

2007 progress report on FYROM

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The Committee on Foreign Affairs adopted the own-initiative report by Erik MEIJER (GUE/NGL, NL) on the 2007 Progress Report on the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), commending the considerable progress achieved by this country since the last Progress Report, published by the Commission. In particular, MEPs welcome:

- the adoption of the Law on the Public Prosecutors, the Law on the Council of Prosecutors and the Law on the Committee for Inter-Community Relations listing the laws to be adopted by the double-majority rule (Badinter principle);
- the establishment of the National Council for European Integration, which aims to achieve cross-party support for EU accession-related reforms;
- the sustained efforts of the Macedonian Government and Parliament in the implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement (on political aspects of inter-ethnic relations in the country) and the increased recognition of the multi-ethnic character of the state;
- the progress achieved in 2007 with regard to the fight against corruption, organised crime, human trafficking and narcotics;
- the progress made in the economic area (particularly, in tax policy, enhanced fiscal discipline, improved business climate and the reduction of legal and administrative barriers to business start-ups).

MEPs emphasise the political momentum that underlies the European integration of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, as well as the regular dialogue pursued between the Macedonian political parties in preparation for accession.

However, it is not enough to agree a rapid accession of this country into the EU and, for this reason, MEPs demand revitalised measures to tackle unemployment, particularly in the villages bordering Kosovo.

Concerning accession negotiations, MEPs welcome the measures already taken, yet they believe that the Macedonian authorities should continue the reform of the public administration in order to ensure its de-politicisation, professionalism, expertise and efficiency. For MEPs, all ethnic communities within the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia should demonstrate that this country is now free of conflicts (both domestic and international) and that the country is ready for the process of integration into the European Union. In this context, MEPs support the initiative of the Thessaloniki-based Centre for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe and the Soros Foundation to publish textbooks on Balkan history, in both the Albanian and the Macedonian languages, intended for history teachers and secondary school students. These textbooks incorporate different views on the common past, provide a balanced perspective and promote reconciliation.

With regard to the draft Law on Revision of the Electoral Code, which would provide for the parliament to be enlarged by 13 seats in the interests of both representation of small ethnic minorities and representation of nationals living abroad, MEPs believe that the proposed Law would have the effect of bypassing the use of the Badinter majority rule as intended by the Ohrid Framework Agreement. Therefore, a broad consensus should be reached on any revision of the Electoral Code, before any amendment is made.

MEPs also demand measures with the aim of combating the ongoing discrimination against the Roma community.

In addition, MEPs request measures to increase the flexibility of the visa policy with the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and to facilitate the entry of Macedonian citizens on Member States' territory.

MEPs also call for measures to promote women's rights and freedom of the media. However, they refuse any measure that aims to fuel or revive 'hate speeches' against neighbouring States.

On the environmental front, MEPs hope that real efforts will be made to protect water quality (especially River Vardar, which drains most of the country and continues as the Axios in Greece). Even though the adoption of the Law on Waste Management has led to some progress on handling asbestos, waste collection and polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB), MEPs believe that the behaviour of the population towards the environment, on the whole, remains ambiguous.

As far as the issue of regional cooperation is concerned, MEPs welcome the active participation of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia in the South East Europe Cooperation Process and its contribution to the establishment of the Regional Cooperation Council. They equally welcome its constructive position on the status of Kosovo, even though the technical demarcation of the border with Kosovo remains problematic. In this context, MEPs recall their inclination towards the proposal put forward by Mr Martti Ahtisaari, former UN Special Envoy for the Kosovo status process. Overall, MEPs commend the good-neighbourly relations between the FYROM, Kosovo and Serbia. They recommend a similar policy with Albania, Bulgaria and Greece.

MEPs welcome the increased bilateral cooperation between the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Greece, and the rapprochement of these two countries. They note that bilateral talks have been held in the region, under the auspices of the United Nations with a view to finding a mutually acceptable solution to the difference that has arisen over the name of the country and that both countries have accepted the UN Special Envoy's proposal of 19 February 2008 as a framework for further discussions. Consequently, MEPs call on both sides to step up their efforts to resolve this issue, which should in no circumstance become an obstacle to the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia's membership of international organisations.

At the same time, MEPs note that, although the country has achieved significant progress since 2005, it is the only country of the three candidate countries with which no accession negotiations have taken place to date. Therefore, it is desirable that this exceptional situation should end and that the necessary reforms are undertaken. In this context, the Commission is called to develop a set of benchmarks which will lead the FYROM to the opening of the accession negotiations before the end of 2008.

Finally, MEPs regret that the FYROM signed and ratified the Bilateral Immunity Agreement with the US authorities, granting citizens of that country exemption from the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court in The Hague: for MEPs, such an act runs counter to EU standards and policies all aimed at supporting the International Criminal Court as well as the EU guiding principles concerning bilateral immunity agreements. They call on the Macedonian Government to bring its national legislation into line with EU principles.