

## Address given by Günter Verheugen on Slovakia's accession to the EU (Košice, 21 February 2001)

**Caption:** On 21 February 2001, Günter Verheugen, European Commissioner for Enlargement, delivers an address at the Technical University of Košice in which he outlines the implications of the enlargement of the European Union (EU) and considers the progress made by Slovakia so that it is in a position to accede to the EU.

**Source:** Speech of Mr. Günter Verheugen, Member of the European Commission, responsible for the Enlargement of the European Union, at the Technical University of Kosice on 21 February 2001. [ON-LINE]. [Bratislava]: Delegation of the European Commission in the Slovak Republic, mise à jour 04.01.2002[10.06.2005]. Available on <http://www.europa.sk/english/index.htm>.

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**Speech by Mr. Günter Verheugen, Member of the European Commission, responsible for the Enlargement of the European Union, at the Technical University of Kosice on 21 February 2001**

Dear Rector, your Excellencies, distinguished academic dignitaries, dear students and guests:

I very much appreciate the opportunity to speak here at this distinguished university, in the historic city of Kosice.

When I spoke in front of your fellow students at the Comenius university in Bratislava more than a year ago, I said that the Commission had switched the signal from red to green for Slovakia's ambitions to enter the European Union. In this respect, the enlargement process has been often compared with a train. One year after opening accession negotiations with Slovakia, and one year after my last visit to your country, I can confirm that the Slovak enlargement train is on a good track and even accelerating its speed towards the European Union.

In my capacity as Commissioner responsible for enlargement this is my third time in Slovakia, but this is my first visit to the regions of Slovakia. The purpose of my visit is to learn more about regional realities and to emphasise the key role the regions play and will play in the process of enlargement. The regions are an important part of the overall process. Enlargement is not strictly limited to the mere transposition of EU legislation at central level. It comprises also the necessity to implement and enforce these rules. And it is the regions, which carry out the latter task to a large extent.

I would like to structure my speech around three issues. First: Why are we preparing for enlargement and what are the benefits it will bring ? Second: Where does SK stand in this process? Third: The enlargement process after Nice.

I.

Let me start with the first point: Why are we preparing for enlargement, what are the benefits it will deliver?

The enlargement train set off some time ago, back when the European Council at its meeting in Copenhagen in June 1993 took the historic decision to open the European Union to the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Having been already for a while on this journey, some people tend to forget why they have departed in the first place and, sitting in their individual compartment, lose sight of the benefits reaching the destination will mean.

Enlargement is the only adequate response to the end of the Cold War in Europe. It is a historic opportunity to unite Europe peacefully after the years of painful division and conflict, which marred the last century. Enlargement will extend the European Union's stability and prosperity to a wider group of countries, consolidating the political and economic transition that has taken place in Central and Eastern Europe since 1989. Enlargement is thus the continuation of the European Union's original purpose of healing Europe's divisions and creating the ever-closer unification of its people.

Now, less than a decade later, the positive impact of enlargement is already visible. It is visible both politically and economically, and benefiting equally the present Member States and the prospective members. The goal of enlargement has led to political stability, based on common European values, and has boosted economic reform in the candidate countries. Stable democracies have emerged in Central and Eastern Europe. They are already so robust that there need be no risk of a relapse into authoritarian rule.

The credit for this success belongs mainly to the people of those countries themselves, to you. I know that citizens of Kosice, and students from this very university also contributed to this new start. During the velvet revolution they streamed onto the streets to show the old regime that its time was up. In fact, the city and citizens of Kosice started building bridges even earlier. It was in 1980, when Kosice courageously stepped ahead, ignoring ideological barriers, became one of the first twin city of former Czechoslovakia with a

Western European city, the German town of Wuppertal. Many official and private ties have been established since then. Today, one of the strongest local supporters and activists of this project has moved from the town hall of Kosice to the presidential palace in Bratislava.

II.

So where does Slovakia stand on its path towards the European Union?

Overall, I can say that Slovakia is, after a difficult start, on a good track and gaining speed towards its destination, the European Union.

As you know, the enlargement train has to pass some checks, which were specified at the European Council meeting in Copenhagen in 1993 and which are referred to as the "Copenhagen Criteria". These are: the political criteria, the economic criteria and the criteria to take on the obligations of EU membership. A fourth criterion was added by the European Council of Madrid concerning the administrative and judicial capacity to implement the acquis.

1.

Let me start with the political criteria. In order to enter the European Union, a candidate country must be a stable democracy, respecting human rights and protecting minorities. The Regular Report, which is since 1998 the Commission's main tool to analyse the progress made by candidate countries in meeting these accession criteria, acknowledged in 1999 for the first time that Slovakia fulfils the political criteria. However some important issues under these criteria need further monitoring. Firstly I am confident the Slovak Parliament will soon decide the amendment of the constitution, which will enforce the independence of the judiciary.

On another aspect of the political criteria, respect of the rights of minorities, and in particular of the Roma population, the Commission is attaching great importance. The Roma form an important minority in this country, with an estimated proportion of around 10 %. Most of them live in the eastern part of Slovakia, in the regions I am visiting today and tomorrow. Many Roma live in the so-called settlements. In these places living conditions for these people are very bad and are a violation to human dignity.

I know that your government has developed good policy approaches to tackle the situation of this minority. This has been recognised by the Commission several times. But there remains a gap between good policy formulation and its implementation on the ground. This is an example where the regions and their political authorities have a crucial role to play.

But I want to emphasise that Slovakia is not the only country the Commission is concerned about in this respect. Other candidate countries with important Roma minorities – I am speaking of Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Romania - face similar problems. The Commission is determined to help these countries in tackling this important issue through all means, notably via financial assistance in the framework of the PHARE programmes.

A last issue concerns the fight against crime and corruption. Slovakia has achieved substantial progress by the adoption by the Government of a programme in this area and by the transposition of international obligations. This should be followed now by real implementation on the ground that should lead to visible positive results in the short term.

2.

I would now like to turn briefly to the economic criteria. These require the existence of a functioning market economy as well as the capacity to cope with the competitive pressure and market forces within the Union.

The latest Regular Report came, for the first time, to the conclusion that Slovakia can be regarded as a

functioning market economy and will become competitive in the medium term.

Macroeconomic stability has presently been restored through measures to reduce the fiscal and external deficits. This progress will need to be consolidated by a continued prudent policy mix.

The structural reform programme of your government has started setting an environment to attract foreign direct investment. The engagement of US Steel in the Slovak steel company VSZ Kosice, just some kilometres from here, can be regarded as a positive example. Slovakia needs to be sure that measures to support large investments in your country are fully in line with EU competition rules. There are also considerable administrative obstacles to create new SMEs in Slovakia, which play a crucial role in every country's economy. On Friday morning, I am going to meet business people in Bratislava to discuss the business environment in Slovakia.

3.

The third Copenhagen criterion requires the ability to take on the obligations of membership. This means that the body of Community law and practice - which is known as the *acquis communautaire* - is properly transposed.

The fulfilment of this criterion demands tremendous efforts by the candidate countries. Here, Slovakia has advanced significantly over the past two years, notably in terms of legislative alignment. I would just like to mention some areas like the internal market, telecommunications or audio-visual policy.

But there are some other sectors, where Slovakia has to put much more effort to keep the pace of progress towards accession. These are important and difficult chapters of the *acquis* like agriculture, environment, transport, justice and home affairs, financial control or regional development.

4.

Finally Slovakia – like all other candidate countries – need the appropriate administrative capacity to implement and enforce the laws. Let me underline the key role the public administration has to play to support Slovakia in its way towards accession. I do not only refer to the central administration in the capital, in Bratislava. Implementation and enforcement of the *acquis* also take place on the spot, in the regions and municipalities, here in Kosice, in Presov, in Banska Bystrica and in many other places in Slovakia.

The decentralisation measures planned by the Slovak government will certainly facilitate and strengthen regional policy by transferring more responsibilities down to regions and municipalities. This is in line with the principle of "subsidiarity" as we call it in the European Union: decisions should be taken at the lowest level possible. One of the purposes of my visit is to discuss precisely the role of the public administration in the regions in the context of enlargement.

The Regular Report has singled out weaknesses in the administrative capacities across the sectors. In this respect, it is of utmost importance that the implementation of the reform of the public administration, which your government has prepared, is not further delayed. The reform has to go hand in hand with the reform of the Civil Service. This requires the adoption of modern civil service legislation, reflecting the principles of impartiality, professionalism, efficiency and flexibility. The public administration has to be turned into an environment, which attracts young, ambitious, well-qualified people.

III.

Let me turn now to the last point of my presentation: The enlargement process after Nice.

Much has already been said about the Nice summit last December. It is common knowledge that the Commission and many others would have liked to have seen more far reaching reforms. One thing is for

sure: Nice has eliminated the last obstacles to enlargement on the EU side at the highest level. From an EU perspective, the enlargement train has now definitely been given the green light and the way ahead is clear. With the Nice Treaty, all the conditions will be met for us to welcome new members.

Nice has cleared the remaining institutional obstacles for enlargement on the Union's side. But Nice has done more for enlargement than clearing the way institutionally. By endorsing the Commission's strategy paper on enlargement, put forward in November 2000, Nice has set out clear perspectives for the further conduct of the negotiations. The central element in the Commission's strategy is a road map providing a clear sequence for tackling outstanding issues in the negotiations in the course of the years 2001 and 2002.

As a result of the decisions taken in Nice, we now have a definite window of opportunities for the first accessions. Firstly, negotiations with those countries that are suitably prepared should be concluded by the end of 2002. Secondly, these countries should be able to take part in the elections for the European Parliament in Spring 2004.

The overall progress, which Slovakia so far has achieved, is reflected in the negotiation process. Until today, out of 30 chapters already 16 have been opened and 10 provisionally closed. Under the current Swedish Presidency, it is foreseen that at least 12 further chapters will be opened and some closed. The guiding principles of the negotiations, i.e. merit and differentiation, give Slovakia a fair chance to catch-up with its neighbouring countries. This objective, which has been declared and pursued by your government, needs sustained and reinforced efforts, as the negotiations enter now into a more difficult phase, where chapters are going to be dealt with which are technically more difficult and politically more sensitive than the previous ones.

I have described enlargement as a train. Under the Swedish Presidency it is going to be a high-speed train. Nobody welcomes that more than I do. High-speed trains of course have to be particularly careful about safety. We would be wrong to think that we can go top speed at the expense of quality. I am confident that with joint efforts, together with your help, the path lying ahead will be smoothly passed and Slovakia will soon arrive in the very heart of Europe.

Thank you very much for your attention and I look forward now to a discussion with you!