

EUROPEAN UNION



Committee of the Regions

RELEX-IV-022

**80th plenary session
17-18 June 2009**

**OPINION
of the
Committee of the Regions
on
ENLARGEMENT STRATEGY AND MAIN CHALLENGES 2008-2009:
POTENTIAL CANDIDATE COUNTRIES**

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- Calls on the European Commission to include more information on reforms and inclusion of local and regional authorities in the enlargement process. Decentralisation in accordance to the *acquis* and progress made by local authorities deserve more attention in the country reports.
- Calls on the European Commission to support programmes to inform citizens on the challenges, benefits and impact that future EU membership will have on their lives.
- Calls on the European Commission to work faster towards lifting the visa regime for the countries that recently made progress in fulfilling required criteria defined in those countries' roadmaps.
- Calls on EU Member States to continue providing their support to local authorities in potential candidate countries in further capacity-building of an impartial and accountable civil service.
- Calls on all countries concerned to make additional efforts towards embracing European values, reforms and accepting dialogue as a means of reconciliation.
- Recalls that the progress of potential candidate countries towards candidate status should only take place when they have demonstrated progress in accordance with established criteria.

Rapporteur:

Councillor Gordon Keymer (UK/EPP)

Member of Tandridge District Council

Reference document

"Enlargement strategy and main challenges 2008-2009"

COM (2008) 674 final

I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

A. General recommendations

General progress and timetable

1. Welcomes the European Commission's Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2008-2009 reports on potential candidate countries.
2. Calls on the European Commission to include more information on reforms and inclusion of local and regional authorities in the enlargement process. Decentralisation in accordance to the *acquis* and progress made by local authorities deserve more attention in the country reports.
3. Notes that local and regional authorities in potential candidate countries remain somewhat detached from the process of enlargement and do not fully benefit from it, which inevitably impacts on their citizens. Calls on the European Commission to support programmes to inform citizens on the challenges, benefits and impact that future EU membership will have on their lives.
4. Notes a contradiction between the promotion of people-to-people contacts on the one hand, and the application of strict visa regimes on the other. Calls on the European Commission to work faster towards lifting the visa regime for the countries that recently made progress in fulfilling required criteria defined in those countries' roadmaps.
5. Calls on EU Member States to continue providing their support to local authorities in potential candidate countries in further capacity-building of an impartial and accountable civil service.
6. Calls on the European Commission to assist governments of countries concerned in managing the current financial and economical crisis as it will inevitably have direct impact on local authorities and the citizens that they serve.
7. Calls on EU Member States to provide continuing support to the process of enlargement as it "serves the EU's strategic interests in stability, security and conflict prevention"¹.
8. Calls on all countries concerned to make additional efforts towards embracing European values, reforms and accepting dialogue as a means of reconciliation. Particularly urges potential candidate countries to continue working on resolving bilateral issues including

¹ COM (2008) 674 final.

border disputes and providing for the return of refugees and internally displaced persons. Local and regional authorities are the best placed spheres of government to implement such changes.

9. Supports the development of road transport networks and revitalisation of regional airports in view of the potential benefits of employment, access, tourism and more balanced regional economical development and regeneration.
10. Recalls that the progress of potential candidate countries towards candidate status should only take place when they have demonstrated progress in accordance with established criteria.

B. Country specific remarks

Albania

11. Welcomes the completed ratification process of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement between EU states and Albania.
12. Welcomes the transfer of responsibilities for VAT, local taxation, water supply and sanitation as well social protection and social inclusion from central government to municipalities. However, expresses concern about the ability of municipalities to manage these new competences.
13. Considers that there is an urgent need for further capacity building of local authorities, local government associations and particularly the Department of Public Administration in the central government, which is responsible for drafting strategies on administrative reforms of local governments.
14. Notes a particular need for further capacity building of municipal financial services as local tax and revenue collection is very limited and hopes that these issues will be addressed in the forthcoming fiscal decentralisation.

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH)

15. Welcomes the signing of a Stabilisation and Association Agreement between the EU and BiH and encourages authorities in BiH to work continuously towards fulfilling its obligations under the Agreement along the lines of the draft action plan for implementation.
16. Welcomes the fact that recent local elections held in BiH were in line with the international standards of good practice. Nevertheless, notices deep divisions along the ethnic lines.

17. Welcomes recent reforms of local government in both entities which aligned local legislature with the European Charter of Local Self-Government and recommendations of the Venice Commission.
18. Regrets the lack of communication between governments of entities on aspects of EU accession, which has had a negative impact on the speed of reforms and does not allow for a proper flow of information to local governments.
19. Notes that municipalities in Bosnia and Herzegovina have good cross-entity communication and calls on the European Commission to continue supporting “joint projects” particularly in the area of capacity building of local authorities and local government associations.

Montenegro

20. Welcomes Montenegro’s application for candidate status and calls on EU Member States to authorise the European Commission to start with the assessment process.
21. Calls on the European Commission to support the major infrastructure project to build a North-South motorway as it will also immensely improve the development of communities in Montenegro
22. Notes the limited administrative capacity of local authorities and considers that a further capacity of both local authorities and the Union of Municipalities (Montenegro’s local government association) is needed and calls on the European Commission to support peer-to-peer exchange of know-how projects.

Serbia

23. Welcomes the increasing consultation by the central government of the Standing Conference of Towns and Municipalities (Serbia’s local government association) and the setting up of a Department for EU integration within the Standing Conference which will develop an action plan for the inclusion of local authorities in the accession process.
24. Calls on the Serbian government to continue working on decentralisation. Moving in the right direction would be a resolution of the issue of municipal property rights. At present local authorities in Serbia do not own their properties.
25. Calls on the European Commission and the Serbian government to continue to support capacity-building of local authorities through additional funding and training to enable them to carry out their increased duties and responsibilities

26. Calls on the European Commission to continue supporting local government capacity building programmes such as the “Exchange” programme of the Standing Conference of Towns and Municipalities in Serbia.

Kosovo (under UN SC Resolution 1244)

27. Welcomes the work undertaken by numerous international and local organisations in promoting a better future for Kosovo and considers that the lack of progress on decentralisation remains one of the key obstacles for democratic governance in Kosovo.
28. Believes that there is need for concrete improvements for the people of Kosovo. Further development of public transport and transport networks is needed particularly in areas where the return of refugees and internally displaced people is expected.
29. Would like to see greater confidence-building activities between different ethnic groups in Kosovo and encouragement to participate in local decision-taking processes. Of particular concern is the low turnout at local elections.

Brussels, 17 June 2009

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 2008-2009: potential countries
Reference(s)	Enlargement strategy and main challenges 2008-2009 COM (2008) 674 final
Legal basis	Article 265 (1) TEC
Procedural basis	Optional consultation
Date of Commission letter	26 February 2008
President's decision	19 December 2008
Commission responsible	Commission of external relations and decentralised cooperation (RELEX)
Rapporteur	Mr Gordon Keymer (UK/EPP), Member of Tandridge District Council
Analysis	
Discussed in commission	28 April 2009
Date adopted by commission	28 April 2009
Result of the vote in commission	Unanimity
Date adopted in plenary	17 June 2009
Previous Committee opinions	<p>CdR 115/2006 fin², Opinion on the 2005 Enlargement Package and the Communication from the Commission: The Western Balkans on the road to the EU: consolidating stability and raising prosperity COM(2006) 27 final, Rapporteur Mr Franz Schausberger (AT/EPP)</p> <p>CdR 385/2006 fin³, 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 – potential countries COM(2006) 649 final, Rapporteur Mr Wolfgang Gibowski (DE/EPP), adopted in the CoR Plenary Session of 6 June 2007</p> <p>CdR 386/2006 fin⁴, Opinion on the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council – Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges</p>

² OJ C 51 of 6.3.2007, p.16.

³ OJ C 197 of 24.8.2007, p.16.

⁴ OJ C 197 of 24.8.2007, p.7.

	<p>2006-2007, including annexed special report on the European Union (EU)'s capacity to integrate new members – integration capacity COM(2006) 649 final, Rapporteur Mr Isidoro Gottardo (IT/EPP), adopted in the CoR Plenary Session of 6 June 2007</p> <p>CdR 246/2007 fin⁵, Opinion on the Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European parliament - Enlargement strategy and main challenges 2007-2008, potential countries, COM(2007) 663 final, Rapporteur Mr Martin Heatley (UK/EPP), adopted in the CoR plenary session of 9-10 April 2008</p> <p>CdR 93/2008 fin, Opinion on The added value of participation by local and regional authorities in the enlargement process, Rapporteur: Ms Helene Lund (DK/PES), adopted in CoR plenary on 27 November 2008</p> <p>CdR 143/2008 fin, Opinion on the Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament: Western Balkans: Enhancing the European perspective, COM(2008) 127 final, Rapporteur: Mr František Knapík (SK/EPP), adopted in CoR plenary on 27 November 2008</p>
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O J C 172 of 5.7.2008, p. 60.