

FINAL DOCUMENT APPROVED BY THE COMMITTEES

The Committee on Foreign and Community Affairs and the Committee on European Union Policies of Italy's Chamber of Deputies,

Having examined the "2016 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy" (COM(2016)715);

Taking cognisance also of the Conclusions of the European Council of 15 December 2016;

Remarking that:

- 1) enlargement has been an EU priority since the fall of the Berlin Wall and, thanks to its incontrovertible successes, is widely acknowledged to be the most powerful tool of EU foreign policy;
- 2) starting off as a group of six countries, the EU now, even after seven separate rounds of accession, is still a community that eight more countries want to join. And yet one of the most important countries of the EU itself, the United Kingdom, has opted to divorce itself from the European project. After more than 12 years since the "historic unification" of Europe in May 2004 when 10 new members joined, the prospects of enlargement have changed drastically; for it now needs to be acknowledged that popular scepticism has grown so much that, today, 53 per cent of EU citizens are vociferously opposed to any further expansion;

- 3) while the beginnings of "enlargement fatigue" lie in 2007 in the immediate aftermath of the accession of two countries, Bulgaria and Romania, whereupon the EU seemed to have saturated its "absorption capacity", the enlargement process did not really start to falter until after the failure of the European Union's draft constitution, which was met by "No" votes in referenda in the Netherlands and France;
- 4) the exit of the UK from the EU is the event casting the longest shadow over the EU's power to attract and transform countries whose governments and public alike are preoccupied with tangible short-term benefits, and are subject to the influence of other international actors, primarily Russia and Turkey;
- 5) following the adoption by the European Commission of the 2016 Communication on Enlargement, the year 2016 itself turned out to be notable for the historic failure that occurred at the EU General Affairs Council on 13 December 2016 when, for the first time since the 1990s, the Council did not arrive at its customary annual common position on the enlargement policy after Austria vetoed the continuance of accession negotiations with Turkey, which had been proceeding in spite of the extraordinarily repressive measures adopted by Ankara in reaction to a coup attempt, and in spite of its consequent violations of the Copenhagen criteria;
- 6) the failure to reach an agreement in the General Affairs Council stalled the entire enlargement dossier and accession process for the countries of the western Balkans, for which an agreement would certainly have been reached eventually in spite of several unresolved issues, such as, especially, Croatia's stance on Serbia's treatment of its Croat minority and the situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina;

- 7) as far as Turkey is concerned, recent events there have compelled the EU to elucidate a renewed, coherent and clear position. While, on the one hand, credit is due to Turkey for constancy in its handling of the agreement with the EU on the migration emergency, and for having thereby helped attenuate impact of the migration on European territory, on the other hand, this positive result and Turkey's correspondingly enhanced bargaining position should not be enough to silence European outspokenness on the wave of repression unleashed by the Turkish leadership, which has taken drastic and generally summary action against tens of thousands of Turkish citizens who have been deprived of their personal freedom or their jobs, without receiving any consideration from a court, and without receiving a modicum of respect for their guarantees and rights. Most worrisome of all are the repeated repressive measures against Turkish media and communication channels that the government deems to be expressing dissent and whose journalists, editors and publishers it has subjected to mass arrests;
- 8) Europe's credibility requires a firm stance vis-a-vis Ankara. The migration emergency would cease to be an Achilles heel in this respect if the European Union were to consider addressing the disobedience of the countries of the "Visegrad Group" regarding decisions taken in 2015 with the same resoluteness that it displays when addressing Member States' compliance with, for example, budgetary constraints;
- 9) it is therefore reassuring that, on 1 March 2017, the European Commissioner Pierre Moscovici, at a hearing before the Committee for Foreign Affairs, the Committee for Budget Planning and Finance, and the Committee for EU Policies, was able to inform Italian MPs that the EU was beginning a process for imposing penalties on the Member States that are failing to comply with EU migration policy;

- 10) with respect to the Austrian veto on enlargement, it ought to be remembered that Austria has a historical memory of the sanctions imposed on it by the European Union in 2000 for the anti-democratic tendencies evinced by the government of the day, whose head was Jörg Haider, leader of the Freedom Party (FPÖ). Even though the traditional reluctance of Austria to accept the accession of Turkey is a well-known fact that dates back to before 2016, the European Union, in this as in other areas, must be sure to follow a consistent line and not leave itself open to accusations of double standards.
- 11) the complexity of the Turkish dossier and the consequent stalling of the accession process at the end of 2016 raise serious concerns for the future of the enlargement dossier for all the other countries involved. They are likely to end up at the bottom of the list of European policy priorities, which will be monopolised by the Brexit negotiations with London and by the management of pressing issues that are both internal (budgetary matters and the crisis of solidarity among Member States) and external (the situation in the Middle East and problematic relations with Turkey and Russia, now compounded by the arrival of a new political season in the USA);
- 12) in view of the above, therefore, and for the sake of consistency and credibility in the management of the EU's external relations, as well as for the sake of Italy's strategic interests, it is necessary to assure progress and map out a perspective path of European integration for the countries of the western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro and Kosovo);
- 13) unquestionably, the only feasible way of bringing real stability and some prosperity to the Balkans is to integrate these countries into the European Union;

- 14) that said, the integration of these countries should not be regarded from a narrow European-security perspective as a bulwark against major external threats (terrorism and immigration). It would be a grave miscalculation to discount the intrinsic importance of the integration of this region into the EU for reasons to do with defending the rule of law and democracy, maintaining regional and continental stability, and, ultimately, counterbalancing the excessive political and economic leverage of external actors over issues that are of vital strategic interest to Europe and Italy. Further, the western Balkans can complete their process of democratic consolidation if they perceive themselves as being considered to all intents and purposes future EU Member States whose advancement towards Europeanisation will be supported;
- 15) despite the anti-European rhetoric that is beginning to make inroads into the public discourse of certain political leaders of individual Balkan states, it should be borne in mind that many citizens and the political and institutional elites of these countries continue to cherish an interest in and a genuine and deep feeling of attachment to the EU;
- 16) notwithstanding the enlargement fatigue that has insinuated its way into Member States and into the very institutional heart of Europe, Italy maintains its support for European institutions, notably the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the European Commissioner for Neighbourhood Policy in their efforts to implement and maintain enlargement as a priority on the agenda;
- 17) in as much as it is difficult to undertake the task of achieving harmonisation among countries that differ in their standards of economic development, governance and the rule of law, to proceed in this direction would offer proof of the dependability and capacity of the European Union;

18) the countries of the western Balkans that have set out on the path to accession are still paying the price of the war of the 1990s, and have yet to face down and finally overcome past grievances stoked by nationalism and ethnic rivalries. As the Commission's Communication illustrates, each of these countries poses problems that need to be addressed. Their problems are aggravated by the growing gap between, on the one hand, inward-looking political elites intent on maintaining a status quo that is fuelling internal factionalism and, on the other, very young civil societies (at least 11 per cent of the population in the region is made up of people aged between 15 and 24 years, with peaks of 17 per cent in some countries, while at least 41 per cent of the population of all six Balkan countries is aged between 24 and 54 years) that are keen to overcome the past and pursue a path towards development and a consolidated and stable democracy. These countries must also bear the burdens of an informal economy, expanding economic and social disparities, and organised crime and corruption, while poverty and high unemployment remain among the most pressing concerns of their publics. Even though per capita income has almost doubled in the past two decades, the average level in the region is still just 36 per cent that of EU Member States, and the younger generation therefore sees EU integration as an opportunity that they urgently need to grasp to close the economic gap with other western countries;

19) against this backdrop, Italy has a crucial role to play in exercising the presidency of the Berlin Process;

20) the Berlin Process - born of a German initiative in 2014 to counterbalance European and individual Member States' resistance to the prospect of enlargement, and bringing together Germany, Austria, France, Croatia, Slovenia and Italy in a process that is scheduled to end

in 2018 – continues to be led by Germany. Through the Berlin Process, Chancellor Angela Merkel has sought to renew the "European perspective" of the Balkans region, with the aim of strengthening its partnership with the EU and generally setting various reforms in motion. Even though the Berlin Process is effectively propelled by the leadership of Germany, which the western Balkans regard as the real driving force of Europe, and even though it is therefore not a Union initiative, neither is it in contradiction with EU policies towards the region. In fact, the European Commission immediately declared its support for the process and has reaffirmed its importance in the Communication we are examining. After the summits of Berlin, Vienna and Paris, which called for intergovernmental cooperation on issues of economic development, the enhancement of transport, energy and gas networks, and cultural cooperation, with particular regard to young people, Italy, by virtue of its role within the Security Council and its G7 Presidency, is required to come up with a serious and concrete plan to relaunch the process in time for the summit on 12 July next year in Trieste, the main purpose of which will be to draw up a road map of economic growth fashioned after the Italian model of production, which is based on small and medium-sized enterprises;

21) meanwhile, "enlargement fatigue" must not be allowed to become an excuse for candidate or associate countries of the EU to renege on their commitments to reform and fulfil membership criteria. It is very important to the credibility of enlargement that it is seen as a two-way process. So, if a country introduces the necessary reforms, the EU must keep faith with its promises: the effort must be mutual. The success of the process depends very much on the real strength of commitment of the political leaders of the Balkans, who ought to follow the example of Croatia, which joined in 2013. But it depends also on the EU's ability to avoid sending out discouraging or peremptory signals that might set the region back or

frustrate the hopes of its young people and citizens, whose abandoning of the European project would risk exacerbating instability across the whole continent;

22) Italy can also play an important role at the celebrations taking place in Rome in March 2017 to mark the 60th anniversary of the signing of the Treaties of Rome;

23) the celebrations offer an important opportunity to discuss the future of Europe and of its policies of enlargement, to which the fate of the Union is inextricably linked, especially in light of certain new political and organisation approaches now under debate, such as the idea of a “two-speed” Europe;

24) it is therefore a matter of priority to reprise the broader questions of European governance and the prospects for strengthening the EU, because only a strong and cohesive EU can purposefully guide the process of enlargement and oversee the admission of new countries into the common European home;

25) on the basis of the foregoing points and in wake of the failure of the EU Council of 13 December 2016 to adopt a unanimous position, it is to be hoped that the European Commission will continue to pursue its mandate for all the countries of the Balkans, even if by dint of majority-adopted conclusions. To be sure, the impasse that has been reached on this matter does not send a reassuring signal. Indeed, it confirms the growing influence of a populist pattern of politics and an increasingly bilateral approach to enlargement policy;

26) with respect to the policy priorities of the region itself, the Serbia-Kosovo dispute is the knottiest of the issues to resolve, but the recent emergence of a "Belgrade-Tirana axis", with an exchange of visits between Prime Minister Vučić of Serbia and his Albanian counterpart Rama, is one positive among many negative signs. Nor should the scale of the opposition of

some Member States to candidate countries be underestimated, notably Greece's strong opposition to the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia;

27) more generally, the current stalemate in the enlargement policy must not be allowed to disrupt the work to institutionalise the process. Unless the European Commission underwrites and owns the process, it will be left with responsibility only for its technical implementation. Naturally, the approach taken cannot disregard the importance of the convinced and active involvement of civil society and, more generally, the societal stakeholders of the Balkans region, and it must be acknowledged of the Berlin Process that it reasserted the need for the active involvement of these groups, including in high-profile political processes;

28) given the current mood of uncertainty about the future of European enlargement, a process of Europeanisation under the stewardship of the European Commission seems to offer the only hope of transforming the countries of the region into functioning democracies. It is therefore important to be able to identify which political actors in the region will be able to commit themselves actively to ensuring that reforms are actually carried out rather than remain on paper;

29) recognising that the present final document must be forwarded to the European Parliament and the European Commission as part of the informal political dialogue;

Expresses a

FAVOURABLE OPINION