

REPORT OF THE COUNCIL TO THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL ON THE EUROPEAN CONFERENCE

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Introduction

The Luxembourg European Council on 12-13 December 1997 set up a European Conference in order to bring together the Member States of the European Union and the European States aspiring to accede to it and sharing its values and internal and external objectives. The Conference was established as a multilateral forum for political consultation intending to address questions of general concern to the participants and to broaden and deepen their cooperation on foreign and security policy, justice and home affairs and other areas of common concern, particularly economic matters and regional cooperation.

The Vienna European Council on 11-12 December 1998 agreed to consider the future role and membership of the European Conference at Helsinki in the light of a report by the Council on the work in the Conference and other fora engaged in similar work.

The present document is the report requested by the European Council.

Activities of the Conference

The European Conference meets at two levels: Heads of State and Government and Ministers for Foreign Affairs. No other level or formation is foreseen. Cyprus, the applicant States of Central and Eastern Europe and Turkey were initially invited to participate.

Turkey has never accepted the invitation and has not taken part in the activities of the Conference. Certain European countries not originally invited subsequently expressed interest to participate in the Conference (FYROM, Iceland, Norway, Switzerland, the Ukraine). Of these, Switzerland was invited to the Conference held during the Austrian Presidency and its status as "member elect" was confirmed by the Vienna European Council. Due to the reactivation of Malta's membership application, Malta was invited to the Conference in 1999 on the basis of a decision by the Presidency provided for in the Council Conclusions of March 1999.

According to the original decision taken at Luxembourg, the Conference was to meet annually at the level of Heads of State and Government. The only such meeting to date was held in London on 12 March 1998. The meeting addressed drugs, crime and environmental questions. Five issues emerged for further consideration and were listed in

the Chairman's conclusions: transnational organised crime, the environment, foreign and security policy, competitive economies and regional cooperation. An expert group on drugs and organised crime was set up. In addition, Ministers for Foreign Affairs discussed separately the situation in Kosovo and agreed on a statement that was endorsed by the Heads of State and Government.

The first meeting of the Conference at the level of Ministers for Foreign Affairs was held on 6 October 1998 in Luxembourg during the Austrian Presidency. Discussion focused on the fight against organised crime, the prevention of and fight against sexual exploitation of children, ways of combating the smuggling of human beings and regional cooperation on environmental issues. Bulgaria, the Czech Republic and Lithuania reported on the environmental activities of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation, the Central European Initiative, and the Baltic Sea States Cooperation, respectively. Foreign policy, in particular the situation in Kosovo and Albania, was also discussed. The outcome was embodied in the Chairman's conclusions.

The second meeting of the Conference at the level of Ministers for Foreign Affairs was held in Brussels on 19 July 1999 during the Finnish Presidency. The topic of the Conference was the Western Balkans. The outcome of the meeting was again embodied in the Chairman's conclusions. In particular, it was noted that the expert group on drugs and organised crime had fulfilled its mandate and would therefore be discontinued.

Activities in other fora

Insofar as the applicant countries are concerned, parallel activities on similar issues take place in various contexts outside the Conference, not always involving all candidates together:

- in the margins of European Council meetings, the Member States and the applicant countries have on several occasions met at the level of Heads of State and Government and that of Ministers for Foreign Affairs;
- at the Tampere European Council, it was agreed to strengthen EU's external action in the field of Justice and Home Affairs;
- political dialogue is conducted regularly with the associated States of Central and Eastern Europe, Cyprus and Malta within agreed frameworks, which involve all candidates together at official level while this is not the case at the level of Ministers;
- informal sectoral ministerial level meetings between ministers of the Member States and ministers of the applicant countries have been organised on issues such as the environment, health and Justice and Home Affairs;

- the bilateral association agreements, being constructed with accession as the ultimate goal, provide a comprehensive framework for integration and cooperation in all fields so far covered by the Conference;
- finally a wide range of issues are discussed within the framework of the individual accession negotiations, which take place at Ministerial and Deputy level.

As regards other fora outside the framework of the European Union and with a considerably wider range of participants than the applicant countries:

- the Council of Europe covers several of the activities found on the agenda of the European Conference, such as the promotion of human rights, and the strengthening of the rule of law and democracy;
- another important multilateral forum is the Organisation for European Security and Cooperation, which covers political, security, economic and human aspects;
- steps to strengthen regional cooperation and security in Europe, notably the Stability Pact on South East Europe, the Central European Initiative, the Northern Dimension and the Baltic Sea Cooperation involve in various compositions most of the participants to the European Conference;
- regional bodies of the United Nations, notably the Economic Commission for Europe, are also active in particular as far as trade and economic cooperation is concerned.