

The future of the Union ■ By Olli Rehn

Enlargement is a success story

BRUSSELS
Europe's mood is gloomy, if not grim, after French and Dutch voters rejected the European Union's constitutional treaty. Now the EU and its member states must reflect on how to address the concerns of their citizens.

But a pause for reflection does not mean that the EU suddenly stops working. The EU has major responsibilities in ensuring security and stability, on its own continent and further afield. We cannot take a sabbatical from these without causing serious damage.

Some politicians have been quick to call for a slowdown or even a halt to the EU enlargement process. Certainly we need to pace ourselves after last year, when 10 new members joined the Union. But it would be irresponsible to disrupt a valuable process that is helping to build stable and effective partners in the most unstable parts of Europe.

If the EU goes wobbly about the long-term prospect of membership for Western Balkan countries, its beneficial influence will be seriously eroded just when the region is entering a very difficult period of talks on Kosovo's future status. The European perspective for the whole region is the key to finding a sustainable solution for Kosovo.

It is now up to every responsible politician to calm the overheated debate. The perception of enlargement and its consequences was there in the French debate, but it would be a misinterpretation to depict this issue as the decisive cause of the "no" vote. The sense of insecurity and social discontent stemming from high unemployment played a much bigger role. These problems long predated the arrival of a small number of Polish plumbers in the French labor market.

In the Dutch debate, there were likewise a number of socioeconomic factors at play. We must focus on

growth and jobs, most notably through investment in innovation and economic reform, and not draw false conclusions, making EU enlargement the scapegoat for the "no" votes.

Myths and perceptions aside, enlargement is a great success story. It has proved to be one of the most important instruments for European security. It reflects the essence of the EU as a civilian power; by extending the area of peace, stability, democracy and the rule of law, the EU has achieved far more through its gravitational pull than it could ever have done with a stick or a sword.

The membership perspective works as an extremely powerful incentive for reform. Look at Spain and Portugal in the last 20 years. Look at Poland and Estonia in the last 10 years. Look at Croatia and Turkey in the last couple of years — and follow them in the coming years to see what the prospect of accession can do to enhance human rights and push economic reforms.

Ali Babacan, Turkey's chief EU negotiator, said recently, "We shall review all our systems from A to Z to embed the rule of law in our country." The stability of Europe and the security of its citizens will be best ensured if countries strive to improve their governance and transform their economies because they want to enter the Union.

We have to take into account the concerns of those who consider that enlargement is moving too fast. Since the enlargement agenda is already stretched to its limits, we must be very cautious about taking on new commitments. But the EU was founded on the principle of sticking to one's word.

This means that Bulgaria and Romania will join the Union in 2007, if they fulfil the conditions. It also means that accession negotiations will start with Croatia and Turkey once the two countries meet the strict criteria.

We can best reassure the public by sticking to the membership conditions, and showing that future members will not disrupt the Union but reinforce it.

This has been my line as the EU commissioner for enlargement. While I hope Bulgaria and Romania will make it in time, I am prepared to postpone their membership if they do not implement essential reforms.

I would like to start negotiations with Croatia, but that will only be possible once the country is co-operating fully with the United Na-

tions' War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague. Turkey is required to bring into force six pieces of legislation that greatly enhance human rights, and to sign a protocol extending its existing association agreement with the EU to Cyprus, before starting accession negotiations.

The European Commission has been criticized by some for being too committed to enlargement, and by others for being too strict in the conditions it imposes. But in this job, one has to balance the legitimate concerns of our own citizens with the historical mission of European integration. Clear conditionality is the best way to ensure that enlargement is not made a scapegoat but remains a success story.

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