



Uachtaránacht na hÉireann ar  
Chomhairle an Aontais Eorpaigh  
Irish Presidency of the Council  
of the European Union  
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**Statement to the AFET Committee of the European Parliament by Eamon  
Gilmore, Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, on the Irish  
Presidency priorities on enlargement**

**22 January 2013**

Let me begin by thanking you for the invitation to come and address you today.

I understand you have had an intensive two days focussing on enlargement issues and examining the Commission's progress reports on a number of countries; and that you have held a discussion with the Serbian Minister for European Integration. I know how supportive the Committee is of the overall objectives of enlargement policy.

So it is perhaps fitting that I should appear before you at the end of this lengthy session for a discussion on the Irish Presidency priorities on the enlargement dossier. I look forward to working closely with you on progressing the enlargement agenda over the course of our Presidency.

While I will focus my remarks on the enlargement agenda over the coming months, I am also conscious of the legislative agenda which falls to this Committee, in particular proposals for the EU external financing instruments. Let me assure you that we are looking forward to working with the Parliament and your Committee on this dossier over the course of the Irish Presidency.

Before going into detail, allow me to begin with a few comments about Ireland's overall Presidency priorities and how these complement the EU's enlargement policy.

As I am sure you are aware, the theme of our Presidency is Stability, Jobs, and Growth. The Irish Presidency will be that of a recovery country driving recovery in Europe. While our official Presidency programme sets out in detail its legislative and other priorities across all formations of the Council of the European Union; the main priorities can be summarised as:

- Securing stability
- Investing in sustainable jobs and growth
- Europe and the world , in particular the importance of looking beyond our borders and engaging with global partners

In relation to this third priority, we will work closely with the High Representative/Vice President Catherine Ashton and the European External Action Service in responding to the key foreign policy and security challenges that we face. I look forward to engaging with the Committee in this regard in support of the High Representative during our Presidency.

Enlargement is a key part of the Presidency programme and of its theme. The enlargement policy remains the EU's most effective tool in supporting reform and transformation throughout Europe. The adoption in the Western Balkans, and in other aspirant members, of the EU's values ensures stability and irreversible political reform. There are obvious economic benefits in the form of a larger common market which translates into jobs and economic growth,

both for the EU and its new and aspiring members. Ultimately the policy contributes to both our security and our prosperity.

Ireland has experienced these positive effects first hand. This year marks the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Ireland's EU accession. Membership of the EU has been a driving force for social and political change in Ireland, one of the first three "accession" states of the European Union. During our last Presidency in 2004, Ireland welcomed ten new Member States into the EU during the 'Day of Welcomes'. In 2013 the Irish Presidency will continue to prioritise a credible enlargement policy based on the principle of conditionality.

### **Nobel Peace Prize**

When discussing and assessing the EU's enlargement policy it is important to keep the bigger picture in view. The European Union is the most successful peace process the world has ever seen. And the EU's enlargement policy is one of its most successful policies; concretely contributing to the over-arching aims and ambitions of the Union. Robert Schuman's vision was of a supra-national community that would share strategic resources in order to 'make war not only unthinkable but materially impossible' and to build a lasting peace in Europe.

Our achievements in that respect were recognised last year when the European Union was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Alfred Nobel in his will said that the prize should go to whoever "shall have done the best work for fraternity among nations, for the abolition or reduction of standing armies, and for the holding and promotion of peace congresses". The European project has created a level of cooperation between countries that is without parallel. This cooperation has allowed the EU to become the most successful force for

democratisation and peace in the world today. Enlargement is central to that achievement.

### **Enlargement agenda in 2013**

Ireland is, and always has been, a strong advocate of EU enlargement, and of the European future of the Western Balkans. We want to see concrete progress in the accession process for all the candidates and prospective candidates. I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to this Parliament's and this Committee's championing of the enlargement of the Union. Your individual members play a significant role in transmitting messages about EU values, rights and responsibilities to prospective members. I believe that we are of one mind with the Parliament in our aims.

Overall 2013 is likely to be an eventful year for the EU's enlargement policy.

While in recent years the first semester Presidency did not have a huge workload on enlargement at Council, the Danish Presidency changed that trend with decisions made on Serbia and Montenegro. The Council Conclusions agreed in December allow for the possibility of similar important decisions on the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Serbia, Kosovo and possibly Albania during Ireland's term. And, of course, we are due to see the completion of Croatia's journey to EU membership with their accession on 1 July.

### **Western Balkans**

The momentum gained by Croatia's imminent accession needs to be sustained. The EU's commitment to the European perspective of the Western Balkans is unequivocal, but it also needs to remain credible. The December Council

Conclusions agreed a number of “rendezvous” paragraphs which propose returning in the first half of 2013 to the possibility of opening accession negotiations for Serbia and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, of granting of candidate status to Albania, and of opening of Stabilisation and Association Agreement negotiations with Kosovo.

Decisions on these issues will follow from reports to be presented to the Council in Spring, and on progress achieved by the individual countries. The Irish Presidency will lead the Council's assessment of these.

It will be a delicate balance to allow enough time for progress to be registered and reported on, while ensuring we have the time needed for discussion and agreement at Council. We are in contact with the Commission with regard to the timing of these reports and their subsequent consideration at Council. We would hope that consideration in the Spring would then pave the way for possible decisions at the June Council. We recognise that this is an ambitious timetable. To adhere to it will be challenging; particularly when you consider the numerous factors governing decisions. But I can assure the Committee that the Irish Presidency will work assiduously to try and secure progress on the accession paths of all the countries of the Western Balkans.

In that regard, let me just confirm that Ireland is also supportive of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s EU perspective. While there are no decisions due to be made by the Council on Bosnia and Herzegovina during our Presidency, we hope that the coming months will see the Bosnian government and political leaders make real and sustained progress in order to realise their country’s EU ambitions.

Our commitment to furthering the process for all was further evidenced by the Informal meeting of Ministers and State Secretaries for European Affairs which

took place in Dublin yesterday. The five candidate countries were invited to participate, and the lunch time discussion was devoted to enlargement. In addition to this, Minister of State for European Affairs, Lucinda Creighton, and Commissioner Füle met separately with representatives from the three prospective candidates to discuss how we can further encourage and support them in the accession process.

Of course, we have three countries already in negotiations and the bread-and-butter work of advancing the process for them continues.

### **Croatia**

And here, let me return to Croatia, which has completed negotiations and is expected to accede on 1 July. The Irish Presidency will oversee consideration of the Commission's final monitoring report. The Commission's last monitoring report gave the Croatians a clear list of the outstanding issues that had to be addressed. I am confident that they are working on these and that the next, and final, monitoring report will deem them ready for accession.

### **Iceland**

Turning now to Iceland, the Committee will be aware of the agreement between the governing coalition parties to essentially slow down the accession negotiations in the run up to their elections on 27 April.

However, you will also have noted the intention to continue cooperation with the EU on the chapters that are open with a view to advancing these towards closure. Ireland will continue to work with Iceland in this regard.

All EU candidates have, of course, the right to pursue the negotiations at a pace which they deem appropriate to their particular situation. We respect the decision of the Icelandic government who have throughout this process acted with the upmost transparency in all their dealings on the accession process.

This decision does temper our initial ambitions somewhat. However, we would hope to be in a position to open two further Chapters – those for which Iceland has already submitted negotiating positions to the EU - and to close three Chapters.

Our engagement with Iceland will continue. My colleague, the Minister of State for European Affairs, will travel to Reykjavik tomorrow for discussions.

## **Turkey**

The December Council Conclusions on Turkey recognised that it is in the interests of both parties that accession negotiations regain momentum soon. The Commission's positive agenda has succeeded in retaining engagement in the process. The technical working groups established are carrying out valuable work in a number of key areas to promote the continued alignment of Turkey's legislation with the EU acquis.

The EU has prepared a broader dialogue and a framework for cooperation with Turkey on JHA issues, as well as a road map towards a visa-free regime. It is now important for Turkey to sign in parallel the readmission agreement with the EU. This is a precondition for steps towards visa liberalisation as a gradual and long-term perspective.

Though of great value in themselves, these positive developments are not a substitute for actual progress in the negotiations. I am conscious that it has been some time since the last negotiation chapter was opened under the

Spanish Presidency in 2010. We would hope to make progress on the negotiations during our Presidency and hope to open at least one Chapter, if that proves possible.

To achieve this we will rely on the willingness of all parties, both EU Member States and Turkey, to facilitate progress.

## **Montenegro**

The Cypriot Presidency succeeded in opening the first of the negotiations Chapters with Montenegro. As the process of screening continues, we would hope to follow that example by opening a further chapter, possibly two.

The negotiating framework for Montenegro puts into effect the “new approach” which sees progress achieved on the rule of law chapters linked to overall progress in the accession negotiations. The EU has completed the outcome of screening on these chapters - Judiciary and fundamental rights, and Justice, freedom and security. Montenegro has been invited to prepare the required Action Plans which constitute the opening benchmarks for these chapters. We do not expect to open these Chapters during our Presidency, given the need for the preparatory work to be of a high quality; ensuring this will take time. However, we will strongly encourage progress to that end.

## **Final remarks**

As I mentioned at the outset, when it comes to enlargement our Presidency programme states that “In 2013 the Irish Presidency will continue to prioritise a credible enlargement policy based on the principle of conditionality”.

The use of the words “credible” and “conditionality” was very deliberate.

Conditionality is important in the accession negotiation process. It is also

important that the process remain credible. Therefore, the conditions set have to be rigorous to ensure that acceding countries are fully prepared for, and able to cope with, the responsibilities of membership; but at the same time the conditions must remain credible and achievable and should not become so unrealistic that they prevent countries from moving forward on the path to EU membership.

The Irish Presidency has placed particular emphasis on this balanced approach which we will aim to apply in the important decisions that come before Council in the months ahead.

Accession is a complex, difficult, and demanding process. There is no denying that the new applicants for EU membership are being held to a higher account than their predecessors, not least due to the increase in the scope and depth of the acquis. What is vital is to keep forward momentum in the process. We hope to be able to do that during our Presidency.

The European Parliament is often referred to as the voice of people. When it comes to the EU's enlargement policy your support is vital in ensuring that the concerns of the people of Europe, both EU citizens and those in aspirant countries, are heard, and that the changes, advances, and benefits of the policy are communicated to them. With your support I am confident that enlargement will remain a strong and credible policy which will continue to benefit the citizens of the enlargement countries and the European Union as a whole.

Thank you