

**PRESS RELEASE**

**Bulgaria and Romania: the final countdown before EU membership**

The ministers of European affairs for Romania and Bulgaria both believe that their respective countries will be ready to become members of the European Union on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2007. This is the core conclusion of the conference ‘Bulgaria and Romania: the final countdown before EU membership’, held at the College of Europe, Natolin, on 14<sup>th</sup> January 2006. Mrs. Anca Boagiu, the Romanian Minister of European Integration and Mrs. Meglena Kuneva, the Bulgarian Minister of European Affairs, were the main speakers at the conference. Other speakers included Mr. Klaus Grewlich, adviser to the Romanian President, Mrs. Sabire Sapundjieva, Bulgarian Vice Minister of Justice, Mr. Ion Codescu, Romanian Secretary of State for the Ministry of Justice and Mr. Andrea Biondi, professor of law at Kings College and the College of Europe. The conference was chaired by Prof. Robert Picht, the Vice-Rector of the College of Europe. The conference on Romania and Bulgaria continues the series of discussions related to enlargement, organised by the College of Europe.

*“Romania has no plan B for EU accession. We want and we have to be ready to become EU members on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2007. We are working now to settle the issues signaled by the European Commission in the comprehensive monitoring report and to transform the so called ‘red flags’ into ‘yellow and green flags’. Another top priority at the moment for Romania is to encourage the ratification process of the Accession Treaty in all the remaining Member States and to improve the communication on the two countries’ accession to the European Union, both internally and within the EU. Romania and Bulgaria will bring considerable added value to the European Union. For instance, the increasing importance of the strategic position of the Black Sea is being considered of greater importance by European officials within the framework of CFSP and the neighborhood policy, especially when considering that Romania will be the second external border of the EU. Romania aims at being not only the seventh biggest country in the EU, but also the seventh power of the European Union. Therefore, it is in our interest to be very well prepared as EU members”*, stated Ms. Anca Boagiu, the Romanian Minister for European Integration.

*“Bulgaria and Romania’s accession to the European Union will take place in a rather difficult period: in the aftermath of the failure to ratify the Constitution in France and the Netherlands and the difficult general economic context reflected in the discussions on the EU budget. Another relevant issue is that we are not geographically in Central Europe. At the same time, the general perception on the endemic corruption and organized crime in the Balkans should be changed, especially when considering the spillover effect, which affects also negatively the image of our two countries. Therefore, there is an immediate need for a coherent, correct and improved quality of information in all the Member States. Also, an improved communication with the public on the costs and benefits of the EU accession is necessary”*, underlined Ms. Meglena Kuneva, the Bulgarian Minister of European Affairs.

Other issues discussed in the conference concerned the state aids, reform of judiciary and fight against corruption. As with regard to the state aids, Ms. Kuneva and Ms. Boagiu stated that both countries are applying the same rules as the European Commission concerning the admissibility of the state aids. The ministers consider that state aids should be tools directed towards the society, not to the benefit of one company or another. This is also a way to fight corruption. The process will be further developed following the changes to be made during the Austrian and Finish presidencies of the EU. Therefore, not only Romania and Bulgaria, but also the European Union has to adapt to new economic and social challenges, aiming strongly at implementing the Lisbon strategy to improve the global competitiveness of the EU market.

As far as the reform of the judiciary is concerned, the officials of both countries underlined the fact that Bulgaria and Romania went through important changes, whose effects are yet to be seen. Both countries have problems with the image of the judicial system and have to enhance the training and independence of the judges and prosecutors, increase their number and endow the courts with IT equipment..

In the field of corruption, the officials of both countries admitted that this is still a hot issue, however, it is believed that even this ‘red flag’ can be solved by the date of accession. Measures to fight corruption have been taken, from public declarations of wealth and interests of politicians and public servants to strengthening the institutions dealing with high level and petty corruption. A track record of high level corruption cases is monitored by the Commission. The Romanian and Bulgarian officials consider that solving the high level corruption problem takes time, but important steps have been taken in the right direction.

The European Commission will issue on 16<sup>th</sup> May a report concerning the progress of Romania and Bulgaria for EU membership. The Commission can propose the application of safeguard clauses for Bulgaria and Romania that can lead to the postponement of the accession date by one year, i.e. until 1<sup>st</sup> January 2008. The Council will decide on the safeguard clauses in June. Postponing accession can be done by unanimity (for Bulgaria) and, for Romania, by unanimity or qualified majority voting (if important problems in the fields of competition, state aids and justice and home affairs have not been solved).