

Q&A with Commissioner Rehn

Q. There is a growing probability, that due to the conflict between Slovenia and Croatia, Croatia will not be able to close all the chapters this year. How much this possible event could compromise the EU achievements, the enlargement achievements, the enlargement projects all together. Actually how do you comment the recent evolution in respect both countries. Do you see any chance for improvement?

Commissioner Rehn:

Maybe I start with concerning your question as regards on Croatia negotiations. Indeed we have a roadmap for completing the technical negotiations by the end of this year for Croatia, if Croatia will be able to meet all the conditions.

So far Croatia is working effectively towards this target timeline and it is possible still to maintain this target timeline.

However, it is important that in the next accession conference which is planned for March, towards the end of March, it would be important to open - maybe close but at least open - a number of chapters so that the dynamic order negotiations will be kept on.

Therefore it is important that we could find a solution that could help solve the border issue and would allow Croatia's EU accession negotiations to continue according to the negotiating framework.

I welcome the fact that the Prime Ministers of Slovenia and Croatia, Prime Minister Pahor and Prime Minister Sanader will meet next Tuesday, that is certainly a very positive step forward and it counters the negative rhetoric in the public debate in the two countries that has increased.

That is also the reason we have taken initiatives as regards European facilitation on the border issue and I can tell you that, I met President Marti Artissari, here in Brussels in Berlaymont yesterday and we discussed the Western Balkans in general, we discussed the setting up of a senior experts groups for a possible European facilitation between Slovenia and Croatia on the border issue and on the continuation of Croatia's EU accession negotiations. President Artissari would be in principle ready to take up the task and chair this group. But for the group to be set up we first need an agreement of the two countries on the terms and conditions of such facilitation.

We are now working on this subject to get such an agreement in a positive spirit with the governments of Slovenia and Croatia and I sincerely wish that they will take this chance now and cease the opportunity

I expect clarity on the matter latest in 1st week of March and I have also consulted the Czech Presidency and they are in agreement with the objectives and the timeline which would fit well with the timeline of the next accession conference. So work in progress!

Q: Do you think the agreement between Slovenia and Croatia is still possible after the latest development, the possible red light of Slovenia even to Croatia's NATO accession? Is it still possible to continue negotiations with Croatia on the 27 March? Are you planning to meet again both ministers, maybe yesterday with Ahtisaari or in the coming days?

Commissioner Rehn:

Thank you for this question. I think actually these difficulties concerning the NATO protocol of Croatia in Slovenia, in terms of its ratification and the possibility of a referendum, this is a further reason why I hope that both countries would seize the opportunity and accept to work on the basis of this kind of European facilitation. I plead to the leaders of the two countries that they would now counter this negative trend and create a positive trend with strong determination and they can rest assured that they have the support of the EU for this objective.

We have regular contacts with both foreign ministers and we met here last week and we will meet shortly again and we try to find an agreement on the terms and conditions of this kind of European facilitation, as I said during the latest at the end of the first week of March.

Q: You said 2009 is going to be the year of the WB and yet I can't think of a single country – maybe with the exception of Albania now – whose accession process is not in trouble. There will be a discussion of the foreign ministers on Monday, what action is needed to come out of the present stalemate? Are you still sure that 2009 will be the year of the WB?

Commissioner Rehn:

It will be the year of the WB, I hope a positive year for the WB, despite of all the negative news on the global economy and the political difficulties in Europe. I recall last week a major European weekly magazine brought an article about the WB with a headline 'a stuck region'.

I take this as a warning signal, not as a fact. I don't agree with this analysis, but it is a worthy warning that the region maybe stuck unless we will able to take decisions that respects our own consensus on the EU enlargement policy. So that if a country on its own merits deserves to move forward in its accession process then we should take such decisions and let that country move forward in the EU accession process.

Of course we have a very challenging context, the economic crisis, the European elections are approaching we will have the Irish referendum, but I plead to the foreign ministers and governments of the EU that they will now show responsibility and ensure that our policy of stabilisation and gradual integration in the WB would be continued and kept in track. Monday is very important in that regard.

Commissioner Rehn on the previous questions:

While we are of course extremely focused now on the financial crisis and the economic recession that we are fighting and we are feeling the pain of the Europeans, we are trying to find redress in this very serious situation. At the same time it is very important that we wouldn't make EU enlargement a scapegoat of these economic troubles. In fact this study shows very clearly that EU enlargement when carefully managed has been a genuine win-win outcome with trade creation, in terms of economic growth, in terms of job creation and we should indeed see that we are in the same boat with the candidate countries and potential candidates of SEE. Let's not make the peoples of the WB pay for the system errors of financial capitalism. Let's recall that we shouldn't make a Serbian worker pay for the mistakes done in Wall Street. Let's keep a cool head and let's take decision with all responsibility that can be expected from the leaders of the EU.