

## 2243. Council - GENERAL AFFAIRS

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### OPENING OF ACCESSION NEGOTIATIONS WITH MALTA, ROMANIA, SLOVAKIA, LATVIA, LITHUANIA AND BULGARIA

Following the conclusions of the Helsinki European Council, Intergovernmental Conferences at Ministerial level opening the accession negotiations with Malta, Romania, Slovakia, Latvia, Lithuania and Bulgaria were held in Brussels on Tuesday, 15 February 2000. (see list of Heads of delegation of candidate countries in Annex).

During each of the meetings the President of the Council presented the General Position of the European Union, and Commissioner Verheugen made complementary statements. In presenting the Union's General Positions, the President of the Council stressed the following:

- Accession implies full acceptance of the actual and potential rights and obligations deriving from the Union's legal system and its institutional framework, known as the "acquis" of the Union. This includes the Treaty of Amsterdam, which represents the latest stage of European construction.
- The Union "acquis" has to be applied as it stands at the time of accession. 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.
- Monitoring of progress by the candidates in transposing, implementing and enforcing the "acquis" forms an essential part of the accession process, as the EU will ultimately need to be able to judge whether they are ready to effectively take on the obligations of membership.
- The Union attaches pivotal importance to the smooth functioning of the Internal Market and of EU policies in complex areas such as Agriculture, Justice and Home Affairs and the Environment. All candidate States need to make rapid progress in these areas even before accession.
- This is also true for the progressive alignment of the candidates' policies and positions towards third countries and within international organisations to those of the Union. The "acquis" also includes all commitments entered into and the policies pursued by the Union externally.
- The acceptance of the rights and obligations resulting from membership may give rise exceptionally to transitional measures, to be defined during the accession negotiations. Transitional measures shall be limited in time and scope, and accompanied by a plan with clearly defined stages for the application of the "acquis".
- All candidate States are participating in the accession process on an equal footing and each of them will be judged on its own merits in the negotiations. Each candidate's progress in preparing for accession will contribute to the advancement of the negotiations, taking into account the Copenhagen and Madrid criteria and the fulfilment of its obligations under the Association Agreement, as well as the implementation of its Accession Partnership.
- The Helsinki European Council underlined that the candidate States which have now been brought into the negotiating process will have the possibility to catch up within a reasonable period of time with those already in negotiations if they can make sufficient progress in their preparations.
- The Union has taken important steps in preparing itself for enlargement. The agreement at the Berlin European Council in March 1999 on the Agenda 2000 reform package, including the new financial framework, provides a solid basis for the EU to successfully move towards enlargement.

- Enlargement should strengthen the process of integration in which the Union Member States are engaged. It must be ensured that the institutional structures of the Union are not weakened or diluted, or their powers of action reduced. Accordingly, the Helsinki European Council reaffirmed the Union's political commitment to complete the Intergovernmental Conference on institutional reform, which was launched on 14 February 2000, by December 2000.
- The Union will decide at the appropriate moment whether the conditions for the conclusion of the negotiations that were launched on 15 February 2000 will have been met. Substantial efforts will be needed until then.

Each of the candidate States set out its strategic objectives, as well as the political, cultural and socio-economic aspirations it was pursuing on the road towards membership.

All the candidate States stressed that the opening of the accession negotiations with the Union was a historic event. They also underlined their determination to spare no effort to bring the negotiations to a successful conclusion.

**ANNEX**

### **HEADS OF DELEGATION OF CANDIDATE COUNTRIES**

#### **Malta**

Dr Joseph BORG Minister for Foreign Affairs

#### **Romania**

Mr Petre ROMAN Deputy Prime Minister, Minister for Foreign Affairs

#### **Slovakia**

Mr Eduard KUKAN Minister for Foreign Affairs

#### **Latvia**

Mr Indulis BERZINS Minister for Foreign Affairs

#### **Lithuania**

Mr Algirdas SAUDARGAS Minister for Foreign Affairs

#### **Bulgaria**

Mrs Nadejda MIHAILOVA Minister for Foreign Affairs

### **Association with Bulgaria**

The Council adopted a Decision on the position to be taken by the Community within the EU-Bulgaria Association Council regarding the extension of the five-year period referred to in Article 64(4)(a) of the Europe Agreement.

Adoption of this Decision will allow the Association Council to meet Bulgaria's request for an extension by a further five years of the current arrangements governing the assessment of state aid granted by Bulgaria.