

Enlargement

Western Balkans MPs debate EU accession, war crimes tribunal and visas at EP MEPs and Enlargement Commissioner Olli Rehn assured MPs from the western Balkans that the EU will stick to its promises and offer full membership to their countries if they meet the accession criteria. They were speaking on Tuesday at an interparliamentary colloquium organised by the European Parliament and including parliamentarians from across the western Balkans region.

Enlargement fatigue?

The representatives from the Balkans set out their concerns: Gordana Comic (Democratic party, Serbia) mentioned her discussions with Montenegrin parliamentarians on a Regional Charter of Minority Rights. Ferdinand Xhaferaj (Democratic party, Albania) raised the frequent talk of 'enlargement fatigue' in the EU, and expressed his fear that "the tunnel may be getting longer for us."

Doris Pack (EPP-ED, DE), Chair of the EP Delegation for relations with the countries of south-east Europe, said that enlargement fatigue was a problem between European citizens and their politicians, who "are not fulfilling our own criteria to ourselves in the EU." She urged the visitors to take advantage of the opportunities already offered to them by the Union. such as the life-long learning programme.

Elmar Brok (EPP-ED, DE), Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, struck a similar note, saying that European politicians must solve the problem of selling the enlargement process for the success story that it always has been. Nevertheless, he said that countries whose realistic expectations do not include accession to the Union in the next few years should think about intermediate steps towards full membership, such as an "EEA +" (European Economic Area Plus) that would allow them to implement a majority of the community *acquis*.

International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia

The Parliamentarians held an exchange of views with Jean Daniel Ruch, Special Advisor to the Prosecutor at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY). They said all the trials needed to start as soon as possible to prevent the accused from gaining celebrity status through media and political manoeuvring in their home countries.

Ms. Comic regretted that the circumstances of Slobodan Milosevic's death at the tribunal "leave the debate open about whether he was guilty or not," an unwelcome development for Serbian democracy. Nikola Spiric (SNSD, Bosnia & Herzegovina) also wondered whether the role of the media in Yugoslavia's bloody past was being sufficiently examined.

Free trade, EU enlargement, visas - Commission response

Commissioner Olli Rehn outlined the current state of play with each country, and welcomed the arrival of a free trade area replacing the complicated web of bilateral arrangements in the region.

Predrag Sekulic (Democratic Party of Socialists, Montenegro) asked about the timeline for the new negotiating mandate to be established, in order that talks may be resumed between the EU and his newly independent country. Mr Rehn replied that the Commission saw this step as a simple technical adjustment, and that the Commission decision could therefore be expected by the end of next week.

Quemal Minxhozi (Socialist Party, Albania) brought up the visa waiver issue, as well as Suzana Grubjesic (G17+, Serbia) who asked whether "we are seeing a Schengen curtain instead of an iron curtain?" The Commissioner replied that visa facilitation goes hand in hand with readmission agreements and document verification systems, which are both unresolved in the region. He also stressed that visa issues are primarily decided by the Member States.

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