Bulgaria's progress towards accession. Strategy paper and 2003 report

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The committee adopted the own-initiative report by Geoffrey VAN ORDEN (EPP-ED, UK) on Bulgaria's progress towards EU membership. Its verdict was that negotiations were proceeding well on schedule, without any major problems, and could be concluded early in 2004. The report also insisted that the date of Bulgaria's accession should not necessarily be linked to that of any other candidate country. The committee particularly welcomed Bulgaria's constitutional reform as an important catalyst for substantial administrative and judicial reform. The adoption of anti-corruption legislation was seen as a positive step, although more systematic measures against fraud and bribery were deemed necessary, as was more progress in enforcing anti-corruption measures. MEPs also welcomed the improved legislation and concrete measures for the protection of children. Nevertheless, they pointed out that living conditions in children's homes needed to be improved substantially and they voiced concern at the imminent closure of the State Agency for Child Protection. As many of the children in care were from the Roma community, they stressed that more action was required to overcome barriers between the Roma community and the wider society. At the same time, they recognised that this was not simply a question of discrimination, but rather a two-way process. They encouraged the Bulgarian authorities to persevere in their efforts to promote the integration of Roma, while calling on Roma representatives to identify social and structural problems in the Roma way of life and to help implement measures which would facilitate Roma integration into the wider Bulgarian society. The committee welcomed the substantial investments made to improve safety at the Kozloduy nuclear power plant. On the basis of a November 2003 Council peer review report on the safety of the Kozloduy 3 and 4 reactors, it urged the Commission and the Council to show greater flexibility as regards the closing down of these units. Lastly, MEPs highlighted a number of issues still to be addressed by the Bulgarian authorities. These included: continued trafficking in human beings; the need for improvement of the legal aid system; abolition of the requirement for EU nationals to have a permanent residence permit if they want to work in Bulgaria; and the 2003 law on religious denominations, which the Commission was asked to investigate with regard to its compatibility with international conventions on fundamental freedoms.