

Interview with Thorir Ibsen, ambassador of Iceland to EU

Reykjavik aims to close accession talks ahead of 2013 elections

By Joanna Sopinska | Wednesday 14 September 2011



Despite the low level of support for EU accession among the Icelandic population and politicians, the government in Reykjavik is determined to finish accession talks ahead of the parliamentary elections in 2013. In an interview with Europolitics, Thorir Ibsen, ambassador of Iceland to the EU, made it clear that no other option is taken into consideration despite the economic and financial problems the EU is faced with today.

What kind of progress can be made in the accession talks before the end of the year? How many chapters are likely to be opened or closed?

The screening process that we completed in June demonstrated that Iceland has already implemented much of the EU *acquis* through its participation in the European Economic Area (EEA) and the Schengen agreements. During the process, both the Commission and the Icelandic administration identified areas where there are differences in our respective legislations and we have achieved a good understanding of where circumstances are special in Iceland, which makes us believe that we would be able to move fairly rapidly with the negotiations over the course of this winter. At the second EU-Iceland intergovernmental conference in June, our foreign minister said that he would like to see all the remaining chapters opened by the end of the Danish Presidency.

Are agriculture and fisheries among the items that you want to start negotiating this year?

Iceland has been of the opinion that these two most challenging chapters should be opened as soon as possible. We have already received a screening report on agriculture and we are expected to present a plan before we open up the chapter for negotiations, outlining how we are going to implement the related *acquis*. That will be worked out in the course of the winter. As regards fisheries, the ongoing reform of the EU's Common Fisheries Policy might affect the pace of negotiations. We understand that there may be delays in the current revision of the policy. However, we are also willing to open up this chapter as soon as possible.

How many intergovernmental conferences are scheduled to take place before the end of this year?

There will be two such meetings - the first will take place on 19 October at the level of deputy (chief negotiator) and the second on 12 December, at ministerial level.

What messages are you receiving from the Polish Presidency that is now in charge of steering the negotiation process alongside the European Commission?

We are receiving very positive messages. Our foreign minister has just returned from a visit to Poland. He announced in the media last week that the Polish Presidency is fully committed to maintaining the momentum of the negotiations thus far and to opening up half of the remaining chapters by the end of its Presidency.

Does the Icelandic government support the call by President Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson for an EU probe into the Icesave case?

I'm not going to interpret what the president said. I have seen media reports where he is quoted as indicating that it would be worthwhile if the EU launched an investigation into the case. I did not see any call or request for such an investigation from my government.

Still on the Icesave issue: what is the current state of affairs?

It is a complex issue, which includes elements that you can manage and elements that you can not. The good news is that the assets of Landsbanki are increasing in value. In fact, the most recent assessment stated that the assets will cover more than 100% of what is claimed by the British and the Dutch. However, before the funds can be realised, the Supreme Court of Iceland has to rule on the priority order of creditors, a ruling that we are expecting in October or early November. As concerns the case of the EFTA Surveillance Authority (ESA), the government of Iceland will reply to its reasoned opinion in September.

Can we expect that the release of funds will start by the end of the year?

Yes, a sizable amount will be released if the Supreme Court of Iceland confirms the priority order of creditors.

The Icelandic Foreign Minister, Össur Skarphéðinsson, has recently signalled that a referendum on the country's accession to the EU could be organised in 2013 before the parliamentary elections in the country. Could you confirm this statement?

The government has always expressed the view that it would be feasible to conclude the negotiations and hold a referendum before the elections in 2013. Everybody is working hard to try to meet this deadline.

Meanwhile, public opinion in Iceland seems to be growing more and more sceptical towards EU accession. The latest opinion poll shows that over 60% would vote against membership. How are you going to encourage these sceptics to change their mind?

It is too early to speak about this. Other candidate countries faced similar obstacles in the past. There are different patterns when it comes to accession negotiations. It is important to note that there has been growing support for EU membership in Iceland over the last ten years. Furthermore, the population and the parliament fully supported the country's EU membership application. Unfortunately, today the European Union is up against many difficulties. This makes the prospect of EU membership less attractive for the Icelandic people at the moment. Nevertheless, two-thirds of the Icelandic population consistently supports the continuation of the accession negotiations with a view to submitting the agreement to a referendum.

Given these 'difficult' circumstances, is the Icelandic government considering freezing negotiations or any other option?

No, it is highly unlikely that the government would opt for any option other than continuing the negotiations. The parliament passed a resolution on the application for EU membership, which the government agreed to. Subsequently, the accession negotiations were launched and they will be completed.

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