaigns need to be adequately funded.

Parliament reaffirms that a firm commitment to **full and rigorous compliance with all the criteria established at the Copenhagen European Council** of June 1993 by candidate countries as well as by the EU is imperative, including for the EU's integration capacity;

Turning to the candidate countries the resolution stresses that the **rule of law is a key principle** of democratic, economic and social development and one of the main conditions for EU accession. It notes that some countries continue to face major challenges, particularly in the **fight against corruption and organised crime**. Furthermore, Members note that that **freedom of expression** is one of the fundamental principles of democracy and observe with concern that in some countries it is not yet fully respected. It is a priority for the Western Balkans and Turkey to ensure the **freedom of media from political interference** and to guarantee the independence of the regulatory bodies.

On the **Western Balkans**, Parliament emphasises that **full cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia** (ICTY) constitutes a fundamental condition for the Western Balkans countries to make progress on the path to membership of the Union. It also stresses the importance of **good neighbourly relations** as a prerequisite for an unhindered enlargement process. All countries are called upon to make every effort to resolve their disagreements with their neighbours in the early stages of the enlargement process. Parliament points out that while such disputes should not, in themselves, constitute an obstacle to progress towards accession, the EU should avoid being encumbered by such outstanding bilateral disputes and should endeavour to resolve them before accession.

Parliament goes on to call on countries in the region to make greater efforts to improve the situation of ethnic minorities, and in particular the Roma. It stresses, too, the vital importance of the process of visa liberalisation for the Western Balkan countries, and considers that the Commission, within the limits of its competence and in the light of UN Security Council resolution 1244 (1999), should start the visa dialogue with Kosovo as soon as possible.

Turning to **country-specific issues**, Parliament commends **Croatia** for its continued progress in meeting the criteria of accession to the Union, and considers that the accession **negotiations can be concluded by mid-2010**, provided that Croatia steps up its efforts and fulfils all the necessary criteria and benchmarks, including full cooperation with the ICTY. It welcomes the bilateral agreement on resolving the border dispute with Slovenia, which has created the momentum to open further chapters in the accession process.

It congratulates the **former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia** on the progress achieved by that country since the last progress report, and expects the negotiations to begin in the near future with the hope that mutually satisfactory solutions to outstanding issues with neighbouring countries can be reached, including the name issue between the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Greece. Parliament recalls the importance of good neighbourly relations and urges the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to be sensitive on issues affecting its neighbours. It notes the recent establishment of diplomatic relations with Kosovo, as well as the conclusion of the agreement on the physical demarcation of the border, as a vital contribution to regional stability;

Members commend the progress that **Turkey** as a candidate country has made towards fulfilment of the Copenhagen political criteria and urge the Turkish Government and all parliamentary parties in Turkey to establish consensus on the formulation and implementation of key reforms. They are concerned about the situation in the area of freedom of expression and freedom of the press, particularly following the unprecedented fine imposed on a media group. Parliament also deplores the continued non-fulfilment of commitments stemming from the Additional Protocol to the EC-Turkey Association Agreement and urges Turkey to proceed to its full, non-discriminatory implementation. It commends the diplomatic efforts made to normalise relations with Armenia and also welcome Turkey's signing of the Intergovernmental Agreement on the Nabucco gas pipeline, and calls for the opening of the energy chapter in the accession negotiations.

Parliament notes with satisfaction the progress made by **Serbia,** and in particular its unilateral implementation of the Interim Agreement. This shows that country's commitment to moving forward on the path to membership of the Union. It calls on Serbia to step up its cooperation with EULEX KOSOVO, especially as regards EULEX KOSOVO's operations in northern Kosovo, but regrets the call addressed by the Serbian authorities to the Kosovo Serbs for a boycott of the local elections on 15 November 2009.

The resolution then goes on to acknowledge that some progress has been made by **BiH** in the area of security and border management. However, it expresses its dissatisfaction over the limited progress achieved by BiH as a potential candidate country on the path to membership of the Union. Parliament notes with growing concern the unstable political climate and the lack of a common vision shared by both entities, and encourages the Council to continue its efforts to pursue a dialogue with political leaders in BiH in order to help that country and its peoples to remain on the path to European integration.

It welcomes the intention of the Commission to strengthen relations with **Kosovo,** including exploring the possibility of Kosovo participating in Community programmes. Parliament expects the process of decentralisation to be concluded before the end of the year in order to meet the basic requirements of the Ahtisaari Plan, ensuring political representation for all the inhabitants of Kosovo and in particular for the Serb minority. Parliament welcomes, furthermore, the unprecedented good participation of Kosovo Serbs and regards this as an encouraging indication that the Kosovo Serb community is willing to take up its responsibilities in the Kosovo institutions.

Members acknowledge the progress made by **Albania and Montenegro** since the last progress report.

Lastly, Parliament welcomes **Iceland's application for membership** and expects that the Commission will soon formulate an opinion and a recommendation on that application. It also expects that that, in view of that country's well-established democratic tradition and high level of alignment with the acquis communautaire, Iceland will receive candidate status in the near future. However it considers that

Iceland's track record in implementing its obligations under the Agreement on the European Economic Area should be an essential element of the Commission's assessment. Parliament reiterates its call for the Commission to open a delegation office in Reykjavik as soon as the first half of 2010.