

Seminar: WILL ROMANIA CLOSE ALL ITS CHAPTERS IN 2004?

26th February 2004

Executive Summary

Organised by the "Clubul Romania - UE" Brussels, the event took place on the premises offered by the Mission of Romania to the EU. Around 90 people attended the event, both of Romanian and foreign nationality.

An selection from the discussions follows. The material distributed at the seminar as well as the presentation slides are annexed.

Opening by Dan Luca, President of the Club Romania UE:

Welcomes everyone and in a few words presents the Club, its present situation and aspirations, as well as a mentioning of past activities. Then he introduces the next speaker.

His Excellency, Mr. Lazar Comanescu, Ambassador of Romania to the EU:

I'm here to welcome you and to welcome also the initiative which was taken by the Club. I noticed that the topic of the meeting of today has been conceived as a question mark but I'm encouraged to say that in spite of what has been said in the recent past or weeks or days I think that the answer to such a question can only be a positive one.

We do not take the accession for granted we are very much aware that we have to work very hard. We are aware that are many things still to be done, but we are determined to do that not to lose such an opportunity for accession in 2007 and close hereby the negotiations at the end of this year.

This is the main message which I wanted to express together with the fact that your meeting here would be helpful to identify a possible debate on this topic and providing us with additional input on what we should do, continue to do. With your contribution, which is a very important one, our mission which I have been mentioned can be accomplished.

We are aware that there are a lot of things to be done and not very simple ones but what was submitted yesterday to the high officials which I mentioned is what we call now the "To do list" which says that the ministers will take radical measures by the end of June and if we stick to this list, I believe that we can make it.

Presentation by Radu Cioponea, Vice-president of the Club Romania-EU:

The issue is where we are now in 2004 in the negotiations. We will try to focus on very few of the chapters. The first chapter we looked at is agriculture.

Interview with Wolfgang Munch from the European Commission, DG Agriculture:

- Positive aspects
 - Romanian agriculture has potential.
 - The markets of EU 15 and EU 25 will need Romania as a provider of fruits, vegetables and wines.
 - Romania is interesting for the low labour cost.
- Weaknesses
 - Hidden unemployment
 - Low labour productivity
 - In the rural areas the agriculture is the only source of income.
- As the time to accession is too short, no dramatic changes can occur, therefore "my assessment is that the accession is easier than what comes afterwards".

Radu Cioponea:

Environment. The good news is that recently the Law for the National Environmental Agency has been passed and we hope to see more improvements in the future.

Justice and home affairs. This has been and still is one of the most painful chapters: the very high level of corruption, the treatment in the police stations, independence of the judiciary etc.

Financial provisions. Issues related to limited administrative capacity, tax fraud etc.

Reform of Administration. It is not a chapter, but is extremely important. In Romania important is to decouple the public servants from politics, the way these people are trained etc.

Amendments to the Draft Report on Romania's progress towards accession. It stands for anti corruption measures, properly corruption legislation, the independence and functioning of the judiciary, the freedom of media, treatment in police stations etc.

Prof. Jean-Michel de Waele, Head of the Political Sciences Department, ULB:

I have a special statute: I don't negotiate, I'm not a diplomat either in my career or my speech.

I lead a research group at ULB focused on Eastern and Central Europe States and I have a number of academic exchanges with the University of Bucharest.

First element: we'll have an enlargement on 1st May, there will no doubt be problems for the difficulties are always bigger than announced; there's a depression part that will unfold.

Second element: the EU is going through a phase of existential doubts: institutional reforms, constitution, change of the EC, European elections, electoral games.

Third element: some States already got cold feet about immigration, even before 1st May.

All these don't create a favourable climate to finalise negotiations with Romania and Bulgaria.

To this adds the fact that the dialogue is difficult and there's a lack of explanations from the Romanian political elite. All is not yet lost, but it's high time to stop the public claims according to which all efforts are made and there's no doubt all will end well. Personally, I'm not so sure.

There's clearly a problem with the public image of Romania.

The way in which the vote of the Constitution was reflected by Western media did not give an image of a clean country regarding the democratic process.

To conclude: ALL IS NOT YET LOST.

I'm struck by the difficulty of the political class of Romania, regardless of orientation, to hold a credible position with the EU; I'm also struck by the difficulty of the young generation to emerge as a new class bearing the responsibilities in Romania.

I also think that in Romania there's a lack of a real consensus about the European questions. There's no real European debate.

Viorel Ardeleanu, Deputy Head of the Mission of Romania to the EU:

Romania can close the negotiations in 2004.

We are aware of a lot of things that we have to do in short period of time.

We are committed and believe we're ready to finalise the negotiations this year and meet the objectives to enter EU in 2007; there is political consensus in Romania on these objectives.

We have a council on transparency and a committee in the Ministry of European Integration (MIE). These two bodies are part of a process, a strategy of improving the transparency in decisions.

We want to introduce a new culture in the administration and now there is a debate and there will be decisions starting with the Government and next months there will be a reshuffling in the reorganisation of the Government with a new chancellery.

Not the last thing is the fight against corruption. The prosecution office, a new body after the Spanish and Italian model started to give results.

What we understand of the "reorientation" of the strategy is that we focus more on implementation. That's what the Government understood and what will happen in the next period.

Viorel Serbanescu, Head of the Negotiation section (Mission of Romania to the EU):

I will be very factual, very technical.

From a political point of view it is perfectly possible to close the chapters in 2004. Arguments: the political framework for accession, 2007 is a timetable that is presumed that is supported by the members of the Commission and the Council, the Commission supports and facilitates this time frame, the European Parliament Report which is a worry for us and we take it as it is and we understood it as a signal to speed up preparations and to solve the outstanding issues, the political determination of the Government to do the homework to close the negotiations in 2004.

Technical point of view: where were the new ten member countries one year before closing negotiations? Conclusion: Mathematically it is perfectly possible to close the chapters in 2004.

The conditions in which we negotiate: We negotiate under few principles – level playing field, equal treatment, regatta principle.

What are the actions? Firstly we are on track, again, technically. The European Commission presented the financial package. Technically speaking we have the ‘to do list’, a list of priorities.

We can go to the conclusions: politically and technically is perfectly possible to close the chapters in 2004. We are confident that Romania will keep the right tracks as we did up to now and we think that the objective is realistic.

Question: I don't believe in this conspiracy theory that the environment is difficult for Romania's accession because of Turkey. If it were a connection then Bulgaria would be in difficulty too.

Ardeleanu: What we say that the environment is more difficult compared with 3 years ago. In comparison to the other ten countries, Romania is not lagging in certain chapters behind the other ten. We know that we have internal problems and we have the tasks for the new phase, but the 2 things are linked and we cannot separate them.

Martijn Quinn, Country Desk Officer, Romania Team, DG Enlargement, EC:

I will focus on my special subject, which is administration.

I will make 3 general points: closing chapters in 2004 is not a real deadline to enter in 2007 but a self-imposed deadline. We can close the chapters in 2005 and still enter in 2007. Romania is focusing too much on closing chapters, but this is part of the political poker which is being played.

2007 is the beginning of the game and not the end of it. The focus on negotiations is misleading, the fundamental changes in society, economy are important. To be an effective member should be the objective.

Romania has been the last from the beginning (21 April 2002) because it is a very poor country. It is difficult to implement the acquis when there is a very low GDP per capita, but administrative capacity is the second reason, and the quality of governance, and the slow improvement of the quality of governance. Laws are being passed but not implemented.

There is a problem with the administrative capacity in Romania and there is an objective consensus here: EC, EP, IMF all say the same.

We have been waiting for this message for a long time and the “To do” list is coming late, and it looks like quick political response to the EP crisis.

Unless Romania will do something about its administrative capacity I don't think that it will be able to be an effective Member State; the EC will give all the political and technical support needed.

Questions:

Is the “To do” list a self-imposed list or is it an agreed list between the EC and the government?

About DG Enlargement what is the kind of assistance that EC provides for countries which are behind the schedule except the financial aid which is not working.

Can you give some comments about the reorientation term? What is behind this word?

Answers:

“To do” list: is a response of the criticism of the EP and it is intended that the EC report in 2004 will have the chance to see the positive things.

The criticism of the EP is not new, the key difference is the conclusion, but it shouldn't come as a surprise given the evolution of Romania.

Assistance we give to countries is technical and policy advice but it is the responsibility of the country itself. We cannot write the documents instead of them and it links to administration.

Reorientation is a nice political word for suspension, it is a warning shot; on the whole the EP supports the accession of Romania in 2007. The EC understands that the reorientation has to be done by Romania especially in restructuring of public administration, the whole responsibility remains with the Romanian authorities.

Tim Bremmers, Managing Director, EULEC:

In Romania there is a strict split between justice and home affairs, the way in which Romania is managing these two institutions is a strict split.

There is no real objective management tool to measure if Romania will be in the EU.

Will Romania close all its chapters in 2004? Certainly not! We all have to close Romania's chapters.

Question: I haven't heard any convincing arguments from you that we will not be in EU by 2007 if the two ministers (JHA) sign common documents; do you have any technical details?

Bremmers: A new culture in administration was mentioned here. The real change has to come from the inside; people in current positions after the elections have to move out otherwise there will be no change. We should not negotiate further this chapter, just close it.

Ardeleanu: There are 5 top growth markets and Romania is one of them (the Economist). There are only few commitments that we have taken and we passed the deadline.

Question: What do you think will be the most difficult tasks and why are they so?

Ardeleanu: Anticorruption, reform of public administration and restructuring of public economy. We consider that we will implement all these measures and there will not be any special field.

Question: What is the Mission doing in order to improve the image of Romania?

Answer: We are organising events in order to prove that Romania has competent people and extraordinary values and culture and that in IT and software we have the 5th country in engineers. Of course we do not do well in all areas but we will have to improve.

Question: What is the contribution that simple citizens can do for Romania to achieve its goals for 2007? What can we do as an NGO to help?

Bremmers: All will have a link to Romania entering in the EU and just by spreading the good news, chapter 24 has to be closed which does not imply that all the driving forces should be thrown away. We should all work on materialising the improvements Romania has made.

Ardeleanu: Just be yourselves! If you will be a successful economist or engineer this will be as a Romanian the best thing to prove that we share the same values as the EU member countries and we are capable to manage ourselves.

Roundup by the Club: Romania's self-imposed target to close the negotiations in 2004 is clearly not the prime objective; instead, accession in 2007 and integration afterwards should be. Romania has placed itself in a very difficult position. There are shortcomings found by the EC and reiterated now by the EP, but answers are coming too often too late. The EU is still willing to support Romania's accession and integration.

All is not yet lost: we can take home the cautiously optimistic message that there is still a chance to join the EU in 2007.

Expressing his gratitude on behalf of the Club, R. Cioponea closes the meeting and invites all participants to work with the Club for future actions in support of Romania's accession. Also, a new seminar is foreseen soon after the 2004 Regular Report to be issued by the EC this autumn. More details will follow in due time.