

1. EUROPEAN COUNCIL

AND

COUNCIL OF THE UNION

B) COUNCIL OF THE UNION

General Affairs Council, 7 December 1998: Council conclusions on European Union Enlargement.

General Affairs Council, 7 December 1998: Council conclusions on European Union Enlargement.

The Council welcomes the Commission's first Regular Progress Reports on the basis of the conclusions of the Luxembourg and Cardiff European Councils. The Council notes that the assessment of the Commission was based on the same objective accession criteria as defined by the European Councils in Copenhagen and Madrid and as used in the opinions delivered by the Commission in July 1997, and considers that the methodology of the Commission allowed an objective, balanced and fair analysis of the state of progress. The Council welcomes the substantial progress made by candidate countries in their preparations for membership and encourages them to continue with their efforts throughout the accession process. It noted that although progress in the adoption of the *acquis* varies considerably between countries and between sectors, the difference between those with whom negotiations have begun and the other candidates has generally narrowed. It also noted the Commission's views on the variable progress made by a number of countries, including some with which negotiations have been opened, towards meeting the Copenhagen criteria. The Council noted the particular progress made by Latvia and Lithuania and the new situation in Slovakia following the elections which augurs well for its integration into European structures. It also noted the progress made by Bulgaria and the reform efforts being made by Romania. It encouraged all candidates to intensify their preparations for membership. The Commission's analysis with regard to Turkey was generally shared by the Council which noted the need for particular efforts by Turkey to ensure the rule of law in a democratic society according to the Copenhagen criteria and the relevant conclusions of European Councils; it also stressed the importance of further developing relations with this country on a sound and evolutionary basis. In this process the Council reaffirms the importance of the European Strategy for Turkey. The Council recalled the great importance which it attaches to the treatment of minorities, an area which needs continued attention. The Council underlines the need for the rhythm of legislative approximation to be accelerated and matched by the development of corresponding implementation capacity. The transposition of the *acquis* is not sufficient in itself but must be followed by effective implementation and enforcement. Therefore the development of administrative and judicial capacities is a crucial aspect of preparation for accession and the existence of credible and functioning structures and institutions an indispensable pre-condition for future membership.

The Council highlighted the need for special attention to be paid, in advance of accession, to the effective application of all elements of the single market *acquis* including the establishment of a functioning system of state aid control. Policies should be pursued to foster economic and social convergence. Other sectors requiring attention include the environment, the nuclear sector and justice and home affairs. In this context the Council recalled the primary importance of the enhanced pre-accession strategy for the central and eastern European countries and the specific pre-accession strategy for Cyprus. The role of the Association Agreement bodies in monitoring the adoption and implementation of the *acquis* was also reaffirmed. The Council encouraged the Commission to continue to pay particular attention to helping candidates with which negotiations have not yet begun to intensify their preparations for membership and encouraged those candidates to make full use of the catch-up facility. It expressed its satisfaction that the Accession Partnerships have already enabled the candidate countries of central and eastern Europe and the Union to focus on priorities and to align them with available resources. This approach will be reinforced by the availability of two new pre-accession instruments from 2000 onwards and will increase the need for a clear link between resources and priorities. The Council welcomed the extension of the mandate of the

Technical Assistance and Information Exchange Office (TAIEX) to cover the entire acquis. The Council noted with satisfaction that the European Conference, decided in Luxembourg, has, in its first two meetings, already proved to be a successful multilateral forum in the framework of the enlargement process. The Council noted the Commission's intention to present, early next year, an update of its favourable 1993 Opinion on Malta's application for membership with a view to appropriate follow-up by the Council. The Council generally endorsed the Commission's report, including the analysis in the composite paper. The Council noted the Commission's intention to propose the opening of negotiations with Latvia before the end of 1999, if the momentum of change is maintained. It also noted the Commission's view that the important progress made by Lithuania should allow the Commission to propose the opening of negotiations if recent decisions are tested in practice. Furthermore, it noted the Commission's view that the new situation in Slovakia following the elections allow for the prospect of opening negotiations on condition that the regular stable and democratic functioning of its institutions is confirmed. The Council welcomed the intention of the Commission to present it with further progress reports next year. However, at this stage the Council did not make any recommendations to the European Council to extend the accession negotiations.