

BELGIUM BELIEVES THAT IT IS WISE TO FIRST DEEPEN AND THEN WIDEN, SAYS EMBASSADOR BEKE FOR PORTAL EUROPE

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Interview Ambassador Philippe Beke for Portal Europe.bg.

How would you assess the level of preparations of Bulgaria for an EU-membership?

Since Bulgaria started the negotiations in the year 2000, many changes have occurred in the society. Indeed, the *acquis communautaire*, which is the equivalent of the European legislation, has profoundly changed the Bulgarian legislation. The European Union member states signed the Accession Treaty with Bulgaria and Romania on the 25th of April 2005, taking some 40 transitional periods into consideration. After the signature, the EU-Commission made several monitoring exercises through peer-reviews, numerous visits of Commissioners and Commission experts and two monitoring reports so far. The monitoring report of 16th of May 2006 clearly identified the progress of Bulgaria in several areas lacking in October 2005 sufficient results. The last monitoring report of the Commission, which is planned for the 26th of September 2006, must take stock of the efforts made by Bulgaria on the basis of its Action Plan. Definitely, in the field of Agriculture and Justice and Home Affairs positive steps can be acknowledged. Nevertheless, the recent EU peer-reviews in the field of organised crime, corruption, fraud and functioning of the courts made clear that further serious efforts have to be developed. The seriousness of the Commission's analyses in these areas should encourage all positive minds in Bulgaria to move forward in these areas which are the pillars of the society sustaining. Indeed, the rule of law coordination is an essential part to meet success in these areas. I believe it is important to mention that the Government has very successfully presented a coordinated strategy on infrastructure for the period 2006-2015. Well developed infrastructure in Bulgaria should promote confidence for the European partners and in particular for the economic actors, as well Bulgarian as foreign.

What is the viewpoint of Belgium concerning the EU enlargement with Bulgaria and Romania; and the possible further enlargement waves?

The 5th enlargement of the European Union of which Bulgaria and Romania are part, is the most complex, the most ambitious and the most delicate enlargement of the European Union since its creation in 1957. When in the beginning of the nineties enlargement to Central Europe was put on the table, it concerned only the then three Visegrad-countries, namely Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia. It is not

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a coincidence that the famous financial programme Phare is the abbreviation of Poland, Hungary assistance for reconstruction of Europe. On the 1st of May 2004 not only the Visegrad-countries but also six other countries joined the European Union. The debate on further EU-enlargement up to 27 countries brings us back to the debate in the beginning of the nineties. Commission President Jacques Delors in these days proposed a single market for the newly independent countries willing to join the EU, which would give the opportunity for these countries to progress economically in a swift way, creating through that political stability and the best possible ways to join in some future time the EU-institutions; next to this approach Jacques Delors believed that it was essential to deepen the EU-construction so that a well prepared European House could accept after this transition period well prepared new member states. Today we hear the same debate on the EU-institutions versus the challenges of further enlargement. Belgium believes that it is wise to first deepen and then widen, in particular after the French and Dutch rejection of the Constitutional Treaty. Meanwhile however, negotiations have started with Croatia and Turkey while the Thessaloniki Summit of June 2003 indicated clearly the EU vocation of all Western-Balkan countries. Besides, a lot of progress has been made in the new neighbourhood policy, which should enable further facilitation for countries having borders with the EU. More than in the past we will have to consider in a duly reflected way the membership's approach next to the functioning of the Union with a larger number of member states.

What is the viewpoint of Belgium concerning the debate about the European Constitutional Treaty?

During its Presidency in the second half of 2001, Belgium worked hard to lay the basis of the work developed by the Convention. The representatives of the member states and candidate countries discussed for several months on a text, which laid the basis of the 2003 Constitutional Treaty. Belgium believes that this Constitutional Treaty, which is rather a coordinated text on all former amendments of the Treaty than it is a brand new so-called Constitution, is no more – no less the best possible consensus between the member states. Belgian prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt recently wrote a book, which is called "The United States of Europe", in which he brings the challenge forward on how further European integration should be managed. We need, as it was clearly indicated in the Lisbon-strategy, common efforts in research and developing. We need a further integrated social and fiscal policy in which member states could further develop their own policy but within the limits of some parameters. We need definitely a common EU foreign policy and a common EU defence policy, which will give all necessary strength to Europe as a world player, without overshadowing neither NATO nor bilateral foreign policy priorities. We need also clearly to further develop the European area of justice and security. For Belgium the further integration of the European Union should be an institutional state of the art bypassing a mere free-trade zone approach as a construction, which will in the end create weakness rather than strength.