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

2003/2202(INI) - 11/03/2004 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted a resolution based upon the own-initiative report drafted by Geoffrey VAN ORDEN (EPP-ED, UK) on Bulgaria's progress towards accession. Bulgaria's EU membership negotiations are proceeding without any major problems and are well on schedule. Parliament believes the negotiations could be concluded early in 2004 and insisted that the date of Bulgaria's accession should not necessarily be linked to that of any other candidate country, i.e. Romania. It welcomed in particular the 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 need 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 are from the Roma community, it is clear that more action is required to overcome barriers between the Roma community and the wider society. However, MEPs 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 will facilitate Roma integration into the wider Bulgarian society. Parliament welcomed the substantial investments made to improve safety at the Kozloduy nuclear power plant. It called on Bulgaria to respect its closure commitments for Kozloduy and asked Council and Commission to consider providing further funds for the decommissioning of units 3 and 4. Among issues still to be addressed by the Bulgarian authorities are the continuation of trafficking in human beings, real progress on gender equality, 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.