



The enlargement process after the Nice Treaty

Günter Verheugen, a member of the European Commission, outlines the progress of the enlargement project negotiations and his concerns for candidate countries.

Last year was excellent for the whole enlargement project. As you may remember, people were very sceptical after the Helsinki Summit as to our ability to handle enlargement negotiations with 12 countries at once. But these doubts have now been laid to rest: we have achieved every single one of the ambitious goals we set for ourselves. This is down to a number of factors, including:

- the strategy adopted in Helsinki has worked;
- the principles agreed upon there have contributed to wide-ranging progress in the negotiations and in preparing for the new accessions;
- the principle of individual merit has prompted faster change in all the candidate countries, partly thanks to the more efficient structures they have set up for governmental, administrative and parliamentary decision making;
- the principle of differentiation has meant we now have a tailor-made negotiation process for each country and no one has to mark time; and
- the principle of catching up has also worked well. Already, the best prepared of the countries invited at Helsinki to start negotiations are hot on the heels of those that have been negotiating since the beginning of 1998.

Another important factor was that the Directorate General (DG) for Enlargement has quickly got its definitive structure up and running. The staff reinforcements currently being implemented – not only in Enlargement but in many other DGs too – will enable us to cope with the still-expanding workload.

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commitment on the part of the Council and the Member States. The General Affairs Council, in particular, focused more closely than ever on enlargement issues, repeatedly underlining its determination to drive the process forward.

The really decisive factor, however, was the elimination of the last obstacles to enlargement on the EU side.

On enlargement at least, Nice achieved what was needed. Enlargement has been given the go-ahead and the way ahead is clear. With the Nice Treaty, all the conditions are met for us to welcome new members. This also explains why the outcome of the summit has been so warmly received by the candidate countries.

It is common knowledge that the Commission and many others would have liked to have seen further-reaching reforms. But I reject the perception that, following Nice, the enlarged Union will be incapable of action or of taking decisions. This optimism is grounded above all by the fact that the new Member States – if only out of self-interest – will be particularly *communautaire* and pro-integration.

The key outcome of the EU conferences during the French Presidency (at Sochaux and Nice) was that on every aspect of reform the candidate countries all backed the most pro-Community solution.

Nice has given us a clear timetable. We are ready to get down to matters of substance – in fact, we have already begun. I also believe that the dates issue has been defused. As a result of two decisions taken in Nice, we now have a definite window for the first accessions.

Negotiations with those countries that are suitably prepared should be concluded by the end of 2002, and these countries should be able to take part in the European elections in spring 2004. Given these time parameters, the principles I mentioned earlier (which continue to apply) and our updated negotiation strategy, actual accession scenarios will emerge as a matter of course. This was reflected in a statement made by President Kwasniewski of Poland in mid-January. His country still hoped to join in 2003, but a year later would also be able to do so.

Welcoming Sweden

Under the Swedish presidency, this is going to happen quickly. Nobody welcomes that more than I do. Sweden's six-month work programme looks like being a fast ride, but it has been discussed in detail between the presidency and the Commission and I can assure you that, while it looks ambitious, the programme is realistic. This will be a quantum leap in qualitative as well as quantitative terms.

As regards to the numbers, we will be submitting some 150 draft common negotiating positions, about 40% of which will form the basis for talks on

new chapters with the six countries that still have some chapters outstanding. By the end of the Swedish presidency the negotiations will have reached a stage where for some countries virtually all the chapters will be open.

Another 90 or so of the draft negotiating positions will represent a continuation of the work on chapters already open, which are reaching a critical point. I hope that during the Swedish presidency we will manage to bring a number of chapters to a conclusion – in other words to take decisions on the transition measures that have been requested.

This means the negotiations are entering a new qualitative stage, therefore, a political one. The course charted in Nice assumes that under the Swedish presidency the EU will be settling its final negotiating position in a number of areas, some of them extremely sensitive. They are:

- the four freedoms: movement of goods, services, people and capital;
- the environment;
- social policy;
- external relations;
- culture and the media; and
- company law.

The necessary preparatory work is already under way. The Swedish programme, which the Commission unreservedly supports, looks set to impart greater momentum to the enlargement process. I would appeal both to the candidate countries, to take advantage of this and step up their own efforts, and to the Member States, to stay on track and make good on the promises

they gave in Nice. However, we would be wrong to think we can go for speed at the expense of quality. Countries will only be ready for membership once they clearly meet the criteria and we are sure that they have not only taken over Community law but can transpose and apply it properly.

The Commission will therefore be continuing in the same way with the monitoring process started under the French presidency to measure actual progress, and will support the European Council in Göteborg in its effort to bring the process to a successful conclusion.

Areas of concern

I would like to mention a few points of concern.

The weaknesses in the candidate countries' preparedness that we identified in our progress reports need to be taken very seriously. The closer we get to our goal, the more seriously the continuing shortcomings get in the way of membership. The candidate countries have to make really determined efforts to bring in reforms, primarily administrative and judicial reform, but also structural reform of their economy. I would also draw particular attention to the importance the Commission attaches to the position of the Roma in a number of candidate countries.

I am concerned about developments over Cyprus. Recent statements by Turkey's Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit and Rauf Denktaş, the leader of the Turkish Cypriots, suggest they are hardening their position. The Commission is doing everything in its power, working closely with the UN Secretary General, to support efforts to resolve the conflict.

I can only appeal to all concerned to work towards a solution. The time factor is becoming acute. There are not going to be any separate accession negotiations with Northern Cyprus and it is illusory to think it might join the EU as part of Turkey.

A greater effort needs to be made on all sides to communicate the importance and advantages of enlargement and get the public behind it. The communications strategy worked out last year is now being put into effect, but by itself it is not enough to win over public opinion. What is needed is a full public airing of the issues. The progress of the negotiations should help allay fears, as should the special programme for EU border areas we will put forward soon.

Preparing for the future

The Commission is fully prepared for the work in prospect and is keen to see the enlargement project well on the way to completion within its term of office. Now that the Commission's recommended strategies and practical suggestions have been accepted in full, at both Helsinki and Nice, it is beyond dispute that it has fulfilled its role as both the driving force for integration and a source of creative thinking on enlargement. ■

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This article is taken from a speech made by Commissioner Verheugen on 16 January 2001

The accession criteria: a reminder

Under the accession criteria defined by the European Council in 1993 in Copenhagen, membership requires that the candidate country ensures :

- stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and the respect for and protection of minorities;
- the existence of a functioning market economy and the capacity to withstand competitive pressure and market forces within the Union; and

- the ability to take on the obligations of membership, including adherence to the aims of political, economic and monetary union.

Countries applying

- Bulgaria
- Hungary
- Poland
- Cyprus
- Latvia
- Romania
- Czech Republic
- Lithuania
- Slovakia
- Estonia
- Malta
- Slovenia