

Croatia's 2007 progress report

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The Council held an exchange of views on the enlargement strategy and adopted the following conclusions:

- In line with the enlargement strategy agreed by the December 2006 European Council and the Council conclusions of 11 December 2006, the Council welcomes the Commission's communication on the enlargement strategy and main challenges 2007-2008, of 6 November, and takes good note of the analysis and recommendations contained therein. The renewed consensus on enlargement, which is based on **consolidation of commitments, fair and rigorous conditionality and better communication**, together with the **capacity to integrate new members**, continues to form the basis of the EU's enlargement strategy. An improved quality of the enlargement process will ensure that enlargement continues to foster peace, democracy and stability throughout the continent and to bring concrete benefits in terms of increased trade, investment and economic growth. 2008 will be a particularly crucial year for supporting the transition process in the Western Balkans. The Council recalls that the future of the Western Balkans lies in the European Union.

The Council reaffirms that the pace of the negotiations depends notably on the negotiating countries' progress in addressing opening and closing benchmarks as well as the requirements of the Negotiating Frameworks, including the implementation of the Accession Partnerships, currently in course of revision, with each country being judged on its own merits. The Council recalls that chapters for which technical preparations have been completed will be opened in accordance with established procedures, in line with the Negotiating Frameworks. In this context, the Council looks forward to the Intergovernmental Conferences with Turkey and Croatia later this month. It is also essential that the enlargement policy maintains fair and rigorous conditionality at all stages of the negotiations.

In this regard, the Council welcomes the Commission's intention to continue enhancing the quality of the enlargement process by tackling key priorities in areas of **public administration and judicial reform** and the **fight against corruption** at an early stage.

- The Council then returned to the **situation in Croatia**:

The Council commends Croatia for the overall progress it continued to make in the past year, which allowed the country to enter an increasingly important and demanding stage. Negotiations are on the right track. This also demonstrates to the Western Balkan region as a whole that the perspective of EU membership is tangible. Increased attention must be given to further transpose and **implement effectively the acquis**, in order to be able to meet the obligations of membership in good time.

Further sustained efforts are required in a number of areas. Croatia needs to build on its achievements and implementing record and to make further progress, particularly in:

- **judicial and administrative reforms;**
- **the fight against corruption;**
- **economic reforms;**
- **minority rights;**
- **refugee return.**

The Council also notes that full cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) must be continued and further improvements are needed, to ensure that the prosecution and trial of war crimes in Croatia itself is carried out, without ethnic bias.

The fulfilment of the obligations under the Stabilisation and Association Agreement remains crucial. It is also essential that Croatia continues its efforts towards good neighbourly relations, including work to find satisfactory solutions to pending bilateral issues with neighbouring countries, especially as regards border issues.

The Council also calls on Croatia to fully respect the 4 June 2004 agreement concerning the Ecological and Fisheries Protection Zone, referred to in the June 2004 European Council conclusions and the Negotiating Framework, and not to apply any aspect of the Zone to the EU Member States until a common agreement in the EU spirit is found.