

ENLARGEMENT IN FINNISH PRESIDENCY PLANS

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When the European Parliament debated the priorities of the Finnish Presidency on July 5, Finnish Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen made clear he would be giving full attention to enlargement during his country's just-commenced six months in office.

"Enlargement is a key issue for Finland's Presidency", he said. "The enlargement of the Union has been a success story. Not only is enlargement a key tool for strengthening stability and democracy but it is also one of the strategic responses to the challenges of globalisation. Recent analyses show that both new and old Member States have clearly benefited from the last enlargement."

He committed the Presidency to supporting the Western Balkans' European aspirations. "In many ways, this is a decisive year for the future of the Western Balkans", he said. "The process concerning the status of Kosovo will probably reach a conclusive phase in the autumn. The Presidency hopes that the difficult negotiations in which the parties are currently engaged under the leadership of Martti Ahtisaari will bear fruit by the end of the year."

Reflecting on the June European Council's discussion on EU absorption capacity, he said: "I am very pleased that this was not set as a new accession criterion. No new criteria should be set for applicant countries" – even if, he insisted, "it is imperative that the existing ones be adhered to". And looking further ahead, he observed: "The EU must continue to be an open union. European countries that fulfil the membership criteria must have the possibility to join".

"The purpose for which the Union was created – securing peace and stability in Europe – is still relevant", said Vanhanen, adding that he received a personal reminder of that on a recent trip to Croatia.

"Croats want to join the Union so that they and their children never have to witness war again", he said.

European Commission President José Manuel Barroso said in his address to the Parliament that he looked forward to working with the Finnish Presidency. "The next six months present an opportunity to demonstrate what we mean when we talk about a 'Europe of results'", he said - including managing "to steer the discussion on enlargement". The Commission President echoed Vanhanen's views:

"Enlargement is one of the most successful policies of the EU, an extraordinary achievement in exporting freedom and opportunity across our continent. Many of us here today have benefited from this policy. We should be proud of our enlargement policy", he said, adding that he too "was very pleased that the last European Council reaffirmed that we will honour existing commitments".

President Barroso added that "on enlargement, as on so much of European policy making, there is a popular debate with which we must engage". He insisted that he welcomed that debate: "It is important to show that Europe does not enlarge by default. That enlargement is a conscious choice. That it is of benefit to all. That far from being a negative factor, an enlarged Europe is a precondition for a powerful Europe. For a Europe that really counts in the world. That is why the Commission will, this autumn, report on the enlargement process as a whole, including the capacity of an enlarged Europe to function

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properly, to set up the debate at the December European Council. This will be a serious, rigorous exercise. Nothing else would satisfy the public demand for more certainty and confidence", he said. On Turkey, Barroso remarked: "We must take the same, serious and correct approach". He welcomed the fact that negotiations are underway. And although "it will be a long road; sometimes a very bumpy one", he underlined that "what matters is that we are open, honest and fair. Turkey must fulfil its commitments, just as the EU must fulfil its commitments". Turkey's commitments, he added, "include respect for the Ankara Protocol."

Enlargement and the Western Balkans were also high on the list when Erkki Tuomioja, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Finland, and President-in-Office of Council, presented the external relations priorities of the Finnish Presidency to the European Parliament on July 12.

"Enlargement will be one of the central issues during our Presidency", he said. "Finland is prepared to organize the Council's general debate on enlargement at the December European Council, on the basis of Commission documents. The general debate will include a discussion on the Union's absorption capacity, on which the Commission is to prepare a report, as well as further ways of improving the quality of the enlargement process. It is important that the discussion will not lead to new criteria for enlargement, nor to a withdrawal from the commitments previously given by the EU. Debate on the borders of Europe might send unhelpful messages to some of the neighbouring countries of the Union".

"As regards the Western Balkans", he went on, "it is important that the European perspective and conditionality of these countries remain credible. We will continue to support the movement of the Western Balkans countries towards the EU in the framework of the Stabilisation and Association Process, and in line with the Thessaloniki Agenda".

On Kosovo, he said: "It is important to ensure a unified and coherent EU stance regarding the status process. In addition, the EU's future role in Kosovo, including a possible ESDP operation, will figure prominently on the agenda.

Serbia remains key for stability in the region. As Presidency, we will intensify the engagement with Serbia in order to support that country's European course and to encourage full cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia".

In her contribution to the debate, MEP Sarah Ludford (ALDE, UK) described the Western Balkans as "a heavy responsibility for the EU", and insisted that encouragement (such as in easing the visa regime) should be coupled with pressure (to bring war crimes suspects to the Hague tribunal).