

THE LIBERALS AND DEMOCRATS IN THE EP: "THE BULGARIAN GOVERNMENT HAS TO AVOID COMPLACENCY"

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Neil Corlett, spokesperson for the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe in the European Parliament, answered our questions, concerning Bulgaria's integration into the EU:

What is the opinion of your group about the degree of readiness of Bulgaria and Romania to join the EU?

The ALDE Group has always been supportive for Bulgaria's and Romania's bid to join the European Union and hopes that the target date of 1 January 2007 can be met. It is reassuring to see that the new Bulgarian government is aiming for accession in 2007. It affirms its willingness to implement the necessary reforms. This affirmation is important. What is, however, more important for the ALDE Group is the concrete implementation of reforms in the critical areas as identified in the Commission's last Progress Report. There, more efforts are required

In which spheres are the basic difficulties and obstacles?

One of the problem areas remaining is the justice system. Reforms take time - as legislation must be implemented before clear changes can be measured. The commitments made by the Bulgarian government must be followed by political deeds. The Bulgarian authorities must use the next few months to make visible progress especially in the fight against organised crime and the integration of the Roma into Bulgarian society.

How would you assess the effectiveness of the present government of Bulgaria in meeting the EU requirements?

The government in Bulgaria emphasizes that it is doing its best to live up to the EU's requirements but it needs to show a renewed effort and has to avoid complacency. For the ALDE Group it is not comprehensible, for example, that until December last year it was impossible for the government to fully staff the National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Demographic Issues which aims to improve the Roma's position within Bulgarian society. This is not something that the Bulgarian Government cannot achieve relatively rapidly. Here, it must show more decisiveness.

What is the general public feeling of your voters about Bulgaria and Romania as future members of the EU?

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The rejection of the Constitution last year by two member states has been a shock to the system and forced everyone to reconsider the pace of change. It has certainly hardened opinion in the minds of many citizens and forced politicians to pay more attention to justifying their decisions. Remember that the ratification of the accession treaty is still pending in a number of EU member states and Parliamentarians there have to answer to their voters who by and large oppose further enlargement at this time.

Do you think that a possible delay of 6 months or a year would change a lot in the two countries before their actual integration?

It is important that Bulgaria and Romania will join the European Union - when they are ready. The precise date is of secondary importance. A delay of a few months or one year, though regrettable, would not be dramatic in the long run. It is now up to Bulgaria to do everything in her power to achieve the initial target date of January 1, 2007.