

Mister President,

Honourable Members of the European Parliament,

I am glad to be here today to discuss with you a process that has historically been at the core of the reunification of the European family, the enlargement strategy of our Union. Traditionally, the rotating Presidency of the second semester has dedicated more time to this issue. Predominantly because December is the time of the year when Member States make the yearly assessment of the process, on the basis of the progress reports of the Commission. 2010 is no exception and the Belgian Presidency has acknowledged this responsibility early on: We have indeed identified the enlargement process as one of the priorities announced in June already. Since the first of July, I have approached this file as an honest broker:

- An honest broker towards the 9 candidates and potential candidates. The rate at which new members are integrated depends on each candidate's own merits as assessed by the Commission. To avoid unnecessary tensions, I have seen it as my role to relay the expectations which must guide their efforts.
- An honest broker towards 27 Member States: on December 14th, the Council will assess where we stand and what the next steps should be. In my capacity of President of the General Affairs Council, my priority in that respect is to facilitate the emergence of consensus on a clear message to be addressed to candidate countries.

The yearly repetition of the exercise must not however make us forget about its deeply political nature. From 1973 until 2007, the European Union membership has been extended six times. But in conditions made very different both by the historical background of the applicants and by the level of integration reached by the European Union (today candidates must adopt over 150.000 pages of legislation before joining).

We can usefully draw attention to the first anniversary of the Lisbon Treaty's entry into

force, which ensures that the EU can pursue its enlargement agenda, while maintaining the momentum of European integration.

This year, the difficult economic environment resulting from what many see as the biggest economic crisis since 1929 must also be taken into account. With rising levels of worldwide uncertainty – within the EU but also in candidate countries asked for difficult reforms – some might question the use of the ongoing enlargement process. However, as demonstrated by the past waves of enlargement, not only do applicant countries benefit from increased access to the world's biggest free trade zone, but the EU's own global competitiveness benefits from integration with new members in terms of complementarity and comparative advantages. As reminded in the Commission's reports. Candidate countries indeed effectively contribute to the objectives of the Europe 2020 strategy by further extending the area of the EU's regulatory framework and therefore the strength of the internal market our companies can flourish on. Economic uncertainty goes often hand in hand with larger concerns about safety. In that regard too, in the day of transnational criminal networks, the stringent requirements from the candidate countries – both in terms of legislation and implementation – contribute to the reinforcement of rule of law in Europe and make Europe safer every day.

However, these facts alone may not suffice to convince public opinions about the benefit of enlargement when they are worried about globalisation and predictions of European decline. To guarantee the broader public support needed, I see two elements which have been key to the renewed consensus on enlargement as described in December 2006:

- First, public opinions cannot be taken for granted. Governments must therefore help the Commission in its information and communication efforts to explain the realities – and the opportunities – of the enlargement process.
- Second, all involved must keep an eye on the credibility of the process. On the side of EU member states, it means rewarding genuine progress of a candidate country on its path towards the EU, without interference of bilateral issues outside EU obligations. But also that any applicant can only join the EU once deemed objectively fully

prepared to bear the responsibilities of membership. On the side of applicant countries, this translates in refraining from exaggerated promises to the population, on a long path requiring numerous and sometimes painful reforms and fostering a climate allowing for regional cooperation. Of course, an early settlement of bilateral disputes can prove to be helpful.

All these principles have been reaffirmed and clarified over the years, notably in the renewed consensus on enlargement of December 2006. In my view, respecting them is the only guarantee for the long term credibility and therefore durability of the process which has reunited a large part of the European family. In this context, the experience of visa liberalisation for the Western Balkans is an example to keep in mind: It has shown how much can be achieved by combining rigorous conditionality with the delivery of specific benefits. It also underlines the importance of communication by the governments concerned about what the process exactly entails.

Allow me now to review the progress made in the last 12 months by each of the nine countries, candidates and potential candidates, which made the strategic choice of an EU perspective. I would like to start with the Commission's opinions on Montenegro's and Albania's applications for membership. For both, the Commission acknowledges positive evolution, but recommends that negotiations should be opened after respective key priorities listed in the opinion have been met.

- For Montenegro, in the light of incomplete but genuine progress, the Commission recommends that the Council grants the status of candidate country in December. But the opening of accession negotiations remains conditioned to further progress on seven benchmarks, particularly linked with the rule of law, judicial reform, media freedom, and electoral reform, as well as the fight against corruption and organised crime.

- For Albania, the Commission underlines the need to multiply efforts to improve the country's record, before granting the status of candidate country. The Commission also recommends conditioning the opening of accession negotiations to a positive assessment of progress. Given the initiatives of members of the European Parliament to facilitate dialogue among Albanian political parties after the June 2009 elections, it will not come as a surprise for this Committee that, as I said to my colleague Edmond Haxhinasto on October 14th, ensuring a return to the proper functioning of Parliament remains one of the key issues. There is however more action required from Tirana: As illustrated by the 12 precise benchmarks listed by the Commission which cover not only the wider stability of democratic institutions, but also electoral reform, the rule of law, as well as the fight against corruption and organised crime.

Let me now turn to current candidate countries:

- With Croatia, accession negotiations have closed in on their final phase, with 33 out of the 35 chapters of the acquis open, and 22 being provisionally closed. If benchmarks are duly met, we hope that more can be closed by December 22 at the occasion of the third Accession Conference with Croatia under Belgian Presidency. In parallel, preparation for the drafting of the Accession Treaty has also started as decided by the Council in December 2009. Encouraging progress has been registered in many areas, but Croatia is still required to provide full cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia – including by intensifying its efforts to meet the Prosecutor's request for military documents related to Operation Storm. Furthermore, efforts remain necessary in the fields of competition, as well as judiciary and fundamental rights. In this regard, I warmly welcome the Commission's intent to produce a monitoring report on progress in the field of Judiciary and Fundamental Rights on March 11, 2011, as a way to help Croatia in assessing steps needed to ensure full compliance by the date of accession.
- Turkey continued its political reform process. Concerns remain for the freedom of religion, for the freedom of expression, as well as gender equality and minority rights, also because of the only partial implementation of the democratic opening announced

in August 2009 to address the Kurdish issue. At this point, I wish to reiterate the unequivocal condemnation of all acts of terrorism I made in Ankara this summer, and restate my solidarity with the victims and their families. Overall – and even if more needs to be done – the package of constitutional amendments approved by referendum on the 12th of September has been a step in the right direction. The clear popular support testifies of the Turkish citizens' aspirations for further strengthening of fundamental freedoms and rule of law in their country. To fully meet these aspirations, two elements seem key:

- First, the implementation of the package in line with EU standards: The priority given by the government to enacting the reforms is encouraging in that regard.
- Second, a more inclusive consultation process to prepare further Constitutional reforms. Recent statements of Prime Minister Erdogan on possibly starting to draft a text, after next spring's elections, to replace the 1982 Constitution ratified under military rule go in the right direction and would be a good opportunity to do so.

Finally, in line with the Council's conclusions of December 2006, I took the opportunity of my visit in August and my participation in the Bosphorus conference in Istanbul in October to plead privately and publicly with my interlocutors for a full, non-discriminatory implementation of the Additional Protocol to the Association Agreement. Delinked from the UN-process for the island's reunification, the Belgian Presidency has been pursuing active contacts with all parties to facilitate progress towards normalizing bilateral relations with the Republic of Cyprus. And these efforts continue. In the meanwhile, the Council's 2006 decision to suspend negotiations on eight chapters has had a growing impact on the pace of negotiations: Intensive efforts are made, including the Presidency's green light for a briefing of the Council by experts of the Commission on additional consultations in Ankara last week. However, combined with delays by Turkey on meeting established benchmarks on chapters not blocked, this growing impact on the pace of negotiations might prevent Council from being able to formally open any chapter this semester. If this is the case, this lapse in the pace of negotiations should serve as a wake-up call:

It must in priority strengthen political determination to break the current deadlock.

Only then will we be able to return to the October 2005 mutual commitment of Turkey and the EU to start an accession process largely beneficial to both parties.

- With Iceland, I have had the honour of chairing the first Accession Conference to mark the formal start of negotiations on July 27. As I said to Minister Skarphedinsson, Iceland's close ties with the EU and overall good level of preparedness to meet EU acquis requirements will prove undeniable assets for the accession negotiations. However, Iceland will be expected to integrally adopt and enforce the EU acquis – including for fisheries and whaling – as well as to meet all existing obligations under the EEA Agreement, including financial services. At this stage however, the results of the Commission's screening process are not expected until 2011.
- As far as the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia is concerned, progress has been achieved – although at a more uneven pace – in reforms of the parliament, the police, the judiciary, and public administration, as well as in the protection of minorities' rights. The Commission's recommendation to open negotiations for accession dates already from October 2009, but a unanimous decision of the Council remains required for negotiations to start. As I reiterated to my colleague Antonio Milososki when I chaired the Association Council in July: A negotiated and mutually accepted solution to the name issue under the auspices of the UN remains essential. In the meanwhile, the government in Skopje should continue reforms, in particular as regards independence of the judiciary, freedom of expression in the media, and further implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement.

Let me conclude with the remaining three potential candidates:

- As for Serbia, the Belgian rotating Presidency facilitated consensus at the October 25th General Affairs Council on a decision to invite the Commission to submit its Opinion on Serbia's application, while reiterating that full cooperation with ICTY remains an essential condition for membership of the EU – particularly for the crucial arrest of the two remaining fugitives, Ratko Mladic and Goran Hadzic.

Furthermore, despite work of the Serbian government to reform its judicial system,

more efforts are needed to ensure its independence, as well as to eradicate the serious problems of corruption and organised crime. At a regional level, I have congratulated President Tadic for his leadership in important steps to promote reconciliation in the region, more notably – but not exclusively – towards Bosnia-Herzegovina and regarding the tragic legacy of the massacres of Srebrenica. More recently, we all welcomed the agreement found on Serbian resolution adopted in September by the General Assembly of the United Nations Assembly which, with the co-sponsorship of the EU, opened the way for a process of dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina. I call for this dialogue facilitated by the High Representative to be started quickly.

- Following the orderly conduct of the October legislative elections and fifteen years after the Dayton Peace Agreements, Bosnia and Herzegovina's citizens deserve a qualitative step forward of their country on the path towards European integration. When I met with my colleague Sven Alkalaj last month, this has been the message that I asked him to relay to all political actors in Bosnia. In the reiterated European perspective of their country, the various communities must find the necessary common ground to agree on ways to adopt the necessary reforms. This includes aligning the Constitution with the European Convention of Human Rights, improving the functioning of its institutions to allow adoption and implementation of EU laws, and, finally, meeting the objectives and conditions set for the closure of the Office of the High Representative.
- And finally, Kosovo, for which positive developments have been the decentralisation process and municipal elections in Kosovo Serb areas, as well as the significant increase of cooperation with the EU Rule of Law Mission, the so-called EU-LEX. However, serious concerns remain in terms of rule of law, particularly in the tackling of corruption, organised crime and money-laundering. In full respect of individual positions of member states on the issue of the status, but in line with the 2009 Council's commitments, the Commission's proposals to support Kosovo progress in its European perspective are positive news.

These measures are currently discussed by member states and could include meeting

requirements for a possible trade agreement with the EU and launching a visa liberalisation dialogue conditioned on the pursued implementation of an Action Plan on reintegration of returnees. These are concrete indications from the EU: irrespective from the dialogue with Belgrade, the European destiny of the people from Kosovo will not be forgotten.

Ending with the Western Balkans, and more specifically by evoking the common European perspective of countries that were, not so long ago, at war with each other, this prompts a reminder of what first served as a foundation for European integration project some sixty years ago: The people's desire for peace and stability. Since then, this hard-fought peace has borne the sweet fruit of a common prosperity. Not all regional issues are solved. Far from it! In the Western Balkans, the dramatically improved regional cooperation cannot make us completely forget prolonged tensions, some I mentioned earlier. Away from the Western Balkans, some developments in the field of enlargement – or the lack thereof – might forecast tensions detrimental to all involved, if the parties do not show the necessary political determination to break the deadlock. Nonetheless, providing that the credibility of the enlargement process is maintained and allows for the lasting support of our citizens, this process will be able to contribute to our and their future prosperity by consolidating regional peace.

Thank you
