RESOLUTION

on priorities and challenges in preparation of the enlargement of the European Union

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The state of play

The Luxembourg European Council took in December 1997 the decisions necessary to launch the overall enlargement process of the European Union.

The Council stated the main challenge in this area: 'The task in the years ahead will be to prepare the applicant States for accession to the Union and to see that the Union is properly prepared for enlargement'.

The implementation of the reinforced pre-accession strategy, launched by the Union started in March 1998. Intergovernmental bilateral conferences were convened to begin negotiations with the Czech Republic, Cyprus, Estonia, Hungary, Poland and Slovenia (the '5+1-concept'). Preparations for negotiations were simultaneously speeded up with Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania and Slovakia. Turkey was offered a separate pre-accession strategy.

Accession partnerships, presented by the EU describe short and medium-term priorities and intermediate objectives for the applicant countries to adapt to the Union's acquis. The applicant countries have, based on the AP's tabled their 'National programme for the adoption of the acquis'. Screening of the situation is underway in 31 sectors and the Commission presented in November 1998, its first progress report.

Conclusions by the EEA-CC

1. The EEA-CC expresses its support to the efforts to enlarge the European Union with the intention to consolidate and strengthen Europe as a whole, both internally and globally.

2. Article 128 in the Agreement on the European Economic Area, States that a state becoming a member of the Union shall apply to become a party of the EEA Agreement. The EEA-CC recommends that the EEA Council should consider appropriate procedures to start this process.

3. The EEA-CC supports an efficient implementation of the pre-accession strategy. The preparedness of the individual applicant countries to become members on an equal footing and a sustainable basis must be strengthened. The criteria laid down in 1993 by the Copenhagen European Council must be met. Temporary transitional measures (as regards free movement of persons, environmental standards, agriculture etc.) must be limited to exceptional cases or circumstances to avoid any risk for a weakening of the functioning of the single market, which covers all the EEA States.

The EEA-CC notes that an enlargement of the Union would bring immense and direct consequences on the EEA and all the individual States of the EEA. Agreements between the EEA-EFTA States and the applicant countries, as well as between the EEA-EFTA States and the European Union must be transformed in line with the new situation, as new members join the Union and thereby also the single European market, which covers all the EEA Member States. Consultations in this matter among all the partners concerned should, therefore start in good time and at the latest at the moment when accession negotiations begin.

Balanced solutions should be sought in topics, where the consequences of an accession might change drastically existing relations between partners concerned.

With EU's enlargement the new Member States will become members of the EEA, transfer treaty-making powers to the Community and, thus take over EU's trade policy and agreements. In the present situation EFTA's free trade agreements with the applicant countries give in certain fields better market access than the EEA-Agreement does. It can, therefore be foreseen, that EFTA countries will in connection with EU's enlargement point to the WTO's rules and ask for negotiations with EU to compensate for this. These problems are especially related to fish and fish products.
4. The EEA-CC encourages the EU to engage in full all the EEA States in its efforts, prior to an enlargement, to strengthen the functioning of the European single market. An evaluation of the need to strengthen common monitoring procedures of the single market would also be desired before an enlargement of the single market to new Union members.

5. The EEA-CC would strongly support all steps to secure that all the EEA States and their actors, particularly in the case of the EEA-EFTA States are well informed about the development in the accession negotiations as regards the single market acquis. All EEA States must be given real opportunity to prepare themselves to foreseen results, above all in the case of possible transnational arrangements. The EEA Ministerial Council would have a role to negotiate appropriate proceedings to agree about good interaction during the negotiation process and relevant pre-accession contacts.

6. The EEA-CC recommends that the EEA Ministerial Council opens dialogue about participation in funding by the EEA-EFTA States of activities, in parallel to the pre-accession strategy, to improve above all the ability of the applicant countries to cope with and implement the single market requirements. New instruments could be developed to improve the effectiveness of joints or parallel contributions.

7. The EEA-CC urges all partners concerned to make efforts to ensure economic, social, cultural and political contacts between the applicant countries do not break down during the preparations for enlargement or as a consequence of enlargement. Attention should be focused on developing and strengthening cross-border and regional cooperation between the applicant countries and also with their neighbours, remaining outside the EU.

8. The EEA-CC notes that the major challenge of pre-accession activities is to prepare the applicant countries for membership of the Union. The EEA-CC agrees with the opinion of the ESC (see Opinion reinforcing the pre-accession strategy, CES 456/98) that the strategy would be most successfully implemented by including the economic and social actors in this process, as well as encouraging the applicant countries to develop similar arrangements. These actors should be involved in the preparations for enlargement of and accession to the Union. They could constructively contribute to the enlargement and accession through advise in the context of the implementation of above all the single market requirements as a part of the pre-accession strategy, thereby making use of the knowledge, experience, contacts and views which these actors have.

9. The EEA-CC notes that the economic and social actors in all the EEA countries would be prepared to give their contribution to the preparation of an enlarging of the single market to come into force as a consequence of accessions to the EU. This contribution would be needed for instance in explaining the content and conditions of the single market to the actors in the applicant countries. Institutional building in the applicant countries to establish an appropriate and functioning economy, labour market and dialogue between the actors and between them and the government is a core element in the preparations of a sustainable accession to the single market. The EEA actors, also from the EEA/EFTA States are willing to participate and contribute in this endeavour.

10. The EEA-CC expresses its wish that the Committee would be used as an instrument for information and consultation aiming at a well functioning EEA even after the enlargement of the EU. Appropriate contacts with actors in the applicant countries could also be established as a part of the activities of the EEA-CC.

11. The EEA-CC will present additional resolutions, as appropriate, during forthcoming preparation of the enlargement of the European Union.