Wider Europe, neighbourhood: a new framework for relations with Eastern and Southern neighbours

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The committee adopted the own-initiative report drawn up by Pasqualina NAPOLETANO (PES, I) in response to a Commission paper on a new framework for relations with the EU's eastern and southern neighbours after enlargement. The report said that common policies should be developed between the EU and its neighbours on human rights, democracy and the rule of law as well as the development of civil society, education, research, culture and the media. A second group of common policies should deal with the free movement of people, judicial cooperation, the fight against terrorism and conflict prevention. MEPs believed that the idea of "neighbourhood" relations should also cover joint efforts in areas such as illegal immigration, illegal trade and the fight against corruption. A third set of policies would include the free movement of goods, services and capital as well as employment. The committee added that the security of the EU's external frontiers also required effective, coordinated measures against drug trafficking, fraud and trafficking in human beings. A key aspect of the report was its view of the geographical dimension of an enlarged Europe. MEPs, going beyond the proposals made by the Commission, sought to include Turkey, the western Balkans, the countries of the southern Caucasus and western countries which are not members of the EU such as Switzerland, Norway and Iceland. The report also made reference to Libya and Mauritania, two observer members of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership, as well as the Gulf states. It said that other countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran could also come within the purview of this "neighbourhood policy" in the medium and long term. However, MEPs emphasised that closer ties with these countries must have absolutely no effect on the candidate status of Bulgaria and Romania, nor on Turkey on which the Council was due to take a decision about opening accession negotiations in December 2004. The same principle applied to the potential candidate status of the western Balkan countries. The report also said that clear distinctions must be made between the regions and countries concerned, in particular on the basis of the types of challenge involved, the level of respect for democracy and human rights, and the interest and capacity of these countries to engage in closer cooperation. MEPs said that the prospect of association agreements, such as already exist with some countries in the Mediterranean region, could provide a framework in future for encouraging the reforms advocated by the EU. Given the size of Russia and its resources, the report stressed that relations with that country would continue to be extremely important, even outside the neighbourhood policy framework. However, the same degree of attention was needed on human rights and MEPs wanted Russia to take concrete measures in this area. They said that the current situation in Chechnya and the state of democracy were posing obstacles to the full development of the EU-Russia partnership. On Ukraine, the committee gave its backing to the reformers who were continuing to work to strengthen democracy in their country. It said the EU should leave the door to accession open in case the reform process made headway. MEPs also urged the EU to step up its support for civil society and the democratic opposition in Belarus, the only remaining dictatorship in Europe. On the Mediterranean region, the committee proposed that a Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly be set up to provide the Barcelona process with a stable parliamentary dimension. Lastly, they called for the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe to expand its remit to include the countries of the Mediterranean basin.