

'The EU is expecting guests' from La Libre Belgique (13 November 2001)

Caption: On 13 November 2001, the Brussels daily newspaper La Libre Belgique outlines the progress of the negotiations for accession to the European Union and considers the issue of the adoption of the *acquis communautaire* by the applicant countries.

Source: La Libre Belgique. 13.11.2001. Bruxelles: La Libre Belgique. "L'Union attend du monde".

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The EU is expecting guests

S.Vt.

Note to candidates: adopting laws is good; implementing them is even better

The Big Bang won't happen tomorrow, not quite. All of a sudden, the European Union could see its numbers increase from fifteen to twenty-five in 2004. Among the thirteen candidates from Eastern and Southern Europe, twelve are currently negotiating their entry into the EU, and ten of them (eight from Central Europe as well as Cyprus and Malta) should see their hopes realised within three years (*).

As pointed out in the annual report on enlargement that Commissioner Günter Verheugen submitted to the European Parliament on Tuesday evening, 'all the accession candidates have made substantial progress over the past year in meeting the accession criteria'. So much so that the Commission believes that next autumn it will be able to name the States that are ready to join the 'family'. Of course, 'the pace must be maintained', it says, and the road map and the timetable for negotiations, drawn up last year, must be respected. This, it should be said, will be no easy task, given that some very sensitive issues, such as agriculture and regional policy, still have to be negotiated.

As proof of progress in the reforms, the ten leading candidates can all now be considered to be functioning market economies. Cyprus and Malta, moreover, are capable of withstanding competitive pressure and market forces within the EU, while, in the 'short term', this should also be the case for Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia.

Furthermore, the twelve States in negotiations are continuing to meet the political criteria for membership, even if, in general terms, faster reform of the legal system is required, measures to combat corruption need to be intensified, the status of Roma people improved and human trafficking addressed more effectively. Turkey still does not meet these criteria, which are preconditions for starting talks with the EU. While it has made progress, 'as is shown by the recent major constitutional reform,' it still has to extend and speed up its reforms, help resolve the problem of the partition of Cyprus and be more amenable on the issue of European security and defence policy.

Implementation is even better

For the twelve other candidates, negotiating with the EU requires the acceptance of European rules, standards and laws that have been built up over half a century. It is the Mediterranean island of Cyprus that, for the moment, is the fastest in meeting them. Out of 31 chapters for negotiation with the Fifteen, it has already concluded 23, ahead of Hungary (22), the Czech Republic and Slovenia (21), Slovakia (20), etc.

Having said that, adopting European laws — known as the Community 'acquis' — is good, but implementing them is even better. And that is where the problems arise since administrative structures and legal systems are not yet equal to the task. The Commission has therefore just proposed to help with capacity-building in the candidate countries by offering them technical assistance or training, and also euros, amounting to 250 million in 2002 on top of the 750 million already earmarked for this purpose. Next year it will check to see if the States have made any progress.

(*) Cyprus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Malta, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia are in negotiations and have a chance of joining in 2004. Bulgaria and Romania are also negotiating but they will not be ready in 2004. Turkey, a candidate country, has not yet been approved to begin negotiations.