

Exchange of correspondence between Dick Benschop and Péter Gottfried (8–9 November 2000)

Caption: On 8 and 9 November 2000, Dick Benschop, Netherlands Junior Minister for Foreign Affairs, and Péter Gottfried, Head of the State Secretariat for Integration in the Hungarian Foreign Ministry, exchange letters concerning the latest progress in the process for the enlargement of the European Union.

Source: Correspondence between Mr. Péter Gottfried and his Dutch colleague Mr. Benschop (8-9 November 2000).

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Letter from Dick Benschop to Péter Gottfried (8 November 2000)

Dear Péter,

How are you? We are getting closer to Nice, the pace of our work is picking up, the working days are ever longer and longer.

It is time we get on with enlargement. It will create the world's largest single market - benefiting trade and jobs. It will also help us tackle more effectively problems - organised crime, drug smuggling, cross-border pollution - we cannot combat alone. I think that we need a new political impetus.

Our citizens are becoming more and more aware of the implications of enlargement - we should be open about what we do to the maximum extent. That is why I am happy for starting this open email-correspondence with you.

I suppose that you have already digested today's report by the European Commission on the progress of Hungary and the other candidate countries on the road to enlargement. I am rather happy with it, especially because it proposes a clear 'roadmap' for enlargement. I think it should be clear what you and the other candidate members can expect from us, just like it is very clear what we expect from you. The conclusions on Hungary are positive and do justice to the efforts your country has made last year.

I also feel it is right that the Commission asks attention for the quality of public administration and the rule of law. They are essential, also in the eye of the Dutch citizens. You know that our 'MATRA' programme contributes to this end.

One thing is clear: a lot of work has been done during the last 12 months. You can nearly physically feel the enormous efforts accompanying the process of accession. The negotiations will be tough sometimes, but I agree with the Commission that we will have to become much more active in defining our bottom-line position as an EU.

Differentiation between candidate countries, in my view, will be inevitable. We should judge each candidate on its own merits. We should be open and transparent about that to create credible and realistic expectations.

I was very sorry that we had to postpone our meeting. I had to be in Parliament. The yearly discussions about the ministry of Foreign Affairs' next year's budgets and policy were rescheduled at a late stage from 31 October to 2 November.

Our Parliament shows growing interest in the subject, just like our media. They write or speak about human rights or about the costs and benefits of enlargement. Since at this stage it looks as if the timeframe of enlargement will differ from the assumptions on which the budget reservations for enlargement were based, parliamentarians want to be informed whether this development has consequences for the available budgets. Our answer is that the Financial Perspectives will do fine, as long as the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is kept out of the story.

However, if the candidate countries stick to their position that they fully want to participate in the CAP upon accession, we will have a financial problem. Such a situation has not been taken into consideration when leaders of government agreed upon Agenda 2000 in Berlin last year. These costs would further increase the urgency for the -in my view long overdue- structural adjustment of the CAP. The last word on this theme has probably not been spoken. We should come back to this issue in the coming year as negotiations approach a new stage.

Péter, I hope you forgive my rather long first e-mail. I seem to get carried away by my enthusiasm for

enlargement. I promise: my next mail will be shorter. I do look forward to your response and in particular to your views on the Commission's latest regular report.

Best regards,

Dick Benschop

Response from Péter Gottfried to Péter Gottfried (9 November 2000)

Dear Dick,

I was glad to read your kind e-mail sent to me on the day of the European Commission's Regular Report on Hungary. Indeed we are getting closer to Nice and I very much hope that the decisions taken there will give a green light for the Commission to devote its full attention to the task of enlargement.

I completely agree with you that it is time to get on with enlargement and for this a new political impetus is needed. Public opinion both in the member states and in applicant states needs to be provided with a clear message stating that EU enlargement is an opportunity rather than a necessity in the best interest of all in order to forge a stronger, more stable and more competitive Europe. Nice has the possibility, and I would add, the responsibility to live up to this.

I agree with you that the Regular Report just published by the Commission not only gives a positive assessment of Hungary's progress in the past year but also reflects our overall level of preparedness. This encourages us to continue with our efforts to complete the remaining tasks ahead of us. The Strategy Paper represents a clear "road map" which has to be complemented by an efficient negotiating phase right from the beginning of the Swedish presidency. I will not say I could not have imagined an even bolder route taking the autobahn considering our level of preparedness, but I believe the itinerary presented will safely lead us to accession without too many unnecessary speed limits. In any case I understand that the map provides for flexibility, deviations are possible in both directions. It will be important that the EU establishes its remaining positions well in advance of the targeted period so that the budget related chapters could be closed by mid-2002.

I was glad to see that the Strategy Paper devoted much attention to communication strategy. I think it is essential that citizens everywhere be aware of the great opportunities of enlargement and know that the new members will be fully prepared when they join the Union.

The Hungarian Parliament, as well as yours, follows with growing interest the enlargement process, just like the media. An enlarged session of the Integration Committee in Parliament just took place on the 26th of October. A Plenary session is scheduled for the end of November where EU accession will be the order of the day, with the costs and benefits of accession openly addressed. As you are well aware the political setting of this debate is against a background in which more than 2/3 of the Hungarian public opinion is in favour of joining the EU. This public backing is reflected by all six parties represented in the Hungarian Parliament who signed a joint declaration in September stating their support for EU membership. Therefore most Hungarians have high hopes of joining the EU in the time frame indicated in Helsinki.

You briefly mentioned CAP as a hurdle still to pass. In my opinion well-prepared new members are not cause for concern. The weight of agriculture in Hungary at present is barely over 5% of our GDP which is comparable with the EU average. Also the level of producer prices for the most important commodities are close or already at the level of intervention prices applicable by the CAP. Our general philosophy is that we would like to be integrated into all community policies preferably from the day of accession. I am convinced that it is our common interest to see the single market fully operating from the beginning. We shall have to make sure that Hungarian farmers do not find themselves in a situation where their competitive position is undermined because of major difficulties of the regulatory system.

Dick, I thank you for following closely the development of our negotiation process and providing us with the needed assistance inter alia through the MATRA programme so we can achieve a successful preparation for accession.

Best regards,

Peter Gottfried

PS the e-mail correspondence can be viewed on www.mfa.gov.hu

November 9, 2000