

BRUSSELS (AFP) Sweden and the European Commission welcomed Thursday a parliamentary vote for Iceland to join the EU and said it awaited an official application.

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Swedish Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt, whose country currently holds the EU presidency, welcomed the news.

"I welcome that the Icelandic parliament has now decided for itself to apply for EU membership," Reinfeldt said in a statement.

"The application is going to be handled according to the (European) Council's established procedures," he added.

Also EU commission chief Jose Manuel Barroso welcomed a parliamentary vote for Iceland to join the EU and said it awaited an official application.

"The decision of the Icelandic parliament is a sign of the vitality of the European project and indicative of the hope that Europe represents," Jose Manuel Barroso said in a statement.

"Iceland is a European country with long and deep democratic roots," he said, adding: "It is now up to the Icelandic government to follow up this decision by officially applying to the presidency of the EU."

The commission, the EU's executive arm, supervises enlargement issues on behalf of the bloc's 27 member states.

"I am pleased that the EU's enlargement agenda may soon extend to Europe's northwestern corner as well, with Iceland, a country with deep democratic traditions," said Enlargement

Sweden welcomes Iceland to apply to EU

Written by Johan Nylander

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Commission Olli Rehn.

A total of 33 members of Iceland's 63-seat Althingi assembly backed Thursday the governing Social Democrat party's proposition to open membership talks with Brussels, while 28 voted against and two abstained.

If and when Iceland completes successful membership negotiations, the question will then be put to the people in a referendum.

The government argues that EU membership would help stabilise Iceland's economy following the collapse of its once-booming financial sector in October.

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