Enlargement strategy and main challenges 2006-2007: the institutional aspects of the European Union's capacity to integrate new Member States

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The Council adopted conclusions on the enlargement of the EU regarding the accession of Bulgaria and Romania on 1 January 2007 and accession negotiations with Croatia and Turkey.

Romania and Bulgaria: it looks forward to welcoming Bulgaria and Romania as Member States on 1 January 2007 and notes with satisfaction that the process of ratification of the Accession Treaty is close to completion. In line with the Council conclusions on Bulgaria and Romania of 16-17 October 2006, the Union institutions will cooperate with both member countries and verify progress in the areas of judicial reform and the fight against corruption and organised crime after accession;

Turkey: the Council takes note of the Commission's report of 8 November 2006 (COM(2006)0649) and welcomes the findings and recommendations contained therein. It welcomes the continued progress made by Turkey in the reform process, but regrets that the pace of reforms has slowed down in 2006. It is essential that Turkey undertakes determined efforts to intensify the reform process and to implement it with determination, so as to ensure its irreversibility and sustainability. The substantial and technical preparation of the negotiations have progressed well. The Council recalls that, in line with the Negotiating Framework, the advancement of the accession negotiations continues to be guided by Turkey's progress in preparing for accession. In this context the Council notes that further significant efforts are required to strengthen freedom of expression, freedom of religion, women's rights, minority rights, trade union rights and civilian control of the military. In line with the Negotiating Framework, Turkey also needs to commit to good neighbourly relations and to the peaceful settlement of disputes in accordance with the United Nations Charter, including, if necessary, jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice. The Council recalls the declaration of the European Community and its Member States of 21 September 2005 and notes that Turkey has not fulfilled its obligation of full non-discriminatory implementation of the Additional Protocol to the Association Agreement. In this context the Council agrees that the Member States within the Intergovernmental Conference will not decide on opening chapters covering policy areas relevant to Turkey's restrictions as regards the Republic of Cyprus until the Commission verifies that Turkey has fulfilled its commitments related to the Additional Protocol.

These chapters are: Chapter 1: free movement of goods, Chapter 3: right of establishment and freedom to provide service, Chapter 9: financial services, Chapter 11: agriculture and rural development, Chapter 13: fisheries, Chapter 14: transport policy, Chapter 29: customs union and Chapter 30: external relations.

The Council will follow up and review progress made on the issues covered by the declaration of 21 September 2005. The Council invites the Commission to report on this in its forthcoming annual reports, in particular in 2007, 2008 and 2009, as appropriate.

Croatia: the Council commends Croatia for the progress it has made in the past year. The accession negotiations have begun well and first results have been obtained. Croatia is now required to build on the progress made. The Council recalls that, in line with the Negotiating Framework, the advancement of the accession negotiations continues to be guided by Croatia's progress in preparing for accession. Particular attention should be paid to accelerating the pace of reforms in the areas of judicial and public administration reform, the fight against corruption, and economic reform. Rigorous implementation of Croatia's obligations under the Stabilisation and Association Agreement, in particular in the areas of state

aid and real estate acquisition, will be essential to maintain Croatia's positive momentum on the path to EU membership. The Council welcomes Croatia's full cooperation with ICTY and emphasises that Croatia needs to maintain it. Croatia also needs to pay due attention to good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation, including making the necessary efforts towards finding solutions to outstanding bilateral issues, in particular border disputes.