

Statement by Joe Borg at the opening of the accession negotiations with Malta (Brussels, 15 February 2000)

Caption: On 15 February 2000, in Brussels, at the opening of the negotiations for the accession of the Republic of Malta to the European Union, Joe Borg, Maltese Foreign Minister, emphasises his country's strong attachment to Europe.

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Statement by The Hon. Dr. Joe Borg Minister of Foreign Affairs of Malta, Brussels, 15 February 2000

The Government of Malta welcomes the opening of accession negotiations for Malta's membership of the European Union. Today's meeting lays the final part of the road which will lead to the achievement of this objective.

Malta embarks on accession negotiations in the strong belief that membership of the Union is a natural complement and extension of our national development. This membership will firmly anchor Malta in the European process. It will further reinforce and enrich our democratic traditions and institutions, built as they are on the three pillars of respect for the individual, the sense of collective responsibility, and the observance of the rule of law. It will add an indispensable dimension to our efforts to promote the economic well-being of our people in a framework of improving social justice, a heightened awareness of the need to safeguard our environment and an enhanced capacity to compete in an increasingly globalised community. Malta has shared in the vicissitudes of European history since time immemorial. We have formed part of both the sad as well as the glorious moments of our continent. Our cultural and spiritual heritage bear witness to the wealth and variety of the European heritage. In our collective memories reside the ferment and turbulence of the European past.

Malta is therefore well placed both to understand and to participate in the continuing European process. With others we recognise the essential dimension of this process - the endeavour to ensure that the energy and creativity of this continent, so often misdirected to tragic consequences in the past, will henceforth be channelled exclusively into peaceful and co-operative activities.

In this spirit we understand that we must look beyond the individual building blocks of the process to grasp its fundamental inspiration and direction. The impressive institutional and regulatory framework which has evolved, the complex procedural and technical apparatus which have been put in place are, ultimately, only parts of a bigger whole. A whole rooted in that original vision for peace and co-operation which, as we have learnt through the experience of the last decade, is as vital and relevant today as it was half a century ago.

Malta strongly shares this vision and stands ready to make its own contribution to the European process. In the cultural field this contribution will primarily be a function of the historical and geographical circumstances that have given a particular shape to our national identity - in terms of language and customs, artistic creation and spiritual attitudes, we feel that the Mediterranean ingredient of our European identity gives us something very unique and special to add to the already immensely rich and varied European landscape.

In the political field we bring to the Union our own very strong commitment to the democratic process. We are all sharply aware of the continuing fragility of this process in many parts of the world. Those of us who are privileged to enjoy its benefits share the responsibility of working together towards its further strengthening and dissemination.

In the field of external relations Malta brings to the Union its particular insight into the Mediterranean dimension of European security and co-operation. At a time when events to the east of the continent demand increasing attention, Malta can play a role in supporting the Union's determination to devote the necessary attention to its southern neighbours.

In the economic field we add to the Union a strategic location in the central Mediterranean which offers a useful springboard for the growing European involvement in the development of the region. Our own economic relations with the Union have traditionally been very close.

Today, a significant part of our economy, be this in the shape of trade exchanges, of tourism, of investment flows or of provision of services is directed towards Europe.

At the same time, because of its geographical location, and the bilateral and regional policies it has

consistently pursued, Malta has excellent relations of co-operation and trust with all its neighbours. These relations can be put to the service of further promoting the objectives for partnership and mutually beneficial co-operation which the Union seeks with all Mediterranean countries.

As has already been recalled today, Malta opened its formal relations with the European Community almost thirty years ago, with the conclusion of an Association agreement. Throughout this period Malta has worked ever more closely with the members and institutions, first of the Community, and then of the Union. Following our application for membership, introduced just under ten years ago, this co-operation has greatly intensified.

There has therefore been a long period of gestation for today's meeting. In itself this underlines the thoroughness and commitment with which Malta approaches its objective for membership. It also explains why we come to the accession negotiations already with a good insight into the objectives and working methods of the Union.

The extent to which we are mentally well disposed and technically prepared to enter into accession negotiations emerged over the last ten months, during which Malta was engaged with the Commission in the analytical examination of the Union's acquis. The very useful and thorough work that has been accomplished over these months shows that, even taking account of the large task which still awaits us, the Maltese officials are adequately equipped to relate to, and work with, their European counterparts. Our legislation is to a significant extent already moulded in the shape of the Union's own legislation, and most of our administrative structures are sufficiently mature to evolve in the direction required by the obligations of membership.

The work of the last months has also given us a clear indication of what remains to be done in the process towards membership. We do not underestimate either the extent or the complexity of the task that lies ahead. While we feel encouraged by the level of our own preparedness, we therefore also recognise the need to benefit from all the programmes of support which the Union has devised for accession candidates.

In the last few days the Maltese Government has approved the first draft of our National Programme for the Adoption of the Acquis, intended to serve as the road map for the rest of our journey towards membership. While a copy of this first draft will be shown to the Commission by the beginning of March, as earlier agreed, in the coming weeks we will finalise the programme in active consultation with all the social partners in Malta. In this way the programme will become the expression of a co-ordinated national endeavour leading towards accession and beyond.

This programme analyses our existing legislative and administrative set-up in the framework of the Union's own acquis in the different areas. It lays down the short and medium term objectives which need to be pursued in the exercise towards harmonisation.

In broad terms we can divide the work that needs to be done in this regard over three levels. At one level there are a large number of areas where the acquis calls for legislative measures and administrative structures that are already clearly reflected in Malta. We therefore expect that the remaining transposition and harmonisation work connected with these areas will be relatively smooth and that the relevant negotiations will be expeditious.

At the second level there are some areas of the acquis where a significant amount of technical and administrative work is still required in Malta. The challenge arising at this level resides mainly in the complexity and detail of the exercise. Some aspects of the thirty odd chapters in which the acquis has been divided, and especially those relating to the free movement of goods and of services, taxation, customs, social policy and employment, consumer policy, transport, energy and environment, fall within this level.

During the negotiations on these aspects we will mainly be seeking the assistance of the commission services to help us in further identifying the precise nature of the action which is required, in planning out a detailed transposition and harmonisation programme and in obtaining the necessary training and advice

relevant to our needs. We do not expect the negotiations on these aspects to present undue difficulties, except, perhaps, in the finalisation of the appropriate time frames in a few instances.

A third level covers a small number of areas where the particular geographical, economic and social circumstances of Malta will need to be given special attention in the process of transposition and harmonisation. Most of these areas have already been identified during the screening exercise. In part they cover some very specific aspects such as those relating to the situation prevailing in our shipbuilding and shiprepair industry, as well as a very few aspects relating to traditional work or recreational activity in Malta. In part these areas also relate to broader aspects arising from Malta's size, and in specific aspects connected mainly with the introduction of the common agricultural policy, of measures of environment protection and of some measures relating to the free movement of capital. During the negotiations we expect to submit concrete proposals which, while reflecting our full commitment to accept all the responsibilities of membership, will also ensure the safeguarding of our legitimate concerns.

Our very clear objective in the coming negotiations is to ensure that Malta will form part of the next enlargement. We are prepared, and determined, to achieve what to us appears as a very realistic objective. In this spirit it will be our wish during the course of this year to open as many chapters for negotiations as will be necessary to bring us into step by the middle of next year with those candidates that are most advanced in the accession process. We look forward to the relevant decisions first by the Portuguese and subsequently by the French presidency in this regard.

Progressively as it moves deeper into accession negotiations, and closer to membership, Malta will intensify its already very close relationship with the Union and its members. We will pursue and develop the political dialogue initiated last year. We will seek to deepen and enlarge the economic and trading relationship we have with the Union in the framework of our existing Association agreement. We will continue our co-operation with the members of the Union in the pursuit of a EuroMediterranean partnership. We expect to start participating in a whole range of community programmes. We will also be following very closely the developments in the forthcoming inter-governmental conference which, hopefully by the end of this year, will complete its work on institutional reform.

At the national level the Government will continue to involve all the social partners in Malta in the accession process. The structures for information, consultation and co-ordination, which functioned so well during the screening exercise will be maintained, and where necessary strengthened and improved in the light of the unfolding negotiations. The Government is committed to consulting the Maltese people on the outcome of the negotiations through a referendum, which will be held as soon as the negotiations are concluded. It is our hope that this conclusion will happen during the year 2002 which will coincide with the Union's own target for its preparedness to accept new members as stated by the Commission in the report it presented to the Council last October, and that was endorsed by the Helsinki European Council. It is our firm commitment to be fully prepared for membership by the working date for accession we have adopted in the framework of the negotiations, namely the first of January

2003. This means that over this and the coming two years we have an exciting and exhilarating challenge before us. Today, as it formally faces up to this challenge, the Government of Malta reiterates its commitment and determination to pursue its objective successfully to the complete fruition.