

Resolution on the 2011 progress report on the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

2011/2887(RSP) - 14/03/2012 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted by 582 votes with 70 against and 34 abstentions a resolution tabled on behalf of the Committee on Foreign Affairs on the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

It reiterates its call on the Council to set a date for the start of accession negotiations with the country without further delay, noting that the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia was among the first countries of the region to be awarded candidate status, is the country with the highest domestic public support for EU accession and has now been the subject of a positive recommendation from the Commission to set a date for the start of EU accession negotiations for three successive years. Members share the assessment made by the Commission in its 2011 progress report as regards the country's continuous fulfilment of political criteria, and regret that the Council did not follow the Commission's recommendation for the third consecutive year and did not decide to open the accession negotiations with the country at its meeting on 9 December 2011.

Members are concerned that the perception of the country's progress being overtaken could hamper continued improvements in inter-ethnic relations in the country and that the failure of any country in the region to achieve steady progress towards EU accession ultimately poses a threat to stability and security for them all. The decision of the Council not to follow the recommendation of the Commission has triggered legitimate frustration and dissatisfaction in the country's public opinion. However, Parliament welcomes the commencement on 15 March 2012 of the High Level Accession Dialogue with the European Commission as a step forward in the EU accession process, and shares the view of the Commission and of Government authorities that there is a need to focus the dialogue on the chapters on (i) Judiciary and fundamental rights and (ii) Justice, freedom and security, which will further advance the degree of application of EU accession criteria and standards. It considers that this dialogue will create a new commitment to reforms and strengthen our relationship through biannual political level meetings;

The name dispute: noting the decision of the International Court of Justice with respect to the name dispute issued on 5 December 2011, Parliament takes the view that this decision should give a new impetus to ensure that every possible effort is made to solve the name dispute under the auspices of the UN, and calls on the parties to comply with the judgment in good faith and use it to intensify dialogue. It strongly regrets that the name dispute is continuing to block the country's road to EU accession and thus hindering the enlargement process itself. Members underline that good neighbourly relations are a key criterion for the EU enlargement process and calls on the governments concerned to avoid controversial gestures, controversial actions and statements which could have negative effects on relations. The VP/HR and the Commissioner responsible for enlargement are asked to facilitate an agreement on the name issue and offer political guidance. Members regret the omission of the term Macedonian in the Progress Report 2011 and since 2009 despite the fact that it is the norm in references to the country's language, culture and identity in United Nations texts. They call on the Commission and the Council to start developing a generally applicable arbitration mechanism aimed at solving bilateral issues between enlargement countries and Member States.

Parliamentary cooperation: the resolution welcomes the election of the new parliament and the swift creation of the coalition government, resulting from the early parliamentary elections, and calls on all political actors in the country to redouble their efforts to proceed with necessary reforms, including the effective implementation and follow-up of the Commission's recommendations. Parliament also congratulates the country on the conduct of the early parliamentary elections of 5 June 2011 and welcomes the OSCE/ODHIR's assessment that they were competitive, transparent and well administered throughout the country, whilst drawing attention to the need for following up on recommendations. These include updating the voter list, guaranteeing balanced coverage by the press, including by the public broadcaster, of both the government and the opposition parties, protecting civil servants against all kind of political pressures, ensuring the effective monitoring of party financing and transparent public funding, arrangements for out-of-country voting, and fully respecting separation between state and party structures.

Economic development: Parliament commends the country for its good economic performance and for maintaining macro-economic stability, but also recognises the challenges of high unemployment and poverty, which continue to represent a major burden on the country. It urges the government to support small and medium-sized enterprises by facilitating access to finance and encourages it to continue its good practice of consulting business community representatives. Members welcome the fact that the country has moved up 40 places in the Transparency International anti-corruption index over the last five years. It notes, however, the finding of the Progress Report that the independence and impartiality of the State Commission for the Prevention of Corruption remains fragile and calls on the government to provide the State Commission with the necessary funding and staff. Members encourage the authorities in charge to continue implementing legislation to combat corruption and improving the independence, efficiency and resources of the judiciary.

Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA): congratulating the country on the 20th anniversary of its independence and on the 10th anniversary of the Ohrid Framework Agreement in 2011, Parliament stresses, nevertheless, that further and even stronger efforts are needed in order to achieve full reconciliation between the parties and lay down the basis for the consolidation of non-partisan and interethnic democratic institutions. It calls, in particular, for significantly enhanced efforts to combat separation between children of different ethnic groups in the education system, while supporting the right of all to education in their mother tongue.

Decentralisation: Members endorse the Commission's recommendation for stronger impetus to be given to the decentralisation process, and call for a significant rebalancing between central and local budgets to achieve this.

Fundamental rights: Parliament is deeply concerned about recent developments in the media and the fact that media ownership remains opaque and highly concentrated. It urges the authorities to ensure respect for the rule of law and media freedom in the country and thereby ensure that the Commission's assessment remains positive in the future. In particular, it calls for:

- the equitable and transparent distribution of government advertising revenues between all national broadcasters without any consideration of editorial content or political inclination;
- adoption of the necessary changes so as to align the Law on Broadcasting with EU legislation;
- efforts to avoid abuse of libel actions against journalists for political reasons;

· anti-trust legislation in the field of the media, as well as measures to prevent political influence in the media sector;

Members also raise concerns about the limited progress regarding gender equality and women's rights, the need to amend anti-discrimination laws, the very difficult living conditions experienced by the Roma community and the fact that they continue to face discrimination in access to education, the labour market, healthcare and social services, and the fact that only modest progress has been made in the field of labour rights and trade unions.

Justice and Home Affairs: Parliament notes the progress made in the reform of the judiciary, but is concerned at the shortcomings of the Law on Judges, in which there is leeway for political influence through dismissal procedures. It commends the cooperation with the EU on the fight against organised crime and terrorism. In addition, Members note the measures taken to manage migration flows more effectively, but express concern, about the use of profiling and call for the strict application of the principle of non-discrimination in such measures.

Public administration: Parliament commends the government on the progress in preparing the transfer of management of funds under the IPA. It notes with satisfaction the accreditation of national authorities for the IPA components on transition assistance and institution-building, regional development, human resources development and rural development, and calls on the government and the Commission to speed up the necessary work with a view to transferring management of the remaining IPA component on cross-border cooperation.

Other issues: Members express disappointment at the lack of progress in joint celebrations of common historic events and figures with neighbouring EU Member States, which would contribute to a better understanding of history and good neighbourly relations. They encourage the establishment of joint expert committees on history and education with Bulgaria and Greece, with the aim of contributing to an objective, fact-based interpretation of history, strengthening academic cooperation and promoting positive attitudes in young people towards their neighbours.