2016 Commission report on Serbia

2016/2311(INI) - 22/03/2017 - Committee report tabled for plenary, single reading

The Committee on Foreign Affairs adopted the own-initiative report by David McALLISTER (EPP, DE) on the 2016 Commission Report on Serbia.

Members recalled that Serbia, like any country aspiring to join the Union, must be judged on its own merits in terms of fulfilling, implementing and complying with the same set of criteria.

Accession negotiations: Members welcomed the opening of negotiations with this country and the **continued engagement of Serbia on the path of integration into the EU** and its constructive and well-prepared approach to the negotiations.

They underlined that the thorough implementation of reforms and policies remains a key indicator of a successful integration process. However, they noted delays in the absorption of pre-accession aid and called on Serbia to make progress in this area.

Economic reforms: Members welcomed the progress made by Serbia in developing a functioning market economy and the improvement of the overall economic situation in the country. They underlined the paramount role of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) for Serbia's economy and encouraged Serbia to promote entrepreneurship, particularly among young people.

Political reforms: although Members welcomed the conduct of the parliamentary elections on 24 April 2016 which were assessed positively, Members reiterated their call on Serbia, in line with the requirements of its candidate status, to progressively align its foreign and security policy with that of the EU, **including its policy on Russia**. They considered the conduct of joint Serbia-Russia military exercises regrettable.

The report commended Serbia's constructive and humanitarian approach in dealing with the **migration crisis**. They called on Serbia to fully respect the rights of asylum applicants in Serbia and to ensure that unaccompanied and separated minors are protected.

Rule of law: Members called for effective reforms in the judiciary field, in particular by taking steps to promote judicial independence which is not assured in practice. They expressed concern at the lack of progress in the fight against corruption and urged Serbia to show clear political will and commitment in tackling this issue. Members also reiterated their call for proper reform of the offence of abuse of office and abuse of responsible position so as to prevent possible misuse or arbitrary interpretation.

Efforts are also called for in the following areas:

- the fight against organised crime and criminal networks;
- the prosecution of war crimes;
- the fight against terrorism and money laundering.

Democracy and human rights: Members considered that the constitution needs to be revised so as to fully reflect the recommendations of the Venice Commission, notably with regard to the independence of key institutions. They stated that further effort is needed to depoliticise the public administration.

They noted that further sustained efforts are needed to improve the situation of persons belonging to vulnerable groups, including Roma, persons with disabilities, persons with HIV/AIDS, LGBTI persons, migrants and asylum seekers, and ethnic minorities.

Furthermore, measures are called for as regards the freedom of expression and the media.

Protection of minorities: Members underlined that **Vojvodina** (Northern Serbia) has maintained a high degree of protection for minorities and that the inter-ethnic situation has remained good. They stressed that the autonomy of Vojvodina should not be weakened and that the law on Vojvodina's resources should be adopted without further delay, as prescribed by the constitution. Members also noted the adoption of the new Roma social inclusion strategy 2016-2025 and called for its swift adoption. There is a large number of Roma people from Serbia seeking asylum in the EU due to their lack of protection.

Good neighbourly relations: Members encouraged Serbia to strengthen its proactive and positive engagement with its neighbours and the wider region. They called on Serbia to fully implement bilateral agreements with neighbouring countries and to enhance cooperation with the neighbouring EU Member States, in particular on border areas, in order to facilitate economic development.

They noted that Serbia has shown an increasingly constructive engagement in regional cooperation initiatives such as the Danube Strategy, the SouthEast Europe Cooperation Process, the Regional Cooperation Council, etc and called on it to implement the **connectivity reform measures** associated with the connectivity agenda and the conclusions of the 2016 Paris conference on the Western Balkans and TEN-T regulation.

International Criminal Tribunal: Members welcomed the adoption of a national strategy for the investigation and prosecution of war crimes. They called for **enhanced regional cooperation in handling war crimes** and solving all outstanding issues in this respect. They called for full cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and urged the authorities to continue working on the issue of the fate of missing persons, locating mass graves and guaranteeing the rights of victims and their families. They reiterated their support for the initiative to establish the regional Commission for the establishment of facts about war crimes and other serious violations of human rights committed in the former Yugoslavia.

Regional cooperation: Members commended the opening of three new border-crossing points between Serbia and Romania, as well as reconciliation with Albania. It welcomed Serbia's continued engagement in the **normalisation process** with Kosovo. They called on both parties to identify new areas of discussion for the dialogue, with the aim of improving the lives of people and comprehensively normalising relations. Members expressed concern at the recent tensions between Serbia and Kosovo regarding the first train journey from Belgrade to Mitrovica North, including warmongering statements and anti-EU rhetoric.

Energy: lastly, Members called on Serbia to fully implement the connectivity reform measures in the energy sector and to ratify the Paris climate agreement.