



Dr Joe Borg, Member of the European Commission, Responsible for Fisheries and Maritime Affairs

Opening speech for Croatian Lighthouse Exhibition

Ministers, Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour for me to participate in the opening of this exhibition on Croatian lighthouses. This is a theme which ties in strongly with my portfolio within this Commission of fisheries policy and more specifically, maritime affairs. Therefore I am particularly happy to have this occasion to give a few opening remarks and to address very briefly the relations between the EU and Croatia in my sphere of competence.

A lighthouse is clearly something more than a mere navigation tool. It is a powerful symbol of mankind's search for light, security and comfort. Throughout the centuries, the sighting of lighthouses provided a sense of relief and protection to seafarers, from the early times when simple fires were lit in strategic places until the 19th century when new optical techniques permitted light to reach as far as the horizon.

Taking into account Croatia's rocky coastline of over six thousand kilometres dotted with numerous islands, it is not surprising that there are a large number of lighthouses to be found. These are clearly a reflection of Croatia's rich maritime tradition which emerged on the basis of the fact that the most economical trade route between Europe and the East lay along the Adriatic coast. The legacy that remains from the early days of the ancient Greeks, in terms of flourishing trade and bustling ports, reveals Croatia to be still very strongly attached to its maritime heritage.

I have heard, although I have regretfully not yet seen for myself, that the Croatian coast is stunning. I also understand that some lighthouses have been converted to offer accommodation to the many tourists that now flock to Croatia in large numbers. Croatia also boasts a large number of highly trained seafarers, sizeable activity at its ports and more recently, in preparation for its EU membership, a pre-accession Maritime Transport Strategy which affords particular importance to the application of high standards of safety at sea and to the protection of the marine environment in the Adriatic Sea.

These are two areas that are of particular interest to the EU. Initiatives on both fronts have in fact already been adopted: in the Maritime Safety Package which will help guard against the accidental pollution of our seas, and in the Thematic Strategy for the Marine Environment which introduces the principle of ecosystem-based spatial planning in our coastal waters. These two policies are seen as key components of the work I am currently piloting - on drawing up an integrated Maritime Policy for the EU.

The Commission is in fact, aiming to adopt a Green Paper on this subject in a few months which, in turn, will be the starting point of an extensive consultation process. We are looking forward to having input also from Croatia during this period of consultation which is foreseen to go on until the middle of 2007.

I would now like to make a few brief comments with respect to co-operation between the EU and Croatia in fisheries matters. I am pleased to say that we have got to know each other very well during past years, both through bilateral discussions and through co-operation in multilateral fora such as the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean and the respective Atlantic and Mediterranean Tuna Conservation organisations.

With Croatia now recognised as a candidate for membership of the EU, I am looking forward to deepen our bilateral contacts ever further in the framework of the accession negotiations. As far as fisheries policy is concerned, the next step will be the screening meeting taking place on 24th February.

Accession negotiations are never easy and we are bound to encounter difficult points during the process. However I am convinced that a constructive and positive attitude from both sides will enable us to find solutions to any obstacles that may arise. Drawing a quick parallel to a lighthouse, I would like to think of the EU as a beacon or ray of light, providing guidance and support to those seeking to take up a place within the European Community. The European project has clearly shown itself to be successful on a number of fronts, not solely in political or economic terms, but also as a forum where nations come together to work jointly for the prosperity and well-being of their people.

Allow me to now conclude these opening remarks by firstly thanking all those involved in the organisation of this photo exhibition for giving us this insight into Croatia. I would also like to thank the organisers for their kind invitation to me to be here and of course, all of you, for your attention. I trust you will enjoy the exhibition.

Thank you.

Berlaymont, 7 February 2006