

VAN ORDEN - THERE MIGHT BE SOME CONDITIONALITY TO BULGARIA'S EU MEMBERSHIP

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Geoffrey Van Orden: The signs are positive for 1st January 2007, but there might be some conditionality - September 7, 2006 - Government's press-center for EU news.

Geoffrey Van Orden is the rapporteur for Bulgaria in the European Parliament. He was born in 1945. Van Orden is member of the British Conservative Party. He has a degree in political science and has worked in the British Army and in the European Commission. He is a member of the European Parliament since 1999.

- What is new today regarding Bulgaria's forthcoming accession? Is the EU Parliament aware of the efforts of our country from the last months to answer the requirement from Brussels?

- The answer is yes. First of all, it was a great pleasure to see Prime Minister Stanishev here in Strasbourg on Tuesday. I was with him when he went at the Conference of Presidents of the European Parliament, which is the conference of the leaders of the political groups. And I have to say that from the seven groups five of them gave a very positive encouragement. There were two of the smaller groups that were less positive. But that is hardly a surprise. The major groups are taking a rather positive view. Of course all of them feel that there is still work to be done. The Prime Minister himself recognized that the reform process doesn't stop on the moment of accession; it is an ongoing process that will go along for a long time to come. I think that was a realistic view.

- Can you say there is no doubt as far as the accession date is concerned?

- I cannot say that, it would be premature to say there is no doubt. The Commission has to deliver its report on the 26th of September. And they understand there will be no conclusion by the Council until its December meeting. I don't think they are necessarily going to take a decision at the informal Council meeting in Lahti (October 20). We will not know the final outcome until the final moment. So it will be premature to say that it's cut and drive. I would say that the signs are positive for the 1st January 2007 but there might well be some conditionality. On one hand there might be some safeguard clauses and on the other hand it may be that some member states would seek to impose restrictions on the free movement of labour.

- Like you own country.

- That is quite possible.

- Isn't this some kind of discrimination since the eight East European countries who became EU members in 2004 got direct access to the UK labour market?

- Hey, I don't think that should be seen in that way at all! I think it should be seen as a decision each country can make in the context of the time and their own political judgment concerning their own

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domestic political circumstances. Many people were very critical of the British Government for not imposing restrictions on the "Accession 8" in 2004. The situation now can be seen two years on and what are the consequences of that. I think it is to the British government to draw its own conclusions. I think in no way it should be seen as discriminatory. The British government has been very supportive of Bulgaria's accession, as all the major political parties in the United Kingdom.

- The Bulgarian Prime Minister said yesterday that it is more difficult for Bulgaria to sell its accession due to enlargement fatigue. Do you agree?

- I don't think it's just enlargement fatigue. I have said for a long time that there are undoubtedly certain elements in some countries that want to slow down the whole pace of enlargement. So I don't think this is only a question of fatigue, I think there are some political voices that are speaking out against further enlargement. And I am afraid Bulgaria and Romania come to the frame as far as those people are concerned. They are a minority, I would say. All governments are positive about enlargement and we should capitalize on that. Enlargement is a process totally in the benefit of the European Union and indeed to the countries concerned.