

BRUSSELS SIGNALS ON-TIME ENTRY FOR BULGARIA AND ROMANIA

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By Mark Beunderman EUOBSERVER

EU justice commissioner Franco Frattini has hinted that Bulgaria and Romania could enter the union on time in January 2007, but face continued Brussels monitoring on the implementation of justice reforms. Mr Frattini heads the portfolio which has caused the most trouble for Sofia's and Bucharest's EU bid, with Brussels officials frequently citing shortcomings in the judiciary, organised crime and corruption.

The commission will on 16 May present a key report which could recommend a one-year membership postponement from 2007 to 2008 for both countries, but statements made by Mr Frattini in a European Parliament seminar on Tuesday (25 April) indicate that this is unlikely.

"Both Bulgaria and Romania are working very well in the right direction, that's my opinion in my portfolio area," the commissioner said.

But the justice commissioner gave the clearest indication so far that a May recommendation for 2007 entry could be followed by further Brussels monitoring of the two countries' reform shortcomings, even after accession.

This means that, for example, Bulgaria could face continued scrutiny by EU officials on how many suspects it actually prosecutes for the many murders by criminal gangs.

"We could accept a monitoring system even after the date of accession," said Mr Frattini.

"I prefer to [first] take a clear decision on accession and then decide perhaps in the autumn on possible monitoring measures," he added.

EU leaders meeting in June will have the final say on the entry date, with enlargement-wary states such as France and the Netherlands likely to push for a tough monitoring system if the two countries become members next year.

Mr Frattini said any post-accession monitoring system will be "commonly agreed" between the commission and Sofia or Bucharest, not "imposed by Brussels."

But some member states are likely to be interested in the tougher "safeguard clause" instrument.

The justice and home affairs safeguard clause - enshrined in the two countries' accession treaties with the EU - could exclude Bucharest and Sofia from full participation in specific policy areas.

This could mean, for example, that the EU would not recognise verdicts of Bulgarian judges until the Bulgarian judiciary functions properly.

But Mr Frattini said it is still "premature to decide about safeguard clauses."

Any monitoring measures or the safeguard clause are expected to be applied to Bulgaria rather than Romania, with Mr Frattini explicitly praising the Romanians for their "huge progress" in reforms.

He welcomed reforms "particularly in the corruption field," referring to the efforts of justice minister and chief anti-corruption fighter Monica Macovei.

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"A big part of the success of Romanian accession will have been achieved thanks to Ms Macovei," Mr Frattini indicated.

Bulgaria, however, was told by the commissioner that "more concrete results are needed."

"I would like to highlight the need for concrete results in terms of investigations brought before tribunals," he said referring to backlogs in prosecutions of criminal activities.

Mr Frattini's more critical stance towards Bulgaria echoes earlier comments by enlargement commissioner Olli Rehn, who also singled out Sofia as the most problematic of the two EU hopefuls. Many eyes will be on the European Parliament on Wednesday, when Mr Rehn will be quizzed by MEPs on Sofia's and Bucharest's entry preparations ahead of the May report.