

Speaking points

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Mr President, Honourable Members, Ladies and Gentlemen,

- First of all, I am delighted that my very first official engagement - since taking up office just some hours ago - is here in the European Parliament.
- I also think that it is an excellent turn of events that the very first debate in this high house with the new Commission is taking place on enlargement.
- And thirdly, I am delighted that the European Parliament expressed its strong support for enlargement in the three reports.
- The resolutions are proof to the commitment of the European Parliament to the accession perspectives of Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and Turkey.
- This is a clear signal that enlargement will continue to be a top priority of the European Parliament and I will do my utmost to bring this success story forward.

On Croatia,

- I appreciate the Parliament's fair and balanced report and would like to congratulate Mr Hannes Swoboda, the rapporteur.
- The report highlights the progress achieved by Croatia in meeting the criteria for accession, but at the same time recognises the efforts that are still necessary for concluding the negotiations. Your report thus reinforces the messages and supports the work undertaken by the Commission.
- Let me underline that closure of negotiations in 2010 is still possible, provided that Croatia progresses in fulfilling all outstanding benchmarks. The ball is clearly in Croatia's court. Croatia has come a long way over the past years but important challenges still remain to be tackled.
- Here we share a common assessment. Croatia needs to focus in particular on the
 - further reform of its judiciary and public administration,
 - the fight against corruption and organised crime,
 - the respect of minority rights, including refugee return,
 - as well as war crimes trials and full cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY).
- We are encouraged by recent developments in fighting corruption. We hope that investigations into wrong doing lead to concrete results.

- As for cooperation with the ICTY – which is a fundamental requirement - Chief Prosecutor Brammertz confirmed that full cooperation is still not achieved. He however acknowledged recent positive steps, such as the setting up of a task force aimed at stepping up investigation efforts. I hope that the work of the task force will soon produce concrete results.
- Finally, the arbitration agreement of November 2009 between Slovenia and Croatia on the handling of the bilateral border issue has started a new momentum in the negotiations process, which I trust Croatia will be able to seize, by intensifying its efforts to address the remaining outstanding issues.

As regards the **former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia**,

- 2009 was a good year as regards its reform process. Thanks to political consensus between all the main political forces the country was able to make significant progress in key areas. It achieved visa liberalisation and the Commission could recommend starting accession negotiations.
- I am glad to see that there is a strong consensus between the Parliament and the Commission that accession negotiations should start as expressed in the constructive and forward looking report of Mr Thaler.
- Now the challenge for the country is to maintain the reform momentum. Whilst the country sufficiently met the political criteria there is still much work to be done. A shared vision of the future and effective political dialogue between the political forces will be crucial to ensure progress.
- Continued efforts are needed in particular on
 - fully implementing the Ohrid Framework Agreement and improving inter-ethnic relations;
 - ensuring the rule of law and an independent judiciary;
 - successfully prosecuting high level corruption cases.
- The economic crisis has not left the country untouched. Unfortunately the country already suffered one of the highest unemployment rates in Europe. Now more than ever, prudent macro-economic management and active labour market measures are needed to contain and then reduce unemployment.
- Like you, I am convinced that the start of accession negotiations is key to maintaining the reform momentum in the country. Equally important, it will enhance the European perspective for the wider region. It is therefore in the strategic interest of the EU. This is the message which I will be putting forward to the Member States and to the country so as to take the process forward.

On **Turkey**,

- I would like to thank your rapporteur Ms Oomen-Ruijten for her continuous effort towards a fair and balanced approach in her report on Turkey. The Commission remains committed to the accession process with Turkey as this process gives strong encouragement to political and economic reform.
- Work on the political criteria remains of utmost importance, in particular as regards fundamental freedoms. A number of landmark reforms have been carried out in the past year. Some of them were next to impossible only a few years ago.

- Last week, the EMASYA Security Protocol was annulled, which allowed the Army to intervene without authorization in case of security threats. This is a landmark achievement in civilian-military relations. We will closely observe the follow-up of this cancellation.
- The submission of a draft law setting up an independent Human Rights Institution and the much-awaited anti-corruption strategy, adopted in principle by the Turkish government on 21 January, are also promising.
- We continue to support the democratic opening, launched by the government. The success of this initiative requires the participation and support of all political parties and all segments of society.
- However, the Commission has concerns following the decision of the Constitutional Court to close the pro-Kurdish party represented in Parliament. We also regret the arrests that took place in the South East at the end of December. We condemn the terrorist attacks that took place at the same time. None of these developments is really conducive to the successful implementation of the democratic opening.
- As regards the accession negotiations, the opening of the important Environment chapter last December is an encouraging development, bringing the number of open chapters to twelve.
- The Commission welcomes the reinforced dialogue on migration with Turkey which should lead to concrete achievements, in particular as regards readmission and border control.
- I am hopeful that we will be able to open more chapters this year. However, Turkey will need to make additional efforts in order to be able to fulfil the demanding benchmarks. It is therefore important that the necessary preparations are being continued with rigour.

Conclusion

- Your three reports underlined that despite considerable progress achieved in 2009 there is still a lot of joint work ahead of us.
- I am looking forward to a very fruitful and close cooperation over the next five years.