Malta: accession to the European Union and progress in negotiations

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PURPOSE: to present the regular report for 1998 on progress with respect to Malta's accession application. CONTENT: in line with the request of the Maltese authorities, who decided in September 1998 to relaunch their EU accession application, the Commission presents a report which updates the opinion which it gave in June 1993 on Malta's application. The criteria for assessing the prospects for accession by this country are the same as all of the other countries, namely : - relations between this country and the EU (particularly within the framework of the Association Agreement linking the EU to Malta since 1971); - political criteria (general political development since 1993, respect for democracy, protection of minorities); - economic criteria (functioning market economy, capacity to cope with competitive pressures and market forces within the EU); - Malta's capacity to adopt the obligations of membership (particularly the Community acquis). In its conclusions, the Commission's report considers the results to be satisfactory in economic and political terms with respect to Malta : the Maltese institutions are functioning normally and Malta displays all the characteristics of a market economy. Nevertheless, the Maltese authorities still face a certain number of structural problems which require sustained attention. In order to strengthen Malta's capacity to cope with competitive pressures within the EU, a customs union should be set up in the first instance, accompanied by a comprehensive reform programme. As regards the adoption of the acquis, limited and uneven efforts have been made since 1993 to align Maltese legislation with the acquis, particularly in the field of the internal market. In conclusion, Malta's preparations with a view to accession differ from those of the other countries, due to its decision to freeze its application for 2 years. This interruption has given rise to significant delays which will require particular effort by Malta so as to give these preparations fresh momentum. The development of a broad-ranging national plan outlining both economic and legislative measures with a view to accession will help this process. The Commission intends to propose a detailed account of the state of progress of the preparations of Malta's candidacy, within the framework of its regular report on Malta, to be published at the end of 1999.