



Committee of the Regions

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OPINION
of the
Committee of the Regions
on
ENLARGEMENT STRATEGY AND THE MAIN CHALLENGES
2009-2010:
CANDIDATE COUNTRIES

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- reiterates that the EU's objective is to promote peace and the values and prosperity of its peoples. To this end, the Union is open to any European country that is fulfilling the Copenhagen criteria;
- underlines its full support for the measures and reforms introduced by the candidate countries in order to meet the membership criteria;
- draws attention to the key importance to the admission process of compliance with the principles of good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation. It calls on the candidate countries to find mutually acceptable solutions to outstanding issues with neighbouring countries within the framework of European priorities, principles and values;
- points to the importance of actively involving local and regional authorities and their associations at an early stage, since it is a profoundly democratic structural procedure which cannot be carried out at central level without the active participation of all levels of governance and without full compliance with the principles of subsidiarity and proximity.

Rapporteur

Mr Georgios Papastergiou (EL/EPP), Prefect of Pieria

Reference document

Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and to the Council – Enlargement strategy and main challenges 2009-2010
COM(2009) 533 final

I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

General recommendations

1. reiterates that the EU's objective is to promote peace and the values and prosperity of its peoples. To this end, the Union is open to any European country that is fulfilling the Copenhagen criteria;
2. points out that the enlargement process is an important factor in ensuring peace and stability on the European continent and provides the citizens of the candidate countries with a further opportunity to benefit from the growing prosperity produced by the economic area;
3. emphasises that the European Union must confirm its absolute commitment to the prospect of accession for all European countries that comply with the membership criteria and the conditionality of the Stabilisation and Association Process;
4. notes that the success of the admission process depends on how the relevant candidate country prepares for accession and fulfils the Copenhagen criteria;
5. underlines its full support for the measures and reforms introduced by the candidate countries in order to meet the membership criteria;
6. draws attention to the key importance to the admission process of compliance with the principles of good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation. It calls on the candidate countries to find mutually acceptable solutions to outstanding issues with neighbouring countries within the framework of European priorities, principles and values;
7. points to the importance of actively involving local and regional authorities and their associations at an early stage, since it is a profoundly democratic structural procedure which cannot be carried out at central level without the active participation of all levels of governance and without full compliance with the principles of subsidiarity and proximity;

CROATIA

Progress achieved by Croatia in the accession process

8. commends Croatia for the continuous progress it has made in meeting the criteria for Union membership and the obligations arising from accession;
9. voices its satisfaction at the bilateral agreement to settle the border dispute with Slovenia that has achieved a mutually acceptable solution;

10. urges Croatia to step up its efforts to meet all the necessary criteria and benchmarks, including full cooperation with the ICTY, where there are still outstanding issues, and to accelerate reforms in certain key sectors, a precondition for the completion of accession negotiations in 2010;
11. considers that progress has been achieved in eradicating corruption. It notes, however, that corruption remains widespread in many sectors, and recommends that additional efforts be made and the administrative capacity of bodies fighting corruption be boosted, together with a culture of political accountability at all levels;
12. welcomes the legal guarantees and general respect for media freedom and pluralism, but highlights the threats and political pressure to which journalists investigating corruption and organised crime are subject;
13. is concerned at the inadequate application of anti-discrimination legislation. Recent budget cuts must not be used as an excuse for not applying the law in full. The Committee points out that discrimination against minorities is a particular problem, as in practice neither protection against discrimination nor the relevant criminal proceedings are aligned with EU models;

Boosting local and regional authority capacities

14. is pleased at the smooth conduct, higher voter turnout and increased involvement of women in the first direct elections of mayors and prefects that were held in May 2009;
15. welcomes the adoption of the "2009-2013 National Training Strategy for Local Government Officials and Staff". It recognises its importance for boosting the ability of local government to deliver decentralised services to citizens, but nevertheless points to the significant weaknesses in administrative procedures, recognising that the legislative foundation for building a modern, professional public administration remains incomplete;
16. notes that the decentralisation strategy has not been adopted, due to a lack of commitment at political level, and regrets the lack of general coordination between the political and technical levels, as well as between the central administration and local authorities. It calls on the national authorities to introduce procedures enabling them to be properly represented in the legislative process, and recommends that measures be taken to improve the economic situation of local and regional authorities;
17. calls for more practical steps regarding educational provision and better vocational skills and knowledge for Croatian central, regional and local authorities and proposes that cooperation between the Member States be developed in this regard so that their experiences may be made use of more rapidly and that the conditions of the European Union Accession Treaty be met as quickly as possible;

18. acknowledges the progress made in simplifying registration procedures for companies, but emphasises that the business climate is suffering from the large number of parafiscal taxes at national and local level, corruption, and shortcomings in public administration;
19. considers that local and regional authorities and their associations must be involved in implementing the Community *acquis*. It points out that local and regional authorities must be well prepared to fulfil the obligations arising from future EU accession and to benefit from the opportunities it offers;

FORMER YUGOSLAV REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA

Progress achieved by the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia in the accession process

20. notes the Commission's recommendation and the conclusions of the General Affairs Council of December 2009, and encourages the government of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to ensure good neighbourly relations, and in particular to intensify efforts to find a negotiated and mutually acceptable solution to the name issue under the auspices of the UN;
21. points to the importance of good neighbourly relations and calls on the government of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to work together with all partners at further developing regional cooperation;
22. welcomes the EU's decision to allow citizens of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to travel without a visa within the Schengen area as of 19 December 2009;
23. asks the authorities of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to continue their reform efforts, especially in relation to public administration and the judiciary, anti-corruption policy, women's rights and inter-ethnic relations, in accordance with the 2001 Ohrid Framework Agreement, under which the rights of people of all ethnic backgrounds must be guaranteed and their participation in public life and administration increased;
24. welcomes the progress made in relation to strengthening and implementing the framework for eliminating corruption, although corruption continues to exist and to be a serious problem. The Committee of the Regions calls for the necessary efforts to continue, especially as regards implementing the legislative framework;

Boosting local authority capacities

25. commends the proposal to set up a new committee for local government;
26. endorses the use of cross-border cooperation to promote dialogue between local and regional authorities in neighbouring countries;

27. is pleased that OSCE/ODIHR observers and the Council of Europe were able to report that the presidential and local elections which took place in 2009 met most of the OSCE criteria and international standards for democratic elections. The Committee of the Regions calls on the government to continue implementing the further recommendations of the OSCE and ODIHR, and expects the irregularities they observed to be properly investigated;
28. urges that decentralisation be continued and that further responsibilities be transferred to municipalities, which are the key authorities under the Ohrid Framework Agreement, but points out that efforts must be stepped up, especially in relation to the economic framework for municipalities. Also encourages the work of the Association of Municipalities (ZELS), which is very important in promoting the decentralisation process;
29. welcomes the entry into force of the law on inter-municipal cooperation in June 2009, and looks forward to its implementation, and of similar laws that are in preparation;
30. highlights the improvement in collection of municipal taxes and efforts to strengthen the capacity of the municipalities in relation to managing wealth tax, public finances, public debt and financial control;
31. points out that administrative capacity is still inadequate in certain municipalities, especially ones with a small population, in relation to financial management, tax administration and financial control, and laments the continued lack of transparency and accountability of local and regional authorities;
32. sees a need for better coordination between national and local levels of government, and for more efforts by the ministry in charge of local authorities to facilitate the decentralisation process;
33. calls for the campaign against human trafficking to be stepped up by further implementing the National Action Plan for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings and illegal immigration (NAP) and ensuring a better coordination at local level;
34. welcomes the fact that municipality staff are progressively being trained to implement parts of the *acquis* which they are transposing at local level and to manage EU funding, and encourages continuation of these efforts;
35. notes that administrative capacity to implement and apply environmental legislation is far from adequate, at both national level and local level, and emphasises the importance of effectively addressing the issue, also taking into account any environmental effects on neighbouring countries;

TURKEY

Progress achieved by Turkey in the accession process

36. welcomes the broad public dialogue on a series of traditionally sensitive topics such as the role of the judiciary, the rights of people of Kurdish origin, the rights of the Alevi community, the role of the army and Turkey's relations with its neighbours, and commends the Turkish government for its constructive attitude and its role in steering the dialogue;
37. notes that progress on tangible reforms remained limited in 2009, and would encourage the government to turn its political initiatives into specific changes to legislation and their subsequent implementation;
38. regrets the fact that despite enactment of legislation relating to the Copenhagen political criteria, implementation of this legislation is still wanting, particularly in the areas of women's rights, non-discrimination, religious freedom, freedom of expression, zero tolerance of torture and the eradication of corruption;
39. is concerned about the state of play with freedom of expression and freedom of the press, particularly following the unprecedented fine imposed on a media group;
40. regrets the limited progress made in the area of religious freedom, and urges the government to establish a legal framework in line with the European Convention on Human Rights and the case law of the European Court of Human Rights so as to enable all non-Muslim religious communities and the Alevi community to practise their faith without unjustified constraints;
41. regrets the fact that the Turkish government continues to express reservations regarding respect for the rights of minorities, such as those provided for under international law; calls therefore on the Turkish government to bring its policy into line with international standards in this area and calls on the political parties to support the government's efforts, and urges Turkey to adopt measures in line with the recommendations of the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly on the Greek minority living on the islands of Imbros (Gökçeada) and Tenedos (Bozcaada), so as to maintain the intercultural character of the two islands as a model for cooperation between Greece and Turkey;
42. deplores the continued non-fulfilment of commitments stemming from the Additional Protocol to the EC-Turkey Association Agreement and urges Turkey to proceed with full, non-discriminatory implementation;
43. urges all interested parties to actively support the ongoing negotiations and to contribute in a practical way to full settlement of the Cyprus question, on the basis of a bizonal and bicomunal federation with a single international legal personality and citizenship, in accordance with the relevant decisions of the UN Security Council and the principles

underpinning the EU, and invites them to facilitate the creation of a climate that is conducive to negotiations, with the withdrawal of Turkish forces from Cyprus, an EU Member State, the resolution of the issue of the settlers and the return of the sealed-off part of Famagusta to its legal inhabitants;

44. notes the importance of Turkey as a transit country for illegal immigrants; takes note of the plan to resume negotiations on a EU-Turkey readmission agreement, and urges Turkey to fully implement, in the meantime, the existing bilateral readmission agreements with the Member States; urges the Turkish government to step up cooperation with the EU on managing immigration, involving Frontex, which manages security at the EU's external borders;
45. With regards to other regional issues, the CoR welcomes the improvement of Turkey's relation with its neighbours especially the joint agreement with Armenia and underlines the high importance of a rapid ratification of the protocols of establishing diplomatic ties and further development of bilateral relations with Armenia. The CoR expects Turkey to continue the efforts towards good-neighbourly relations and the peaceful settlement of differences;

Boosting local authority capacities

46. welcomes the generally free and fair local elections held in March 2009;
47. expresses dissatisfaction at the slow progress with transferring responsibilities to local authorities, in particular the establishment of operational municipal councils, which is the basis for strengthening public participation in local authority decision-making;
48. calls for an increase in transparency and accountability, in particular regarding the internal and external financial control of local authorities, and underlines the importance of decentralisation and of strengthening the capacity of local authorities to carry out the tasks entrusted to them;
49. welcomes the priority given to full employment in the negotiations and the adoption of a national programme for adoption of the Community *acquis*; notes despite this that there is little progress to report in relation to the effective implementation of policies and constitutional reform;
50. draws attention to Special Report No. 16/2009 of the European Court of Auditors on the European Commission's management of pre-accession assistance to Turkey and calls on the Commission to implement the Court's recommendations and to set goals and implement programmes on the basis of the accession criteria;
51. welcomes the establishment of development agencies, in particular the fact that the regional and local bodies concerned are involved in drafting the agencies' budgets. Stresses,

nevertheless, that the selection criteria are unclear and that the procedure is not sufficiently transparent;

52. notes that alignment with the *acquis* in the area of regional policy and coordination of structural instruments are still limited;
53. is hopeful and confident that a comprehensive analysis of the specific shortcomings and criticisms of Turkey's authorities and other institutions will be undertaken and that appropriate legal and administrative steps are to be taken to remedy them.

Brussels, 14 April 2010

The First Vice-President
of the Committee of the Regions

Ramón Luis Valcarcel Siso

The Secretary-General
of the Committee of the Regions

Gerhard Stahl

II. PROCEDURE

Title	Enlargement strategy and the main challenges 2009-2010: Candidate countries
References	Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament: Enlargement Strategy and main challenges 2009-2010 (COM(2009) 533 final)
Legal basis	Article 265(1) EC Treaty
Procedural basis	Optional referral
Date of Commission letter	1 April 2009
Date of Bureau decision	30 November 2009
Commission responsible	CIVEX
Rapporteur	Georgios Papastergiou (EL/EPP)
Analysis	
Discussed in commission	2 March 2010
Date adopted by commission	2 March 2010
Result of the vote in commission	Majority
Date adopted in plenary	14 April 2010
Previous Committee opinions	<p>CdR 384/2006 fin¹, 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 June 2007.</p> <p>CdR 386/2006 fin², 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 EU's capacity to integrate new members, COM(2006) 649 final, Rapporteur: Mr Isidoro Gottardo (IT/EPP), adopted in CoR Plenary on 6 June 2007.</p>

¹ OJ L 197, 24.8.2007, p. 12.

² OJ L 197, 24.8.2007, p. 7.

	<p>CdR 382/2008, Opinion on the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council - Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2008-2009 - candidate countries, COM(2008) 674 final, Rapporteur: Ms Jasmina Vidmar (SI/ALDE), adopted in CoR plenary on 17 June 2009.</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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