Enlargement: a European strategy to prepare the countries of Central and Eastern Europe CEECs for accession

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This communication deals with the future of the Central and Eastern European Countries currently associated with the Community and their accession at a later date. It is the Commission's initial response to the Corfu European Council on closer links between the Community and these countries and to the strategy needed for the purposes of accession, which will only take place once these countries meet a number of economic and political criteria such as: - the existence of stable institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities; - the existence of a functioning market economy; - the ability to cope with competitive pressures and market forces within the Union; - the ability of the candidate country to take on the obligations of membership and, more importantly, to subscribe to the objectives of political, economic and monetary union. The Community also needs to make preparations during the period in the run up to accession. These preparations should take the form of the gradual integration of the political and economic systems of the associated countries and the Union and greater cooperation in all areas of common interest. At the same time, the Community should make provision for institutional changes so that it can operate smoothly in a Union of more than 20 countries. This communication therefore proposes a strategy covering two independent areas: - the full structuring of relations between the associated countries and the Union institutions; - the promotion of convergence, integration and regional cooperation on the basis of the Europe agreements.