

COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL

Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2009-2010

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The accession process gives strong encouragement to political and economic reform in the enlargement countries and reinforces peace and stability in Europe. It is in the EU's interest to keep up the momentum of the enlargement process, on the basis of the principles and conditions agreed and the renewed consensus on enlargement.
2. The enlargement countries have not escaped the effects of the global economic recession. The EU is helping them to alleviate the impact of the crisis and prepare for sound recovery. The implementation of EU-related reforms underpins this.
3. The rule of law, in particular the fight against corruption and organised crime, but also strengthening administrative capacities, remains a major challenge which the enlargement countries need to address. The Commission will continue to use all instruments of the enlargement process in order to support them in this endeavour. Problems affecting the freedom of expression and the media need to be tackled as a matter of urgency.
4. Bilateral issues should not hold up the accession process. Bilateral disputes need to be resolved by the parties concerned, who have the responsibility to find solutions in a spirit of good neighbourliness and bearing in mind the overall EU interests.
5. Regional cooperation in South-East Europe has improved, with countries in the region assuming increased ownership of the process. However, the efficiency of regional structures and initiatives needs to be improved. Disagreements over Kosovo should not obstruct regional cooperation.
6. The establishment of a visa-free regime for the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia at the beginning of 2010, based on the Commission's proposal, will demonstrate that reforms bring tangible benefits for citizens. The Commission will table proposals for Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina by mid-2010, provided these countries meet the conditions set in the roadmaps. Free movement of persons and exchanges, in particular young citizens and students, are essential for helping Kosovo to build viable economic structures. Against this background visa facilitation should continue to be promoted and a process should be launched for Kosovo, aiming at eventual visa liberalisation when the necessary reforms will have been undertaken and the conditions met.
7. Croatia has made good progress in meeting the benchmarks set in the accession negotiations. This progress was noted by the Accession Conference in October 2009, following the political agreement of September 2009 between Slovenia and Croatia on the handling of the border issue. This was a significant step forward giving new impetus to the accession negotiations. Croatia needs to pursue reform efforts, in particular on the judiciary and public administration, the fight against corruption and organised crime, minority rights, including refugee return, war crimes trials.

Croatia needs to settle the issue of access to documents for ICTY. If Croatia meets all outstanding conditions, the accession negotiations could be concluded next year.

8. The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia has substantially addressed the key priorities of the accession partnership. On this basis, and in view of the overall progress of reforms, the Commission considers that the country sufficiently fulfils the political criteria set by the Copenhagen European Council in 1993 and the Stabilisation and Association Process. The country has moved closer towards becoming a functioning market economy and has made progress in a number of areas linked to its ability to take on the obligations of membership.

In the light of the above considerations and taking into account the European Council conclusions of December 2005 and December 2006, the Commission recommends that negotiations for accession to the European Union should be opened with the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Maintaining good neighbourly relations, including a negotiated and mutually accepted solution to the name issue, under the auspices of the UN, remains essential.

9. Montenegro applied for EU membership in December 2008 and in April 2009 the Council invited the Commission to submit its Opinion. Parliamentary elections met almost all international standards but some shortcomings remain to be addressed. Strengthening administrative capacity and consolidating the rule of law remain major challenges for Montenegro.

10. Albania applied for EU membership in April 2009 and the Commission stands ready to prepare its Opinion, once invited to do so by the Council. Parliamentary elections met most international standards but shortcomings remain to be addressed in future elections. Strengthening the rule of law and ensuring the proper functioning of state institutions remain major challenges.

11. Bosnia and Herzegovina urgently needs to speed up key reforms. A shared vision of the overall direction of the country by its leadership, and the political will to meet European integration requirements are necessary if progress is to be made. Bosnia and Herzegovina also needs to meet the conditions which have been set for the closure of the OHR. The European Union would not be able to consider an application for membership by Bosnia and Herzegovina until the OHR has been closed. Bosnia and Herzegovina will need to reform its constitutional framework to permit its institutions to function effectively before the Commission could recommend the granting of candidate country status. In particular the country will need to be in a position to adopt, implement and enforce the laws and rules of the EU.

12. Serbia has demonstrated its commitment to EU integration by building up a track record in implementing the provisions of the Interim Agreement with the EU and by undertaking key political reforms in line with European standards. Given Serbia's sustained cooperation with the ICTY and its renewed commitment to the European integration process, the Commission considers that the Interim Agreement should now be implemented by the EU. Strengthening the rule of law and accelerating economic reforms remain important. Serbia needs to demonstrate a more constructive attitude towards Kosovo's participation in regional trade and cooperation. Cooperation with the EULEX rule of law mission has begun but further efforts are needed, especially with respect to the operation of EULEX in the north of Kosovo.

13. Stability has been maintained in Kosovo but remains fragile. The EU's rule of law mission EULEX has been deployed throughout Kosovo and is fully operational. Kosovo faces major challenges, including the rule of law, the fight against corruption and organised crime, the strengthening of administrative capacity, the protection of Serb and other minorities, and enhancing dialogue and reconciliation between the communities. Kosovo needs to take a constructive approach towards regional cooperation and to ensure continuing support for EULEX's work. The Commission is proposing ways to mobilise Community instruments to further Kosovo's political and socio-economic development, notably in the areas of visas and trade, and to progress, in line with the European perspective of the region, towards integration with the EU in the context of the Stabilisation and Association Process. On trade, the Commission proposes to extend the autonomous trade measures and, once Kosovo meets the relevant requirements, will propose negotiating directives for a trade agreement in due time.

14. Turkey needs to build on the renewed political reform efforts which have begun. The accession negotiations have reached a more demanding stage requiring Turkey to step up its efforts in meeting relevant conditions. The EU accession process provides a strong incentive for Turkey to strengthen democracy and human rights, further modernise the country and bring the country closer to the EU. Turkey plays a key role in regional security, energy supply and the promotion of dialogue between civilisations. Significant diplomatic efforts to normalise relations with Armenia were made, resulting in the historic signature of protocols for the normalisation of relations in October 2009. Turkey needs to ensure full, non-discriminatory implementation of the Additional Protocol to the Association Agreement and to make progress towards the normalisation of relations with the Republic of Cyprus.

The EU will continue to follow up and review progress made on the issues covered by the Declaration of 21 September 2005, in accordance with the Council Conclusions of 11 December 2006. Good neighbourly relations remain key.

15. As regards the Cyprus issue, the leaders of the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot communities are entering a decisive phase of negotiations on a comprehensive settlement under the auspices of the United Nations. The Commission supports their efforts and provides technical advice on issues within EU competence. It calls on both leaders to strengthen their efforts to bring the settlement talks to a successful end as soon as possible and on Turkey to contribute in concrete terms to such a comprehensive settlement of the Cyprus issue.

16. Iceland has applied for EU membership and the Commission is preparing the opinion requested by Council. Iceland's application will be assessed according to the principles set out in the Treaty and the criteria defined by the Copenhagen European Council in 1993, as well as the December 2006 European Council conclusions on the renewed consensus for enlargement. Iceland is closely integrated with the EU in several areas, through its membership of the European Economic Area and Schengen.

17. Public support for enlargement is crucial. It is important for the authorities in the member states, partner countries and EU institutions to foster public understanding of the EU's enlargement policy.