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European business welcomes Irish Yes to Nice and calls on EU and candidate countries to speed up preparations

European business welcomes the decision of the Irish people to vote in favour of ratification of the Nice Treaty, which paves the way for EU enlargement. "This is an historic decision, which will allow Europe to unite at last and which will spread stability, growth and welfare across our continent", said UNICE's Secretary General Philippe de Buck.

Also in this connection, European business welcomes the conclusions of the European Commission regular reports, which are in line with its own assessment of progress made in the candidate countries.

With regard to the ten most advanced candidate countries, UNICE welcomes the Commission's recommendations and agrees to the process of working towards concluding accession negotiations with each of these countries, based on own merits, by the end of the year. Much progress has indeed been made by these countries but UNICE underlines that in some areas further efforts and preparations are needed before accession. "Developments are impressive but many countries still have shortcomings with regard to implementation of the Acquis due to persistent lack of adequate administrative and judicial capacity", remarked Philippe de Buck.

UNICE has warned in the past that enlargement should not lead to distortions of competition and disruptions in the functioning of the Internal Market. "The acceding countries must fully comply with the Acquis and with their commitments made in accession negotiations if the Internal Market is to be the motor of sustained economic growth in Europe", added Philippe de Buck. "We therefore fully support the safeguard mechanism for the Internal Market the Commission has proposed", he underlined.

With regard to Bulgaria and Romania, he pointed to the substantial progress made by the two countries and underlined the importance of continuing strict application of the merit-based approach. Each of these countries should be able to join the EU as soon as it is ready.

UNICE welcomes Turkey's promising reform process, which it should sustain, and urges Member States to open up negotiations with this country as soon as it has completed the remaining tasks with regard to the Copenhagen political criteria stated in the Commission's report. This would offer EU and Turkish companies a more coherent and sustainable framework in which to conduct their economic activities.

Member States should not lose momentum in monitoring the acceding countries' commitments, which must be an inclusive and transparent process. Member States must reach a breakthrough in their discussions on the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy and Structural Funds before accession. Finally, the Intergovernmental Conference on institutional reform should begin as early as the second half of 2003.

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