Honourable Members of Parliament,

Thank you for this warm welcome and for inviting me to this meeting.

I am delighted to meet you at this important time in history. The current enlargement of the EU is one of the biggest challenges the European Union and, I would expect, the accession countries have ever faced. I am here in my capacity of member of the European Commission with responsibility for environment. Those of you who take an active interest in the accession process probably already have a fairly clear idea of what I am going to say. I will not surprise you. My message is clear: Poland needs to speed up its efforts to participate in EU environmental policy.

The benefits of applying EU environmental policy are, indeed, important.

Environmental protection brings health for citizens and a competitive industry. Good water to drink, clean air to breath, clean rivers for fishing and bathing as well as good urban services are something that Polish citizens are entitled to even without accession to EU.

The costs of implementing the environmental requirements for EU accession are considerable in all applicant countries. In Poland alone, they are estimated at 30 billion €. However, we should not lose sight of the benefits which these investments will bring about. In 1993, the World Bank estimated that environmental damages led to losses for the Polish economy ranging from 3 to 4 % of total GDP. Although the quality of the environment has improved, the costs of environmental problems are still substantial.

The European Commission is in the process of analysing the environmental benefits of the accession process in the candidate countries. Even though the work is not yet finalised I can already now give you some examples of results. For all the candidate countries together, the benefits of complying with EU standards in the field of water and air could be as high as 10 billion € annually.

In the case of Poland, reducing sulphur and nitrogen oxide emissions into the air to EU levels would bring economic benefits 1.2-1.7 times higher than the costs. These benefits only take into account direct health benefits to the population. If indirect benefits such as better production technologies and employment generated by investments are considered, the picture is even better. The economic benefits for investing in water and wastewater services will also be high. In Poland, health benefits alone would be 1 billion € annually.
This proves that environment is not a luxury item on the political agenda. Environmental protection cannot wait until economic development has taken place. Polluting first and cleaning up later is costly and inefficient.

The EU has received Poland's negotiation position on environment. It is the candidate country that has put forward the highest number of requests for transition. The EU Common Position states clearly that Poland should fully adopt and implement EU environmental directives by accession. Transitional periods will be limited in time and in scope and will have to be fully justified. For all requests, Poland needs to provide comprehensive implementation programmes including timetables, the necessary funding as well as the institution responsible. The Commission is currently waiting for this information.

I am aware of Poland's recent efforts to improve its compliance with EU environmental policy. A wide range of new laws is in Government as well as in the Polish parliament. The first of these, the Act on access to environmental information and environmental impact assessment, has already gone through a first reading in Parliament.

Access to environmental information is a central part of EU environmental legislation. This is because it provides the tools for the civil society to actively work for environmental improvement. At the same time as raising awareness of environmental issues it tends to put the spotlight on urgent problems.

Environmental impact assessments are equally important. As you know, the directive on environmental impact assessment is far reaching. For all new investments that can have an impact on the environment, studies must be undertaken. This is a powerful tool for the protection of the environment promoting transparency before decisions. As you are aware, the Council of Ministers has stressed that all new investments, in particular all EU assistance to Poland, will have to undergo impact assessments similar to EU standards.