Speech of Commissioner Verheugen at the Chamber of Commerce of Malta – 24 January 2003

Mr. President,
Dear Members of the Chamber of Commerce of Malta,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to thank you for your kind invitation and the opportunity you give me to address members of your organisation and the Maltese people at this crucial moment of our common history. It is always a pleasure for me to visit your country but today it is with a special sense of duty that I have come to Malta. In my past visits, while positions in favour or against EU membership were already being strongly expressed, I asked the Maltese people to wait until they know the final accession package before they take their final decision. As you know, the negotiations have been concluded in December last year at the Copenhagen summit and here I am today to tell the Maltese people what this package is, what we have achieved together with the Maltese authorities. The Maltese people must know what they are being offered in order to decide, in their heart and conscience, whether or not, they want Malta to join the EU in May 2004, whether this is the right choice for them, for their children and for the coming generations. In order to clarify fully the situation for the Maltese people, I shall also mention the alternatives and sketch out what it would imply if the Maltese people decided not to opt for membership.

But let me first tell you how much I am aware of the fact that all the opportunities offered to Malta by membership - and they are indeed huge - cannot be turned into successes without the hard work of entrepreneurs like you and of the people employed in your companies. When I was a child, the generation of my parents had to rebuild a Europe devastated by war and this could be achieved only through the hard work of entrepreneurs and of all European people. You, in Malta, had to build, at your country’s independence forty years ago, a modern country, a modern and competitive economy. And this you did in a small country that has hardly any natural resources. Today you are considering going one step further. In a global world where the economy ignores the frontiers of nations, you are considering joining the European Union. The EU knows the reality of the enterprises, big and small, their crucial importance. We can help to create the right environment for business and social development, but ultimately this development depends on your will. I wish to pay a tribute to all entrepreneurs in the EU and in Malta who generate, through their hard work, our economic development in the spirit of social solidarity, which is also one of our essential values.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Years of steady efforts by all candidate countries have brought us at the end of a long and strenuous process, and the enlargement of the Union has become a tangible reality. For all those who have been involved in this huge and complex task of transposing and implementing the so-called Community "acquis", of negotiating the terms of its implementation, there is the feeling that we have reached the well deserved light at the end of the tunnel.