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EUOBSERVER / BRUSSELS - Bulgaria is hiring consultants to identify parliamentarians and opinion-makers in member states where ratification of its EU accession treaty is seen as problematic, signalling nervousness about a possible delay of its EU membership.

The Bulgarian Public Procurement Agency has closed a public tender for a €100,000 consultancy job targeting at least four member states – Germany, France, the Netherlands and Denmark - where it fears a "possible delay of ratification."

Sofia appears nervous that national parliamentarians in the four countries will be influenced by a key report by the European Commission, due in May, which might recommend a delay of Bulgaria and Romania's scheduled accession in 2007 by one year.

The tender speaks of "a possible delay of the ratification procedure of the Bulgarian accession treaty in some member states, particularly by the link established between the ratification procedure and the European Commission's monitoring report."

A negative or critical report by the commission could cause national MPs to postpone ratification, which is necessary in all EU member states for the accession treaty to enter into force.

As part of a last-minute Bulgarian PR offensive, a consultancy firm should now identify key opinion and decision-makers in the four states and devise strategies to convince them that the 2007 entry date should be upheld and ratification accelerated.

Speed up ratification

The tender, ***first picked up by Bulgarian news-portal Europe.bg***, lists three aims of the job.

First, "To avoid the application of the delay clause postponing the membership of Bulgaria with one year from 2007 to 2008."

Second, "To speed up the process of ratification before the final review of preparedness for membership [the May commission report]."

Third, "To increase support for Bulgarian membership in 2007 in key countries such as France, Germany, the Netherlands and Denmark."

The winning consultancy firm is set to be made public by mid-March.

Little enthusiasm

The French, German and Danish parliaments are to deal with ratification of Bulgarian and Romanian EU membership only after publication of the commission report, sources confirmed.

The Dutch senate is also considering this option. The Dutch lower house already ratified the accession treaties in February - despite the country's largest Christian Democrat party voting against Romanian accession in 2007.

Meanwhile, Romania appears to share Bulgaria's uneasiness with the slow pace of ratification, with

Bucharest's foreign affairs minister Mihai Razvan Ungureanu recently expressing disappointment about France.

"To be honest, I expected a lot more enthusiasm from France," he said in February according to Bucharest daily news.

Real risk of delay?

However, Brussels insiders and national parliament sources generally see no risk of a delay of ratification, even if parliamentarians are awaiting the commission report.

To soothe sceptics' fears that Bulgaria and Romania are insufficiently prepared for EU entry, the commission report may contain one or more so-called safeguard clauses.

These clauses provide for an exclusion of either countries from participation in specific EU policy areas - primarily justice and home affairs and parts of the internal market - even if they become member states in 2007.

But despite the unlikelihood of delay "Bulgaria wants to be on the safe side," said Marin Lessenski, an analyst at the Institute for Regional and International Studies (IRIS).

Enlargement fatigue

A Bulgarian diplomat said the lobby offensive was "nothing extraordinary," but also pointed to concern about the "enlargement fatigue" currently characterising EU public opinion.

"Bulgaria is not such a well known country," the diplomat added.

European diplomats told EUobserver last month that public opinion will be "a factor" for both France and the Netherlands in handling the option of a delay for Bulgarian and Romanian accession, despite the official line that timing depends purely on meeting EU standards.

French and Dutch citizens' uneasiness over enlargement is widely seen as a contributing factor to why they rejected the EU constitution in referendums early last year.