2004 enlargement: state of preparedness for Union membership of the 10 new countries. Comprehensive monitoring report

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The committee adopted the own-initiative report drawn up by Elmar BROK (EPP-ED, D) in response to the Commission's comprehensive monitoring report on the 10 acceding countries. In its general comments, the committee urged the future Member States not to relax their efforts to fully achieve European standards after accession, especially on sensitive issues such as the Roma. MEPs pointed out that the smooth application of EU law backed up by an adequate administration and an efficient and independent judiciary was a basic condition for countries to benefit fully from the advantages of EU membership and they warned that some countries had not yet taken all the necessary steps. They also underlined the importance of properly functioning systems to ensure the delivery of EU funds. The report also highlighted concerns over issues such as food safety, the lack of progress with regard to veterinary legislation, persistent widespread corruption in the public sector, the problems of minorities, discrimination against homosexuals, unresolved border problems between some of the new Member States and Russia, the need for improved security of the EU's external borders by efficiently combating illegal trafficking and organised crime, and the big increases in unemployment, inequality and social exclusion in some of the future Member States. Turning to the individual accession countries, the Czech Republic received good marks overall, although MEPs expressed concerns about such issues as people trafficking at the Czech-German border, food-processing standards, money laundering, plans for the barrages on the upper reaches of the Elbe and delays in ratifying the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. As for Estonia, the report highlighted a number of shortcomings, especially in areas such as mutual recognition of professional qualifications, labour law, equal treatment of men and women, the problem of stateless persons and the liberalisation of the electricity and gas sectors. On Cyprus, MEPs welcomed the recent resumption of negotiations under the auspices of the UN Secretary-General and called on the Greek Cypriots to demonstrate their good faith and on the Turkish Cypriot leader to accept the Annan plan. They also called on Turkey to bring its full weight to bear to enable an agreement to be reached before accession and said that a failure to reach such an agreement could pose a serious obstacle to Turkey's European ambitions. MEPs were anxious at reports that the press was being intimidated in northern Cyprus and called on the authorities there to guarantee the safety of journalists and to safeguard freedom of expression and the rule of law. Regarding Latvia, MEPs welcomed improvements in the country's administrative capacity and the reform of the judicial administration but were worried about the persistent high level of corruption and other issues such as the length of pre-trial investigations, overcrowded prisons and the low priority given to investigating human trafficking. They also expressed concern at the situation of people who, despite being long-term inhabitants of Latvia, had no clear status due to changes in citizenship legislation. Latvia was urged to integrate ethnic minorities, ensure bilingual education during school age and promote the naturalisation process. MEPs also voiced disquiet at recent attempts by the Latvian parliament to remove one of Latvia's observers from the European Parliament. Lithuania was highly praised for having made enormous progress economically and reached a high level of alignment with EU legislation in most areas. It also had a satisfactory record on the integration of minorities. However, the Lithuanian authorities were urged to further address high and persistent unemployment through active labour market policies, ensure security at the country's borders and pursue the fight against illegal trafficking and organised crime. The report pointed out that the Kaliningrad-Lithuania border is especially sensitive, as was shown by the recent corruption case involving some high-ranking customs and border officials. Although Hungary's preparations for accession had maintained their momentum, the report said there was an urgent need to remedy some administrative shortcomings in the agricultural sector and to tackle the country's fiscal and trade deficits. Measures to combat discrimination and exclusion (especially where the Roma are concerned) should go hand in hand with broader social and

development policies. Despite improved legislation for fighting organised and economic crime, MEPs nevertheless pointed to the seriousness of corruption, leading to misappropriation of public funds, and hoped that every step would be taken to investigate and shed light on this matter. As far as Malta was concerned, the committee welcomed the fact that all parties now unreservedly support the country's membership of the EU and that the Maltese government had managed to align Maltese legislation with that of the EU in virtually all areas. MEPs hoped that the Wild Birds Directive would be fully implemented after the transition period had expired. On Poland, MEPs noted the government's determination to remedy the shortcomings identified in the Commission monitoring report and welcomed the far-reaching reform of public finances, measures to increase security at Poland·s eastern border, the adoption of laws to amend the codes of criminal and civil procedure and the new draft law on reproductive rights. However, MEPs noted that corruption was continuing to damage various spheres of economic and political activity, unemployment remained worrying and EU legislation on food safety, environment and animal welfare was still not fully implemented. Regarding Slovenia, the report welcomed the country's significant economic progress, the lifting of restrictions on direct foreign investment and the fact that it had adjusted virtually all of its legislation. MEPs called for further action to expedite the law on rail transport. A problematic issue in the relationship with Croatia was the latter·s unilateral declaration of an ecological zone in the Adriatic, for which a mutually acceptable solution must be found. Lastly, as regards Slovakia, the committee noted that reform of the judicial sector was continuing, but effective implementation of the EU legal and administrative framework would require further efforts over several years, and the fight against corruption should be one of the government's priorities. The report expressed support for efforts to improve the living conditions of the Roma and to fight against their social exclusion. Finally, it said that Slovakia should have its Paying Agency for agricultural funds up and running at the time of accession, as Slovak farmers could otherwise be greatly harmed.