

Statement made by Toomas Hendrik Ilves at the opening of the negotiations for Estonia's accession to the EU (Brussels, 31 March 1998)

Caption: On 31 March 1998, in Brussels, at the opening of the negotiations for Estonia's accession to the European Union (EU), Toomas Hendrik Ilves, Estonian Foreign Minister, outlines the implications of his country's accession to the EU.

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**Statement at the opening of the Estonia's accession negotiations with European Union,
Mr. Toomas Hendrik Ilves, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Estonia
(Brussels, 31 March 1998)**

Mr. Chairman,

Today's meeting marks the beginning of a new period in Estonia's relations with the European Union and an important day in my country's overall development.

Since the restoration of independence in 1991, Estonia's policies have consistently aimed at the restoration of economic, social, political and cultural ties with our western neighbours. We have sought to restore our place in the family of democratic European nations.

Estonia's application to join the EU is underpinned by a number of motivating factors.

Estonia shares the basic values and principles upon which the Union has been established and wishes to preserve and defend these values in co-operation with the Union. These include a commitment to democracy, the rule of law, honouring individual and human rights, and respect for the rules of market economy.

Membership of the European Union will clearly bolster Estonia's economic development, bringing new opportunities for growth and increasing the general well-being of the population. At the same time, I am confident that Estonia's rapidly developing economy and dynamic society will contribute positively towards increasing the Union's global competitiveness. Our strong commitment to free market principles and full competition has not gone unnoticed.

Membership of the EU will line up Estonia with the other member countries that for decades have successfully fostered stability, security and prosperity within the borders of a dynamic union and beyond. Estonia has actively sought to achieve these goals since 1991 when we first launched our reforms and the prospect of EU membership was faint. Accession to the Union will increase our will and ability to contribute to safeguarding stability in Europe.

Mr. Chairman,

Estonia's path to the negotiations that we formally open today has been rapid. Only half a year after our diplomatic ties were established in 1991, the signature of the Trade and Co-operation Agreement on 11 May 1992 created a legal basis for our relationship. The Free Trade agreement, signed on 18 July 1994, further strengthened these ties.

The entry into force of the Europe Agreement on 1 February 1998 presents us with new possibilities, which should be fully used.

The dynamic development of our ties naturally led to our application for membership in the European Union on 24 November 1995. I would like to stress that our application was based upon the understanding that membership is a commitment: on the one hand, a commitment to defending the principle objectives upon which the Union is founded, and on the other, a commitment to the furthering of economic, political and monetary union.

On 16 July 1997 the European Commission gave a positive avis on Estonia's readiness to join the EU. This opinion was later approved by the Luxembourg European Council on 13 December 1997 when it was decided to open accession negotiations with six candidate countries, including Estonia.

This historic decision was, above all, testimony to the success of radical reforms undertaken by my country. It was also testimony that, as a result of our pragmatic and realistic approach to reforms, Estonia has already achieved a significant level of integration with the Union. I would like to stress that throughout the

negotiation process, we will remain committed to continuing, and indeed, intensifying our integration efforts. The Europe Agreement, and in particular the Accession Partnership framework with relevant priorities included therein, will serve as the main instruments for co-operating with the Union.

Mr. Chairman,

I would now like to turn to the underlying principles of the negotiations.

Estonia is well aware of the rights and obligations of membership and we are prepared to do everything necessary to be ready at the time of our accession to assume the obligations arising from membership.

At the same time, accession, and indeed, the period leading up to accession, should in no way slow down Estonia's rapid economic development as this is directly linked to Estonia's ability to come to terms with competitive pressures of the Union's internal market.

The goal of the accession negotiations launched today is Estonian membership in the European Union. Their successful conclusion will demand a great effort from both sides. Estonia seeks a negotiating result that is constructive and, above all, acceptable to the Estonian people. Ultimately, however, once achieved both sides will see benefits.

Throughout the negotiation process, we will be guided by the understanding that we must fully accept, adopt and implement the *acquis communautaire*. We will negotiate on the basis of the *acquis*, bearing in mind that the *acquis* is a 'moving target' and therefore subject to constant changes and amendments.

It should be noted, however, that Estonia's acceptance of the rights and obligations of membership could give rise to a need for technical adjustments, transitional arrangements and temporary derogations in certain fields.

We expect that the negotiations with Estonia will be based on the same principles and criteria as the negotiations conducted with other candidate countries. Progress of each individual negotiating process should, however, be measured according to the readiness of each individual applicant country.

The negotiations should proceed quickly and constructively. The first phase of the negotiations - the screening process - should be completed during this year and it should be possible to move quickly to substantial negotiations on those chapters where the screening will have been completed.

Upon the successful conclusion of the negotiations, we will expect to join the Union as an equal member with all the rights as well as with all the obligations that this implies. We expect to join a Union whose institutions function effectively and provide all members with fair and equal representation.

Mr. Chairman,

Now a few words on our views on the Union policies.

Estonia is prepared to accept the Maastricht Treaty in full and play an active part in its implementation. It is also our firm ambition to contribute to the further development of Union's policies especially in the areas mentioned below.

Estonia understands the future gains of implementing the principles of the economic and monetary union and we accept its goals. We will take a number of steps to maintain a stable economic environment and to implement further structural measures that contribute to achieving this goal. We pay attention to further strengthening of the compatibility of the Estonian monetary policy with the launching of the third stage of the economic and monetary union.

The social dimension is of increasing importance for Estonia. We are intensifying our efforts in areas such

as employment, work conditions and vocational training in order to ensure equal opportunities for all members of society. Acceding to the amended European Social Charter is a priority for Estonia and preparations aimed at meeting this goal are currently being made.

Estonia shares the Union's objectives and principles in the field of foreign and security policy and wishes to actively participate in all relevant activities.

In the formulation of its foreign policy, Estonia attaches particular importance to relations with its Baltic neighbours. Estonia holds the continuation, and further development, of traditional Baltic co-operation to be essential. We seek to ensure that existing political, cultural and economic relations with our neighbours are preserved. We strongly support the early membership into the EU of Latvia and Lithuania.

We also value highly our relationship with Ukraine. We wish to work to strengthen ties between the EU and Ukraine and are interested in contributing to this end by offering our knowledge and experience.

We equally support the strengthening of the Union's existing ties with the Russian Federation. As a neighbour of Russia, we have a fundamental interest in promoting closer co-operation with that country.

Upon accession as well as during the negotiations, Estonia will attach special importance to justice and home affairs. In particular in combating organised crime, drug trafficking, money laundering, illegal immigration and illegal employment international co-operation and information exchange is of essential importance. To ensure this, Estonia is prepared to become a party to relevant international legal instruments.

We are well aware of the fact that upon accession our country will form part of the Union's external border and are committed to ensuring that this border functions effectively. We also recognise that the Schengen protocol now forms part of the *acquis* and must therefore be implemented in full.

Mr. Chairman,

I would now like to turn to a number of specific negotiating areas that are of particular importance to Estonia and where I am confident that joint solutions can be found:

Energy policy

Estonia is highly dependent upon oil shale as a source of energy. This unique local natural resource secures an independent supply of electric energy for Estonia. A large part of the North East region of Estonia and its population is involved in its production, processing and use. From the socio-economic point of view, Estonia's entire industry and economy is dependent upon its production.

In light of its importance to the Estonian economy and overall development, oil shale should be awarded necessary treatment in EU policies, in particular, legal status equal to coal. Its production should be included in the establishment of security reserves. Transitional arrangements in the establishment of the required security reserve and in the restriction of emissions will also be required.

Bringing the electric power generation industry into technical compatibility with EU requirements by the time of accession will be a difficult and capital intensive undertaking and will depend to a large extent on a mutually acceptable and flexible approach to the solution of this issue.

Estonia should also be free to decide whether to produce atomic energy.

Agriculture

Estonian agriculture has already undergone a significant amount of restructuring. At the same time access of Estonian agricultural products to the Union's market has been limited or blocked. Upon joining the EU Estonia is prepared to accept the common agricultural policy and to fully apply its instruments. Since the

Estonian agricultural sector is relatively homogenous and represents only a small share of the national economy, adjustment to the common agricultural policy and implementation of the Union's system in this field will not pose any major problems.

Agriculture in Estonia is, however, closely linked to regional and social policy. The improvement of rural life is a priority of the Estonian government. As Estonian agriculture is brought closer into line with the Union's agriculture, structural measures will most likely be necessary with a view to eliminating disadvantages in certain regions and increasing the competitiveness of Estonian agriculture in general. An exacerbation of social problems and regional discrepancies should at all costs be avoided.

Fishing

Estonia is a country with a long tradition of fishing in both the Baltic Sea and distant waters as well as in the manufacture of fish products. A number of island and coastal areas are largely dependent on fishing. The Estonian economy is similarly linked to the fishing industry.

Upon accession to the Union, Estonia is prepared to adopt the common fisheries policy. Yet specific conditions of Estonian fishing should be taken into account. It is important that traditional fishing methods and access to fishing grounds be maintained.

Transport

With accession to the European Union, the Estonian transport network will become part of the European transport network and will have to operate as a part of the North European transport network. The common interest of Estonia and the European Union is the existence of well-functioning transit corridors and border posts on the EU-Russia border. In this context the development of the Narva-Ivangorod bypass in co-operation with Russia will facilitate and promote trade between the latter and the European Union.

Environment

Environmental issues occupy an important role in the Estonian consciousness. As noted in the Commission's avis, public expenditure as a percentage of GDP is high compared to average EU levels, and the government is committed to funding environmental investment.

Gradually harmonising existing environmental legislation with EU norms as provided by the Estonian environmental strategy, which stresses public health, remains a priority of the Estonian government. We must take due account of the pollution-sensitive Baltic Sea and that local soils offer low protection against pollution of the ground water, which is Estonia's main source of drinking water. This requires a carefully considered approach to certain environmental norms, especially regarding wastewater treatment.

It is clear that a number of major challenges in the environmental field, mostly resulting from our Soviet legacy, must be tackled in order for Estonia to fully comply with the acquis. The rapid implementation of certain norms and the application of EU guidelines will require substantial investments exceeding the government's capabilities. In order to achieve effective compliance with the entire environmental acquis, transitional arrangements will be required.

On the other hand, Estonia has a well-balanced natural habitat, which needs to be preserved in order to maintain the existence of vital populations of plant and animal species, natural and semi-natural habitats and landscapes. The condition of many of these species and habitats substantially differs from those in the European Union. As a member country Estonia wishes to keep these specific features.

Regional policy

In comparison with EU member countries, regional disparities in Estonia have a different provenance. As a result of the Soviet planned economy regional social and economic development as a whole was brought out

of balance. Therefore efforts will be needed to harmonise regional development with Estonian and EU standards. Mr. Chairman,

Having outlined some of the areas that will be of particular interest to my country during the negotiations, I also wish to say that Estonia accepts the principles that were proposed by the Union for the conduct of the negotiations.

Finally, I will briefly mention a few issues that, though not directly related to the negotiations, should be considered:

First, I would like to direct your attention at the issue of visas. At present, Estonia has visa freedom with only five member states. In fact, Estonia is the only applicant country starting negotiations today whose officials are required to obtain visas to travel to Brussels. The European Union is about having the citizens of Europe get to know each other and each others' countries. I believe that the mutual abolition of visa requirements with all member states by the end of this year would, in a very practical sense, symbolise Estonia's return to the European family of nations. It would also considerably facilitate the participation of Estonian officials in the negotiations.

Second, Estonia has a keen interest in exploring the possibility of allowing the participation of Estonian officials in the Union structures already during the period of negotiations. We believe that the experience gained by Estonian officials would greatly facilitate our integration into the EU.

And finally, I would like to stress that Estonia is committed to the principles of full competition. Measures restricting trade between Estonia and the EU should be avoided during the period leading to accession.

This is our position as we open negotiations with the European Union. As regards further business between us, we agree that the meeting of the deputies should take place soon in order to agree on technical details and procedures so that our experts could immediately thereafter start screening the acquis.

Mr. Chairman,

Our relations with the European Union have been constructive and grounded on a firm basis of goodwill and mutual understanding. I am confident that these principles will continue to guide us throughout the negotiation process and I look forward to evaluating our progress at our next meeting.

Thank you.