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ATTENTION - REFILE for ECO clients///

Three future Baltic European Union members said on Wednesday they would be ready to join the bloc on time, after the EU executive highlighted areas of "serious concern" in their entry preparations.

In so-called "monitoring reports" on 10 incoming EU members published by the European Commission, Lithuania emerged as the leading pupil and Latvia as the dunce of the three Baltic republics which regained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991.

While Lithuania and Estonia, which stood in the middle, said the reports showed they were close to crossing the finishing line, worried Latvian leaders ordered their officials to pull out the stops to reverse a worrying backlog.

"The positive evaluation of Lithuania by the European Commission shows that Lithuania basically lives under European rules. Its economy, legal system and administration are ready to work under the conditions of EU membership," Prime Minister Algirdas Brazauskas said in a statement.

"I think that we shall keep the same quality and speed right up to membership and after EU membership," he said.

"We continue to be among the best prepared countries to join," Henrik Hololei, the Estonian government adviser on European integration, told AFP.

"This is a sign that Estonia can fulfil its international obligations when we join the EU in May 2004."

The EU assessment highlighted only two areas of concern for Lithuania, putting it second best in the league table of future EU members after Slovenia, with Estonia following closely in third place with three areas of serious concern to address.

In Latvia, there were some long faces, after a stern warning that there was much ground to catch up, with President Vaira Vike-Freiberga and Prime Minister Einaris Repse ordering officials to step up their performance.

The assessment put the Baltic country of 2.3 million people ahead of just Poland and Malta, which have the most homework to do before EU enlargement in May next year.

"The prime minister has assured me that the head of responsible ministries and departments, for example, the head of customs, will be able to finish this task by May 1, 2004," Aiva Rozenberga, a spokeswoman for Vike-Freiberg, quoted the president as saying.

A common point of concern for the three Baltic countries were delays in preparations to recognise professional qualifications for people in other EU countries.

Such a step is necessary if EU citizens are to be able to move freely when the bloc expands to 25 member states. The problem was said to be most acute for nurses.

For Latvia, particular concerns in the annual report focused on EU food safety standards to prevent the spread of disease, tax policy and customs cooperation.

Lithuania, a country of 3.5 million people, was told to clean up its act in inspecting its fishing fleet.

And Estonia, which has 1.4 million people, was asked to urgently address delays in aligning its social policy and employment laws with those of the EU, especially for labour law and legislation on gender equality.

Despite the ticking off, a theme of the annual report was strong economic growth for the Baltic nations, especially for Lithuania, which is emerging as a future tiger economy.

"In spite of lacklustre growth in the EU, macroeconomic performance in Lithuania remained particularly strong during 2002," the Commission said.

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