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Germany is threatening to derail the planned entry of Bulgaria and Romania to the EU on January 1, forcing its postponement for a year as fears grow over Europe's capacity to absorb new members. Yesterday Horst Köhler, the German president, urged the two countries to overcome clear deficits in their judicial systems and in the fight against corruption ahead of a final "monitoring" report by the European commission next month on their progress towards meeting the political criteria for entry. Germany, along with Belgium, Denmark, France and Ireland, has so far failed to ratify the accession treaty for Bulgaria and Romania and Mr Köhler indicated it would wait until after the commission report on September 26 to start the parliamentary process. Ratification is due by December 31 at the latest. The commission is expected to express reservations about the two countries' progress but could give approval for entry to take place on January 1, swelling the EU's members to 27. But sources conceded that this could be overturned by the 25 governments - especially Germany.

Germany and its neighbour Austria are among the EU countries most afflicted by "enlargement fatigue", notably concerns that entry of new members from poor countries in the Balkans - and Turkey - would bring an unmanageable influx of migrant workers. The two are the only member states left applying the full seven-year transitional arrangements or restrictions on the free movement of labour from the 10 new members, mainly from eastern Europe, that joined in May 2004.

These concerns, highlighted by yesterday's Home Office figures showing 427,000 eastern Europeans working in Britain, have meant that only Finland has said it will fully open its labour market to Bulgarians and Romanians.

The commission plans to issue a strategy paper on enlargement or "absorption capacity" on October 24 - the same day it publishes progress reports on would-be members Croatia, Turkey, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro/Kosovo.

Olli Rehn, the enlargement commissioner, who has warned of a pending "train wreck" in accession talks with Turkey, has responded to calls from German and Austrian Christian Democrats for a definition of Europe's borders by insisting that any European country respecting democratic values and the rule of law may apply.

"This does not mean that all European countries must apply or that the EU must accept all applications,"

he said last month.

"But it means we should not draw in Indian ink some thick 'faultline'; according to some notional historical borders between civilisations and thus construct a kind of velvet curtain only a few years after we got rid of the iron curtain."

His report on Turkey is expected to underline a significant lack of progress since accession talks began in October 2005 - largely because of the unresolved issue of the Ankara government's refusal to implement a customs union protocol obliging Turkey to open its ports and airports to Cypriot ships and planes.