



Committee of the Regions

RELEX-IV-009

74th Plenary Session

9-10 April 2008

**OPINION
of the
Committee of the Regions
on the**

**2007 ENLARGEMENT STRATEGY AND MAIN CHALLENGES
2007-2008 - CANDIDATE COUNTRIES**

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- emphasises that the European Union must maintain its "open door" policy as regards enlargement, in order to stimulate democratic reform and economic development outside the current borders of the European Union;
- stresses that the fulfilment of the Copenhagen criteria and the requirements of the Stabilisation and Association Process conditions is a basic obligation for Member States, with the emphasis on the principle of own merit, which was also an essential factor in previous enlargements;
- stresses that it is vital not to interrupt Turkey's European journey; the EU must honour the commitments it made when it decided to open negotiations. However, it agrees with the Commission that the accession negotiations are an open-ended process, the outcome of which cannot be guaranteed beforehand;
- welcomes the good progress that Croatia has made towards meeting the Copenhagen political criteria, economic criteria and the *acquis communautaire*, and in implementing the Stabilisation and Association Agreement;
- considers that the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia has made considerable progress towards fulfilling the Copenhagen political criteria and economic criteria and highlights the progress made at the end of 2007; calls therefore on the Council to decide on opening negotiations with the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

Rapporteur:

Mr Alin Adrian Nica (RO/ALDE), Mayor of Dudeștii Noi, Romania

Reference text

Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament: Enlargement Strategy and main challenges 2007-2008 – candidate countries
COM(2007) 663 final

I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

General recommendations

1. reiterates its belief that the enlargement of the European Union is one of the most powerful means of exerting political influence, and is an important step towards peace and stability on the Continent and that it gives the citizens of candidate countries a further opportunity to achieve not only the wellbeing provided by the common economic area but also the EU common values, mainly freedom, democracy and solidarity;
2. emphasises that the European Union must maintain its "open door" policy as regards enlargement, in order to stimulate democratic reform and economic development outside the current borders of the European Union;
3. stresses that the fulfilment of the Copenhagen criteria and the requirements of the Stabilisation and Association Process conditions is a basic obligation for Member States, with the emphasis on the principle of own merit, which was also an essential factor in previous enlargements;
4. highlights the fact that successful integration depends first and foremost on the way the candidate country prepares for accession, and on the soundness and careful implementation of reforms;
5. points out that monitoring the progress and adaptability of legislation is a guarantee for successful integration;
6. draws attention to the fact that local and regional authorities must play an active role in integration, as it is a structural democratic process that cannot only be implemented at central level and without the active participation of all tiers of government or full compliance with the principles of subsidiarity and proximity;
7. considers that it is important to consult associations of local and regional administrations when the central administration proposes legislative measures which fall within the purview of local and regional authorities;
8. highlights the fact that the sustainable development of a country relies largely on compliance with and application of the fundamental principle of decentralisation, with all that it implies: i.e. decentralisation in decision-making, administrative and financial terms;
9. points out that the war of the mid-1990s left deep scars in the collective consciousness of the Balkan peoples, and it is therefore essential for all the local, regional and national players in

the region to cooperate in order to resolve the problems that have been a source of conflict in the past;

10. emphasises the importance of supporting, through pre-accession policies and programmes, initiatives and efforts for cooperation (including 2008: the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue) and the exchange of experiences and best practices (including experience of the application of the principles of the European Charter of Local Self-Government) between local and regional authorities from the Member States and candidate countries; in this sense, it has a major role to play in promoting training seminars aiming at exchanging good practices and lessons learned by the EU regional and local authorities. In particular, this should take specific account of the experiences of the new EU Member States that joined in 2004 and 2007, especially since some of them are located on the border with the three new EU candidate countries;

Turkey

11. stresses that it is in everybody's interests to support Turkey throughout a lengthy, complex reform process. It is a basic principle of the accession process that the pace of the negotiations depends on the progress of these reforms which will also be furthered by external EU support based on funding programmes. Therefore, both Turkey and the European Union should show patience and perseverance in this process;
12. stresses that it is vital not to interrupt Turkey's European journey; the EU must honour the commitments it made when it decided to open negotiations. However, it agrees with the Commission that the accession negotiations are an open-ended process, the outcome of which cannot be guaranteed beforehand. Compliance with the conditions imposed by the EU must be the only criteria on which accession is decided. Moreover, it is very important that Turkey should make a commitment to good-neighbourly relations, in accordance with the requirements laid out in the negotiating framework. However, Turkey is expected to put an end to all economic exclusions or border closures, and to refrain from threats or military operations regarding its neighbours;
13. welcomes the fact that parliamentary elections were properly organised, and hopes that the new government will speed up the reforms needed to meet the accession criteria by making real progress in sensitive areas. At the same time, is concerned about the repeated interference by the Turkish armed forces in the political process and believes that more effort should be made to ensure full and effective political control of the army;
14. welcomes the recent measures to amend the constitution, and considers that the proposed amendments will, if adopted, encourage progress towards meeting the Copenhagen criteria, and reiterates the need to amend Article 301 of the Turkish penal code, which makes it a punishable offence to denigrate Turkishness and Turkey, in order to secure comprehensive freedom of expression;

15. emphasises that local and regional authorities – which implement much of European legislation – must play a central, decisive role in the internal democratisation and European integration processes, and recommends that the European Commission highlights the role of local and regional authorities in the negotiation process with the Turkish government;
16. recommends re-examining Turkish village law with a view to increasing the efficiency and strength of public administrations at the lowest level;
17. proposes that more models for the regional development of local and regional authorities in Turkey be looked into, following the example of the EU Member States, as such models could make it possible to draw up and implement regional policies and strategies, define priorities for local and regional development, and even apply programmes supported by the European pre-accession or structural funds;
18. stresses the need to set up a joint consultative committee comprising representatives of the Committee of the Regions and of Turkish local and regional authorities; consequently, urges the Turkish government to request that a joint consultative committee be set up and asks the European Commission to take account of the importance of setting up this committee in the context of negotiations with Turkey;
19. stresses that Turkey must continue to take real steps towards the financial decentralisation of local public authorities in order to make it possible to strengthen the financial autonomy of local and regional authorities, and reduce their dependence on the central exchequer;
20. points out that, as well as extending administrative powers for local or regional authorities, financial resources must be provided in order for them to exercise their new powers;
21. notes that a process of public sector reform is underway in Turkey in order to increase efficiency and improve the administrative capabilities of public institutions, with a view to effectively managing government and European funds;
22. points out that discrimination still exists in Turkey as regards women's access to public administration and justice services, even though the legal framework has been partially harmonised with European legislation in the field; also draws attention to gender discrimination as regards access to education, as many girls are not educated beyond primary school, for reasons of religious traditionalism;
23. highlights the discrimination to which ethnic minorities in Turkey – particularly Kurds – are subject;
24. highlights the problems encountered by non-Muslim faiths in Turkey, due to lack of legal recognition. These faiths encounter problems when it comes to charitable activities, the right

to freedom of religion, the election of leaders and the training of the clergy. It also points out the repeated assaults and attacks on representatives and followers of non-Islamic faiths. The state must guarantee that there will be no more of these incidents and, to this end, use its resources to curb extremist factions, combating their subversive activities;

Croatia

25. welcomes the good progress that Croatia has made towards meeting the Copenhagen political criteria, economic criteria and the *acquis communautaire*, and in implementing the Stabilisation and Association Agreement; Croatia's example shows its neighbours in particular what advantages can be gained from being firmly anchored, politically and economically, to the structures and values of the European Union; welcomes the fact that a real breakthrough was achieved during the accession negotiations in 2007 and calls on the newly-formed Croatian government to redouble its efforts to fulfil the conditions for opening negotiations on the chapters that are still outstanding;
26. welcomes and encourages the measures taken by Croatia to decentralise local public administration and considers that, via these measures, more emphasis should be placed on subsidiarity so that decisions can be taken even more closely to the citizens;
27. considers that Croatia's continued engagement in regional initiatives, that has contributed towards further improvement of relations with its neighbours, has to be encouraged and strengthened; and highlights the importance of cross-border cooperation between local authorities in Croatia's border regions and those of neighbouring countries (Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Slovenia and Montenegro);
28. welcomes Croatia's full cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal and calls for further progress in the conduct of war crimes trials, including the strengthening of witness protection programmes;
29. welcomes the fact that both prime ministers of Croatia and Slovenia have reached an informal agreement in principle, that the border dispute should be submitted for decision to a third arbitrator; calls upon the Croatian and Slovenian governments to make a good use of all opportunities for realisation of this Agreement; welcomes the decision of the Croatian Parliament, that Croatia will not implement the Ecological and Fisheries Protection Zone until a common friendly solution in the spirit of EU, will be achieved;
30. believes that progress has been made in improving the implementation of the Constitutional Law on national minorities, and that the position of the Roma minority in Croatia is improving; nevertheless considers that further progress must be made with regard to the social integration of ethnic minorities, particularly the Roma populations, and of refugees, by promoting access to public services and higher education;

31. highlights the importance of creating specific instruments to ensure good governance, focusing in particular on the fight against corruption. In this context, the extended remit of the Office for the Prevention of Corruption and Organised Crime (USKOK) and the increase in corruption cases being prosecuted in the Croatian courts is to be welcomed; calls upon the Croatian government to further increase its efforts under the national anti-corruption programme 2006-2008;
32. welcomes the progress achieved in the construction and reconstruction of housing units and infrastructure, as well as the housing programme for solving the issue of former tenancy rights holders, and calls for its continuation and acceleration;
33. welcomes the recent progress with regard to regional policy and the coordination of structural instruments, but stresses that measures are still needed to increase efficiency and improve the administrative capabilities of public institutions, in order to effectively manage European funds;
34. observes, nonetheless, that some progress has been made towards the reform of local public administrations, although uneven implementation of the legislative framework for public administration has led to its inefficiency;

The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

35. considers that the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia has made considerable progress towards fulfilling the Copenhagen political criteria and economic criteria and highlights the progress made at the end of 2007; calls therefore on the Council to decide on opening negotiations with the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia;
36. welcomes the compliance with a number of the provisions of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement;
37. notes that the implementation of the Ohrid framework agreement has triggered radical changes within the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia society, with the full recognition of its multi-ethnic and multicultural nature, this being a key aspect of the political criteria for accession to the EU; again emphasises that the Badinter principle must be fully obeyed, and that all parties must respect each other and work together within the democratic institutions which the country has struggled to create. Regrets, however, that integration of ethnic minorities remains limited;
38. recommends that the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia learn from Europe's experience in the field of public administration and education, which takes ethnic and linguistic diversity into account; calls for the conclusion of agreements to secure the harmonious, equitable coexistence of the two ethnic majority communities and various minorities; in this context,

calls for the effective application of the constitutional provisions aimed at guaranteeing fair representation of ethnic minorities in public administration;

39. regrets the fact that corruption is still rife and continues to be a very serious problem, and therefore recommends that the authorities take steps to eradicate this blight;
40. appreciates the efforts made to decentralise local public administration and the concern shown for administrative efficiency by consolidating various municipalities for economic and development reasons; also stresses the need to speed up the process of financial decentralisation in order to strengthen the authority of local and regional administrations;
41. regrets the fact that no progress has been made on the issue of the country's name. Welcomes the resumption of negotiations assisted by the UN's special envoy Matthew Nimetz, and calls on the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to step up its efforts to help resolve the issue in line with UN Security Council Resolutions 817/93 and 845/93, thus promoting the establishment of good-neighbourly relations and the development of regional cooperation;
42. applauds the efforts made to increase administrative transparency by guaranteeing citizens' access to public information, but points out that the public institutions involved are not prepared or are unwilling to facilitate access to information;
43. welcomes the decision by its Bureau on 4 March 2008 to set up a joint CoR-the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia consultative committee following the formal request submitted by the government of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia; calls for all necessary administrative steps to be taken in order to enable the consultative committee's first meeting to be held in the first semester 2008.

Brussels, 9 April 2008

The President
of the Committee of the Regions

Luc Van den Brande

The Secretary-General
of the Committee of the Regions

Gerhard Stahl

II. PROCEDURE

Title	Enlargement Strategy and main challenges 2007-2008 – candidate countries
Reference	Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament: Enlargement Strategy and main challenges 2007-2008 – candidate countries COM(2007) 663 final
Legal base	Article 265 (1) TEC
Procedural basis	Optional consultation
Date of Commission referral	20.3.2007
Date of Bureau decision	22.5.2007
Commission responsible	Commission for External Relations and Decentralised Cooperation (RELEX)
Rapporteur	Mr Alin Adrian Nica, (RO/ALDE) Mayor of Dudeștii Noi, Romania
Explanatory memorandum	
Discussed in commission	13.12.2007
Date adopted by commission	25.2.2008
Result of the vote in commission	Majority vote
Date adopted in plenary	9.4.2008
Previous Committee opinions	<p>CdR 50/2006 fin¹, Opinion on the Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on Civil Society Dialogue between the EU and Candidate Countries, COM(2005) 290 final, Rapporteur: Mr Isidoro Gottardo (IT/EPP), adopted in CoR Plenary on 26.4.2006.</p> <p>CdR 499/2004 fin², Opinion on the Proposal for a Council Decision on the principles, priorities and conditions contained in the European Partnership with Croatia, COM(2004) 275 final, Rapporteur: Mr Isidoro Gottardo (IT/EPP), adopted in CoR Plenary on 13.10.2005.</p>

¹ OJ C 206 of 29.8.2006, p.23.

² OJ C 81 of 4.4.2006, p. 42.

	<p>CdR 495/2004 fin³, Opinion on the Recommendation of the European Commission on Turkey's progress towards accession, COM(2004) 656 final, Rapporteur: Ms Helene Lund (DK/PES), adopted in CoR Plenary on 6.7.2005.</p> <p>CdR 384/2006 fin⁴, Opinion on the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council – Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2006-2007, including annexed special report on the European Union (EU)'s capacity to integrate new members – candidate countries, COM(2006) 649 final, Rapporteur: Mr Antti Liikkanen (FI/PES), adopted in CoR Plenary on 6.6.2007.</p> <p>CdR 386/2006 fin⁵, Opinion on the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council - Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2006-2007, including annexed special report on the European Union (EU)'s capacity to integrate new members – candidate countries, COM(2006) 649 final, Rapporteur: Mr Isidoro Gottardo (IT/EPP), adopted in CoR Plenary on 6.6.2007.</p>
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³ OJ C 31 of 7.2.2006, p. 11.

⁴ OJ C 197 of 24.8.2007, p. 12.

⁵ OJ C 197 of 24.8.2007, p. 7.