

'European Parliament welcomes "observers" from the EU candidate countries' from Le Monde (7 May 2003)

Caption: During the year leading up to the accession to the European Union of the 10 new Member States due to take place on 1 May 2004, the European Parliament and the Council welcome observers sent by those countries with a view to preparing their political and administrative staff for the Community structure.

Source: Le Monde. 07.05.2003. Paris. "Le Parlement européen accueille les «observateurs» des pays candidats à l'UE", auteur:Rivais, Rafaële , p. 6.

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European Parliament welcomes ‘observers’ from the EU candidate countries

Initiation to the mechanics of the Community

BRUSSELS

from our European office

The ten candidate countries for accession to the EU will have a year in which to supplement the training of their political and administrative staff to cope with the mechanics of the Community: the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union have agreed to allow ‘observers’ from those countries to attend their deliberations until the countries actually accede to the Union on 1 May 2004.

The European Parliament began to welcome its 162 observers on Monday 5 May, in Brussels: they are serving Members of Parliament in their own countries and have been sent by their national assemblies because they are already familiar with European issues, whether because they have worked for a minister, because they have been members of delegations cooperating with the European Parliament, because they have sat in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe or because they represent their country in the Convention. So they are not political novices. ‘We even have some heavyweights who could one day become European Commissioners,’ notes Klaus Welle, Secretary-General of the Group of the European People’s Party (EPP, right), referring to Vytautas Landsbergis, ‘Hero of Independence’ in Lithuania and former President of that Baltic Republic; Alojz Peterle, former Prime Minister of Slovenia; Mart Laar, twice Prime Minister of Estonia; Jan Figel, ‘who did an exceptional job in preparing Slovakia for accession’; and Vilém Holáň, former Czech Defence Minister.

The EPP Group is hosting 69 of the 162 observers, the socialists 57, the liberals 13, the Confederal Group of the European United Left (GUE, communists) 7, Charles Pasqua’s Europe of the Nations Group 3, and the Greens just one. The EPP has confirmed the political choices that it made in November 2002 during a ‘dress rehearsal’: it has rejected the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia of the populist Vladimír Mečiar, who has not yet determined his group, but it has accepted into its ranks the party of the Hungarian nationalist, Viktor Orbán, and the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) led by Václav Klaus from the Czech Republic.

The ‘observers’ will select the committees on which they are to sit, most laying claim to foreign affairs because of its prestige, then agriculture and justice, although Parliament has only a consultative role in those areas. They may speak to their heart’s content, but they cannot vote. In plenary sitting, they will not be able to speak or vote.

The European Parliament pays its observers an allowance of 250 euros per day, intended to cover their hotel and meal expenses. It also pays their travel costs. The Council for its part does not refund any expenses: not those of ministers, who now have the right to attend Council meetings; not those of diplomats, who may take part in ambassadors’ meetings; not those of experts, who may serve on working parties. The capital cities of the candidate countries are therefore sending experts in limited numbers, but they are keen to maintain a presence at meetings of ministers and ambassadors in order to raise their concerns in those forums, although they are not entitled to vote. Several observers have indicated by this means that it would be difficult for their country to apply a directive on the recycling of packaging waste within the time-limits proposed by the representatives of the Fifteen.

The capital cities are also taking advantage of the opportunity offered to them of training staff for their future diplomatic missions to the European Union: ‘Observer status provides us with an excellent opportunity to prepare ourselves!’ says Margus Rahuoja, assistant head of the mission of Estonia to the European Union, pointing out that Tallinn ‘is sending its most distinguished officials’ to beef up its team.

Three questions to ... Egidijus Vareikis

Interview conducted by Rafaële Rivais

You are a Member of the Lithuanian Parliament and a member of the Social Liberal New Union, an opposition party. What does it mean to you to have been selected as one of the 162 ‘observers’ invited to sit in the European Parliament for a year?

My colleagues in the group to which I belong have elected me to serve as an ‘observer’ because I have some experience of European issues: I worked in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for several years.

I chose to sit in the Group of the European People’s Party (EPP) because I am a Christian Democrat. My history has been marked by religion. My father, who wanted to be a Catholic priest, was deported to Siberia in 1944. When he returned in 1956, he had to renounce his vocation and become an engineer. Then he married: if it had not been for Stalin, perhaps I would never have been born! I became a scientist, specialising in biochemistry. In a modest way, I participated in the independence movement in 1990.

What do you know of the European Parliament?

In November 2002, I took part in the symbolic part-session organised by Parliament with representatives of the candidate countries. It had taken me 18 hours to travel from Vilnius to Strasbourg. But that doesn’t bother me. Not everything will be easy; we may not necessarily have simultaneous interpretation, but I am optimistic. This observer status will be extremely useful to us in our training and preparation. Perhaps I shall be able to stand in the 2004 elections!

The next part-session of the European Parliament will include a debate on Iraq. What will your position be?

On questions like that, I feel closer to the United States than to some European countries. It is the same for many of my colleagues who come from countries formerly annexed by the USSR!