2016 Commission report on Serbia

2016/2311(INI) - 14/06/2017 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted by 524 votes to 70, with 79 abstentions, a resolution on the 2016 Commission Report on Serbia.

Parliament 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: Parliament 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.

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

Economic reforms: Parliament welcomed the progress made by Serbia in developing a functioning market economy and the improvement of the overall economic situation in the country. It 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 Parliament welcomed the conduct of the parliamentary elections on 24 April 2016 which were assessed positively, it called on the authorities to fully address the recommendations of the OSCE/ODIHR election observation mission, in particular with regard to the lack of transparency of the financing of political parties and of the election campaign. Parliament stressed that the funding of political parties must be in accordance with the highest international standards. It called on the authorities to properly investigate claims of irregularities, violence and intimidation that arose during the electoral process.

Taking note of the results of the presidential elections held on 2 April 2017, Parliament strongly condemned the rhetoric used during the presidential campaign by government officials and pro-government media against other presidential candidates. It regretted the uneven access of candidates to the media during the election campaign as well as the **parliament recess during the campaign**, denying opposition politicians a public forum. It called on the authorities to properly investigate claims of various types of irregularities.

Plenary noted that Prime Minister Aleksandar Vui received 55.08 % of the vote in the presidential election of 2 April 2017 and that esses that a multiparty delegation from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) observed the election, and that the OSCE/ODIHR deployed an election assessment mission (EAM).

Relations with Russia: Parliament reiterated its 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. It considered the conduct of joint Serbia-Russia military exercises regrettable. It welcomed, however, Serbia's important contribution to several EU CSDP missions and operations (EUTM Mali, EUTM Somalia, EUNAVFOR Atalanta, EUTM RCA) and its continued participation in international peacekeeping operations.

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

It called on the Commission to continue the work on migration with all the countries of the Western Balkans in order to ensure that European and international norms and standards are followed.

Rule of law: Parliament called for effective reforms in the judiciary field, in particular by taking steps to promote judicial independence which is not assured in practice. It 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. Parliament also reiterated its 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: Parliament 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. It stated that further effort is needed to depoliticise the public administration.

It 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**. Parliament stressed that political interference, threats, violence and intimidation against journalists, including physical assaults, verbal and written threats and attacks on property, remain an issue of concern. It called on the authorities to publicly and unequivocally condemn all attacks, to provide adequate resources to investigate more proactively all cases of attacks against journalists and media outlets and to swiftly bring the perpetrators to justice.

Protection of minorities: Parliament underlined that Vojvodina (Northern Serbia) has maintained a high degree of protection for minorities and that the inter-ethnic situation has remained good. It 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.

Parliament 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. It 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.

It noted that Serbia has shown an increasingly constructive engagement in regional cooperation initiatives such as the Danube Strategy, the South-East 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: Parliament welcomed the adoption of a national strategy for the investigation and prosecution of war crimes. It called for **enhanced regional cooperation in handling war crimes** and solving all outstanding issues in this respect. It 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. Members 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: Parliament 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**. It regretted, however, the decision taken by the Serbian authorities not to allow former President of Kosovo Atifete Jahjaga to attend the 'Mirëdita, Dobar Dan' festival in Belgrade, at which she had been invited to deliver a speech on victims of sexual violence during the war in Kosovo. It also regretted the subsequent reciprocity measure adopted by the Kosovan authorities to ban Serbia's Minister of Labour Aleksandar Vulin from entering Kosovo. Plenary stressed that such decisions are in breach of the **Brussels Agreement on freedom of movement concluded by Serbia and Kosovo**.

Members 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. They 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.

They called on the Commission to make further efforts to support a true reconciliation process in the region, notably through **support for cultural projects dealing with the recent past and promoting a common and shared understanding of history** and a public and political culture of tolerance, inclusion and reconciliation;

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