

Address given by Günter Verheugen on the European Neighbourhood Policy (Bratislava, 19 March 2004)

Caption: On 19 March 2004, Günter Verheugen, European Commissioner for Enlargement, delivers an address in Bratislava in which he outlines the principles of the European Union's Neighbourhood Policy.

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Speech by Günter Verheugen on the European Neighbourhood Policy (Bratislava, 19 March 2004)

Prime Ministerial Conference of the Vilnius and Visegrad Democracies: "Towards a Wider Europe: the new agenda"

Prime Ministers,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to address you today on the issue of the EU's neighbourhood policy. I am particularly happy to do it at this Conference, which is a follow-up to the high-level conference Prime Minister Dzurinda called in May 2001. The Bratislava meeting of "Europe's New Democracies" three years ago was an important stage on the road from the Vilnius Statement in May 2000 to the forthcoming NATO summit in Istanbul.

The Vilnius Statement expressed the firm belief of the participating countries that their integration into NATO and the EU would facilitate the creation of a free, prosperous and undivided Europe.

This hope of only a few years ago is now about to become a reality, as the Accession Treaty will enter into force in seven weeks.

Ladies and gentlemen,

An "undivided Europe" cannot be a united but inward-looking European Union that does not care about what happens beyond its borders.

First of all, "Europe" and "the European Union" are not the same, even though the Union now has an almost continental scale. Secondly, the European Union has major interests in the stability, prosperity and democracy of its neighbours not to speak of its moral and political obligations towards them.

We must never forget that European integration is not about milk quotas and customs duties. It is about peace, stability and prosperity for our citizens. Instability in one part of Europe immediately affects the other parts. Enlargement has been the most important contribution of the EU to long-lasting stability in Europe in recent years. It was a very courageous strategy but today, only 42 days ahead of the accession of 10 new Member States, I can say with some pride: mission accomplished.

Enlargement has transformed the continent. In 1993 the Union took a strategic decision to open its doors to the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Even before they joined, the prospect of membership encouraged them to undertake a whole set of far-reaching reforms in the political, economic and social fields.

The present round of enlargement is not yet completed. We are still negotiating with Bulgaria and Romania. It is our joint objective to welcome both countries as full members at the beginning of 2007. Both countries have a particular importance for strategic key interests of the European Union. Without them, it would be extremely difficult, if not impossible to achieve political and economic stability in the whole area. During the Kosovo conflict and as contributors to the democratisation and stabilisation process in the Western Balkans region, both countries have demonstrated their willingness and capability to meet our expectations.

In the context of the present enlargement only one issue is not yet resolved the Cyprus question. We are closer than ever to find a solution to a conflict which is decades old. I do believe that we are now entering the decisive phase of the process. I want to encourage the two communities in Cyprus as well as the two "mother countries" to seize this unique opportunity. I have doubts whether another window of opportunity

will present itself before the EU will have to make one of its most difficult and far-reaching decisions the possible opening of accession negotiations with Turkey.

Turkey is a candidate country. It has a membership prospective and it already has a privileged partnership. It would take too much of our time to discuss now in detail the relations between the EU and Turkey. I would rather mention only one element, which is important in the context of security concerns in the 21st century. It will be one of the most important questions whether we will be able to organise relations between European countries and the Islamic world, based on tolerance and understanding, or whether there will be conflict between us. Turkey can play a crucial role, as a country with a strong Muslim population, at the same time a country that shares our values of democracy, rule of law and human rights.

The Union has always exerted a strong pull on its neighbours even beyond the circle of countries to which we have held out prospects of membership. It is our task now to use this attraction to foster the necessary reforms in those countries, to step up our relations with them in our mutual interests and for the sake of the peoples concerned.

Our new Member States will be in a good position to help and benefit from this. Bordering on Ukraine, Slovakia for instance is well placed to help in this area. A thorough knowledge and historical experience of the region and its peoples means our new members can play a key role in establishing relations with countries further east.

Every last round of accession to the EU brought about new challenges and new opportunities. The accession of the Nordic countries added a northern dimension to our strategic thinking and led to enhanced co-operation with new neighbours. The same was true in the case of enlargement to the South. The southern dimension will be reinforced by the two Mediterranean Island-States, Cyprus and Malta. Malta for instance is a small country but trusted by everyone in the region and provides therefore a true added value. The new Member States in Eastern and Central Europe will help us to develop a credible, sustainable eastern dimension as well.

Living along our new external frontiers, you fully understand the problems linked with borders. The Union continues to pay this issue a great deal of attention. We have drawn up 12 neighbourhood programmes that take account of the new geographical situation and seek to strengthen cross-border relations with our neighbours. Such programmes group Hungary, Ukraine and Slovakia, or Estonia, Latvia and Russia to mention only a few.

Euro-regions are an important way of increasing cross-border trade, facilitating border traffic and improving living conditions in cross-border areas. This has been happening in the Tatras and Carpathian euro-regions, which date back to the early to mid-1990s.

So while we expect the imminent accession of the democracies of Central and Eastern Europe to NATO and the Union to overcome the division of the continent, we are doing everything to avoid drawing new dividing lines across a continent that has suffered too much from its divisions.

But the security of our citizens is non-negotiable, and that means we have to maintain some security controls.

Border controls are part of this. Given the length of our external borders, that will not be easy. The Union's land border with the countries covered by the Wider Europe initiative will increase from 1,300 to 5,100 kilometres. Moreover, the accession of two island states, Cyprus and Malta, will bring a number of Mediterranean countries closer to EU territory. So borders are a key issue.

This applies to the human dimension too. Slovakia, Poland and Lithuania have already had experience with new visa regimes covering countries that are not on the accession track.

But we have to recognise: along most of the enlarged Union's external borders, there is a *long tradition of*

cross-border contacts. Politically, economically and in terms of everyday life, maintaining and managing these cross-border contacts and developing new ones is important.

In August 2003, the Commission presented a *proposal* to establish a *local border traffic regime* at the Union's external land borders. This will make it easier for local people to cross borders without letting up on measures to combat illegal migration and crime.

This new legislation will mitigate negative effects but will not be enough to address the new opportunities and challenges stemming from EU enlargement in Eastern Europe.

Organised crime knows no frontiers. Trafficking in persons and drugs, money laundering and corruption are trans-national problems. These challenges cannot be tackled effectively at national level alone. This calls for close co-operation with our partners in the field of Justice and Home Affairs too, a core element of the Neighbourhood Policy.

This is particularly important today when we face a common enemy in the shape of terrorism that takes advantage of our open, tolerant societies. What is at stake is our citizens' security and our open, tolerant societies. The terrorist threat cannot be defeated by any single country on its own and we must all work together to overcome it.

For years to come, terrorism might well be the most important threat to our societies. I don't want to say this, but we can't ignore the deep impact which terrorist attacks already have had on our societies. I'm really afraid that March 11th in Madrid will change the European way of life as much as September 11th changed already the American way of life.

The European reaction must be clear and firm: we have to strengthen European integration in all those areas which are important for the fight against terrorism. After September 11th we took some important decisions, but implementation in Member States is not yet sufficient, and in some areas our system is slow and cumbersome. We can considerably improve the internal security situation if we fully exploit the possibilities of European integration in the field of justice and home affairs.

But there is another dimension too. Europe needs a truly common foreign and security policy for several reasons. Effective fight against terrorism is only one of them, but perhaps the most urgent one. Europe must be able to speak with one voice and to influence global affairs in a strategic partnership with the US. I think that we can contribute a lot. Being the world's biggest trading block, the most important donor of development aid and the most open market for the poorest nations, being the leading region in implementing global environmental objectives and having succeeded in transforming countries from communist rule into modern democracies and functioning market economies, we have a lot to offer - a common agenda to tackle the issues of poverty, Human Rights, migration and weapons of mass destruction is not achievable without a strong and united Europe.

On the eve of the EU and NATO enlargements, it is worth taking stock of the recent developments in the Union's Neighbourhood Policy, the main thrust of which is to transform into opportunities all possible challenges stemming from enlargement along the Union's borders to the south and east up to 2007.

I remain convinced that the on-going EU enlargement will not only benefit the Acceding States and the Union as a whole, but also our neighbours. Increased prosperity in an enlarged Union, based on the rule of law and well-functioning, open market economies, will generate opportunities for trade, investment and economic cooperation with non-member countries. It will do so first and foremost with our neighbours. But let me make it clear once more that our Neighbourhood policy is distinct from enlargement. It neither prepares for enlargement, nor rules it out at some future point. For the time being the accession of these countries is not on our agenda.

European Commission President Romano Prodi describes the policy's aim as seeking to create a "ring of friends". This will allow us to develop co-operation with - and encourage reforms in - neighbouring

countries and deepen our bilateral relations to the mutual benefit of the Union and its neighbours. It will build on our existing contractual relations, but with the possibility to go further and faster. The Neighbourhood policy opens the way for partners to progressively participate in major EU policies and programmes. This includes the Union's Single Market.

One basic principle behind the ring of friends we are forging is joint ownership. Of course, we cannot impose the policy on any neighbour. We are offering closer co-operation across the broad spectrum of our relations, from political dialogue to economic integration.

Another basic principle is differentiation. The partners in our neighbourhood differ hugely from each other in many respects: in size, level of economic development, political conditions, state of relations with the Union, etc. We need to take this into account.

In particular, we will need to maintain a broad balance between the levels of ambition in the various areas of our co-operation. The closer we move together in our political dialogue, the more we should be able to do in economic areas as well.

The Commission's proposals were set out in its Communication entitled "Wider Europe Neighbourhood: A New Framework for Relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbours". These were endorsed by the European Councils at Thessaloniki and Brussels in June and October 2003. We were asked to draw up the instruments for the Policy and take it forward.

We have made good progress and now want to put forward the following four elements of the Neighbourhood policy to the Member States by the summer:

- a strategy paper,
- country reports
- action plans,
- a New Neighbourhood Instrument for cross-border co-operation.

The **strategy paper** will outline the vision behind the policy, and address the key overall questions.

The **country reports** will describe the political, economic, social and institutional situation of the countries concerned in so far as they are relevant to the Neighbourhood Policy.

The main operational instruments of the Neighbourhood Policy will be the **action plans**. These are tailor-made documents outlining commitments from both sides in the following main areas:

Enhanced **political co-operation** and co-operation in addressing common security threats and conflict prevention;

Economic reform and development, and a functioning market economy;

Issues relating to the **Internal Market**, including trade liberalisation, co-operation in areas such as energy, and transport;

Co-operation in the field of **Justice and Home Affairs**;

Development of **infrastructure networks** and markets for energy, transport and telecommunications, and co-operation on the environment;

Policies to promote **people-to-people contacts**, for instance in education, research and development, and

culture, and through the gradual opening-up of certain Community programmes.

We must bear in mind that this exercise requires joint ownership. Because we cannot impose our rules on the partners, they need to be convinced. The action plans will contain nothing that does not have the full approval of both sides. They will be tailor-made to reflect the particular circumstances and objectives of each partner, the possibilities open to it and the degree of desire to move forward with us.

By themselves the action plans will not create any new legal obligations. The existing Partnership and Co-operation Agreements and Association Agreements will continue to form the legal basis for our relations with the partners. The Neighbourhood Policy sets out a comprehensive framework. This allows us to focus attention and create motivation and this will bring added value compared to current agreements and processes. In the Mediterranean, for example, we do not intend to replace the Barcelona Process by any aspect of the Neighbourhood Policy. On the contrary, the Barcelona Process should benefit from the Neighbourhood Policy. It will provide fresh momentum by measuring progress against benchmarks within a given and limited timeframe.

With this policy we are entering new territory. For this reason it has to be implemented in a careful way. We must guarantee that the stakeholders involved on our side Commission, Council and Member States co-operate closely, keep each other informed and strike the right balance between the European common interest and the national interests of the Member States.

Obviously, an ambitious new policy of this sort requires adequate underpinning in terms of financial assistance. Given the way EU financial planning works, this means that decisive progress will only be possible after 2006, when the new Financial Perspective will apply. In the meantime, we are making every effort to improve both the focus and the co-ordination of existing means for technical and financial assistance.

For the period after 2006, we are planning several major efforts to support the Neighbourhood policy.

First, the Commission has recently proposed a substantial increase in funding for the main support programmes for the countries concerned: TACIS and MEDA, or their successor programmes.

Second, we are developing a **New Neighbourhood Instrument (NNI)**, which seeks to foster cross-border co-operation, in a wide sense, across the external border of the enlarged Union. We are already funding such cross-border projects today, under existing instruments. But until now we have been hampered by a number of practical obstacles that we now wish to overcome. Our current cross-border activities with neighbouring countries draw on a variety of internal and external programmes, which makes it rather difficult to have them work together efficiently.

This clearly shows we have to re-think our approach to the Neighbourhood Policy. Under that same policy, the existing instruments for the different regions need to be harmonised. The NNI should solve this by creating a single, simple tool that can work on both sides of the EU's external border.

The New Neighbourhood Policy and its instruments should also allow us to reinforce a key aspect of our strategy: The regional co-operation between neighbouring countries which are not part of the EU. Such a regional co-operation can be very fruitful e.g. in the Maghreb region and in the Middle East. I strongly believe that the basic principles of European integration can be applied in those regions to bring about a strong interdependence between neighbouring countries by means of integrating policies and institutions in order to make conflict highly unlikely or even impossible.

Let me now mention the four Eastern European countries which are covered by the neighbourhood policy: Russia, Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova.

Russia remains our most important neighbour in Europe. We already have in place a strategic partnership with Russia so called common spaces which cover the areas which are foreseen for the action plans with the

other neighbouring countries. We have a strong interest to co-operate with a democratic, stable and economically sound Russia. In our co-operation with Russia we do not need new actions plans but real action on the implementation of our agreed strategy.

In the case of **Belarus**, it is clear that current political conditions make it difficult to engage very deeply with its government today. Nevertheless, it is of crucial importance to send a very clear signal to the people of Belarus that we look forward to their full and free integration into the European family. We are exploring options to step up relations with Belarus, for example through civil society.

Both **Ukraine** and **Moldova** are central and crucial to the Union's Neighbourhood policy. In my political contacts with both countries I am very pleased to note that they are keen to work with us on this. Technical preparations are under way and progressing well with both countries. And of course, closer links with both countries are of special interest and relevance to some of the new EU Member States.

A word on the Southern Caucasus: Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan are not included in the Neighbourhood Policy. Georgia in particular has shown clear interest in participating, and has recently made great strides to join our community of shared values. I think this is good news. The Council has called on the Commission, in consultation with the High Representative, Javier Solana, and taking account of proposals from the EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus, to bring forward a recommendation on the relationship between Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia and the European Neighbourhood Policy. We will thus come forward with proposals during the coming months.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We encourage all our neighbours to the east and across the Mediterranean to take full advantage of the offer we are putting to them with the European Neighbourhood Policy. We are confident it offers them substantial benefits while serving major EU interests at the same time.

Slovakia has shown great foresight in organising this meeting. Together with the other new members of the European Union, you have a huge fund of experience and understanding of our neighbours. You therefore have a key role to play in carrying forward the Neighbourhood Policy. We rely on your enthusiasm and commitment to make the Policy a success.

Thank you.