

Address given by Egon Klepsch at the signing of the Accession Treaty to the EU (Corfu, 24 June 1994)

Caption: On 24 June 1994, Egon Klepsch, President of the European Parliament, welcomes the signing, the same day in Corfu, of the Treaty of Accession to the European Union by Austria, Finland, Norway and Sweden.

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Address by the President of the European Parliament Dr Egon Klepsch on the occasion of the official signing of the Treaty on the accession of Norway, Austria, Finland and Sweden to the European Union (Corfu, 24 June 1994)

It is a particular honour for me, as President of the European Parliament, to endorse the signing here of the Accession Treaties with Norway, Austria, Finland and Sweden.

The signing of the Acts of Accession during this meeting of the Heads of State and Government was made possible by the overwhelming vote of assent by the European Parliament on 4 May 1994.

On that occasion I described Parliament's favourable vote as a decision of historic importance and extended a warm welcome to the new prospective members of the European Union.

I should like to reiterate this point: we are extremely glad to welcome you to our ranks and I am convinced that your accession will strengthen parliamentary democracy in Europe.

It was, above all, the progressive democratic values embodied in the socially concerned, democratic model of society in your countries, together with your political culture and your commitment to transparency and openness in politics that the European Parliament recognized when it voted in favour of the accession applications on 4 May.

Moreover, not only has provision been made for transition periods for the new members but the Union itself has undertaken to raise the standards of its environmental directives to those obtaining in the new countries within four years - surely an event without precedent in the history of the European Union and its previous enlargements!

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For the European Parliament, the debate on enlargement shortly before the end of its term of office was surely the most difficult decision it has had to take in the last five years. The entire House was aware of the enormous political importance of the decision. The delays in the timetable for the accession negotiations and the pressure of the deadline were not Parliament's responsibility. We must therefore give particular thanks to our hosts today, the Greek Presidency of the Council, which made enormous efforts to ensure that the necessary documents were prepared and thereby, at the last minute so to speak, enabled Parliament to deal with the matter properly.

It is only through this debate that the general public has come to realize that the European Parliament enjoys crucial rights and powers and that it uses these in a responsible manner. Parliament has shown this on many occasions when exercising its right of co-decision on legislation and the budget - albeit in less spectacular circumstances and with less public impact.

The decision on enlargement was not an easy one for Parliament to take; the reasons for this are well-known and have nothing to do with the applicant countries themselves. The European Parliament believed and still believes that the internal institutional reform of the Union should not have been scheduled to take place after the enlargement debate. We always pressed for the review of the institutions, which is needed if the Community is to operate smoothly, to take place at the same time as the accession negotiations and in parallel to them. This criticism must be laid at the door of our own governments and the Council of Ministers.

We nevertheless gave our assent, because we are counting on the promise given by the Heads of Government that the European Parliament will take part on an equal footing in the proceedings of the preparatory working party for the 1996 Intergovernmental Conference and also because we believe that the new Member States will help strengthen the democratic process in the Union.

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As a result of the enlargement to include Norway, Austria, Finland and Sweden, the geography of the Union will be transformed. The Union's area will grow by 50% and extend beyond the Arctic Circle. For the first time we will have a common border with Russia. This fact alone indicates that the enlarged Union will have new responsibilities in external affairs. The fact that the Union also signed the partnership agreement with Russia today alongside the Accession Acts is, I believe, an extremely positive sign.

The Union also faces major internal challenges. We can only boost growth and beat unemployment if we act together. We cannot do this without a strong Union which has a sense of solidarity, whose members accept the common basic values and convictions of our founding fathers and which is capable of winning the trust of its citizens again and again.

The fourth direct elections to the European Parliament have shown how necessary this will be in future. The positive vote on accession in Austria proves that the public can be won over to this project if it is properly informed.

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The newly-elected European Parliament - which will, from 1995, also have members from the new Member States will be a reliable partner in this process.

It will also pursue and enlarge its role as the democratic conscience of the Union and as the advocate for the 370 million citizens of the new Europe who look to the Union to provide them with peace, freedom, health, prosperity, employment and social justice.