

Address given by Dirk Meganck at the ninth meeting of the EU-Slovak Republic Joint Parliamentary Committee (Bratislava, 20–21 March 2000)

Caption: On 20 March 2000, in Bratislava, at the ninth meeting of the EU-Slovak Republic Joint Parliamentary Committee, Dirk Meganck, the European Commission's Chief Negotiator for the accession of Slovakia, outlines the state of the negotiations for the accession of the Slovak Republic to the European Union.

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Speech delivered by Dirk Meganck, Team Leader for Slovakia, DG Enlargement, European Commission, 9th Meeting of the EU-Slovak Republic Joint Parliamentary Committee, Bratislava, 20/21 March 2000

Honourable Members of the Slovak National Council and the European Parliament, distinguished representatives of the Slovak Government and of the EU Presidency, ladies and gentlemen.

It is for me an honour and a privilege to lead the team dealing with Slovakia within the European Commission, under the authority of Director General Landaburu, official enlargement negotiator for all candidate countries, who was unfortunately unable to be here today.

I very much appreciate the invitation to speak, on behalf of the European Commission, to this distinguished gathering of the Ninth Meeting of the Joint Parliamentary Committee between the European Parliament and the National Council of the Slovak Republic. The non-partisan support which the Slovak National Council has lent to the objective of European integration and the big effort it is devoting to the transposition of European legislation into Slovak law is indeed very encouraging. The European Commission considers this joint committee as a one of the key institutions under the Europe agreement and highly values its contribution to the process of preparing Slovakia for its membership to the European Union. The previous work of the Joint Parliamentary Committee and its declarations and recommendations have been a source of guidance, inspiration and stimulus for the accession process of Slovakia.

I should like to refer to three closely interrelated topics, which in my view are highly relevant to the discussions that will take place at this meeting:

1. Where does Slovakia stand in the process of accession to the European Union and, more particularly, in the negotiations process?
2. Why is Slovakia at what may be viewed as a watershed or critical turning point in its accession process?
3. What are the conditions necessary to successfully overcome the present stage and decisively move towards early accession?

Where does Slovakia stand in the process of negotiations? In December of last year the European Council in Helsinki took the historic decision to invite Slovakia to open EU-accession negotiations, a decision Slovakia had been eagerly awaiting and which this Joint Committee had repeatedly recommended. This decision was taken on the basis of Slovakia's own merits and in line with the diagnostic and the recommendations formulated by the Commission in its last Regular Report on Slovakia. On 20th January, for the first time in the history of the Slovak Republic, the President of the European Commission paid a visit to Slovakia and gave a speech to this Parliament. On 15 February, accession negotiations were formally opened in Brussels between the Union, under its current Portuguese Presidency, and the Slovak Republic. On March 15, the Council of Permanent Representatives of the European Union endorsed the recommendation of the Commission to open negotiations with Slovakia on eight chapters of the acquis: Small and medium-sized enterprises, Science and Research, Education and Training, External Relations, Common Foreign and Security Policy, Competition, Statistics and Culture and Audio-visual. Next week, on March 28, the Slovak Government will present to the Council of Ministers of the Union its negotiating positions on these chapters and the practical modalities of the negotiations will be put in place.

As President Prodi explained in his address to this House, the process of negotiations will be guided by two key principles: differentiation and parallelism. Differentiation to insure that each negotiating country is treated and moves ahead according to its own progress and degree of preparation. Parallelism so that progress in negotiations goes hand in hand with progress in implementing and enforcing the acquis, as they constitute the two sides of the same coin.

We are therefore at a new stage in the process of enlargement of the European Union. While only a few weeks ago it was common to refer to candidate countries as either INS or PRE-INS, today we can speak, at

most, of a Luxembourg and a Helsinki group, if we want to keep track of the historic starting points in the negotiations. But, as the European leaders decided at Helsinki, there is one - and only one - negotiating track. Individual speed and progress within that single track now mainly depends on the ability of each candidate country to prepare for and advance in the negotiations of the 31 acquis chapters, through substantive progress in each one of them. Helsinki, has therefore made it objectively possible for those countries that came to the negotiating table at a later stage to catch up with those that came in earlier.

This brings me to my second point: Why do I believe that Slovakia is at a turning point in its accession process and one I would dare to qualify as critical, without any attempt on my part at being unduly critical?

Slovakia has clearly and publicly stated that its objective is to catch-up with its Visegrad neighbours in the accession process. The Joint Parliamentary Committee at its 8th meeting fully supported this objective. Slovakia has also set the date of January 1st 2004 as its internal target for accession. The Commission fully understands and supports Slovakia's ambitions, since the differentiated approach to negotiations, I have just referred to, makes this objective attainable. Slovakia is so much at the core of Europe that different accession dates for the various Visegrad countries could raise both external border and trade issues, which should ideally be avoided. Slovakia has a real chance to join the Union at the same time than its neighbours, provided that negotiations proceed solidly and speedily, but the difficulties that exist are important and should not be underestimated. I should now like to explore the difficulties referring to five dimensions, closely related to the Copenhagen accession criteria. This should illustrate my previous statement about Slovakia's "critical" juncture in the accession process.

The first dimension is of a general nature and has to do with positioning. Slovakia is at a point of transition between the stage of preparing for accession and the actual stage of conducting accession negotiations. This requires a qualitative leap for these are two quite different phases, although complementary. The new phase requires binding commitments at the negotiating table on legislative and implementing measures and not just indications or intentions on the time schedule envisaged. At the same time the pre-accession efforts will have to be sustained and stepped-up as they constitute the basis for the Council decisions on the further opening of chapters and on the closing of those already opened. Now that the number of chapters to be opened under the Portuguese Presidency has been determined, the mind should focus in two directions. First: what needs to be done to close them as soon as possible? Second: what needs to be done as of now to facilitate the opening of further chapters in the future, particularly those where more difficulties are to be expected, like Environment, Free movement of persons, Regional Policy and coordination of structural instruments, Justice and home affairs, Financial Control or Transport.

The second dimension refers to the first Copenhagen criteria. There is a need to move from compliance with the Copenhagen political criteria to confirmation that political stability is sustainable, democratic progress continuous and reforms irreversible. President Prodi stressed in his recent speech to the Slovak Parliament that the fulfilment of the Copenhagen criteria cannot be put aside once a country has been invited for negotiations and that the political criteria call for continued effort, commitment and improvement. I should mention in this connection a few relevant topics, that the Commission will need to continue examining, amongst others, in the context of the preparation of the next Regular Report, due later this year:

The constitutional reform, which this House is currently preparing and which should, inter alia, contribute to strengthening the independence of the Judiciary.

The Government's current actions aimed at improving the situation of the Roma minority. Continued implementation of the minority language legislation, in line with the Accession Partnership priorities and recommendations of the 8th Joint Parliamentary Committee.

Specific actions in the fight against corruption as highlighted in the draft text currently open to public discussion.

The third dimension refers to the second Copenhagen criteria. There is need for transition from serious macroeconomic stabilisation efforts, which the Commission has very much appreciated and have resulted in

the recent signature in Brussels of the Joint Assessment of Medium-term Economic Policies, to the consolidation and sustainability of these reforms. There is also need to move from the early steps in the structural reform of the economy to its full implementation. This should include the completion of privatisation transactions, currently in preparation, and solutions to the bad-debt clean up and recovery problem, which hinders the proper functioning of the financial sector as a vehicle for finance to the private sector. Reform of the insolvency legislation is relevant for both the second and the third Copenhagen criteria.

The fourth dimension has to do with the third Copenhagen criteria. I see the need here for transition from basic legislation in key areas of the *acquis* to detailed secondary legislation and follow-up. Having transposed the more global and sometimes easier parts of Community legislation, Slovakia is now starting to transpose the more sophisticated and detailed parts of the *acquis* in most fields. This requires a high degree of expertise in very technical fields like, just to put a few examples, legislation on capital markets, genetically modified organisms or the Schengen Information System. Some voices have been heard in this House that indicate that the quality of legislation is not always as high as it should be expected. It has also been indicated that the current legislative procedures are not always sufficiently adjusted to the speed, volume and nature of future EU-related legislation. The Commission welcomes the current efforts within this House to remedy these issues and encourages all players to take their own share of responsibility.

The fifth and last dimension is linked to so-called Madrid or institutional criteria. I should mention here the need to switch the accent from the transposition of legislation to its implementation and enforcement, based on solid institutional and administrative structures. In this context the reform of Public Administration and decentralisation, which the Slovak Government is currently preparing, should be inscribed within a thorough reform of the Civil Service. This requires the adoption of modern civil service legislation, reflecting the principles of responsibility and accountability, impartiality and integrity, as well as professionalism and stability. It also requires an efficient management of civil servants and their continuous training. The decentralisation measures planned by the Slovak government will certainly facilitate authentic regional policy by transferring more responsibilities down to the regions and municipalities. Leaving the fulfilment of tasks to lower levels, whenever there is no obvious need to deal with them at higher ones is in line with what we call in the European Union the principle of “subsidiarity”. However, decentralisation and reform of the civil service should be managed in parallel and in such a way that they are mutually reinforcing and not allowed to impinge on each others’ progress.

Allow me to move to my last point: What are the critical success factors in Slovakia’s path towards accession?

I see an overriding need for what I would call a triangle of stability. The three poles of this stability triangle are: First, stability of political institutions, in order to complete and sustain the political reform and to steer the overall reform process. Second, economic stability, to complete and consolidate the economic reforms and to attract much needed foreign direct investment to Slovakia. Third, stability and solidity of the civil service, in order to set solid basis on which to further develop and implement the *acquis*.

In summary: The European Commission recognises the successful steps that Slovakia has already taken in its path towards accession, but invites serious consideration at all levels of the demanding work that still needs to be done. There is still a lot of work lying ahead if Slovakia is to successfully reach its ambitious early accession objective. For these efforts to bear fruit there is need for a framework of stability and support, and the two should go hand in hand. Stability in political life, the economy, the social field and the civil service. Internal support from a broad spectrum of political forces, public opinion and social partners while fully recognizing that the ongoing transformation process is difficult and sometimes painful for the population. And external support from foreign investors, the European Parliament, the Commission and Member States. The Commission has shown in the past that it is ready to take its full share of responsibility and will continue lending its support in the future, but the main burden will fall on Slovak shoulders. Only through its own efforts and with the full support of its partners will Slovakia be able to meet its ambitious accession objective, while furthering the well-being of its population and contributing to the prosperity and stability in this core region of Europe.



Thank you very much for your attention