

Enlargement? European Citizens have the say!

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With the start of the new Political season in Europe the term “enlargement” is again in vogue. Three countries are the concrete targets of that subject – from the North, through the Balkans to the Bosphorus. These are Iceland , Croatia and Turkey . In today’s edition of the “Interacting with the European Parliament” feature of Radio Bulgaria , the European Institute, Portal EUROPE and the Center for Modernizing Policies we would hear what social attitudes are in view of the European perspective of these three countries.

“I think that all countries should be given the opportunity to join the EU if they want to and if they meet EU criteria.”

“Croatia, especially, is no less European than we are! In the case of Turkey, things are more complicated, but not because of religion. The Turkish people would find it a lot more difficult to put up with European requirements.”

“Turkey’s accession is so much talked about! But it hasn’t met basic criteria in the sphere of human rights. As to Iceland and Croatia – they are part of Europe anyway and if their citizens wish to join in, there should be no problem.”

You heard the opinions of three Bulgarian nationals; and let us turn next to Iceland, Croatia and Turkey and see what their citizens think on the issue.

The government of Iceland received a questionnaire for accession from the EC commission on enlargement. Foreign Minister Ossur Skarfedinsson said after talks with European Commissioner Olli Rehn that Iceland has until November 16 to answer the questions. Iceland has so far established close relations with Europe as part of the European economic zone and the Schengen agreement. Furthermore the country covers some of the European directives. Iceland, which officially applied for EU accession on July 23, hopes to join the Union in 2012. What is the attitude of Icelanders to future membership to the EU? Taking the question is Birgir Peterson, a prominent Iceland analyst and lawyer:

“I think that the general attitude towards the EU is positive in general, but as regards the Iceland accession, I believe that today Icelanders are rather negative towards Iceland’s membership. It is partly because of the EU policies in various areas, such as fisheries and agriculture. People are split on this issue. Many people believe that the euro would be beneficial for the economy and would be beneficial for the living standards. Whether this is possible to achieve within the next five to ten years, opinions vary on that issue. Today the majority of Icelanders does not think that EU membership would change totally their living standards.”

What do you think would be the results of a future referendum on Iceland’s EU membership?

“Accession negotiations will probably start in 2010. So I cannot say whether the referendum will be in 2010 or in 2011. It is very difficult to predict on how opinions will change during that time, but if we would go to the polls today I think Iceland would vote “No”. Of course the public

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opinion may change in the next couple of years. Everything depends on the outcome of the negotiations with the EU.”

As to Croatia, its progress in the process of negotiations for EU accession was slowed down due to the border dispute with Slovenia. Enlargement Commissioner Olli Rehn has said before the Commission on Foreign Relations at the European Parliament that Croatia should, among other things, meet the requirements for full cooperation with the International tribunal in Hague in relation to crimes of war committed in the 1990s in former Yugoslavia. Radio Bulgaria’s reporter talked on the phone to Morana Petricic, journalist at Radio 101 – Zagreb:

“The open border question has already been solved generally last week, when ours and Sloveniaa’s prime ministers met. Now we have to prepare our own proposals about the border and some other problems between our two countries. And then the arbitrage will have the final say. Anyway the most important thing in this already solved dispute, is that EU chapters, which Slovenia has been blocking, are now unblocked and commissioner Rehn said that Croatia can finish EU negotiations next year. People in our country are more focused on problems that they have in their everyday life. So the EU is one of the issues, mentioned in our newspapers, and they say that we can be pretty optimistic, especially now that the dispute with Slovenia has been in its bigger part solved.”

The prestigious Independent Commission on Turkey, consisting of former high-ranking European politicians headed by former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari, stressed the need of continuing pre-accession negotiations between Turkey and the EU. Negative statements on the part of some European politicians and the insistence of some European countries on a stature of “priority partnership” for Turkey instead of full-fledged membership undermine confidence in the European Union, the report of the Commission reads. We talked on the subject to Murat Bilhan, prominent Turkish diplomat, political analyst and professor.

“The Turkish political parties and the institutions, like the Universities and public institutions, they are of course very supportive. So if we want to give a rough percentage of the support among the institutions, it is almost 80%, but among the population, according to latest public opinion polls, it is less than 52%. There is some resentment, disappointment and even anger on the part of Turkish public opinion. It’s a fact because of the reluctance of several countries, not all, because some of the countries in the EU are favoring the Turkish entry. I know that it is not only Mr. Sarkozy who is against Turkish entry as a member in the EU. There are some others, like Mrs. Merkel and such. But public opinion changes in times and in some case in short times. As a last word I would like to say, that General de Gaule’s France invited Turkey in 1960 to join the EU, while the same de Gaule rejected the United Kingdom at that time!”

Concerning the enlargement of the European Union, Bulgaria’s Foreign Minister Romyana Jeleva is firmly of the opinion that:

“For all of us – the countries of the EU and all European citizens, it is important that the process of ratification of the Lisbon Treaty is completed successfully. Without that treaty as a legislative fundament of the EU we would not be able to conduct any further enlargement waves. The truth is that we all now need the Lisbon Treaty. And the progress of each country should be evaluated individually according to the results it shows in meeting EU accession criteria.”

It is a fact beyond any doubt that enlargement would acquire more concrete dimensions after the fate of the Lisbon Treaty becomes clear in the course of next month. This is a subject we would tackle in the coming editions of our programme. It is broadcast on Radio Bulgaria under the project

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