

Address given by Günter Verheugen on the ratification of the Treaty of Accession in Poland (Warsaw, 27 May 2003)

Caption: On 27 May 2003, on the eve of the referendum held in Poland on the country's accession to the European Union, Günter Verheugen, European Commissioner with special responsibility for Enlargement, emphasises the historic impact of the decision put to the Polish people.

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15 countries offering a helping hand - Poland only has to accept (Warsaw, 27 May 2003)

Ladies and Gentlemen,

One year ago here in Warsaw, I talked about the old Warsaw and what it was like before the Germans and later the Red Army brought the curtain down - a metropolis that was home to a multifarious variety of humanity. The old Warsaw was wiped out, a victim of the politics of nationalism and expansionism. Yet the memory lives on, in the families where history is handed down from generation to generation, through family photographs and stories or just because not even a photograph was left as a reminder in the end.

It is a little known fact, however, that under the cloud of the European tragedy, not only western European politicians like Churchill dared to dream of a new blueprint for European politics, but men like General Sikorski too, the Head of the Polish Government in exile in London, and the Czech President Edvard Benes, who as early as 1940 put forward a proposal in London to build a "closer political and economic association" after the war. A treaty to that effect was signed on 23 January 1942. That same year Sikorski called a meeting of seven other European governments in exile together with the Free French Committee headed by De Gaulle to discuss the organisation of a "European Community".

But the Cold War prevented Poland from actively participating in the task of unifying Europe. Not until the 2+4 Treaty, in the wake of German reunification, did Poland receive belated recognition for its role in the anti-Hitler coalition. And only Poland's imminent accession to the European Union will realise what great Europeans like Sikorski saw as necessary in the midst of the European tragedy of the Second World War.

Most Poles can pride themselves on not accepting the supposed fate that Yalta and Potsdam dictated to them. The spirit of democracy and the thirst for national independence stayed alive and survived even the darkest days of the Communist reprisals. That spirit has triumphed and, like Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia, the Solidarity movement in Poland shone like a beacon of hope for all the people of central and eastern Europe who yearned for freedom and democracy and demanded respect for human rights.

But that is history. Because at a time when the Berlin wall still kept east and west apart, Poland had opened a new chapter and already founded a new democratic state which was starting to shake up society. The aim of the dramatic transformations in Poland at that time and later in other countries of central and eastern Europe was the same: to finally join the European family, not as poor relatives, but because they saw it as their natural and rightful place in Europe. Poland and others have been knocking hard on our door. You all know how hard it was for many in western Europe to answer and to get down to work on equal rights, equal obligations and equal opportunities in Europe.

It was probably not until 1999 that it was widely acknowledged that European unification was a necessity and an opportunity for the east, centre and west of the continent alike. Polish society has achieved much to this day. Every single Pole deserves the title Man or Woman of the Year! It was through their endeavour, their dogged fighting spirit, that Poland changed and prepared itself for membership of the European Union. Thus they opened up the way to a truly united Europe and I thank them one and all.

Whether that opportunity now becomes a reality is something that now lies in your hands, ladies and gentlemen, in the forthcoming referendum. The door to Europe is wide open. The choice is yours. In a few days' time you will decide what sort of future you want - a future that binds you together with the Member States of the European Union, or a future that would jeopardise everything that Polish society fought so hard for and that Poland's leading representatives aspired to. I am firmly convinced that you will make the right choice. A choice that will give current and future generation of Poles a future where they can live and work among equals and build a strong Poland that will offer its people peace, security and prosperity.

The imminent decision will not only have consequences for the future shape of the European Union. I am utterly convinced that Poland's eastern neighbours are also keeping a watchful eye open. Is it worth fighting for democracy and human rights? Why put an effort into an economy that is going to be part of the European

economy? This is what Poland's eastern neighbours are asking. And they want answers. You, ladies and gentlemen, will have your say on that answer with your decision. You will help decide the course that your neighbours will follow. The European Union's goal in this respect is unequivocal. We will do our utmost to make peace, security, widespread prosperity and equal opportunity the trademark of Europe in the 21st century.

Five countries have held referendums so far. In all five the voters have lent substance to the theory that the people coming to join us are Europe-minded and want to become members of the Union. The results so far speak for themselves. Perhaps Poland is having more trouble making up its mind. In no other future Member State is the debate on entry to the EU as controversial as in Poland. Nowhere is the opposition front so hardened as in Poland. In no other country is the risk so great that a difficult domestic political situation might obscure the true significance of the decision. The purpose of the referendum is not to judge the current situation in Poland, but to reach a decision that will shape the future of Poland in the 21st century and beyond. The political and economic situation in Poland is difficult. Everybody knows that. Those difficulties have nothing to do with EU accession. Membership of the EU will create a stable political and economic framework for Poland's development as a living democracy and a functioning market economy. Poland's political influence will be greater. The prospects for the Polish economy will improve. What alternatives to the EU do Poles see? It would have to depend on two of its eastern neighbours - but an association of weak economies will not produce a strong one. Let me stress once more: Poland's problems go back to the past. "Everything was better before", I recently heard a disappointed Pole say in a television documentary. I doubt it but I can say above all that there can be no going back. So the only question is this: does Poland want to solve its problems together with its EU partners or all on its own?

I would like to go over a number of questions that have been raised during many of my visits and talks here in Poland.

It is too soon, some say, Poland should be doing better first. It's true, Poland is having a hard time. The arduous process of transformation is not finished and structural change has brought about very high employment. The key question is will Poland's situation improve quicker inside the European Union or outside waiting to come in? Surely it is in all our interests for Poland to continue making progress, for people not to feel abandoned, but useful and recognised members of society.

My answer is unequivocal. Poland will have a greater chance of solving its problems inside the European Union, thanks to the strength and solidarity of the Community. If it had not been for the prospect of Polish accession, the West's engagement, in the broadest sense of the word, would not have been so strong. Accession will only strengthen it. It will bring new jobs to Poland, not only to Warsaw but to individual voivodeships. Not just for cities but for the country too. Who is going to build the roads whose reconstruction we are funding? Who will renovate the schools for which EU funds will be allocated if not Polish men and women? Who is going to benefit from the retraining, work skills and support programmes for the young and the older unemployed that will be carried out for the first time with EU assistance? The Poles, of course! We have earmarked 13 billion euros in the Treaty for Poland for the period 2004 to 2006 alone. That is a massive sum.

We are giving it because we want to help Poland and we want to see a prosperous Polish society. Those who want to postpone Poland's accession are depriving Poland of that aid and condemning it to looking to the east for a future that isn't there.

There are others who say that they are in favour of Europe but not of the European Union in its present form. This argument strikes me as outright dangerous. To put it bluntly, it is tantamount to the rejection of everything that has been achieved in Europe: peace, reconciliation between the Germans and their neighbours, the end of the domination of large countries over smaller ones and, last but not least, prosperity. Naturally, there is still room for improvement in the EU and it is no paradise on earth. Ours is a quest that is still not finished. But European issues can only be resolved through participation. The concept of European integration is very real and very alive. We can develop it and strengthen it if we only take the trouble to get involved, instead of indulging in utopic dreams. The European house that Poland wants to move into is not

ready. It is still under construction. But the finishing touches are for Poland to decide in future on an equal footing. And nobody can force the Poles into accepting something against their will.

And finally there are those who think the entry conditions are bad for Poland. But there is no evidence to support this because the argument does not withstand objective scrutiny. Maybe it's because many Poles, if only for historical reasons, are more ready than in other countries to believe that they are having the wool pulled over their eyes again. Let me be quite clear on this. The European Union is not a club and is not pulling the wool over anybody's eyes. The European Union has taken the decision to enlarge and has every interest for its part in ensuring that Poland's development continues without disruption and that the people of Poland build up their country and see it thrive. When Poland is a member, Polish problems will become the EU's problems. We want a Poland that will strengthen the European Union. That is why we have taken such great care over the negotiation of Poland's entry conditions. The upshot is that Poland has a very good treaty, a treaty that is good for the European Union as well, not least because it is good for Poland.

One question clearly on many people's minds seems to be the fear that Poland will be a second-class member of the EU and will lose its identity. Their fear is quite understandable. A critical decision on the future like the one now to be taken brings anxiety about the new and unfamiliar. As a matter of fact, it is something which Poles have in common with the citizens of the present-day EU if only for different reasons.

But let's take a closer look. Where does this feeling of being condemned to the second division come from? Because Poland used to belong to the eastern bloc? Because most Poles don't have pockets as deep as many Western Europeans? Because of foreign direct investment in Poland?

Just look at the Greeks, the Spaniards and the Portuguese, not to mention the Irish. These are countries with a history as difficult as yours, countries which have experienced dictatorship too. There too magnificent potential has gone unexploited in the past. And there too people have lived and live in extreme poverty. Nobody doubts their status as equals in the European Union now. Why? Because the EU respects values. One of those is that a man's worth is not determined according to the amount he earns. The Union is committed to equality between States. The EU is also committed to solidarity. Just compare Greece, Spain, Portugal and Ireland before EU accession to the way they are today. These countries have become more prosperous. They have a say at the heart of the Union. The Treaty was signed under the Greek presidency in Athens. It was a poignant moment which I suspect is still fresh in your minds. It was under the last Portuguese presidency that the objective was agreed of making the EU a world centre of innovation, offering social cohesion and a solution to the problem of employment. The Spanish presidency saw progress made in Barcelona on the common coordination of economic and employment policies in the EU. Every State can and must make its contribution - that is the reality of the European Union.

Another reality is that we are a Union of different peoples. We are German, French, Spanish, Italian or Irish - living in a European family. It is our diversity which makes us strong and which the Union protects through the treaty. No other international association has an equivalent legal obligation. We want to learn from each other, we want the experiences of one country to help us better overcome our own problems. If there is rapprochement, it is in the fact that the accession of a country adds to the political priorities of the Union and that the new priorities become common ones. Or that products of another country stand side by side with your own country's on supermarket shelves. We are now looking forward to the people of Poland adding their diversity and talents to the family. The experience you gained in resistance, in implementing the most difficult reforms. Your experiences and your ties with your neighbours to the east. Tomorrow we want to see supermarkets, as far as Portugal, with Polish products alongside German, French or Italian ones. We admire your creativity and adaptability, the research of your scientists, your history and culture. Last but not least, we set our hopes on the experience of the Polish Catholic church which it is no exaggeration to describe as one of the most courageous in Europe, which perhaps explains its vitality. It will be indispensable to the defence of our values in the future. All this we need and want for a European Union that is in constant development and renewal, for the sake of all its citizens.

Ladies and gentlemen, I should like to share one final personal experience with you. A few days ago I read the contribution of an eight year old Polish girl, Sara Owczarska, in a book presented by the winners of a

European literature competition on "Literature without borders". She won first prize in the youngest age group for her contribution on the subject "A place to live, a place to dream".

Let me read her essay to you:

"My name is Sara, I am eight years old and I live in Drzewica. I like German. I have a canary. His name is Lucek. I would like to be a German teacher when I grow up. I would like to live in Drzewica. It is quiet here and there are no robbers. I have lots of friends here. I would like to have my own house and garden. I would like to visit Germany too."

A small girl has a modest wish. For it to come true, the parents and grandparents of the many Saras across the land have a big, important decision to make: to bring their country lasting peace, lasting security and lasting prosperity. Fifteen European partners are willing to lend a helping hand. Poland only has to take it.