



Europäische Akademie Berlin

Signing the Accession Treaty a decisive step on the path towards the EU

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

The year 2004 was a historical milestone in terms of EU enlargement. Last May, ten new Member States joined the EU. This increased the population of the European Union to 450 million citizens.

Enlargement is one of the most successful policies of the European Union. Its goal is to strengthen the unity, stability and prosperity of the European continent. And, of course, it also extends considerably the world's biggest internal market, thereby producing substantial economic benefits. This is why the enlargement process remains high on the agenda of the European Union.

Two countries, Turkey and Croatia, are candidates for EU membership. Accession negotiations with them should start in the near future. The other countries in the Western Balkans – the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro including Kosovo – have been given a perspective to become members of the EU once they meet the necessary conditions. All these countries are in different stages in their relationship to the European Union, but all are likely to be Member States sooner or later. Accession has a major impact both on the EU and on the countries concerned in many different respects: social, political, economic, cultural, legal, and so on. That is why enlargement is a project of historical proportion.

What is crucial in order to meet these challenges, is an appropriate management of the pre-accession period. It is important to make sure that the countries and their administrations are carefully prepared for their future role in the European Union. In this the Commission plays a key role, with instruments in place to help and actively monitor the countries to achieve a well prepared EU membership.

The fifth enlargement round which we are witnessing today is carefully prepared, in particular through an ambitious pre-accession strategy which accompanied the accession negotiations.

Another important consideration is the Union's capacity to absorb new members, while at the same time maintaining the momentum of European integration. This is in the general interest of both the Union and the candidate countries.

In my contribution tonight I will focus on our relations with Bulgaria and Romania. Last December the accession negotiations with Bulgaria and Romania were concluded. These countries are scheduled to join the EU in January 2007. The accession of Bulgaria and Romania will allow for completion of the 5th enlargement round, encompassing 12 countries all together.

This enlargement is not only in the interest of the EU and its citizens, it is also clearly in the interest of the people of Bulgaria and Romania who have looked forward to this day with hope and expectations; after all, it is they who have carried the often heavy burden of difficult and radical reforms in order to build modern societies.

The conclusion of the accession negotiations last December and the signature of the Accession Treaty in a few days time on 25 April in Luxembourg do not imply that the preparation for membership is already completed. The Commission will therefore keep a very close watch on this through an intensified monitoring of the preparations. We need to get sufficient assurances that progress continues up until accession. We need to ensure in the interest of both sides that Bulgaria and Romania will be effectively ready for membership in 2007.

Should there be any serious shortcomings, the Commission would not hesitate to make use of our remedial tools. This includes the possibility foreseen in the Accession Treaty to postpone accession by one year until 2008 if either Bulgaria or Romania turns out to be manifestly unprepared for membership.

The Commission will issue in November this year its "comprehensive monitoring reports" on Bulgaria and Romania. They will cover all the areas of EU law and policies. Also the main political, legal, economic and administrative reforms in Bulgaria and Romania will be looked at. These Comprehensive Monitoring Reports should give a clear picture of both countries' readiness for accession.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I have recently visited both countries together with Commissioner Olli Rehn. It is fair to say that they have made steady progress in the past years in all areas of their preparation for accession and in meeting the Copenhagen criteria. They continue to take seriously recommendations made. They have further consolidated and deepened the stability of their institutions. They have made good progress in adopting the *acquis*, as well as in gradually building up the administrative capacity to implement and effectively enforce it. Nevertheless, in terms of administrative capacity, further efforts remain necessary in both countries.

A few more details on both countries:

Bulgaria has made steady progress in the past years. Nonetheless, there is need to keep up the momentum in the preparation for accession. Bulgaria needs to make solid efforts to reform the judiciary, and to intensify the fight against corruption and organised crime. An energetic and results-oriented reform of the judiciary, in particular of the pre-trial phase, is the overarching priority until accession.

The reform of the public administration needs to be continued and still requires a lot of work. All forms of discrimination, be it against minorities or against foreigners should be put to an end. One example is competition policy, where the enforcement of the rules must continue to improve. All the commitments taken in the accession negotiations must be fully implemented. Provided progress continues, in particular in the judicial system, Bulgaria is today reasonably well on track for accession.

Let me now turn to Romania: the Commission called on Romania to pursue with determination the reforms that still need to be made. This covers in particular the effective implementation of the reforms in the public administration and the judiciary. It also concerns the fight against corruption and the fulfilment of commitments taken in the field of competition policy and environmental policy. Organised crime needs to be tackled, and controls of external borders must be strengthened.

Romania has started seriously to tackle the accession requirements, in particular in the field of justice reform and the fight against corruption. A number of legislative steps have been taken, such as removing the de facto criminal immunity of former Ministers. Other relevant legislation is being finalised in the Romanian parliament.

We recently received from Romania a large package of information with details on its strategies to implement the commitments made in the accession negotiations. This concerns the fight against corruption, reform of the justice system and border security. These documents are now being assessed in detail by the Commission.

Progress is also being made in the area of police co-operation, where new laws on the Gendarmerie and on the National Police have been adopted. In border management, Romania is engaged in discussions to determine the future financing for upgrading its border infrastructure.

This political determination now has to be further translated into concrete actions. The new Romanian Government has understood the urgency to deliver concrete results already in the coming months.

In another key area that we will also be closely watching, namely competition policy, Romania has recently fulfilled its obligation to submit on time its national plan for the restructuring of the steel industry.

Ladies and gentlemen,

These developments have allowed the European institutions - Commission, Council, European Parliament - to give the go-ahead for the accession of Bulgaria and Romania.

The European Parliament gave its agreement last week after an intensive scrutiny in different committees. Of course, the signature of the Accession treaty does not mean that Romania and Bulgaria should relax or slow down in their preparations for accession. In the remaining 20 months, Bulgaria and Romania must deliver on key reforms and fully meet the commitments made in the negotiations. The clock is ticking. Every day, every week, every month counts.

Bulgaria and Romania do not stand alone in this process. The EU is providing extensive assistance. Of course the Commission and the other EU institutions are helping with their expertise. From next week on, representatives from Bulgaria and Romania will participate as observers in virtually all committees and bodies of the EU. That will help them to learn in practice how the EU works and to develop contacts with Commission experts and with their peers in the other Member States. It will help the EU to follow closely what is going on in Bulgaria and Romania in even the most specialised areas.

The EU is also providing a large amount of assistance inside Bulgaria and Romania. The available amounts have been increased by 30% for the period 2004 to 2006 and reach about 400 million euro per year for Bulgaria and about 1 billion euro per year for Romania. This assistance focuses on helping both countries to tackle the remaining gaps in their preparation for accession. We invest in crucial infrastructure and in transferring know-how. Such assistance will continue also in the first few years after accession.

The recent experience with the accession of 10 new Member States in 2004 gives us reason to be optimistic that the challenges can be met and that the accession of Bulgaria and Romania can take place as planned. Last year's enlargement has not brought any major upheaval. All indications are that the integration of the 10 is proceeding smoothly. It will eventually be to the benefit of all EU countries and their citizens and companies. Yes, the Commission is sometimes tough on the candidate countries: we criticise gaps and failures and we insist on thorough preparation for membership well before accession. I am convinced, however, that this is part of our success formula. I believe that, if we stay focused, we can achieve the same outcome also for Bulgaria and Romania.

Thank you for your attention!