Consequences of future enlargements on the effectiveness of cohesion policy

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The committee adopted the own-initiative report by Markus PIEPER (EPP-ED, DE) on the consequences of future enlargements on the effectiveness of cohesion policy. In its report, the committee expressed a number of concerns about the EU's future cohesion policy following any new enlargement and called for political and financial reforms and appropriate impact assessment studies in order to avoid any weakening of this policy.

The committee said that it was necessary, at the time of the accession of every candidate country, to decide whether the EU was capable of integrating the state in question. It added that institutional, financial and political reform was also necessary in the context of a review of the EU financial framework. In this connection, the report stressed that "an honest and efficient cohesion policy is impossible without and increase in EU spending to 1,18 % of EU GNI", as stated by Parliament in its 2005 resolution on Policy Challenges and Budgetary Means of the enlarged Union 2007-2013. The committee accordingly regretted that, in its November 2006 communication on Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2006-2007, the Commission did not offer any in-depth analysis of the financial consequences of future enlargements. It called on the Commission to present a detailed impact analysis in order to enable due assessment of the full effects on structural policy on the accession of Romania and Bulgaria.

In connection with forthcoming enlargements, MEPs asked the Commission to regularly calculate, showing separate figures for each state, the regional policy expenditure which the EU would be likely to incur and what consequences this would have on the existing eligibility for funding of the regions. They stressed that future enlargements must not lead to "ever more regions ceasing to be eligible for cohesion policy funding under the current Objective 1 as a result of the statistical effect and without existing disparities really being eliminated".

Among its other recommendations, the committee called on the Commission to issue a communication setting out a proposal for a graduated model of cohesion policy, making it possible to draw a further distinction between pre-accession and membership and enabling potential accession candidates to receive effective support for regional development, subject to their political progress, prior to possible membership of the EU. It also said that Parliament should be involved in the codecision procedure for the evaluation and reform of pre-accession assistance from 2010 onwards. In order for cohesion policy to be effective, the individual responsibility of the Member States should be increased in future by means of higher national rate of co-financing, particularly in regions that have already received EU funding in many programming periods.

The report pointed out that in some regions EU aid is poorly targeted and the situation in those regions has not improved despite many years of financial support, resulting in a waste of Community resources. It therefore called for the introduction of a maximum period of time during which regions may receive structural funds, to avoid this type of situation. The committee also advocated more use of private funds as a source of co-financing structural funding and a greater concentration of funding on the "Europeanisation" of the regional economy and on infrastructures of European importance. Lastly, it called for tougher sanctions in the event of proven abuse of funding and more effective procedures for the recovery of funds.