

Address given by Raul Mälk on Estonia's foreign policy priorities vis-à-vis the EU (26 November 1998)

Caption: On 26 November 1998, Raul Mälk, Estonian Foreign Minister, delivers an address in the Parliament in Tallinn — the Riigikogu — in which he outlines the country's policy priorities vis-à-vis the European Union.

Source: Estonia's main foreign policy priorities, Address by Raul Mälk, Minister of Foreign Affairs, for the Government of the Republic at Riigikogu, 26 November 1998. [ON-LINE]. [Tallinn]: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Estonia, [09.06.2005]. Available on http://www.vm.ee/eng/euro/kat_314/1268.html.

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Address given by Raul Mälik, Minister for Foreign Affairs, for the Government of the Republic to the Riigikogu, 26 November 1998

Honoured Mr. Speaker,
Esteemed members of the Riigikogu,

[...]

II.

Esteemed members of the Riigikogu, allow me to now turn to the European Union.

EU membership is important for a small European state like Estonia. Membership will allow us to directly influence the Union's internal processes. These processes will have an impact on us, even if we remain outside of the Union. 56 percent of Estonia's total foreign trade is already with the European Union. In comparison, our trade with the CIS countries accounts for only 15 percent. The difficulties Estonia is currently experiencing in certain economic sectors demonstrate the vulnerability of small countries in today's globalising marketplace. Today, if we members of the European Monetary Union and already enjoyed full access to the EU's Common Market, then many of the threats faced by our economy would be considerably smaller.

The acquis screening process began on 31 March and accession negotiations were opened on the ministerial level on the concrete conditions for accession to the first seven chapters on 10 November. The start of substantive negotiations in parallel with the screening process is a significant step in the accession process.

It is important that the momentum of the accession process is maintained, as it is likely that the process will last for several years. As the official head of the negotiations delegation, I can confirm that our delegation and the Foreign Ministry have worked intensively to ensure that Estonia does not hold up the process. Position papers for the first twelve screened chapters were completed last summer. These positions were discussed and approved by the Government at the end of August and were officially presented to the European Union in early September.

Now we must move forward. Currently we are preparing additional positions and we are hopeful that the EU will be ready to conduct substantive negotiations in more than seven additional chapters during the German Presidency.

At the opening of accession negotiations on 31 March, my predecessor noted that the negotiations between Estonia and the EU would be unlike traditional negotiations, where the aim of both negotiating parties is to seek mutually satisfactory compromises. Rather, the accession negotiations are focused on finding ways and means to implement as much of the existing EU acquis as possible at the moment of accession.

Transition periods in certain areas are likely, even unavoidable. It will, however, be difficult to achieve permanent derogations, as they will have to be carefully supported by arguments drawing on our history, traditions, or other distinguishing features. This has been confirmed by substantive negotiations thus far.

As of today, we have reached the halfway point in the analytical comparison of Estonian legislation and institutions with the European Union's. To date, the screening has progressed successfully. The final bilateral screening meeting is scheduled for spring of next year.

Through the screening process we have gained a better idea of the amount of reorganisation that is still necessary on the domestic level prior to our accession. We also have a better idea of the timing of our accession. We have set 1 January 2003 as a possible date of accession to guide us in our everyday work. Meeting this deadline does not depend only on the actual negotiations that began on 10 November, but on our ability to resolve problems that have appeared during the screening process and our willingness to keep to our promises as outlined in our position papers. Estonia's rapid accession is dependent on our domestic

reforms. Yet a great deal is also determined by the pace of reforms in the EU itself and dependent on the EU's readiness for enlargement and the existence of a critical mass of goodwill in support of enlargement. The European Union's enlargement and its reform must proceed in parallel.

Thus far we have made rapid progress. This was confirmed by the report released by the European Commission on 4 November. Nevertheless, in addition to our accomplishments, the report also outlines the work that still remains. We should not allow ourselves to think that Estonia is already practically an EU member and therefore no longer needs to make an effort. Becoming a full member depends on following through on our own plans. The Riigikogu, as the country's legislative assembly, has a key role to play in this process. The Riigikogu's European Affairs Committee has made a significant contribution to the European integration process which should be acknowledged.

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