



THE NATO CANDIDATE COUNTRIES ON THE WAY TO PRAGUE.

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Between 25-26 March 2002, Romania has been the guest of an important meeting of NATO candidate countries who, under the logo "Spring of New Allies", gathered the ten Eastern European countries seeking accession to the Alliance. Together with the representatives of NATO members, the ten candidate countries - Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Slovenia, Slovakia, and Romania - made their offer of fostering stability, security and freedom from the Baltic to the Black Sea. Europe's new democracies presented themselves as reliable allies in countering the new threats to the Trans-Atlantic and worldwide security: terrorism, trans-border crime and ethnic or religious intolerance. All those offers will be counted and analysed at the NATO Prague summit, to be held in

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November 2002. A summit that, beside the enlargement, will also discuss, and in the first time, as NATO representatives constantly stated, the new structure of the Alliance after September 11 terrorist attacks.

The ten NATO candidate countries - Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Slovenia, Slovakia, Macedonia - generically called as "Vilnius 10" group gathered at the end of March in Bucharest (Romania) to streamline their priorities, more than half a year before the Alliance summit in Prague. The keywords of all the speeches of the candidate representatives have been: stability and cooperation. "(...) The Spring in Bucharest coincides with a time of renewed hope for Europe's new democracies as we work towards the common goal of joining a great Alliance of freedom and peace", said, in his opening speech, Romanian prime minister, Adrian Nastase. "NATO is the organization built on the principle of solidarity and shared values. So it is natural for the NATO candidates to use the same approach in their preparations for membership", stated Ion Iliescu, the Romanian President. And he added later: "The Southern dimension of NATO enlargement will increase the stability in the region of Western Balkans and will strengthen the democratisation process in this area". Iliescu gave the example of the cooperation established between Romania and Bulgaria, in the one side, as candidate countries and, on the other side, two of the already NATO members: Greece and Turkey. The prime ministers of Greece and Turkey expressed publicly in many occasions their support for a Southern dimension of NATO enlargement, including Romania and Bulgaria. The "second wave of NATO enlargement towards post-communist Europe should be conceived primarily in the context of new realities", appreciated in his speech Simeon de Saxe-Coburg Gotha, Bulgaria's prime minister. "In the face of a global threat such as terrorism, should be a global counterforce capable of operating beyond national borders", he explained. "Our NATO membership will complete a real democratic shield against terrorism, consolidating the Southern flank of the Alliance and linking the territories of Greece and Turkey with the Central European zone", pledged his cause Bulgaria's representative. This exercise of cooperation already has a long history in the three Baltic States - Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The three countries are part of lot of cooperative initiatives from Northern Europe, enabling them to acquire the culture of cooperation, a necessary basis for being and acting as a full members of the Alliance.

At the same time, the Romanian prime minister, Adrian Nastase, outlined at the finally press conference that it's no "competition" between the ten candidate countries, but cooperation. The members of the "Vilnius 10" Group - named after the capital city of Lithuania, when the cooperation group has been created, in May 19, 2000 - signed a joint Declaration in which it is stated the "unique historical understanding of instability, extremism and criminal incursion" and the "believe" in their "experience" of making "valuable contribution to the future security of Europe". Less enthusiasm, more work

From the NATO members side, the message it's very clear: for being a member of the Alliance, it must be undertaken reforms in all fields. Richard Armitage, US

Deputy Secretary showed that, over the eight month remaining before Prague, NATO will be "looking closely" to the answers of two questions posed to all the ten candidates: "Will your nation's admission strengthen NATO?" and "Is your nation's commitment to democracy irreversible?". The Washington's representative said that US - as president Bush stated in Warsaw, in June 2001, want "the most robust round of enlargement possible; we want to bring in as many countries as are qualified from the Baltic to the Black Sea, to the Adriatic". "No country is excluded from consideration because of its history, geography or the views if any outside power", said Armitage. "You have pursued political and economic reform programs; and you have contributed to restructure your army. These efforts must continue", added the US official. At the same time, he outlined, the candidates contribution in various peace missions in the Balkans - such as KFOR and SFOR and in the war against terrorism. Bulgaria, for example, allowed the US to base refueling aircraft taking part to the Enduring Freedom operations in its territory - and Romania has sent military police to Afghanistan. "We urge you and your colleagues to continue to work hard and devote the necessary resources for making your countries the strongest possible candidates", it's said in a message sent to the summit by US senators Tom Daschle and Trent Lott. In a letter of British prime-minister Tony Blair to his Romanian counter-part it's said: "I urge you to continue the reforms, making full use of the guidance provided by NATO under the Membership Action Plan".

The challenges of Prague summit.

For the ten candidate countries, the Prague summit means "enlargement" All the NATO top officials refused to make any predictions for the favourite countries that

will be accepted. NATO Secretary General, George Robertson, appreciated, in the message sent to the Bucharest summit, that it will be received "between one and seven" countries. The other three - Albania, Croatia and Macedonia - are only at the beginning of the process. And, the same NATO officials said, many times, that the NATO enlargement would continue after Prague.

From the NATO side, Prague means more than that. After September 11 terrorist attacks the Alliance, like other organizations, need to be fittest as much as possible to counter the new post-Cold War challenges. And, it is why the November summit will focus especially on the internal structural reforms of the organization as well as on the new relations with Russia, built-up after September 11. The discussions are now taking place on the structure of the new NATO-Russia Council and on the conciliatory attitude of the Kremlin concerning the enlargement, are another important steps reshaping the architecture of international relations.

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