

## 2308. Council - GENERAL AFFAIRS

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### ENLARGEMENT

The Council held a policy debate, the purpose of which was to build up a complete picture of the enlargement process for the Nice European Council meeting and to consider how to take forward the accession process.

At the close of the debate the President noted that delegations had expressed their appreciation of the quality of the Commission's reports on the progress of each applicant's preparations and on the difficulties which have still to be resolved. They emphasised the importance of properly applying the *acquis* and of following up the commitments given by the applicant countries. They appreciated the scoreboards and the progress charts.

The President noted delegations' attachment to the Helsinki timetable, i.e. 1 January 2003 as the date for welcoming the new Member States and their willingness to encourage the applicant countries as much as possible to make progress, and thus to carry out the reforms needed for the acceptance and implementation of the *acquis*. Delegations referred to the importance attributed to the principle of differentiation, based on the merits of each applicant country, which remains the guiding principle of the negotiations.

The President also noted delegations' interest in the principles suggested by the Commission for the further negotiations and the Union's commitment to tackle certain complicated matters in connection with the negotiations in a serious frame of mind. As regards the "road map" proposed by the Commission for the coming 18 months, they stressed that it was purely indicative and that the Commission would have to adapt it to developments in the situation and to the progress made.

In the light of this debate, the Presidency will forward draft conclusions to the Permanent Representatives Committee in the very near future so that the conclusions can be adopted by the Council at its next meeting on 4 December, which will enable the whole matter to be thoroughly prepared for the Nice European Council.

In addition, the Council took note of comments made by Commissioner VERHEUGEN on the question of visas, in particular for Bulgaria. It also took note of the contributions from various delegations. The President concluded that a political message should be sent on this matter to the JHA Council meeting on 30 November.

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### **Slovenia - implementing rules for competition**

The Council adopted a Decision on the position to be taken by the Community within the Association Council established by the Europe Agreement between the European Communities and their Member States, of the one part, and the Republic of Slovenia, of the other part, signed on 10 June 1996, with regard to the adoption of the rules for the implementation of Article 65(1)(i), (1)(ii) and (2) of the Europe Agreement and for the implementation of Article 7(1)(i), (1)(ii) and (2) of Protocol 2 on ECSC products to the Europe Agreement.

### **Estonia and Czech Republic - extension for State aid**

The Council adopted two Decisions on the position to be taken by the Community within the Association Councils between

- the European Communities and their Member States, of the one part, and the Republic of Estonia, of the other part, with regard to the extension for a further period of five years in accordance with the provisions of Article 63(4)(a) of the Europe Agreement concluded with the Republic of Estonia,

and

- the European Communities and their Member States, of the one part, and the Czech Republic, of the other part, with regard to the extension for a further period of five years in accordance with the provisions of Article 64(4)(a) of the Europe Agreement concluded with the Czech Republic.

Those provisions state that, for the purpose of assessing public aid granted by Estonia and the Czech Republic, those countries will, for the first five years after the entry into force of the Agreement, be regarded as an area identical to those areas of the Community covered by Article 92 (now Article 87) (3)(a) of the EC Treaty (i.e. areas where the standard of living is abnormally low or where there is serious under-employment). The Europe Agreement also provides for that period to be renewed every five years by decision of the Association Council.

As the first period has expired, the two countries concerned are requesting a five-year extension. The Commission considers that these countries fulfil the criteria used to determine the eligibility of a region for the aid referred to in Article 87(3)(a) TEC (including per capita GDP less than 75% of the average GDP of the Community). It is therefore proposing that the Association Councils grant the requested extensions.