Construction of the Euro-Med Free Trade Area

2006/2173(INI) - 18/12/2006

The committee adopted the own-initiative report by Kader ARIF (PES, FR) on the construction of the Euro-Mediterranean free-trade zone. The report regretted the lack of progress in achieving the main objectives of the Barcelona Process and called for the process to be re-launched "by giving priority to the establishment of a genuine Euro-Mediterranean socio-economic area which will incorporate social and environmental aspects into the economic side of the partnership to a greater extent". The partnership needed to reflect the socio-economic realities of the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries (SEMCs) and promote economic development and greater regional integration. The committee also emphasised the importance of greater participation by the partner countries and the need to give the SEMCs "the right to control the speed with which they open up their trade and their national strategies for economic and social development".

The Commission was urged to take into account a potential erosion of tariff preferences from which the SEMCs benefit, caused by the signing of free-trade agreements between the EU and some third countries and improvements in the system of generalised preferences (SGP) for developing countries. The committee suggested that the Commission should establish a compensation procedure to reduce the negative impact which this tariff erosion might have on the SEMCs. Among other recommendations, MEPs also stressed the need to increase and tighten up customs checks in order to combat smuggling, counterfeiting and piracy of goods which, apart from causing loss of revenue, presented dangers for the health of the region's inhabitants.

The report welcomed the results achieved by the Facility for Euro-Mediterranean Investment and Partnership (FEMIP) since its inception, and called for it to be transformed into a genuine Euro-Mediterranean investment and development bank.

As far as agricultural issues are concerned, the committee emphasised the value of developing a common Euro-Mediterranean labelling policy on the basis of registered designations of origin which would be sufficiently compatible with the EU's current rules in this area, and of ensuring traceability and transparency of production methods. As regards services, the report said that the Commission should "refrain from pressurising SEMCs to open up their service markets beyond what they agreed to in the GATS framework of the WTO" and should "respond to positive offers by extending EU provisions regarding enhanced possibilities for the free movement of service workers". On energy, MEPs stressed the importance of constructing a genuine Euro-Mediterranean energy market and said that it was vital for the EU and those SEMCs which are without energy resources to "make a coordinated effort to reinvigorate the dialogue with the energy-producing countries". They noted the Commission's desire to accord an important role to North Africa and the Middle East in its external energy policy, and called for this to be translated into concrete actions.

Lastly, the committee stressed the important role of the Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly (EMPA) and called for stronger cooperation between the EMPA, the Commission and the Council in the economic field.