

On December 15 EU leaders opted for a stricter application of membership criteria as Turkey talks are partially suspended.

The Council conclusions are largely in line with the Commission's enlargement strategy, published on 8 November 2006 and its recommendations of 29 November 2006 to suspend talks with Turkey in eight of 35 areas. The agreement on Turkey had already been reached at a meeting with EU foreign ministers on 11 December 2006.

Issues:

The Union's capacity to integrate new members will set the pace for future enlargements. The Finnish Presidency underlined that enlargement depended on whether candidate countries "stick to the rules". Member states also agreed to go ahead with institutional reform before engaging in new commitments for target accession dates.

The EU also confirmed a slowing down in Turkish membership talks, but gave a clear 'European perspective' to the Western Balkans. The Union has also decided to develop a common migration policy, tackling the issues of fighting terrorism, organised crime and illegal migration. Commission President José Manuel Barroso said that this programme "will save lives".

On the issue of the Constitution, the Finnish Presidency gave an assessment of its consultation with member states, but left it for the German Presidency, which takes over on 1 January 2007, to include the results in a report that it will publish in the first half of 2007.

Spain and Luxembourg presented their contribution to relaunch the institutional debate, announcing an informal meeting entitled 'Friends of the Constitution' to be held in Madrid on 26 January 2007.

Positions:

Finnish Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen declared: "Past enlargements have been successful. Today we mapped out the best ways to ensure that future enlargements will also be successful."

German Chancellor Angela Merkel emphasised that the new enlargement strategy was not about stricter procedures, but that candidate countries had to fulfil the required criteria.

UK Prime Minister Tony Blair said: "For our broader global interest, the EU and Britain, it is important that we continue the process of accession with Turkey, that we do not shut the door to membership. The criteria for EU membership must apply to Turkey as to anyone else, but we should recognise that this has got an importance for wider relationships between the West and the Middle East."

French President Jacques Chirac said: "I always said and I always knew that Turkey's entry into the EU would be difficult, and that it was necessary for the stability for the entire region. That is why I have always been in favour of negotiations with Turkey, well aware that they would be long and difficult." He added: "We hope that the negotiations will bring a positive result."

Commission President José Manuel Barroso reiterated his definition of integration capacity: "By capacity of integration I mean the capability of the candidate countries to fulfil all the requirements of membership, but also the EU's capacity to act so that the EU is not weakened by further enlargement, but on the contrary, that the EU is reinforced." He said that there was a consensus emerging on the future enlargement strategy, focused on three points: the consolidation of institutions, strict conditionality and communication of enlargement supported by the public, which requires national leaders to explain its benefits.

Liberal MEP Graham Watson said: "I think the EU was absolutely right to send a clear message to Turkey that if they don't sign the Ankara Protocol they cannot continue in negotiations with us. At the same time, we must recognise that there are divisions inside Turkey."

Green MEP Jost Lagendijk said: "We game, the present treaties, are not enough. I think before we enlarge with new countries we should be able to adopt new rules. We need something better to have the EU function."

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