

Introductory remarks by the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Iceland

Mr Chairman, Commissioner Füle, Member States Representatives,

Thank you for your remarks [acknowledge previous speakers; Hungarian Foreign Minister Martonyi and Commissioner Füle].

Today marks another milestone on Iceland's journey to become a member of the European Union. Almost to the day, two years ago, I handed over Iceland's application to my Swedish colleague, Carl Bildt, and a year later, based on the Commission's positive opinion, the EU Council granted us candidate country status at the first IGC here in Brussels.

Today, after seven months of rigorous screening of the acquis, we open the first four chapters, of which we are already able to provisionally close two.

I would like use this opportunity to thank the Commission and all EU Member States, in particular the Hungarian and Belgian Presidencies as well as previous presidencies, for their excellent cooperation in preparing these accession talks.

I would also like to thank the Icelandic team, both those from the administration and in particular the numerous experts from different stakeholders that are closely involved in the accession process, for their dedication and invaluable efforts.

Today's achievement is indeed the result of the hard work, professionalism and resourcefulness of all sides.

At this juncture, allow me briefly to reflect on where we are and how we got there.

First, during these two years, Iceland has been held to the same rigorous standards as all other candidate countries, and we expect nothing else. No stone has been left unturned and Iceland's solid progress has been made on own merit. In addition, all issues have been scrutinized by the Parliament of Iceland and different domestic stakeholders have participated actively in the process.

Second, the screening process that ended last Monday, has clearly demonstrated Iceland's advanced level of preparation. Through membership of the EEA and Schengen agreements, Iceland already fulfils the majority of requirements in the majority of chapters. The EU's scrutiny of legislation and administrative capacity in my country testifies to this.

Third, the Commission, I believe, has come away from the screening process with a deeper understanding of Iceland, our legislative and administrative systems and the circumstances that shape us as a country and as a people. This includes our deep-rooted democratic values, respect for human rights and the environment, but also the challenges and opportunities inherent in being a small nation and a sparsely populated island in the remote Arctic region.

By the same token, Iceland has also deepened her understanding of the Union, your traditions and working culture. Europe is truly a fabric of nations that share interests and ideals. The EU's strength lies in the fact that it has been able to accommodate different circumstances in different Member states while respecting common principles and guarding the Treaties.

Mr Chairman, dear colleagues,

Although a large majority of chapters are expected to be straight-forward, we have challenging negotiations awaiting us in others. Chapters such as fisheries and

agriculture will need our special attention - circumstances in Iceland are different from those of other European countries. These two chapters can therefore not simply be a “plug and play” for Iceland as I outlined in my general statement a year ago. Negotiations on other chapters such as on regional policy, the environment and on economic and monetary policy will also play a significant role in the overall outcome.

Therefore, we would like to see these chapters opened early in the process in order to have the time needed to work out mutually agreeable solutions.

Mr Chairman,

Iceland is aware of the fact, that candidate countries must be ready to fulfil the obligations of membership from day one. And make no mistake - we will certainly be ready. We have made measurable progress in numerous chapters, as evidenced by the Commission’s progress report.

In other areas, legislative and structural changes will take place according to mutually accepted plans following the successful outcome of a national referendum on the accession treaty. This will ensure that Iceland will be fully ready for membership by the date of accession, is in line with our democratic principles, and fully respects the EU’s methodology.

If particular changes will be defined as necessary or desirable at an earlier stage, we will seek the proper parliamentary approval in order to implement them.

Finally, two points on public opinion. It is no secret that opinion has been mixed in my country on EU accession. But here, a certain sense of proportion is needed. Let’s keep in mind that opinion on the EU in general fluctuates in all our countries, and in the last 2 years polls in both candidate and member countries have shown

lower support than in Iceland at its nadir. Second, recent polling by you, and the opponents of EU in Iceland, indicates in fact a growing level of support for membership which is much more in line with historical trends – before the Icesave episode. And let us also not forget that according to recent polls a thumping majority, or more than 2/3 of Icelanders, supports the accession process and do want to exercise their democratic right to vote on the final outcome.

My government remains firmly committed to concluding the accession talks and in that context I sincerely welcome the opening of the first four chapters.

Thank you, Mr Chairman.

Agenda Item 5: Negotiations on the following chapters

Mr Chairman,

As we open the first four chapters of the negotiations, we are also in the position to provisionally close two of them. You have received our negotiating position for all four chapters. We are closely integrated in all of these chapters and have implemented the relevant acquis for more than 17 years. Iceland accepts the acquis in these chapters and will continue to implement it.

A few words on each chapter:

We welcome the opening of Chapter 5 on public procurement and Chapter 10 on Information Society and Media. Both chapters are fully covered by the EEA and as a result Icelandic legislation in these fields has been strengthened. During that time we have built up the necessary infrastructure to implement the acquis.

The few outstanding issues that you have identified, such as to transpose the EU remedies and defence procurement directives into Icelandic law, are already being dealt with within our administration and the plan is to implement them in the coming months. As regards the implementation of provisions on the independence of the National Regulatory Authority, and the transposition of the AVMS directive under chapter 10, we are presently looking into it, preparations are ongoing and we expect this to be concluded in good time for accession. On all three issues we seek close cooperation and dialogue in order to provisionally close these chapters in due course.

As no further negotiations are needed for Chapter 25 on Science and Research and Chapter 26 on Education and Culture I am happy to agree to them being

provisionally closed. Iceland has both contributed and benefited from its participation with the EU in these crucial areas.

The EU programmes and activities in these fields have paved the way for our scientists, researchers, educators and young people to collaborate hand-in-hand with peers from all over Europe, thereby strengthening education, innovation and job creation in our country. This cooperation has been enriching and invaluable. Evidently, Iceland will continue to take an active part in Union programmes and activities and look to strengthen bonds with Europe even further for our mutual benefit.

Thank you.

Final remarks by the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Iceland

Mr Chairman,

Today is a good day for Iceland and the EU, but still, these are uncertain times for all of us. The storm that individual member states and the EU as a body have had to weather in the last days, months and years has presented a daunting challenge.

My government has certainly had its fair share of difficulties but we gradually managed to gain and maintain control of our economy. I believe that so far Iceland has been remarkably successful, as the IMF, the EU and now most recently the OECD have testified. It is in such circumstances that the ability to keep a firm course is most important. This is what political leadership is about and I am confident that we will continue to demonstrate this leadership and commitment during Iceland's accession process.

Finally, allow me to reiterate our thanks to the Hungarian Presidency for its efforts. I look forward to working closely with the incoming Polish Presidency, and allow me to congratulate them in advance on the assumption of these important duties of chairing the Council.

I also look forward to continued close consultations with the Commission and individual member states on the issues that will need our attention and agility. This and next year will be crucial and we hope to make strong headway towards a final agreement that will serve the common interests of the Union and Iceland.

Thank you, Mr Chairman.