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COMMISSION SETS OUT AMBITIOUS ACCESSION STRATEGY AND PROPOSES TO OPEN ACCESSION NEGOTIATIONS WITH SIX MORE CANDIDATE COUNTRIES

The European Commission proposed today that EU accession negotiations should be opened in 2000 with all candidate countries that fulfil the so-called Copenhagen criteria (respect for democracy, the rule of law, human rights and protection of minorities) and which have proved to be ready to take the necessary measures to comply with the economic criteria.. This means that in 2000, Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Romania and Slovakia should join the accession negotiations which started in 1998 with Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Poland and Slovenia.

This proposal will be recommended to the European Council in Helsinki in December. Commenting on today's decision, the EU's new Commissioner for Enlargement, Günter Verheugen, said: *"This strategy will help strike the right balance between two potentially conflicting objectives in the enlargement process: speed and quality. Speed is of the essence because there is a window of opportunity for enhanced momentum in the preparations for enlargement, in accordance with the expectations of the candidate countries. Quality is vital because the EU does not want partial membership, but new members exercising full rights and responsibilities"*.

The Approach: Speed and Quality

The crises in the Balkan region have created a new momentum in the enlargement process and have emphasized the essential contribution of European integration to peace and prosperity in Europe. The approach recommended by the Commission should in no case lead to a loss of momentum for reform in the candidate countries, and the EU must ensure that candidate countries fulfil all Copenhagen criteria before being admitted as member states.

The Commission recommends that the negotiations with the candidate countries should follow a differentiated approach, allowing each candidate to progress through the negotiations as quickly as is warranted by its own efforts to prepare for accession. This means that, instead of opening an equal number of chapters (the total is 31) for all candidates the EU would decide to start negotiating on a particular chapter after an assessment of the progress made by the candidate in the relevant field in accordance with the Copenhagen criteria. One of the advantages of this new procedure will be that each country will be able to proceed on merit, including the possibility for those who join the negotiations from 2000 to catch up with the others.

The strong link between the negotiations and the preparatory process will also be applied in the ongoing negotiations. The chapters already provisionally closed in the ongoing negotiations will be reviewed. From

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now on, provisional closure of chapters will be decided taking full account of the results of negotiations and the degree to which candidates have fulfilled their obligations.

Target dates

The Commission welcomes the fact that some candidates have already set themselves target dates, thus expressing their determination to prepare for membership within a fixed time period. Before the EU can consider setting target dates, it first needs a fuller assessment of each candidate's situation both in terms of progress in the negotiations and in preparations for membership. Only then can the Union ensure that any target dates will be realistic.

In the meantime, the Commission recommends to the European Council in Helsinki to commit itself to be ready to decide from 2002 on the accession of candidates that fulfil all necessary criteria. By that time, the EU's financial framework and institutional reforms should be in force.

Transition periods

The difference between this and previous enlargements is that following the completion of the Single Market the EU operates without border restrictions. The Commission proposes to clearly define its policy on transition periods for new Member States and to make a distinction between two cases :

- For the areas linked to the functioning of the Single Market, regulatory measures should be implemented quickly. Any transition periods should be few and short.
- For those areas where considerable adaptations are necessary and which require substantial effort, including important financial outlays (in areas such as environment, energy, infrastructure), transition arrangements could be spread over a definite period of time provided candidates can demonstrate that alignment is underway and that they are committed to detailed and realistic plans for alignment, including the necessary investments.

Turkey

The Commission recommends that Turkey be considered a candidate country. However, negotiations can only be opened once the political criteria are met. Meanwhile, steps should be taken to stimulate and support the reforms in Turkey including:

- Enhancing political dialogue, with particular reference to human rights, and providing the option of association with the positions and actions taken under the Common Foreign and Security Policy
- The possibility for full participation in all EU programmes and agencies
- With a view to harmonising Turkey's legislation and practice, beginning a process of analytical examination of the *acquis* (body of EU law).

Neighboring Countries: The Commission proposes to confirm the vocation for membership of countries of former Yugoslavia and, but under strict conditions. In addition to the Copenhagen criteria, these countries would be required to mutually recognise each other's borders, settle all issues relating to the treatment of national minorities and pursue economic integration in a regional framework as a precondition for integration in the EU.

Individual Candidate Country Progress Reports (available on Europa at <http://europa.eu.int>)

All the recommendations are based on individual country reports which assess the progress the candidate countries have made in meeting "Copenhagen criteria", i.e. the conditions set out at the European Council in Copenhagen in 1993 to become member of the European Union. According to these criteria, membership requires that the candidate country :

- Has achieved stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and respect for and protection of minorities,
- The existence of a functioning market economy as well as the capacity to cope with competitive pressures and market forces within the Union, and
- Has the ability to take on the obligations of membership, including adherence to the aims of political, economic and monetary Union

On the **political criteria**: the reports adopted today conclude that significant progress has been made notably by Slovakia with regard to the democracy criteria. Continuing attention needs to be paid to the reform of the childcare institutions in Romania, to the linguistic rights of minorities in the Estonia and Latvia, and to strengthening the judiciaries and the fight against corruption in all countries. The Commission also stresses the need for further efforts to protect minority rights, particularly of the Roma population in many of the candidate countries. The Commission continues to consider that Turkey does not meet the political criteria for membership.

On the economic criteria: Progress was noted in most countries and has already shown its importance in the face of external shocks. All candidates except Slovakia, Lithuania, Bulgaria and Romania are considered to be functioning market economies. Slovakia and Lithuania are close. Bulgaria has made substantial progress. The economic situation in Romania is very worrying and sustained efforts will be needed to put a functioning market economy in place.

This year's assessment of the progress takes place against the background of a world wide slowdown in growth in the aftermath of the Asian, Russian and Kosovo crises. The average real GDP growth in 1998 for the ten central and eastern European countries was 2.2%. Hungary and Poland, at 5.1% and 4.8% respectively, maintained the highest growth rates. The overall volume of foreign direct investment into the central European candidate countries increased in 1998 despite greater investor caution about emerging markets in general. Inflation was lower than expected. With the exception of Estonia and the Czech Republic, all of the central and eastern European candidate countries registered a widening of their trade and current account deficits in 1998 as a result of decline in external demand.

On legal and institutional preparations: The reports show that progress varies significantly between candidate countries. Hungary, Latvia and Bulgaria maintained a fairly steady rhythm of legal approximation. Slovenia and Slovakia significantly increased their efforts. The pace of legislative work in Poland and the Czech Republic however remains sluggish.

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