



**COUNCIL OF
THE EUROPEAN UNION**

Brussels, 24 January 2013

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NOTE

from: General Secretariat of the Council
to: Delegations

Subject: Summary record of the meeting of the European Parliament **Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET)** held in Brussels on 21-22 January 2013
Chairs: Mr Brok (EPP, DE), Mr Provera (EFD, IT)

I. Exchange of views with Eamon Gilmore, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, on the Irish Presidency priorities on enlargement

Mr Gilmore delivered the speech in the Annex. He presented the enlargement agenda for the coming months, saying that Ireland had always been an advocate of enlargement. The EU, he added, was the most successful peace process and enlargement was an instrument for democratisation. He said that, unlike the previous year, important decisions on enlargement were expected in the current semester, as a consequence of decisions taken by the Council in December. He then presented the state of play for each candidate country, and the intentions of the Presidency, in particular concerning the opening and closing of chapters for those that were already negotiating their accession. Mr Gilmore closed his intervention by insisting on the importance of finding the right balance between two factors: the credibility of the process and the importance of rigorous conditionality.

Questions raised by Members went beyond the remit of the Presidency's competence in the field of foreign relations, i.e. enlargement, and touched upon as diverse as tax havens, intervention in Mali, Ireland's neutrality and the CSDP, relations between the UK and the EU, the Eastern Partnership and trade agreements.

On enlargement, both Ms Neyts (ALDE, BE) and Ms Lunacek (Greens/ALE, AT) raised the thorny issue of the accession of countries with major unresolved bilateral disputes with a neighbour that would then veto the neighbour's future accession. They called for such bilateral issues to be solved as soon as possible during the negotiation process and wondered if a specific mechanism should be set up to handle this task. Mr Gilmore recalled that decisions on enlargement were taken by consensus. He insisted on the importance of preserving the credibility of the enlargement process but also noted that the process itself was a catalyst for the solution of bilateral issues.

Mr Howitt (S&D, UK) made a strong plea in favour of opening accession negotiations with FYROM, arguing that a negative decision would not just be a huge disappointment for the country itself but would also have a dramatic impact on the whole Western Balkans region. Mr Gilmore gave credit to the Commission for the key role it had played in paving the way to the December Council conclusions on FYROM. He added that the spring report was eagerly awaited and that Ireland would be happy if negotiations could be opened. He stressed that any decision had to be taken by unanimity but the Presidency would do whatever it could to facilitate an agreement.

Ms Lunacek (Greens/ALE, AT) called for the opening of negotiations on the Stabilisation and Association Agreement with Kosovo, overcoming the resistance of some Member States. The Minister said that he also hoped that this could happen, noting that the positive language used by the Serbian authorities should be of some help.

Mr Duff (ALDE, UK) raised the issue of relations with Turkey and said that the EU had had a traumatic time under the Cyprus Presidency. He called on the EU to send a strong political message to Ankara supporting a solution to the Kurdish problem. The Minister recalled that accession negotiations with Turkey had been blocked well before Cyprus's Presidency and he hoped that they could gain new momentum under the Irish Presidency.

Mr Roucek (S&D, CZ) insisted on the importance of the economic dimension in the enlargement process, in particular at a time of crisis. He argued that Member States should focus on investing in candidate countries rather than in countries like China. The Minister acknowledged that this was a key point, saying that one should never lose sight of the fact that improving citizens' lives was what enlargement was all about.

II. Exchange of views with Suzana Grubjesic, Deputy Prime Minister for European Integration of the Republic of Serbia (*In association with the Delegation for relations with Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro and Kosovo*)

Ms Grubjesic said that her government hoped that accession negotiations with Serbia could be opened by the end of the Irish Presidency and thanked the EP for supporting this objective. She said that Serbia was looking for the normalisation of relations with Kosovo and that there was no alternative to dialogue with Pristina. The aim, she added, was reaching a fair settlement and concrete results. The Deputy Prime Minister then informed the committee of the progress made in adopting and implementing internal reforms, in particular on the fight against corruption on the rule of law and on the economy. She also touched on the issues of visa liberalisation - much awaited by Serbia - and regional cooperation.

During the debate, the rapporteur on Serbia, Mr Kacin (ALDE, SI), commended the new Serbian government which had, he said, achieved more in a few months than previous governments had achieved in several years, both on relations with Kosovo and on internal reforms, thus setting a good example for the whole region. In the same vein, Ms Lunacek (Greens/ALE, AT), the rapporteur on Kosovo, welcomed Serbia's stance in the high-level dialogue with Pristina. Mr Posselt (EPP, DE) was more critical, voicing his concerns regarding Serbia's calling into question of Kosovo's statehood: he stated that Serbia should be aware that Kosovo would never become part of Serbia again. Ms Gomes (S&D, PT) called on Serbia to cooperate with EULEX and dismantle the parallel structures in North Kosovo. Mr Tannock (ECR, UK) wondered whether partition was the only way forward. Ms Grubjesic replied that there was now a permanent dialogue and she did not exclude a meeting between the two presidents. As far as the parallel structures were concerned, she said that this was an issue to be dealt with in the framework of the dialogue, so as to find a mutually acceptable solution.

Mr Kukan (EPP, SK) and Mr Tannock (ECR, UK) voiced their concerns regarding the arbitrary use of Article 359 of the Criminal Code, which rendered abuse of office in both the public and private sectors a criminal offence. The Deputy Prime Minister said that this provision was under review in the parliament.

On media freedom and LGTB rights, she gave Members reassurances on her government's commitment to respecting fundamental rights.

III. Exchange of views with Laurent Fabius, Minister of Foreign Affairs of France, on the situation in Mali (*In association with the Subcommittee on Security and Defence*)

This item was cancelled.

IV. Exchange of views with Hugues Mingarelli, EEAS Managing Director for the Middle East and the Southern Neighbourhood, on the Joint Communication on Supporting closer cooperation and regional integration in the Maghreb: Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia (JOIN(2012)0036) (*In association with the Delegation for relations with the Maghreb countries and the Arab Maghreb Union*)

Mr Mingarelli first explained the reasons behind the adoption of this joint communication: the importance of the Maghreb following the Arab Spring; the recent improvement in relations between some Maghreb countries, notably Algeria and Morocco; and the need to update the Commission's communication on the EU response to the Arab spring.

Mr Mingarelli carried on explaining the main challenges facing the region : the obstacles on the way to democratisation (mainly created by the Salafist movement), unemployment, agricultural reform, strengthening of the private sector, terrorism and organised crime.

Lastly, Mr Mingarelli outlined how he felt the EU could contribute to regional integration in the Maghreb, that is, by supporting regional organisations (Arab Maghreb Union, UfM, 5+5), supporting the reform process and decentralisation, and financing transport and energy networks, etc.

Mr Panzeri (S&D, IT), chairman of the delegation for relations with the Maghreb countries, expressed scepticism concerning an initiative which he considered added nothing new and to be coming too late, as the Maghreb integration was already one of the objectives of the Barcelona process. He also insisted on the need to have a clear institutional framework with a clear allocation of responsibilities. Ms Banarab-Attou (Greens/ALE, FR) was also rather critical of the EU's failure to support social development in the Maghreb countries, and of initiatives like the UfM which were only beneficial to EU Member States. She called for the full respect of the cultural, linguistic and religious pluralism of the region. Ms Gomes (S&D, PT) welcomed the communication and its objectives but wondered why such a good, long-term vision was so difficult to put into practice. Mr Mingarelli pointed mainly to the difficult relations between Algeria and Morocco as the root cause of the lack of regional integration. He rejected allegations that the EU lacked a long-term vision, arguing that the EU had already adopted a strategy for the Sahel region three years earlier.

V. Reports

a) **2012 Comprehensive Monitoring Report on Croatia**

AFET/7/11179, 2012/2871(RSP)

Rapporteur: Libor Rouček (S&D, CZ)

Responsible: AFET –

- First exchange of views

The rapporteur presented his draft resolution, according to which Croatia was well on track for joining the EU on 1 July. The rapporteur called for a swift completion of the ratification process, acknowledging that Slovenia's ratification could be problematic owing to the dispute concerning Croatian savings in Slovenia's Ljubljanska Banka. He argued that Croatia's accession would have positive regional repercussions, by reinforcing EU policy in the area and advancing reconciliation and cooperation. In summary, he said that Croatia's accession would serve as a model and driver of further enlargements.

With the exception of GUE/NGL, the groups shared the rapporteur's positive assessment, and were confident that Croatia would be able to fulfil the conditions in time to accede in July. The only sceptical voice came from Mr Schöpflin (EPP, HU), who said he was much less optimistic than his fellow Members given the domestic and international obstacles on the path to Croatia's accession. He called on the EU to prepare a "plan B", taking into account the repercussions on the whole region of a delayed accession. The Chair as well the rapporteur rejected this view, trusting that Croatia would respect its commitments and that the ratification process would be completed in time.

Virtually all the debate focused on the dispute between Croatia and Slovenia which risked derailing the ratification process. Mr Posselt (EPP, DE) called on Slovenia to ratify and keep relations with neighbours out of its election campaign. M. Kacin (ALDE, SI) defended his country's position, explaining that the fact that the ratification process had not yet started in Slovenia had nothing to do with the political crisis in the country, but only with the lack of the necessary prerequisites. In other words, what Croatia had agreed to do in the Accession Treaty had not yet been respected. He considered that the problem of the Ljubljanska Banka could not be solved by experts, but needed a political solution, which he felt could still be reached in time for Croatia's accession on 1 July. When Members stressed again the crucial importance of solving bilateral issues as soon as possible in the accession process, Mr Kacin replied that this was not a bilateral issue but a multilateral one, because it was mentioned in the Accession Treaty. The rapporteur said it was tragic that Slovenia was looking like becoming the last Member State to ratify, as this was against the whole spirit of the enlargement to include the Western Balkans, i.e. reconciliation in former Yugoslavia. He argued that Croatia's accession was in Slovenia's interest and if the process was blocked, nobody would win. A delayed accession would have long-term repercussions on the whole region, and he reminded Members of the constructive attitude adopted by Italy on the border dispute with Slovenia.

- Deadline for tabling amendments: **24 January 2013, 12.00**

b) Motion for a resolution on the 2012 progress report on the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

AFET/7/11177, 2012/2866(RSP)

Rapporteur: Richard Howitt (S&D, UK)

Responsible: AFET –

- First exchange of views

The rapporteur referred to the ongoing political crisis in the Council but warned against any interference in domestic politics. On the name issue, he commended the Commission's change of position, by no longer making its solution a precondition for opening the accession negotiations. In order to avoid endless discussions, he reaffirmed its choice to use "FYROM" in the title of the resolution, the adjective "Macedonian" within the body of the text itself and, apart from that, to refer to this State as "the country". In order to solve the name issue, the rapporteur called for an arbitration mechanism aimed at solving bilateral issues between enlargement countries and Member States.

The rapporteur considered that the spring report by the Commission, called for by the Council in December, would represent a real opportunity that should not be missed, as the beginning of talks would have a positive impact on the acceleration of the reform process.

The draft resolution was welcomed by Members and most of them hoped that negotiations could start soon. Ms Cornelissen (Verts/ALE, NL) said it had been time for the Commission to get involved in the solution of the name issue and welcomed, as did others, the initiatives recently taken by Commissioner Füle. Ms Neyts regretted that there had been a hardening of the respective positions and called for history to be left to historians. Ms Koppa (S&D, EL) replied that this was not history but irredentism. Mr Kovatchev (PPE, BG) and Mr Kirilov (S&D, BG) said that Bulgaria had been on the sideline and showed patience for a long time, but now needed to react against the growing nationalistic trend; they considered that it was not a question of history but of discrimination against citizens claiming their Bulgarian nationality. The rapporteur closed the debate by welcoming the recent steps recently taken towards the solution of the name issue and he invited the countries concerned to share their common heritage rather than claiming it. On the Bulgarian issue he said he was open to find the right wording through a compromise amendment.

- Deadline for tabling amendments: **28 January 2013, 18.00**

c) 2012 progress report on Serbia

AFET/7/11170, 2012/2868(RSP)

Rapporteur: Jelko Kacin (ALDE)

The rapporteur gave a very positive assessment of the progress made by Serbia, notably in its relations with Kosovo.

Mr Schöpflin (EPP, HU) noted that Kosovo was still defined as a province of Serbia in the Serbian Constitution, which was inconsistent with the process of normalisation of relations. Fellow MEPs replied that the EU never told candidate countries what to put in their Constitutions. Mr Schöpflin also said that the idea of a greater Albania was now being openly discussed both in Albania and in Kosovo but Mr Kacin refused to discuss such speculation.

Ms Brantner (Greens/ALE, DE) thanked Lady Ashton for her personal involvement in the high-level dialogue, while Mr Kukan (PPE, SK) regretted that the EP had not been adequately informed about its developments. The representative of the Commission considered that the improvement of relations with Kosovo was a key factor in any decision to open accession negotiations with Serbia.

d) 2012 Progress Report on Turkey

AFET/7/11180, 2012/2870(RSP)

Rapporteur: Ria Oomen-Ruijten (PPE, NL)

Responsible: AFET –

- First exchange of views

The rapporteur presented the main ideas underpinning her draft resolution. She said that a renewed engagement in negotiations was needed, with efforts from both sides. She called on the Council to open Chapters 23 and 24. On the reform process, she stressed the danger arising from the broad definition of terrorism in Turkish law and highlighted the need to respect freedom of expression. The draft resolution acknowledges the role of Turkey as a regional player and calls for the enhancement of the political dialogue between the EU and Turkey. It calls for a breakthrough on the Kurdish question and regrets the Turkish attitude taken during the Cyprus presidency.

The shadow rapporteurs and most of the other speakers welcomed the draft resolution, with some considering it to be the most balanced and objective text drafted in recent years. Criticism came almost exclusively from individual speakers from Greece and Cyprus, who felt that the text did not accurately reflect the aggressive stance of Turkey.

The call for opening Chapters 23 and 24 was widely supported, with some arguing that such a move would benefit other areas too. Mr Sophocleous (S&D, CY) disagreed, arguing that Turkey was not ready to make any concessions and so should not be rewarded by the opening of new chapters. The representative of the Commission shared the views of the rapporteur and stated that opening these chapters would allow the EU to engage in a more constructive dialogue with Turkey on fundamental rights.

Ms Koppa (S&D, EL) considered that the draft resolution was too positive and failed, for example, to take account of the fact that Turkey was only making positive progress in areas covered by its own priorities. She also considered that the text should describe Turkey's attitude under the Cyprus Presidency as "unacceptable", and that this issue should not be addressed under the section "good neighbourly relations". Ms Papadopoulou (S&D, CY) welcomed the resolution but deplored the fact that Turkey and Cyprus were treated in the same way.

Ms Giannakou (EPP, EL), followed by others, regretted the fact that some elements, such as Turkey's violation of the law of the sea, were missing from the text.

Closing the debate, the rapporteur said she was open to include new elements in the draft. On the Kurdish issue, she warned against the temptation to be more outspoken as this could disturb the peace process. On Cyprus, she considered that she could do nothing more and declared that she would not accept any one-sided amendment that unbalanced the text.

- **Deadline for tabling amendments: 5 February 2013, 12.00**

e) European Integration Process of Kosovo

AFET/7/11171, 2012/2867(RSP)

Rapporteur: Ulrike Lunacek (Verts/ALE, AT)

The rapporteur presented her resolution, in which more emphasis was given to the progress achieved than to the work still to be accomplished. As in the two previous reports, Ms Lunacek included a call on the 5 Member States that had still not recognised Kosovo to do so. She pointed out that the Court of Auditors' report on EULEX deplored the fact that owing to the position of 5 Member States on the statehood of Kosovo it was not able to participate in Europol and Interpol, which was an obstacle in the fight against corruption. Mr Kukan (EPP, SK) considered that whilst the request to 5 Member States to recognise Kosovo was "not unconstructive", the Court of Auditors' statement that the non-recognisers should be blamed for the inefficiency of EU assistance to Kosovo was completely unacceptable.

Mr Posselt (PPE, DE) made a strong plea in favour of Kosovo's statehood, arguing that it did not need any footnote and that it would never be Serbian again.

Other Members insisted on the importance of the fight against corruption and of an independent judiciary, but generally agreed on the positive effects of opening the negotiations on a Stabilisation and Association Agreement. Only Mr Angourakis (GUE/NGL, EL) rejected the draft resolution, calling it a provocation.

f) 2011 discharge: EU general budget, Section III, Commission

AFET/7/10301, 2012/2167(DEC) COM(2012)0436[01] – C7-0224/2012

Rapporteur for the opinion: José Ignacio Salafranca Sánchez-Neyra (PPE)

Responsible: CONT – Jens Geier (S&D)

Deadline for tabling amendments: 15 January 2013, 12.00

This item was postponed.

g) 2011 discharge: EU general budget, European External Action Service

AFET/7/10505, 2012/2176(DEC) COM(2012)0436[10] – C7-0235/2012

Rapporteur for the opinion: José Ignacio Salafranca Sánchez-Neyra

Responsible: CONT – Ryszard Czarnecki (ECR)

Deadline for tabling amendments: 15 January 2013, 12.00

This item was postponed.

VI. Votes

a) 2012 progress report on Montenegro

AFET/7/11114, 2012/2860(RSP)

Rapporteur: Charles Tannock (ECR, UK)

Responsible: AFET –

All the shadow rapporteurs, with the exception of the GUE/NGL group, supported the main ideas underpinning the draft resolution as well as the compromise amendments.

The draft motion for a resolution was adopted, as modified by a number of amendments, with 50 votes in favour, one against and one abstention.

b) Amendment of the EC-Ukraine Agreement on the facilitation of the issuance of visas

AFET/7/10009, *** 2012/0138(NLE) 12282/2012 – C7-0200/2012

Rapporteur for the opinion: Paweł Robert Kowal (ECR, PL)

Responsible: LIBE – Claude Moraes (S&D, UK)

Speaking on behalf of the rapporteur, Mr Tannock (ECR, UK) said that this agreement was a small gesture in the right direction, i.e. towards a visa-free regime.

All the shadow rapporteurs agreed, considering the agreement as a signal that the EU was not turning its back on Ukraine and supporting it for its tangible effects, notably in promoting the mobility of young people.

The opinion was adopted without any amendment with 51 votes in favour and one against.

VII. Next meeting(s)

- 7 February 2013, 9.00 – 10.30 (Strasbourg)
- 18 February 2013, 15.00 – 18.30 (Brussels)
- 19 February 2013, 9.00 – 12.30 and 15.00 – 18.30 (Brussels)

**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**

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

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 40th 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
