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A stronger Europe through deepening and widening

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EU Commissioner for Enlargement

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*Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

EPP Conference on Enlargement and consolidation of the
European Union

Brussels, 8 April 2008

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for inviting me to give a talk in this very important conference on an issue which is close to my heart – and my job description.

I am also pleased to note that the conference is entitled *enlargement and consolidation*, not *enlargement or consolidation*, because these are not opposites. Rather, they go hand in hand. There is no inherent contradiction between the deepening and widening of the European Union. Together they can make us stronger, if we do them right.

This is a classical debate. It is in fact as old as the European Union itself. During the past 50 years the EU has most of the time pursued deepening and widening in parallel.

Coinciding with the Southern enlargement in the 1980s, we founded the single market and developed substantial cohesion and regional policies. Following the Nordic and Austrian accessions in the 1990s, we established the single currency and reinforced our common foreign and security policy. Since the 2004 accessions, we have witnessed many new initiatives in the field of justice, liberty and security, as well as the pursuit of better policies for growth and jobs under the Lisbon agenda.

As a consequence of deepening integration and a parallel gradual widening of our zone of liberty and prosperity, Europe is today much safer and more prosperous than it was when the integration process started. With 27 Member States and a population of close on 500 million, today's European Union is much stronger and more influential in global governance than the EEC 50 years ago with its 6 Member States and a population of less than 200 million.

Size matters. The EU has become a regulatory superpower, which is driving policy-making in many areas. To name recent examples, the chemicals legislation and the climate and energy package are paving the way to successful global governance on these critical challenges.

Economically, too, the size matters. We have compelling evidence that the most recent enlargement has brought new dynamism to the EU economy. A larger internal market has induced more trade, more profitable investments and more growth and jobs.

Trade between old and new Member States have quadrupled over the past decade, and new business opportunities been created when the fast growing economies in the east were brought into the single market.

It did not lead to the doomsday scenarios that some feared. Today we can see that the Cassandras were wrong. Migration has been rather limited. Where it has taken place, it has helped to fill vacancies, keep up growth and move jobs from the grey to the legal economy.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Our enlargement policy has been called the EU's most successful foreign policy tool. It has served the Union well, and it is in all our interest to maintain a carefully managed enlargement policy for the future.

For that, we need a policy that both respects Europe's strategic interest and ensures the Union's functioning capacity. We have such a policy now and we execute it today. EU leaders, on the basis of the Commission's initiative, achieved a renewed consensus on enlargement at the European Council in December 2006.

This renewed consensus builds on three Cs: Consolidation, Conditionality and Communication, combined with the EU's capacity integrate new members. This consensus gives us a solid basis for our work. Let me briefly touch on the key elements of the policy:

Consolidation. We have consolidated the EU's enlargement agenda. This means that we keep our commitments towards countries that have been given a perspective to join. At the same time, we are cautious about taking on new commitments, so as not to overstretch our capacities.

Conditionality. Progress towards the EU depends on how and when the countries meet the conditions of accession. Any country aspiring to join the Union must be prepared to cope with the obligations of membership. We can best reassure the European public by sticking to the conditions for membership, and showing that future members will not disrupt the Union but reinforce it.

This brings me to the last C; Communication. As I have outlined here today, enlargement is a success story in terms of democratic transformation and growing prosperity throughout the continent. But somewhere along the way, the narrative was lost. We have to engage in a genuine dialogue with the citizens, and to address the legitimate concerns many of them have, e.g. worries about future job opportunities.

Calling a spade a spade and being honest about root causes and effects – that's the best way to ensure that enlargement is not turned into a scapegoat for domestic failures, but remains a success story.

In future enlargement policy, we must take into consideration the EU's capacity to integrate new Members. When doing this, it is of paramount importance that we also keep our own *strategic interest* in mind.

The virtue of the renewed consensus on enlargement is that it both emphasises the strategic value of enlargement, i.e. the EU's soft power and, at the same time, identifies the ways and means to ensure our capacity to function, while gradually integrating new members.

The Commission has endeavoured to further improve the quality of the accession process in various ways. We now use benchmarks more systematically. We shall make impact assessments on key policies at key stages throughout the negotiations. And, once the time is ripe, we shall assess the budgetary implications on key policies, in particular on agricultural and cohesion policies.

Building on lessons learnt in the past, we also expect that candidate countries address difficult issues, such as judicial reform and the fight against corruption, at an early stage.

When improving the quality of the accession process, we should not however create something overly complicated. That would only build artificial blockages into an accession process that is already complicated enough. I am sure Croatia's Foreign Minister Gordan Jandrokovic agrees with me here. What is essential is that we must have clear rules that are understood both by our own citizens and by the countries concerned.

Integration capacity is of course also about the EU's own set-up; its vision and institutions, budget and policies. In this context I welcome the Lisbon Treaty and hope that its ratification will be smooth. This Treaty is of great importance for European construction, regardless of future enlargements. It will make the EU more democratic and transparent and more effective and efficient, not least in common foreign and security policy.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The EU's consolidated enlargement agenda covers South-Eastern Europe, i.e. the Western Balkans and Turkey, which have the prospect of EU membership once they meet the conditions.

Yet enlargement is not the EU's only policy for dealing with its neighbours. I fully support the work of my colleague Benita Ferrero-Waldner to further develop and strengthen the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), which guides reforms in our neighbours and brings them closer to European markets, institutions and values.

The tailor-made approach of the ENP benefits the EU and its partners alike. It allows the EU to take a strategic perspective and look at how strengthen our outreach in terms of external economic policy.

It helps us to respond better to economic globalisation by widening the European economic and regulatory space. For our partners, it provides the immense opportunity to integrate into the EU's internal market of 500 million consumers. Just recently, negotiations were launched with Ukraine on a New Enhanced Agreement including on a deep and comprehensive Free Trade Area.

Indeed, enlargement and neighbourhood policies are complementary tools. The development of the Eastern dimension of the ENP contributes to the consolidation of the enlargement Agenda. Both policies form part of the wider European security strategy.

Therefore, while approaching the launch of the Union for the Mediterranean, we should also look for ways to further develop and strengthen the relations with our Eastern neighbours. Anchoring countries such as Ukraine more firmly on the European track is important for the security and stability of the entire Europe.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Before concluding, let me take you onto a quick trip to the countries in my own portfolio, for a quick update on where we stand:

Turkey is negotiating accession since October 2005. It was clear from the start that these negotiations were going to be a long-term effort, one which has to ride out political storms in Ankara, Brussels and other capitals.

The most valuable part of this process will be the transformation of Turkey into a more open society with a strong commitment to the values shared by all Europeans.

The EU accession process has long been an important anchor for the country's political reforms. It was tested last year during Turkey's presidential and parliamentary elections. It will be tested again in the future, e.g. through the Constitutional Court's decision to deal with a case seeking to ban the governing party from politics.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As concerns the Western Balkans, the countries have come closer to the EU over the past couple of years. Each of them is able to accelerate its integration with the EU this year.

2008 can be a decisive year for Croatia's accession negotiations, if the country makes substantial progress in meeting the benchmarks, especially as to judicial and administrative reforms, fighting corruption and restructuring the shipbuilding sector. I am pleased that the Commission could be helpful in settling the ZERP issue. Thus, an obstacle was removed and a crucial and strong push given for Croatia's accession negotiations.

The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia could demonstrate its readiness to undertake accession negotiations by making determined efforts to meet key priorities. We shall assess this in our Progress Report in the coming autumn. Lately, the *name issue* has consumed much political energy. I understand the disappointment experienced in Bucharest last week, and I welcome the political leadership's determination to continue on the road towards NATO / EU integration.

The task for both Albania and Montenegro is to build a convincing track record of implementation of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) and likewise pursue reforms with determination.

Bosnia and Herzegovina could be able to sign its SAA within the next few weeks and thus pass a necessary gateway towards eventual candidacy. As ever, it will depend on the country's leaders rising above local political games to adopt police reform.

Serbia is central for regional stability and good neighbourly relations in the Balkans. Serbia has a crucial choice to make in the parliamentary elections on 11 May: it can either turn to the European future or risk self-imposed isolation. The first option will take Serbia forward, towards stability, stronger freedoms and increasing prosperity – along with the other countries of the region. The other option is a road to nowhere.

Ladies and Gentlemen

On Kosovo- the EU is fully committed to the political and sustained economic development of Kosovo, and ready to use all instruments to help it realise its European perspective. The commitment of the Kosovo authorities to a democratic and multi-ethnic society will soon be enshrined in its new Constitution. This is a welcome step. The EU, on its part, is working hard to ensure the operational deployment of its EULEX mission, and actively coordinating with the UN on the reconfiguration of the international presence.

The current enlargement agenda creates the basis for work also in the years to come. However, evolution is possible. The world around us continues to change. We, too, must be ready to adapt dynamically to new, emerging situations. That way can we can ensure the success of our policies also in the future.

This is also why it is also important to have debates like this on how to develop the enlargement and neighbourhood policies in the future.