Mr. President, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I consider it a great honour for me to address you at this prestigious occasion.
I am delighted to see so many friends here. We meet quite often, Mr. President, dear Minister, and I am grateful for the deep sympathy I meet at each of these occasions.

A Polish writer, Ryszard Kapuscinski, said that the best way to know a country is through friendship. I may say that this is exactly the way I got familiar with Poland.

It is more than a fortunate coincidence that the Diplomatic Academy of the Republic of Poland is created at a moment when Poland is very close to the realisation of its top national objective:

Becoming again an active member of re-united Europe.

Poland has always been a pioneer for the European identity. Let me give only two striking examples which, in my view, are linked to each other:

- Back in Renaissance, Poland was the first country in the world to practice tolerance between different religious convictions within the same state.

- Less than twenty years ago, the Polish people paved the way for freedom and democracy in Central and Eastern Europe.

As Secretary General of NATO I had the privilege to work actively for the first big step in Polish foreign policy after the re-establishment of democracy - Poland's membership in NATO.

I will never forget the ceremony of Poland's NATO accession in March 1999. My old friend Bronislaw Geremek expressed what everybody felt at that moment:

"Poland forever returns where she has always belonged: to the free world."

I feel equally moved now that we are so close to another fundamental step for this country and for the re-unification of Europe. I accompany your accession to EU with the same deep conviction I felt at the moment of Poland's NATO accession.

I am very much aware that this time the atmosphere in your country seems to be more sober, less euphoric than four years ago. Does this mean that the accession to the EU is less important for Poland than the accession to NATO? No, certainly not. The difference lies in the character of the two organisations.
NATO’s task is to ensure the collective defence of its members. Through its NATO accession, Poland could feel secure for the first time in many centuries. This had an enormous psychological impact.

The EU is covering a very broad range of issues and policies. They are important for our daily life, but some of them are very technical and down to earth.

Let me say quite frankly: it is normal that the discussion about milk quota or the administrative requirements of an "objective 1" region does not foster enthusiasm.

I would like to compare the EU accession process to the situation when you build a new house: First, you are very euphoric when you see the drawings by the architect. However, after some time you get aware of the details you have not taken into account. You get annoyed with the craftsmen. There is some unforeseen expenditure. You suffer delays because of bad weather. And your bank is perhaps not as helpful as you initially thought it would be. But in the end, once you have moved in, you are relieved and happy.

As you know, the European Council will meet in Brussels next week in order to finalise the common positions of the EU on the hard core of the accession negotiations. Between the meeting in Brussels and the European Council in Copenhagen in December we will continue to have intensive and, no doubt, difficult negotiations. But the struggle about thorny details should not allow us to forget that we are approaching a step which will be considered a milestone in the History of Europe. As a Spaniard, I remember very well the long and sometimes frustrating transition of my country from candidate to full member status. Spain too came out of a long period of authoritarian rule and placed the hope of its renewed democracy in membership of the European Community. Nearly seventeen years after Spain’s accession, I can only tell you: It is worth the effort. In economic terms, in political terms, in terms of the society in general. And, last but not least, in terms of international influence.

To put it in the words of the Polish political writer Adam Krzeminski:

"For the first time in several hundred years, Poland’s geographical situation is no longer a handicap, but an opportunity."