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Speech by President Barroso at the Croatian Parliament

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Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

Croatian Parliament

Zagreb, 7 April 2011

Mr Speaker,

Honourable Members,

First let me thank you Mr Speaker for your invitation. I am honoured to have this opportunity to address the Members of the "Sabor".

Let me start by wishing you my sincere congratulations because in one-month time this building will celebrate its 237th anniversary. The Croatian Parliament convened its first session in this building on 6th May 1737, even if its earlier sessions date back to the 13th century.

This illustrates how old and deep-rooted is the Croatian democracy. After some trepidation and human suffering caused by a turbulent 20th century I am glad to address the representatives of what is now a multi-ethnic, tolerant and democratic Croatian nation.

But this month Croatia also celebrates another important date. On the 20th of April 2004 the European Commission gave its positive opinion on the application of Croatia for the EU's Membership.

The application for EU membership helped to turn an important page in Croatia's history and its accession will initiate a promising new phase.

But let me assure you that these are equally historical moments for the European Union itself. As you know, the European perspective of the Western Balkans remains a high priority on the European Union agenda and my current trip to the region starting here in Zagreb bears witness of that.

Accession to the European Union has been part and parcel of the European nations' quest to consolidate democracy, stability and achieve social and economic development.

We have seen it in the 50's when the six founding countries embarked on this project in the aftermath of a devastating war; we have seen it in the 80's when Southern countries – Greece, Portugal and Spain – joined the then European Community as a way to secure their transition to democracy; we have seen it in 2004 and 2007 when Central and Eastern European countries entered the European Union to consolidate their regime change; and we will surely see it in the early days of this new decade with the accession of Croatia and other Western Balkan countries.

The forthcoming accession of Croatia will certainly act as a catalyst for the whole region to move steadily towards the European Union.

It is therefore a pleasure for me to visit Croatia at a time when accession negotiations have entered their final stage and their conclusion is within reach.

Over the past years, Croatia has made considerable progress and overall, this is an impressive result. It shows your country's determination in pursuing its reforms. And it also demonstrates the European Union's commitment to proceed on the basis of the 'own merits' principle.

You are now on the last stretch of your path towards EU membership and, as it generally happens in any negotiation process, it is also a difficult stretch if not the most difficult one.

Preparations for EU membership are certainly tough but they are also worthy.

They are tough because real and demanding reforms are needed for joining the European Union. This is a question of credibility, and conditionality is a guarantor of credibility. European citizens have to know that once you join the European Union this means that you are indeed fully ready to do so.

They are worthy because joining the European Union will bring a real change in every Croatian citizen's daily life. The final destination is surely the most rewarding prize of all but the path is also worth the journey.

I have had earlier today a very useful and constructive meeting with Prime Minister Kosor and we have discussed the necessity to keep, more than ever at this crucial time, the momentum of the accession negotiations.

It is ultimately up to Croatia to maintain and even to increase this momentum. The closure of the negotiations will obviously depend on the time when Croatia will have finalised the key remaining reforms, which have to be tackled with determination. And I want to assure you that you can count on the Commission's continued support.

The Member States' expectations of Croatia are high. As you know, they wait for Croatia to deliver strong track records of concrete results. You need to demonstrate that progress is credible and sustainable.

The area of judiciary and fundamental rights, chapter 23, is probably the most difficult chapter. The Commission took stock of the situation in the Interim Report of March. Croatia has certainly made great progress however remaining benchmarks have yet to be met. Further improvements are still needed in judicial reform and in the fight against corruption, to ensure full investigation of war crimes and to improve the implementation of the legislation on minority rights.

It is important for Croatia to continue to focus its efforts on these areas to guarantee that the reforms undertaken will indeed bring real and credible changes. This is first and foremost in the interest of all Croatian citizens.

Mr Speaker, Honourable Members,

As we all know, Parliaments play a central role in democratic life. This is where all the sensitivities of the nation are represented. In this house the important discussions take place, the strategic decisions are taken.

I very much respect the democratic debate and the democratic discussions, for this is in the very foundation of the European values. I know you will have an important electoral moment approaching and temperature will rise as it always does on these occasions.

However I would like to make here a plea. The plea that the European Union accession process continues to be a project of national unity.

The current government is committed to make progress and conclude the negotiations soon. The Prime-Minister just assured me she would spare no efforts in that direction.

But this has to be more than a government or a single party project. This has to be a project of each and every one of you. This is a project for an entire generation.

In its Resolution on the Accession of the Republic of Croatia to the European Union adopted in December 2002, this Parliament affirmed, and I quote “that the membership of Croatia in the European Union was a strategic national objective which would be fully and permanently supported by the Parliament.”

I could not agree more. I therefore encourage you to stick behind this shared goal.

This Parliament also has a great responsibility in explaining what joining the European Union means. The rights and obligations that come with it. I commend in particular your decision to establish the Alliance for Europe in this Parliament which brings together members from different parties.

In this particular juncture of economic hardship caused by a global crisis there is a lot of misinformation and misperception around the EU.

It is important to engage with your citizens and to reinforce the public debate on European Union membership.

Beyond negotiations, accession's preparations also mean getting ready for the significant benefits deriving from EU membership.

Once, Croatia will join the European Union, you will become a part of the world's largest single market, the largest trading partner of the world's biggest economies and the largest provider and recipient of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) among all world regions. In this respect I encourage you to continue working to create a more investment-friendly environment and to deal effectively with corruption and red tape.

Upon accession, Croatia will become a full Member of a community of more than 500 million citizens, the European Union's strongest asset. We have indeed rich human resources compared with most other world regions, our citizens are well educated, our work-force well- trained.

Upon accession, Croatia will become an active player in the "Europe 2020" Strategy for a smart, sustainable and inclusive economy. That is our strategy to address together our common challenges, to boost growth and create jobs, to prosper in a highly competitive and interdependent world while preserving our social market economy model. In a word, this is our strategy to turn common challenges into common opportunities. However, these opportunities do not come by themselves! One has to prepare well in order to reap the benefits arising from such opportunities.

Upon accession, regional and rural development funds will be available to support the Croatian economy, its agriculture and its regions, leading to the creation of jobs.

EU funds will contribute to the development of infrastructures in the key sectors of transports and environment, as it is already the case with the pre-accession funds supporting Croatia.

Of course, the more prepared the Croatian institutions are, the more they will be able to make advantage of these funds.

And Croatian people are getting prepared! I would like to congratulate here the Zagreb Law School for succeeding in the European Law Moot Court Competition last week in Luxembourg, defeating 70 teams from all over the world.

Once you will join the European Union, you will be part of an Union where all countries' identity and traditions are respected. Croatian will be an official language of the EU. Our diversity is not a weakness on the contrary it is a great strength. And the European Union looks forward to strengthening it even further with Croatia's cultural diversity and dynamism.

Once in the European Union, you will be a Member of an Union, and let me quote here the article 2 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, "founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities."

I look forward to Croatia also as a Member State actively helping its neighbours move forward in the accession process.

I encourage Croatia in continuing the process of reconciliation and closing the chapter of a past on war crimes and missing persons. Many war crimes remain open and many families suffer because they do not know the whereabouts of their missing loved ones.

Mr Speaker, Honourable Members,

The stakes are high for Croatia, but also for the region as a whole and for the European Union.

As I have said, when negotiations can be closed depends on Croatia finalising the key reforms. The most important is to be fully prepared. This is a question of credibility and mutual trust, a question of responsibility and solidarity.

I am sure that your fellow citizens can be confident that everything will be done for Croatia to be soon fully prepared, with the constant support of the European Commission; to join the European Union

And confidence is key. As the philosopher Seneca said, and I quote "lack of confidence is not the result of difficulty, the difficulty comes from lack of confidence."

The European Commission will continue to walk alongside with you on this last part of the accession negotiations track and we are looking forward to welcoming you soon as the 28th EU Member State.

Thank you for your attention