

Interview with Günter Verheugen from EUmagazin (April 2003)

Caption: Interview with Günter Verheugen, European Commissioner for Enlargement since September 1999.

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Interview with Günter Verheugen

‘The EU is a political project that needs to have geographical limits’

The European Union has successfully concluded negotiations in the biggest enlargement round in its history without any major crises. For Commissioner Günter Verheugen it was a job well done. But the next applicants for accession are already queuing at the door.

EUmagazin: The forthcoming enlargement, the biggest in the European Union’s history, is a truly historic event. Did you have any doubts when you took up office that this extremely ambitious goal could be achieved in such a short time?

Verheugen: First of all, I have to say that I was surprised when I was given this task. It was a highly significant move when Romano Prodi decided to set up a separate Directorate-General for EU Enlargement and to confer on one Commissioner special responsibility for this portfolio. This was something that had never been done before. At first, I was doubtful whether it was basically possible to complete enlargement and bring ten new Member States in during our term of office. That we might actually be able to do so became clear only during the first 12 to 18 months. When I realised that we were on track, I did my utmost to make it happen.

EUmagazin: And how did you make it happen?

Verheugen: The most important aspect was to organise the entire enlargement process in such a way that the Member States and the applicant countries felt that the Commission saw itself as an honest broker in the process, taking account of the interests of both sides, balancing them out and putting forward proposals with which everyone involved was happy. At the end of the day, it is all about trust, politically speaking. I think that my main role was to create trust, and I think that I succeeded in doing so.

EUmagazin: It all sounds very easy. Did the accession negotiations really go as smoothly as that?

Verheugen: Of course, there were a number of extremely difficult areas in the negotiations, such as the free movement of workers, for example, where there were serious clashes between the various interests and positions. The whole chapter relating to competition proved to be particularly difficult. Some of the applicant countries had encouraged major investment by giving long-term tax exemptions which are not compatible with EU law. The free movement of capital was an extremely complex issue, since it involved the question of land purchases in the applicant countries, and home affairs and justice, which both involve border security, were also difficult fields. In addition, there were a whole series of political side-issues that demanded a lot of time and energy from us all. One example was the Ignalina nuclear power plant in Lithuania, a Chernobyl-type reactor, which I am proud to say that we were able to shut down without any major internal problems. We faced more problems in dealing with the question of the Temelin nuclear power plant in the Czech Republic. Temelin is a new plant to which Austria had objected. We had to find a way to persuade the Austrians and the Czechs to cooperate. It was an extremely laborious process that took a whole year, but we did it. The next complication was the Kaliningrad issue, which involved regulating traffic between Russia and Kaliningrad that would, in future, cross EU territory. And major domestic problems kept cropping up in one country or another.

EUmagazin: And yet the accession negotiations were concluded successfully. Can you take it easy now?

Verheugen: A lot of people have asked me what the Commissioner for Enlargement does when the negotiations are over. Actually, the negotiations with Bulgaria and Romania have not yet been concluded, and the negotiations with the ten applicant countries were only a relatively small part of the accession process as a whole. What is completely new about this enlargement is that we are not just negotiating, we have used highly-developed pre-accession instruments to help the countries of Central and Eastern Europe through a process of transformation and put them in a position where they can satisfy the established political, economic and democratic criteria. This whole process is not finished yet. We are still working as

hard as we can, and we shall continue monitoring even after the negotiations are over, right up until the day when the applicant countries actually join, in order to check that they are fulfilling all their obligations. To make sure of this, we shall be producing another comprehensive report on the applicant countries' progress in these fields six months before the accession date.

EUmagazin: If enlargement is to be a success, the EU still has to carry out a series of fundamental reforms. The work of the Convention on the Future of Europe has a central role to play here. How are the applicant countries involved in the work of the Convention?

Verheugen: The applicant countries are playing an active role in the Convention and are not merely observers. They will take part in the intergovernmental conference following the Convention as equal partners from the outset and with full participation rights. For this reason alone, the applicant countries regard their role in the EU Convention as a major opportunity. This is their first chance to be involved in shaping Europe's future, and they are seizing it with both hands and showing a great deal of expertise. I have the distinct impression that, in the current debate on intergovernmental cooperation versus the Community method, they want to strengthen the Community method, Community law and the Community institutions.

EUmagazin: Yet the behaviour of some of the applicant countries recently points in a completely different direction. Should we not be able to expect them to show solidarity and loyalty to the EU, in the spirit of a common foreign and security policy?

Verheugen: We expect the applicant countries to adopt and support the common positions of the European Union. They had always previously done so, even on Iraq. Once there was disagreement, so a special summit was organised in Brussels which ended with the establishment of a common position. This was adopted by all the applicant countries without any problem whatsoever the next day. I do not think that people are right to be concerned that the new Member States will prevent the EU's common foreign and security policy from getting off the ground. I have no idea whether it will get off the ground, but if it does not, it will not be the fault of the new Member States.

EUmagazin: Is it conceivable that 'old Europe' will use the pro-American accession countries as go-betweens in order to improve and intensify transatlantic relations?

Verheugen: That is an interesting question. I think that the new Member States realise only too well that there is no contradiction at all between European integration and good transatlantic relations and that it would be fatal to make that contradiction. We in Western Europe have to understand that the countries and peoples of Central and Eastern Europe have a completely different history and therefore see certain things quite differently. For example, if you ask Czechs or Hungarians who they think was responsible for the collapse of the Soviet empire, they will not say — as I would — that it was Europe and its policy of détente, they would always insist that it was America. We should not criticise anyone for taking this view. The stronger emotional ties that they have with the USA as a result thereof should be used to strengthen and improve the transatlantic dialogue. I see this relationship as a further opportunity to improve understanding. We should not allow Europe to be divided into a pro-American or a pro-European camp, with pro-European being equated with anti-American. We may be against the policies of the current American Administration but still interested in a transatlantic partnership.

EUmagazin: The new post-enlargement geography will mean that the Newly Independent States become our immediate neighbours. Is it not therefore very important for the European Union to take a more active role in this region?

Verheugen: I agree that we shall need to look very closely at this new configuration. Our eastern neighbours like Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova will be much closer to us after enlargement, and our new Member States in Central and Eastern Europe will not allow us to neglect them. I firmly believe that we need to develop a much more intensive policy of dialogue and cooperation with them and that we shall be able to do so.

EUmagazin: Do we not also need to review the EU's relations with Russia in this context?

Verheugen: We already have successful contractual relations with Russia that can be further developed, so I do not think that there is any need to put EU-Russia relations on a completely new footing. Kaliningrad is going to become an important factor again here. Although I hope that the transit question has been settled once and for all and that there will not be any further problems, the real issue concerning Kaliningrad still has not been resolved. We need to prevent the Kaliningrad enclave from becoming a sort of poor relation and ensure that this problem does not, sooner or later, end up by triggering major economic, social and political tensions. Kaliningrad is and remains part of the Russian Federation, but it can, nevertheless, be included in closer and more productive cooperation. I am still concerned about this problem, because, to date, the Kaliningrad question has been considered only from the transit point of view. We are prepared to talk to the Russians about this problem in order to ensure that Kaliningrad benefits from EU enlargement.

EUmagazin: Immigration, asylum and monitoring the external borders are among the Greek Presidency's priorities. Who is responsible for security at the external borders of the enlarged EU?

Verheugen: Responsibility for security at our future external borders lies with the new Member States. Since this question was one of the most important issues in the negotiations, we made intensive use of the pre-accession instruments to prepare the new Member States for this task, to establish the requisite security arrangements at the borders and to prepare and train the necessary staff. We have spent a lot of money on border security, and, in my opinion, we have already made a great deal of progress. A further point is that the new Member States will not join Schengen immediately. This decision will be taken once it is certain that the new external borders enjoy the same level of security as the current ones.

EUmagazin: Should we expect a further wave of enlargement?

Verheugen: As far as the next steps are concerned, all that we know for sure now is that Romania and Bulgaria are certain to join. This is scheduled for 2007, but they must have met all the conditions in full if they want to join then. Turkey is another applicant. If and when accession negotiations are to start with Turkey will be decided at the end of next year on the basis of a Commission report on whether or not Turkey has satisfied the political conditions for accession. This has not been the case to date, although it has made enormous progress.

We have now also received an application from Croatia, which has gone first to the Council of Ministers for consideration. The normal procedure is for the Council to ask the Commission to review whether Croatia fulfils the accession criteria. Only when it has completed this very detailed investigation will we be able to say whether negotiations with Croatia may be concluded rapidly or not. Let me just give a word of warning here. We may be rather underestimating the difficulties involved in Croatia's accession. Transposing Community law is an incredibly difficult task, particularly for a country that is still in the throes of transformation. I do not think that I can really tell you at the moment whether Croatia is ready to join the EU.

EUmagazin: And how do you assess the ambitions of the other former Yugoslavian countries to join the EU?

Verheugen: At first sight, you would have to say that the other Balkan countries are still a long way away from meeting the political and economic conditions. However, this does not alter the fact that it is in our own interests for us to continue to pursue a very resolute policy in order to help these countries along this very difficult path, as we are already doing with our stabilisation and association measures. I think that there is no one better placed to do this than the Commission, and I am proud to be able to say that there is probably no institution in the world with so much experience of assisting countries through a process of political, economic and social transformation. I also think that there is no other institution in the world with so much practical experience of establishing democracy, the rule of law and human rights in countries emerging from dictatorship. The Commission has built up a store of knowledge and experience here, and these will stand the future applicant countries in good stead.

EUmagazin: Where does Europe end, in your view? How do you define Europe?

Verheugen: There are many different possibilities here. People should not run away with the idea that European integration necessarily means incorporating into the EU the whole of the area that we refer to as Europe geographically and about which people have different views anyway. When people ask me how I would define Europe, I find it very difficult to say. First of all, how do you give a geographical definition? How do you say where Europe ends? Defining Europe in cultural terms, by saying that Europe is where the values of the old Europe apply, does not make things any easier, either. I would prefer to say that the European Union is a political project that also needs to have certain geographical limits, simply because, otherwise, our political and material capabilities will be overstretched. This is something we need to recognise. One possibility, for example, as Romano Prodi said, would be to establish a circle of states with which the EU has friendly ties and to develop increasingly privileged relations with them, but without involving them in the EU's decision-making processes. This would be one option for the next few decades. I am one of those people who think that there is no final answer for the European project, either in terms of its political geography or of the substance of integration.

This interview with Günter Verheugen was conducted in Brussels by Heide Newson.