

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

2004



2009

Committee on Petitions

12.02.2009

WORKING DOCUMENT

on the fact finding visit to Bulgaria from 27 to 30 October 2008

Committee on Petitions

Members of the delegation: Marcin Libicki, Cathy Sinnott, David
Hammerstein Mintz

Ex. officio: Dushana Zdravkova

Objectives of the mission to Bulgaria

Since Bulgaria joined the European Union on 1 January 2007, Bulgarian citizens have actively made use of their right to petition the European parliament. The Committee on Petitions has so far received 88 petitions from Bulgarian citizens, and 27 petitions have been forwarded to the European Commission for further investigation.

A great number of the petitions are concerned with environmental protection but also problems related to transport infrastructure and security, fundamental rights and child welfare have been the subject of petitions.

In this context the visit to Bulgaria aimed to get a more thorough understanding of the situation in Bulgaria and the problems described by Bulgarian citizens in their petitions, but also to publicise the work and the remit of the Committee on Petitions. The visit also gave the participants the opportunity to meet with Bulgarian authorities and discuss the questions raised by petitioners.

The mission

The delegation was first led by Marcin Libicki, chairman, and later by Kathy Sinnott, vice-chair. The visit started with meetings with petitioners in Sofia. It continued with exchanges of views with petitioners and in situ visits in Rila, Chelopech and Gabrovo and finished in Sofia with meetings at the Ministry of Transport, Ministry of Environment and Ministry of Social Affairs.

Meeting with petitioners in Sofia

The first exchange of views with petitioners took place on Monday 27 in Sofia. Apart from the petitioners, whose petitions were on the agenda for the visit, the delegation also met with the petitioners, who had submitted *petition 453/2007 on alleged negligence by Bulgaria in ascertaining the causes of the loss of a ship in the Black Sea and in the rescue operations*, and who had travelled from Varna to Sofia for the purpose of the meeting. The petitioners, relatives of the 14 missing seamen from "Hera", a motor ship flying the Cambodian flag, which sank in February 2004 in the Black Sea a few miles from Bosphorus, criticised the failings and inconsistencies in the investigations conducted by the Bulgarian authorities, and referred to the fact that more than 1 ½ year after the submission of their petition they have not yet received any indications from the EU institutions as to their willingness to intervene in order to bring the fact to light and establish where the blame lies and what happened to the missing seamen. The official version given by the Turkish and Bulgarian authorities was that the ship had sunk owing to bad weather. Satellite photos for the date, time and position of the incident, however, show naval missions of three submarines, two Turkish and one Russian. In the course of the mission, one of the Turkish submarines torpedoed and sank the 'Hera'. The crew of the Russian submarine abandoned their vessel under emergency conditions. Two military helicopters rescued both the Russian and the Bulgarian crews. Hours after the incident, one Turkish and one Greek TV channel broadcasted from the island in the Marmara Sea where the crews had been transferred. Since then there has been no news from the 14 crew members. The petitioners therefore asked the delegation to follow actively up on their petition and ensure that the Bulgarian authorities comply fully with the rules governing

investigation of marine casualties and incidents. Following the exchanges of views the chairman stated that the delegation would raise the matter with the minister of transport during the meeting foreseen for Thursday 30 October.

Subsequently the delegation met with the petitioners, who had submitted *petition 0795/2007 by Latchezar Popov, on behalf of the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, on alleged violations of the European Charter of Human Rights concerning religious freedom, private property, entitlement to a fair trial and social rights*, led by the head of the "Alternative Synod", Metropolitan Inokenty. The two wings of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church emerged after a 1992 schism led by those who alleged that Patriarch Maksim had uncanonically been elected to head the Church in 1971 as he had in reality been nominated by the then Communist authorities. Officials have in recent years firmly backed the Patriarchate (which also retains the recognition of the rest of the Orthodox world) and declared that Bulgaria's controversial 2002 religion law was specifically aimed at reuniting the divided Orthodox Church. After increasing official hostility to the "Alternative Synod", as the opponents of Patriarch Maksim were dubbed, the authorities expelled all Alternative Synod followers from their churches in a mass swoop in July 2004. Officials then declared the schism ended, despite the existence of many parishes of the Alternative Synod, which struggle to survive without means. Official hostility has continued, and the petitioners invoke Article 10 of the European Union's Charter of Fundamental Rights and the corresponding Article 9 of the European Convention of Human Rights. Following the exchange of views the chairman stated that the delegation would raise the matter with the minister of social affairs during the meeting foreseen for Thursday 30 October, that the Committee on Petitions would put pressure on EU and Bulgarian authorities in order to find a solution, and that the discussion on the subject would be resumed at a forthcoming meeting of the Committee on Petitions in the presence of the petitioners.

The main part of the discussion was devoted to the *Rila and Natura 2000 petitions* with 19 petitioners¹ present. The petitioners made a PowerPoint presentation underlining that the Rila National Park is certified as part of the Protected Areas Network (PAN) developed by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and Molecaten, a Dutch sustainable tourism group. It is one of Europe's largest protected areas and contains unspoiled tracts of wilderness, a rarity on the continent.

The diversity of flora and fauna in the Rila Mountains is rich – 17 plant species are endemic to the area, while 15 are threatened and 2 are endangered. Among the animal species are numerous glacial relics, including the snow vole, one of 158 species protected by the Berne Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats. While the construction of new roads, logging and a ski lift occurs inside the Rila National Park boundary, other major developments, including additional roads, hotels and apartments are planned in the surrounding areas. Much of this construction falls in what is known as the "Rila Buffer Zone", which is proposed to become part of a protected area under the Natura 2000 environmental network. As part of the network, all developments would be subject to review according to environmental standards established by an EU initiative. On November 29, 2007, the Bulgarian Ministry of the Environment and Water removed the area from the list

¹ Petitions 196/2007, 507/2007, 745/2007, 997/2007, 1082/2007, 1299/2007, 1503/2007, 526/2008, 1334/2008, 1335/2008, 1336/2008 and 1337/2008.

that it submitted to the European Commission, claiming to have scientific proof for its omission. This action has brought the Bulgarian Ministry of the Environment under serious scrutiny by local and international environmental organizations.

The petitioners underlined that no impact assessments are being made, and that developers tend to split projects up in smaller units in order to avoid EIA's. They also stated that the new ski resorts include so-called swapped land. Most of the petitioners present at the meeting would accompany the delegation during the in situ visit to Rila on Tuesday.

During an informal meeting with Kathy Sinnott, vice-chair, on Tuesday morning, Maria Iotova, journalist from Darik Radio, representing the petitioners who had submitted *petition 911/2008 on cases of pedophilia, incidents with children, crimes and violence against children and orphans in Bulgaria for the last two years* submitted a register of such cases for the last three years (2005-2008). With their report and the statistic data the petitioners hope that EU institutions will undertake an in depth examination of the cases of violence against children in Bulgaria and contribute to resolving the problem, which is characterized of the lack of adequate justice.

Visit to the Rila Natural Park

Accompanied by the petitioners, MEPs visited Borovets, Govedartsi, Iskrovete and Panichiste in the Rila Natural Park. The ski-centre projects visited were the Super Borovets (Iskrovete-Govedartsi-Maliovitsa) and the Panichiste (Panichiste-Ezerata-Kaboul) projects. Members from the local communities also joined the delegation during the visit.

These projects are meant to be an expansion of an existing ski resort in the Rila Mountains, approximately 70 km south of Sofia. The Super Borovets resort will include 19 ski tracks totalling 42 km, lifts capable of carrying 37,000 tourists, 4,000 vacation homes, and several hotels stretching over an area of 100,000 square metres. The Panichiste project will include 15-20 ski lifts, and the construction of these will be followed by service buildings and garages in the national park. The projects imply also the construction of a number of illegal roads. Amongst these is the road from the village of Panichiste, which has been built without an EIA, and which the delegation drove through. The road acts partly as a border of the national park, but at some points it is double its original size and enters the park territory.

The building of such facilities will radically alter the surrounding scenery and ecosystem, threatening biodiversity in the Rila Mountains. The works have reached the Rila buffer zone, and it is very likely that they would lead to demolition of landscape and habitats. The Rila Mountains are among the most bio-diverse regions in Europe. A large portion of the mountainous range is protected by national law and has become candidate for receiving protected status under the European Natura 2000 framework.

Irina Mateeva, responsible for European policies at the Bulgarian Environmental Protection Society, one of the petitioners accompanying the delegation, said, that roughly 30 percent of Bulgaria's territory should be proposed for Natura 2000, but the final list presented by the government to the European Commission barely encompassed 10 percent of the area, and that only 88 places out of a total of 114 suggested by the specialists have been put on the final list given to the Commission. The petitioners also said that the list of Natura 2000 sites submitted

by the Bulgarian government omitted virtually the entire Black Sea coast as well as many mountainous areas near ski resorts that are the focus of investors' interests, and that the reason for the Bulgarian government's postponement of submitting the list is "investors' interests" in some of the sites, especially on the Black Sea coast or near ski resorts, which is in total contradiction with the requirements of the EU habitats directive and national law, which set out scientific arguments as the only motives for site designation.

The petitioners also said that authorities have given clear signs that they do not care, and that the actions they take are never aimed at actually preventing or stopping this kind of development. At most, the Ministry of Environment imposes fines on local officials who allow such constructions. Once these fines are paid, construction continues in the same manner. The petitioners also stressed that the area around Rila National Park, which is a proposed Site of Community Importance (Rila Buffer, code BG0001188) is the only habitat site from the list of 225 habitat sites, which was discarded from the Natura 2000 list. This proves the enormous pressure on the Bulgarian Ministry of Environment by investors in ski development projects around Rila Natural Park.

The petitioners referred further to the fact that chemical substances were used in order to make the snow on the ski tracks more resistant which in itself is in conflict with the stipulations in article 4, paragraph 4 of the bird directive. It was also evident to the delegation that the building activities do not imply sewerage.

The new developments are in contravention of existing Bulgarian legislation, but the Bulgarian authorities fail to do anything to address the problem, and - as underlined by petitioners - it can only be taken as a sign of high-level support for the developments that the Bulgarian prime minister, Sergey Stanishev, presided the opening of one of the illegally constructed ski lifts in September.

The petitioners expressed their satisfaction with the Commission's warning to Bulgaria over failure to designate adequate Special Protection Areas (SPA's) for migratory and vulnerable wild bird species, which is inconsistent with the EU directive on the conservation of wild birds¹, but MEPs draw petitioners attention to the fact that the infringement procedure in question was a so-called "horizontal infringement procedure", which would not necessarily solve the specific case. Members therefore urged the petitioners to denounce each violation of EU legislation separately in order to bring about infringement procedures entailing concrete cases of misapplication of EU law by the Bulgarian authorities. In this way there would be parallel infringement procedures and thus more possibilities for a correct implementation of the legislation in force. On the way back to Sofia the delegation made a short stop at the Djerman River². The river basin has for more than 50 years been exposed to devastating damage in the course of extracting building materials, which is used for the construction activities in the area.

Visit to "Daga", a home for children with mental and physical disabilities

At its return to Sofia the delegation visited "Daga", a home for children with mental and

¹ Council Directive 79/409/EEC of 2 April 1979 on the conservation of wild birds

² The matter risen in petition 196/2007.

physical disabilities, which hosts 75 children from the age of 3 to 18 years. The home belongs to a group of child-care institutions, which have developed in a positive way during the last years, and is adequately manned and equipped. 20 specialist teachers and medical and paramedical staff care for the children, of which a number are in day care.

The children gave the delegation a traditional Bulgarian welcome, which includes bread and honey. With this gesture hosts show that the guests are desired and that they wish to share their meal with them. Subsequently some of the children sang and performed a typical Bulgarian folkdance. Members also received greeting cards made by the children themselves.

The director of the home, Rositsa Stoyanova, told the delegation that the home would be relocated to new premises in the near future and showed the delegation the plans for the new modern and well equipped buildings located in a 0,4 ha park, where the children would be accommodated in 2-bed rooms instead of the current dormitories. During the exchange of views the director also informed the delegation that not all the children were educated in-house, but that some of the children received tuition in special schools. Reaching the age of 18 some inmates would follow vocational training in special institutions. Ms Stoyanova underlined that the main goal was to re-integrate the children in their families and that during the last year 22 children had returned to their families. She also stated that the Bulgarian child protection policy has changed during the last years, and that it primarily is targeted towards training of staff and cooperation between local authorities and NGO's active in the field of child protection and social inclusion.

Informal visit to Chelopech

A petition on the Chelopech goldmine¹ and a petition on contamination of drinking water with arsenic as a result hereof² had recently been received by the European Parliament, and as Chelopech is on the way from Sofia to Gabrovo, it had been agreed to give the petitioners and local citizens the opportunity to show the place to the delegation and to give a short presentation of their arguments in an informal way. The discussion on these petitions will take place at a later meeting of the Committee on Petitions with the participation of the parties involved.

The petitioners explained that the Bulgarian Government in July 2008 gave the owners of the goldmine authorization to increase the production by means of cyanide leaching. The public consultation has only been carried out with people living in the nearby villages of Chelopech and Chavdar, where many of the inhabitants work in the goldmine and thus depend on its managers. The situation has caused panic amongst the citizens living near the rivers Topolnitsa and Maritsa, since they are not sure whether the authorities will protect their health from cyanide spillage.

It has to be borne in mind that the Chelopech Mining project is separated in two parts. Phase 1 is focusing on environmental improvements and Phase 2 on expansion of metals production through introduction of cyanide leaching technology. In 2004 the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development approved a 10 mio USD loan for Phase 1. Phase 2 has been

¹ Petition 1335/2008

² Petition 1334/2008

under review since 2005, and there has been no progress due to the blocking of the project by the Bulgarian Ministry for the Environment and Waters at the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) stage in March 2006.

The EIA process for Phase 2 of the project was blocked after the protest of environmentalists against the introduction of cyanide leaching, as well as the counter protests of miners. The “silent denial” of the Minister for the Environment and Waters did not give a justification based on environmental or legal causes for the blocking of the project. However, the low concession fee was said to be the reason for the rejection of the plans to increase the production of precious metals in the mine. After two years of negotiations, the Bulgarian prime minister's office announced in March 2008 that the Bulgarian state has succeeded to regain a 25 percent stake in the mine, as well as a higher concession fee. There has been no mention about the environmental concerns associated with the risks of the application of cyanide leaching, or about the result from the EIA process of 2005-06. The EIA process in 2005-2006 had to be carried out under Bulgarian legislation. Since then, however, as of January 2007, Bulgaria has become a member of the European Union. Further, the Chelopech project summary document states that: “The Phase 2 operation however, will require a full EIA under Bulgarian and EU legal requirements.

In the discussion on the EIA and its drawbacks the petitioners called MEPs attention to the fact, that no information campaign and public consultations with communities living downstream from the mine had taken place, and that more than two million people live downstream on the Maritsa river, the biggest river on the territory of the country, which crosses into neighbouring Greece. There had not been consultations according to the Espoo Convention for EIA in a trans-boundary context with communities from Greece, in spite of the declared interest by NGOs and local communities, and no accident response plans for the operation and transportation of toxic materials had been presented for public scrutiny as part of the EIA consultations.

After the introduction the petitioners drove the delegation (in cross-country vehicles) to a nearby tailing pond for mining waste. Members were shocked at the extension of the waste deposit and its immediate threat to public health, water, soil and agricultural production, and the climate conditions in the region, e.g. high precipitation and regular floods could make the situation even more dramatic. The petitioners underlined, that elevated arsenic content caused by the production activity of mines had already at several occasions been measured in sources used for drinking water supply in the city of Poibrene. As pollution-related lung diseases and cancer is widespread in the region, not at least amongst children, the subject has to be regarded as a priority matter.

The executive director of "Chelopech Mining" informed the delegation by letter of 3 November, that the tailing dam visited by the delegation is not under the ownership of "Chelopech Mining", and that some of the information presented to the delegation apparently was misleading.¹

¹ At the Committee meeting of 19-20 January 2009 representatives from "Chelopech Mining" expressed their views and provided clarifications. These clarifications will be taken into consideration at the future formal discussion of the petitions in question, in which "Chelopech Mining" will have the opportunity to participate.

Visit to Gabrovo

From Chelopech the delegation continued to Gabrovo following the road through the Balkan Mountains via the Shipka Pass, where one of the greatest battles of the Russo-Turkish Liberation War (1877-1878) took place. The town of Gabrovo is situated at the Northern foot of The Balkan Mountains not far from the Pan-European Transport Corridor IX. Since the commencement of the reconstruction road works in the Haynboaz Pass in 2002 the heavy traffic in north-south transit has been redirected through Gabrovo. The transport authorities have repeatedly assured the citizens, that the road works will be completed by mid 2008, but according to the latest information the works will continue until 2015, which means 7 years more of undermining of the ecological balance of the living environment and of the physical and mental health of the local residents, and not at least their safety, which is threatened by road accidents taking place daily.

During lunch with the petitioners in a restaurant in the city centre, the delegation had the opportunity to get a firsthand impression of the continuous passing of heavy trucks in a distance of few meters from the restaurant windows. Due to lack of rest stops on the north-south transit road truck drivers tend to make a rest-stop in Gabrovo and thus add to the already existing insufferable traffic concentration.

At the following meeting with the affected citizens which took place in the Cultural Centre, they pointed out that residents along the thoroughfare are forced to live amidst the poisonous emissions, and that noise levels greatly exceed admissible standards, and as the traffic goes on day and night, it prevents citizens from being able to sleep and relax. In 2007 they established an Initiative Committee, which addressed the minister of transport, the minister of regional development and public works, the director of the Road Infrastructure Fund and the Bulgarian Ombudsman, demanding a suspension of transit traffic at night and on weekends, efficient safety conditions and ban on stopping and parking of long vehicles along the thoroughfare. As their requests were not followed up or not even replied to, they subsequently petitioned the European Parliament as a last resort. To questions from the delegation concerning possible allocations from the Structural Funds to alternative alleviating road infrastructural measures through the Shipka Pass, the petitioners stated that such measures were not foreseen within the framework of the allocations to Bulgaria for the 2007-2013, as the matter was not a national priority. MEPs underlined that one of the main purposes of the Committee on Petitions is mediation, and that the subject would be discussed with the Bulgarian minister of transport and the minister of environment at the meetings on Thursday. The matter would also be raised with the Commissions DG TREN with a view to promote the exchange of experience and disseminate best practice as well as with the Transport Committee of the European Parliament.

On the initiative of the delegation the meeting continued in the middle of the thoroughfare in front of the Cultural Centre thus suspending the traffic for approximately 10 minutes.

Accompanied by the mayor of Gabrovo, Tomislav Donchev, the delegation subsequently made a short visit to a day care centre for disabled children living with their families. The centre was established in 2006 and cares for children from the town of Gabrovo and the surrounding area. Currently 8 staff members take care of 16 children. Children from outside Gabrovo profit from a special transport scheme.

Visit to an improvised orthodox church

At the return to Sofia, Kathy Sinnott, vice-chair, visited an improvised (in a tent) orthodox church located in Alexander Batenberg Square, accompanied by the petitioner. Many of the priests, on behalf of whom the petition was submitted, had travelled to Sofia hoping to meet the delegation. Having finished the evening prayer service, they gave an account of their dramatic personal situation, e.g. loss of work, confiscation of property, deprivation of unemployment benefits and health care. One of the priests explained with tears in his eyes, that his son after having been excluded from the ecclesiastic seminar on the grounds that this father belongs to the Alternative Synod had attempted suicide. The meeting ended with a benediction and a showing round of an open air photo exhibition next to the improvised church. Ms Sinnott stated that the matter would be brought up within the framework of the meeting in the Ministry of Social Affairs.

Meeting with Petar Mutafchiev, the Bulgarian minister of transport

The first of Thursday's meetings was the meeting in the Bulgarian Ministry of Transport with the minister of transport, Petar Mutafchiev. After an introduction by the minister on the general road infrastructural situation and the Pan-European Transport Corridors crossing Bulgaria, the delegation introduced the cases brought forward by the petitioners, which falls within the competences of the Ministry of Transport. As far as the problem of Gabrovo is concerned, the minister said that he was aware of the problem, but that the responsibility for the situation belonged under the local government. The minister also underlined that when the works in the Haynboaz Pass finish, the situation will alleviate. He further stated that a ring road around Gabrovo was amongst the objectives laid down by the ministry. To the question about the lack of response from the ministry to the letters from the Initiative Committee, the minister said, that replies had been sent. As far as rest-stops are concerned, a consultation would take place in the near future.

After an exchange of views on intermodal road-rail freight transport, pollution in Sofia, overpriced taxi transport from Sofia airport to the city centre and the irregular road activities in Rila, the discussion focussed on the "Hera" Black Sea disaster. The minister pointed out that the ship was not sailing under Bulgarian flag, that the accident did not take place in Bulgarian waters but in Turkish and that the investigation therefore according to the provisions of international maritime law had been undertaken by the Turkish authorities. The Bulgarian Ministry of Transport had nevertheless been in close contact with the Turkish counterpart throughout the investigation and communicated the results to the victims' families. The minister concluded that the matter falls within the responsibility of the judicial authorities, which the ministry is supporting actively in order to find the truth.

Meeting with Cavdar Georgiev, deputy minister for environment

MEPs told the minister that on the basis of the information provided by petitioners during the in situ visits, their main concerns were the lack of public information and consultation, danger of water pollution in consequence of Chelopech, land swapping, absence of EIA's and Bulgaria's failure to implement the Natura 2000 network.

The minister repudiated the figures of two mio citizens in danger of water pollution as a consequence of the mining activities in Chelopez, and he said that it was up to the investors to make sure that the water resources are protected. Replying to the questions about absence of EIA's in connection with infrastructure or urbanization projects the minister said that the Ministry of Environment does its utmost in order to ensure that legislation is observed, and he stated that all the projects referred to by the delegation had been subject to an EIA. When questioned specifically about the road from the village of Panichiste in Rila, he admitted a weakness, but said that all the ongoing procedures now were in conformity with the regulations in force.

Meeting with Vasil Voynov, deputy minister of labour and social policy

The most fruitful meeting Thursday morning was the meeting with Vasil Voynov, deputy minister of labour and social policy. The minister told that the law on protection of the child had been changed in 2006 in order to make it possible to raise children in foster families. The minister agreed that raising children in a family environment was most important and that the ministry was concerned with the number of abandoned children, among these children with special needs. The ministry was therefore currently taking steps to increase help to families in order to make it easier for them to keep their children at home. To the cases of paedophilia in children's homes the minister said that such cases - mainly brought to the attention of the public through the media - were taken very seriously. The minister stated that his department wishes to stay in close touch with the Committee on Petitions and it was agreed, that a representative from the ministry should take part in the next discussion in the committee of the matter in question.

MEPs expressed their disappointment at the fact that it had not been possible to visit one of the disreputable institutions. According to the ministry it had been difficult to organize a visit to a social care home for children, because the delegation had no other option than the evening, and "Daga" had been the one of the few homes which could accommodate a late visit.

The delegation also took the opportunity to refer to the problems of the priests belonging to the Alternative Synod, their lacking possibility to discharge their functions and wage freeze. The minister took note of the delegation's remarks.

Final meeting with petitioners and press conference in the EP Information Office

Before the concluding meeting of the delegation with petitioners on the last day of the visit, MEPs shared their impressions from what they had seen in the country and from their discussions with Bulgarian officials. This summary session was open to the media and received a very extensive coverage in the press due to the fact that members of the delegation expressed strong views about the ecological and rule-of-law issues in Bulgaria. Media interest was also heightened by a protest demonstration of ecological activists which was organised in front the building of the EP Information Office and was scheduled to coincide with the wrap-up meeting. The coverage was factual, with photos. All the newspapers carried the story of the delegation member, David Hammerstein, who was scammed by a taxi driver to pay a price which is about 10 times the usual fare, and the fact that he had shown his receipt to the minister of transport, who had said he could do nothing

about this problem. Many of the titles, including a first-page article, focused on this story. Other newspaper titles were "MEPs shocked by the ecological problems in Bulgaria" and "MEPs inspect illegal constructions in Rila". A newspaper also published a small reply on behalf of the authorities, quoting the deputy minister of environment who felt that MEPs from the delegation were not objective as they had received biased, one-sided information about the ecological problems in Bulgaria.

Conclusions

The visit to Bulgaria enabled the delegation to gain a better understanding of the situations referred to in the petitions. It also enabled the delegation to hear the point of view of the Bulgarian authorities and to identify approaches to cooperation. The meetings with petitioners also to a great extent brought Bulgarian citizens closer to the European Parliament, which is one of the main objectives of the Committee on petitions. The discussions on all the petitions related to the fact-finding visit will be resumed at forthcoming meetings of the Committee on Petitions.

Recommendations

- Urges the Commission to take into account and assess the issues raised in this report and fully investigate all the issues raised in the petitions, particularly as regards the possible infringement of EU environmental law and basic rights and principles contained in the EU Treaty.
- Calls on the Bulgarian Government to ensure strict compliance with *the acquis communautaire* on environmental matters.
- Calls on the Bulgarian Government to evaluate and analyze the pollution problems and the impact on the health of citizens in the concerned regions.
- Calls on the Bulgarian authorities to seek sustainable and secure transport and communication options for the benefit of the local population, their health and economic development.
- Calls on the Bulgarian Government to initiate an independent maritime accident investigation of the "Hera" disaster in the Black Sea according to the IMO Code of investigation of marine casualties and incidents.
- Calls on the Bulgarian Government to ensure that all disabled and orphan children in Bulgaria have an equal opportunity to enjoy a fulfilled and dignified life.
- Calls on the Bulgarian Government to ensure protection of religious freedoms and property rights as laid down in the Charter of fundamental rights of the European Union.