

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT
Delegation for relations with the countries of South East Europe

ASSEMBLY OF THE REPUBLIC OF ALBANIA
Delegation to the European Parliament

13th Interparliamentary Meeting

25-26 October 2006
Strasbourg

JOINT STATEMENT
by the Chairpersons of the Delegations

At the conclusion of the 13th European Parliament - Assembly of the Republic of Albania Interparliamentary Meeting, held in Strasbourg on 25 and 26 October 2006, the two delegations:

On the Stabilisation and Association Agreement and the political situation in Albania :

1. welcomed the signature, on 12 June 2006, of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement between the European Union and its Member States and Albania, which creates a close and far-reaching contractual relationship, and which will be instrumental for improving political, institutional and economic stability in the country and confirming Albania as a pluralist democracy; considered that the signature of the SAA is a milestone and that implementing it will be a great challenge for Albania ; invited the EU Member States to proceed to ratification without delay; noted with satisfaction that the Interim Agreement will already enter into force on 1st December 2006;

2. took positive note of the National Action Plan for the Implementation of the SAA approved by the Albanian Government in July 2006 and looked forward to its timely implementation; pointed out that, in order for the Albanian Institutions to focus more effectively on the reforms needed and on the European integration related legislation and administrative capacity, the political dialogue should develop in a less confrontational atmosphere; recalls, in fact, that proper implementation of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement is the best basis on which to assess a country's readiness to move to the next phase of candidate status and then to EU accession negotiations;

On electoral reform and the forthcoming local elections

3. expressed great concern for the untimely implementation by the Albanian Institutions and political parties of the electoral reform and in particular of OSCE-ODIHR's recommendations issued after the July 2005 parliamentary elections, in particular those related to voters' registration and identification, which are mainly concentrated on accuracy of the civil registers, reiterating the necessity of safe identification documents; urged the Albanian authorities and political parties to implement the electoral reform by November 2006, especially in order to fix the local elections date;

4. took the view that a further reform of the electoral system is required, in particular to guarantee fair representation in Parliament of the political forces supported by the Albanian citizens, to prevent the existing practices of tactic voting and to develop a system of addresses for buildings, to improve the accuracy of voter's lists;

5. expressed great concern about the serious deterioration of political relations between the right majority and the left opposition parliamentarians, occurred during the debates related to the independence of the most important Albanian institutions, on the parliamentary procedures and on electoral reform; took knowledge of the positive political compromise reached, in summer 2006, on the Central Electoral Commission and media legislation; hoped that this would be urgently transposed into acts without further postponement of the local elections;

6. stressed that an international facilitated agreement or compromise is certainly not a replacement for a civilised domestic debate on the electoral reform needed in Albania; urged the political forces, in and outside the Parliament, to act constructively to contribute, each for their part, to the elaboration of a suitable and broadly consensual reform; expressed the hope that a more positive atmosphere will be witnessed in the next local elections;

On the reform of the judiciary and public administration

7. regretted to observe that the level of corruption in the judicial system is still high; acknowledged that the Albanian Government made some progress towards judicial reform, by preparing a draft law to improve transparency of the procedures with a system of random distribution of cases and the rate of execution of judgements; whilst inviting the concerned authorities to step up their efforts on this way, reiterated, nevertheless, that Albania generally needs to improve the functioning and the efficiency of its judiciary;

8. took the view that all efforts should be taken to increase the degree of judicial independence, to improve the statute and remunerations of the judicial clerks and other staff, and to clarify the respective competences of the existing inspectorates;

9. acknowledging that the Albanian public administration apparatus, as in other transition countries, could take advantage of a reform including slimming it down and making it more effective, expressed the hope that the observed dismissals and replacements in the administration, following the taking office of a new Government, would not violate the Civil Servants Law, would not be dictated by a purely partisan logic, would not waste confirmed professionalism and would not, in the medium term, endanger administrative capacity of Albania in view of SAA implementation; considered it important, for this purpose, to strengthen the human resources allocated to the Ministry of Integration; invited the Albanian Government to encourage equal opportunities and fair representation of women and minorities in the public administration structures;

10. considering the fact that corruption remains a serious problem in Albania, welcomed the policy of "zero tolerance" announced by Government and acknowledged that some serious action has been taken, for example in the reduction of Government's apparatus, through better attention to the expenditure of public money, in the economic field and with a certain reduction in bribery; invited the Albanian authorities to step up their efforts to transform this

into a continuous, impartial, systematic and in depth action against corruption, for which financial control activities should also play an important role;

11. on organised crime, took positive note of the Government's determination to crack down on it, and in particular on trafficking in human beings and drug smuggling, but insisted that Albania must demonstrate further substantial progress in combating all forms of organised crime, in particular trafficking in women and children for the purposes of sexual, work or begging exploitation; recommended to continue to develop a legal framework for witness protection; called on the EU Member States and the neighbouring countries to intensify their police and judiciary co-operation with Albania on these matters and the Commission to continue and reinforce support to the Albanian authorities in this regard; invited the Albanian authorities to consider, among others, further strengthening of their financial intelligence units;

On the respect of human and minority rights

12. recalled Albania's important commitments in the field of human rights, since the country is part of the most important international conventions on the issue and strongly invited the relevant authorities to do all their utmost to ensure proper judicial prosecution and avoid that de facto impunity prevails for those law enforcement personnel who would excessively use force or commit acts of torture or ill treatment; recalled that conditions in prisons and detention centres are poor and asked for appropriate legal safeguards to be introduced in legislation and administrative practice in favour of persons detained by the police; urged the competent authorities to come up with new strategies against violence on women and children, including violence perpetrated in family, and welcomed the broad political consensus in Parliament on the draft law against domestic violence; encouraged the competent authorities to continue opening shelters and rehabilitation centres for victims;

13. regretted to observe that reintegration of the victims of trafficking is not satisfactorily addressed in Albania, yet, and encouraged the Government and civil society to focus on building front-line professionals' and NGOs' capacities, especially with a view to address minors' protection issues;

14. were disappointed to note that the rating of Albania in the last annual report by Reporters Without Borders on Freedom of the Press Worldwide in 2006 is decreasing; considered that the freedom and professionalism of the media have to be improved and asked Albanian relevant authorities, institutions and stakeholders to address the issues of media owners' financial interests and sources, the regulatory framework and the media supervisory body by implementing the relevant legislation according to EU standards;

15. called on Albania to make further efforts to protect minority rights and to complete and implement its minority-related legislation so that it supports the implementation of the relevant international conventions ratified by Albania; observed that further efforts are needed, in particular, as regards increasing the use of minority languages when citizens deal with the authorities and in the display of traditional local names, improving access to the media for members of minority groups, extending the possibilities to receive education in the minority language and supporting civil society ; considered that, to formulate a better policy in this field, accurate statistical information on national minorities would be needed;

On the economic situation in Albania

16. welcomed positive macro-economic developments and the strong year-on year budget revenue for 2006; underlined the importance of a secure and renewable energy, especially of electricity supply, and encouraged the Albanian competent authorities to improve their performances in electricity bill collection and to reduce power losses; reminded that, in the light of the SAA implementation, it is essential that Albania becomes more competitive, for example in the farming sector with a particular view to achieving better standards and certification of products, to be able to improve its exports and public finances in front of gradual dismantling of trade barriers and tariffs;

17. recommended that Albania focus more strongly on developing its economic potential, not least through the improvement and possibly the expansion of an environmentally friendly transport infrastructure and the development of environmentally sustainable tourism;

18. in line with the European Parliament wish and the European Commission's initiative, and also taking into account the signature of a readmission agreement between Albania and the EU, asked the EU Member States, and in particular the Finnish Presidency in Office, to rapidly agree on further facilitations of the visa issuing process for the Albanian citizens who wish to travel to EU States for lawful purposes, in particular for studying or working;

19. expressed concern that the Albanian informal economy remains an unfair competitor in the market and that the business environment is not as attractive for investment as it could be, mainly because of weak infrastructure, poor legislation and weak implementation of laws in general and tax legislation in particular; called on the relevant players to make up for the lost time in the privatisation of large enterprises and to facilitate private-public partnerships in the economy;

On the role of Albania in the region

20. in this particularly delicate season, in which important decisions have been or will be made, praised Albania's moderating role in the region of South East Europe, and called on its Government and Institutions to continue using its restraining influence and to operate for dialogue and consensual resolution to the outstanding issues, also in the framework of the various multi-lateral initiatives; reminded that regional dialogue and co-operation are also important parts of the Stabilisation and Association Process.

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