

Austrian Parliament, Parlamentskorrespondenz Nr. 504: "Europe's perspectives: unity in variety. Neighbourhood policy and Western Balkans as themes of the COSAC meeting", 23 May 2006

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Europe's perspectives: unity in variety Neighbourhood policy and Western Balkans as themes of the COSAC meeting

Vienna (PK) – The XXXVth COSAC meeting continued in Parliament today with discussion of the European neighbourhood policy and developments in the Western Balkans. Introductory statements were made by EU Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner and former Vice-Chancellor Erhard Busek.

Ferrero-Waldner stressed the fundamental importance of national parliaments for EU policy as the driving force without which European policy could not work.

There were three issues that the EU had to deal with at present: public scepticism in many areas, economic structural reform and the risks and opportunities of globalisation.

The EU was more important than ever in an increasingly globalised world, said the Commissioner, as the European answer to this phenomenon. It was not by any means outdated but needed to become more transparent and democratic. Its internal structures also needed to be strengthened so as to effectively counter public scepticism.

The Commission had recognised this and intended to move from a reflection period to an action period. The Constitutional Treaty should not be filed away; on the contrary, a progressive strategy was required to make more active and effective use of existing treaties.

An active foreign policy was of increasing significance in that respect. The EU had to export stability and not import instability, said Ferrero-Waldner. The EU neighbourhood policy provided political answers to strategic questions and the geostrategic tasks of the EU. The Commissioner described this policy as a success that had created a prosperity, stability and security policy for the EU and its partners.

Ferrero-Waldner then spoke of the EU political action plans, which addressed many political questions and provided specific answers. The spectrum ranged from human rights to the environment, economic policy and education. She illustrated the different aspects of the neighbourhood policy citing the examples of Ukraine and Moldova.

Parliamentary cooperation was particularly important in that context, she continued. Collaboration at the parliamentary level and the role of national parliaments in the European neighbourhood policy should not be underestimated. To that extent, the subsidiarity principle was one of the elements serving to link European actors more efficiently to enable them to act more quickly.

The European neighbourhood policy was of benefit to the EU and its neighbours, and the national parliaments made an important contribution by bringing the EU to their constituents, she concluded.

Erhard Busek, Special Co-ordinator of the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe, described the current situation in the Balkans, a region of vital importance to Europe. He recapitulated the history of the Stability Pact, stressing the fact that it had not only managed to put an end to the war and atrocities that went with it but had also created a stable political and economic environment. It had found outstanding solutions to the tasks of peacemaking and peacekeeping.

Busek outlined the areas of activity of the Pact and spoke of its achievements to date. In political terms everything was running smoothly and the refugee problem had also been successfully solved in many areas. For that reason the Pact was now focusing more on migration, which had an impact on the domestic policy of the countries concerned and on the employment markets of both sides.

Further tasks included strengthening parliamentary cooperation, concentrating more on local politics and stimulating regional cooperation. As an example, Busek cited the fires every year on the Adriatic coast around Dubrovnik, which could be fought more effectively through cooperation between the fire services of Bosnia, Croatia and Montenegro.

The Pact had also been a success in economic terms, as illustrated by the involvement by foreign enterprises in the region and growth rates of 4 to 7 per cent, which were required if these countries were to align themselves economically with the rest of Europe.

There were distinctions, however: Croatia, Romania and Bulgaria were developing very well, Serbia and Montenegro averagely, but the other countries – Macedonia, Bosnia, Moldova, Kosovo and Albania – gave cause for concern. The countries closest to the EU appeared to have developed better than the others and remedial action was therefore required.

Finally, Busek touched on aspects of the security policy, above all the fight against crime – notably drug trafficking – and against corruption, where there was still much to be done.

These statements were followed by intensive discussion by parliamentarians from Serbia and Montenegro, Germany, Portugal, Greece, Belgium, Netherlands, Poland, United Kingdom, Czech Republic, Slovenia, Croatia, Finland, France, Lithuania and Turkey. Topics included various aspects of foreign policy and also energy, education, the environment and business.

Austrian contributions came from Federal Council member Albrecht Konecny and MP Ulrike Lunacek. Konecny voted for speaking honestly rather than courteously with the states of the Western Balkans. The prospects for the Balkans should be seen in a long-term perspective and for that reason it was necessary to consider intermediate steps on the way to European integration. The EU should also encourage regional cooperation since these countries needed to make peace among themselves and not with the EU. In the interests of integration and strengthening the economy there was therefore a need for collaboration within the region itself, he concluded.

Lunacek spoke of the future of Montenegro and of ways of preventing polarisation of the population in view of the close result of the referendum on independence. The strategy of rapprochement with the EU was also a problem since the candidate countries were receiving a large amount of support that widened the gap between them and the other countries. Finally, Lunacek once again called for a relaxation of the visa regulations so as to give the people of these countries a better European perspective.

In her closing address Ferrero-Waldner said that it was in the EU's interests to coordinate and harmonise the energy policies of the Member States since an attractive energy supply was in the interests of all Member States. As far as the neighbourhood policy was concerned, there was a separate strategy for each country adapted to its special needs. This policy had only just been initiated and results were not yet available. There was no call to prejudge the future; on the contrary, the available opportunities should be used efficiently. At the same time there was a need for realism and expectations should not be too high.

Busek spoke of the current situation in Serbia, Montenegro and Kosovo, saying that it was not advisable to give fixed dates for EU enlargement. The initial question was one of implementation to enable the relevant projects to be successfully completed. This in turn would be contingent on regional cooperation.