

Address given by Walter Rochel at the Economist Conference in Bratislava (19 October 2000)

Caption: On 19 October 2000, at the Economist Conference in Bratislava, Walter Rochel, Head of the European Commission's Delegation to Slovakia, delivers an address in which he considers the Slovak Republic's negotiations for accession to the European Union and emphasises the country's efforts to comply with the accession criteria.

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Slovakia's approximation process

I should like to underline right at the outset that, during the last two years, Slovakia has made impressive progress on its way towards fulfilling the accession criteria, following a period of non-compliance with political criteria which was reversed after the last elections. The Helsinki strategy which allowed for opening of accession negotiations at the beginning of this year is still fully valid, and is being implemented. As you know, the essence of the Helsinki strategy is an equilibrium between speed and quality which means that the pace of accession negotiations will be set by Slovakia herself.

It is also clear that, for completion of the enlargement project, it is essential on the EU side to reach agreement on the institutional reform of the EU. As recently stated by the Commissioner Verheugen (speech to EP of 3rd October 2000) a successful outcome to the summit in Nice in December will allow us to press on more energetically with the negotiations.

Allow me just to go over the principles by which we are guided and which are non-negotiable:

1. We are preparing new Member States for full and equal membership. Enlargement does not create a Europe a la carte, nor a two-tier society. New Member States will have to satisfy all the accession conditions - there is no political discount.
2. Each country in the enlargement process is taken on its own merits, and chapters are opened or closed according to a country's actual state of preparation and actual progress in the negotiations.
3. From this follows another principle: countries that started later have a fair chance of catching up with those that started earlier. But let me be absolutely clear: we cannot help them catch up by slowing negotiations with the front runners. We can help them, but not by leaving their neighbours in the waiting room. It should also be stressed that the speed cannot simply be read from the number of chapters negotiated, what counts is the substance of the chapters.

Negotiations are now entering a new phase. In the case of Slovakia, this means that, until the end of the French presidency, 16 chapters will have been opened during this year which means a quicker pace during the negotiations than with any of the countries which opened negotiations back in 1998 during their first year of negotiations. Based on the European Union common position, it is very likely that, on 24 October, the following chapters will be opened with Slovakia: consumer and health protection, customs union, industrial policy and fisheries.

During the French presidency, we intend to move on to the small print, i.e. decisions on requests for transition periods or derogations. On 8 November the Commission will be presenting detailed proposals concerning the principles governing transition periods and the organisation of the associated decision-making process.

I fully expect the remaining chapters to have been opened with at least four of those countries in the year ahead.

Negotiations are set to intensify in the near future. This will bring a focus on unresolved, and often very difficult, issues. I will name just a few: agriculture, the environment, regional policy, justice and home affairs and the budget. In preparation for this, the Commission is developing a new monitoring system so that it can accurately gauge the state of negotiations and transposition for each country at any moment.

From the above, you see that the EU is doing everything to help Slovakia to successfully move on in its

accession process. In the end, the pace of the accession process will be determined by Slovakia's own efforts, and we cannot substitute for that. On the political criterion, decisive progress was achieved last year. However, this criterion cannot be taken for granted once and for all, and needs constant attention. In this context, let me mention minorities and Roma issues, the fight against corruption and the independence of the judiciary. On the economic criterion, substantial progress has been achieved this year as the Government succeeded to keep the macroeconomic figures under control, and restructuring of the economy on the microeconomic side has progressed notably in particular by moving on with the privatization of state-owned banks and major enterprises. The bankruptcy legislation which has been passed is improving financial discipline. The criterion where most progress is still needed is clearly the transposition of the acquis, and in particular, the creation and strengthening of implementation structures which will effectively enforce the EU legislation. This is also a decisive element for attracting more foreign direct investment which Slovakia urgently needs by assuring a stable and predictable business environment. Therefore, I would like to encourage the Slovak Government and Parliament to be more forceful on transposition and implementation of the acquis this and next year.

To sum up, Slovakia has a realistic chance to catch up with its Visegrad neighbours. But this chance has to be grasped and realized by further progress on the ground here in Slovakia.